

Just the Facts: Public Confidence in Higher Education

Growing public concern about the value of American higher education is widely acknowledged. As a Guardian of the public trust, you share responsibility for understanding the complexities of public opinion toward the sector and enlightening key constituents. Facts to know¹:

Fact: U.S. higher education, which is composed of institutions that depend on government funding yet traditionally enjoy considerable independence, relies on public trust (*see p. 5*).

- Public confidence in higher education is important because it reflects the belief that higher education institutions constitute a shared good worthy of public financial support.
- Nearly all colleges and universities depend on public funds (federal funding focuses on student aid and research; most state and municipal funds are appropriated to institutions).
- Declines in public trust may be tied to policy actions such as the first federal tax on some university endowments and declines in state higher education budgets, which affect institutions' abilities to pursue their missions.

Fact: Members of the public overwhelmingly acknowledge the economic value of a college degree, but like other sectors, confidence in higher education lacks robustness (*see p. 5*).

- Surveys show three-quarters of Americans know it is easier to be successful with a college degree than without, and over 90% agree it is important to increase the number of Americans with a degree/professional certificate beyond high school.
- Only about half of the public holds confidence in the sector or believes it has a positive effect on the country, and partisan divisions are more marked for higher education than for other sectors.

Fact: Clear-eyed assessments of public trust in higher education require context (*see p. 7*).

- It is not clear from available data that higher education is experiencing unprecedented distrust; disagreement and debate over the sector's purpose is not new.
- While confidence in a few sectors has remained strong over time (military, small business), other sectors have experienced declines since the 1970s. On average, trust in higher education compares favorably against these other sectors.

Fact: While surveys indicate public misconceptions around costs and access in higher education, individual opinions are often rooted in personal stories and broader anxiety about the future—not by ignorance (*see p. 9*).

- The public overwhelmingly views the value of college in terms of career preparation, and 78% of Americans agree that a good job is essential to having a high quality of life.

¹ Outlined in [Public Confidence in Higher Education](#)

- Four out of five Americans do not think education beyond high school is affordable for everyone who needs it. Many believe tuition costs are inflated, institutions profit from tuition revenue, and numerous good-paying jobs do not require college.
- The number one reason for high confidence in the sector appears to be the positive experience of either oneself or family members. Research also shows individuals believe personal anecdotes over statistics in forming negative perceptions.