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Voters Want Less Talk and More Action on Higher Ed Value



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Takeaways

- Across the political spectrum, voters still recognize the value of higher education—but with college costs at an inflection point, reforms are urgent to retain this perception.
- There is broad support for holding institutions accountable for ensuring a return on investment with the goal of setting students up for financial and career success.
- Voters want to see policymakers champion reforms that make it easier to attend college, get students across the finish line, and provide a clear return on investment for students and taxpayers.

In a high-stakes election year, higher ed is in the hot seat. With everything from student debt to campus culture to the challenges from the FAFSA rollout in the headlines, it's easy to assume that there's substantial daylight between the problems and the proposed policy solutions on both sides of the aisle. In reality, voters across the political spectrum support reforms that would do more to ensure value in higher ed today and want to see policymakers take action to make that happen.

Third Way partnered with Global Strategy Group and GS Strategy Group to unpack this landscape, asking 1,500 registered voters for their views on higher education, how they see the current problems in the system, and how they view Washington's role in effective reform (plus how those perspectives have changed in the past five years).¹ The upshot? Voters still see the value of a college education and its connection to a secure financial future but recognize that changes are needed to maintain that positive ROI for future generations. They want policymakers to advance value-centered reforms that make it easier to attend college and reap its benefits—focusing on changes that fix what's broken and improve what's lacking. The following analysis examines public perceptions of higher education and the solutions voters want to see from policymakers to improve the system for students and taxpayers.

American Voters Think Higher Ed Is Worth It—For Now

While public *trust* in higher education is at an all-time low, voters showed us they can walk and chew gum at the same time, discerning between trust and *value*—they view higher education as valuable, and simultaneously want to see it live up to its full potential.² A resounding eight in ten

(80%) voters believe that a four-year degree is valuable. For voters aged 18–44, that rate rises even higher, to 85%. Overall, 56% of voters viewed the US higher education system favorably, an assessment that has barely budged from 55% in 2019.³ Across party lines, 65% of Democrats, 52% of Independents, and 48% of Republicans view the higher education system favorably.



THIRD WAY

Do You Think a Four-Year College Degree is Valuable?

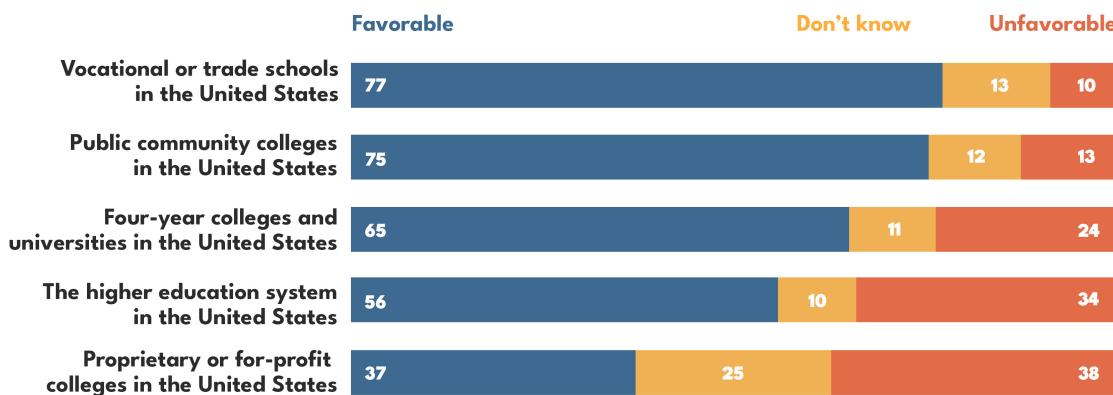


Note: Values may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Third Way/Global Strategy Group and GS Strategy Group poll of 1,500 eligible voters nationwide from March 21–26, 2024.

- Voters overwhelmingly view trade schools (77%), public community colleges (75%), and four-year colleges and universities (65%) favorably. For-profit institutions stand out as the only type of institution voters don't inherently like—with only 37% viewing them favorably.
- Most Americans feel that both associate degrees and bachelor's degrees are “worth the investment and usually pay off,” at 71% and 70%, respectively.
- Compared to other key issues, 64% of voters believe that making higher education affordable and ensuring it provides a good return on investment is either a “top priority” or “major priority” heading into the 2024 election.

Voters' Favorability of Higher Education Institutions



Source: Third Way/Global Strategy Group and GS Strategy Group poll of 1,500 eligible voters nationwide from March 21–26, 2024.

Knowing that how voters assess the value proposition of higher ed depends on how they view its purpose, we asked respondents to define value: do they see the goal of higher ed as preparing students for career success or broadening their perspectives to help them become more informed citizens? Just under half (49%) felt both were accurate descriptions of value. But when forced to make a choice between the two, 57% of voters identified setting students up for future career success as being closest to their definition of value—a view held by 63% of Republicans and 53% of Democrats, as well as 55% of those who have or previously held student debt.

Which of the Following Comes Closest to Your Definition of the Value of Higher Education?



Source: Third Way/Global Strategy Group and GS Strategy Group poll of 1,500 eligible voters nationwide from March 21–26, 2024.

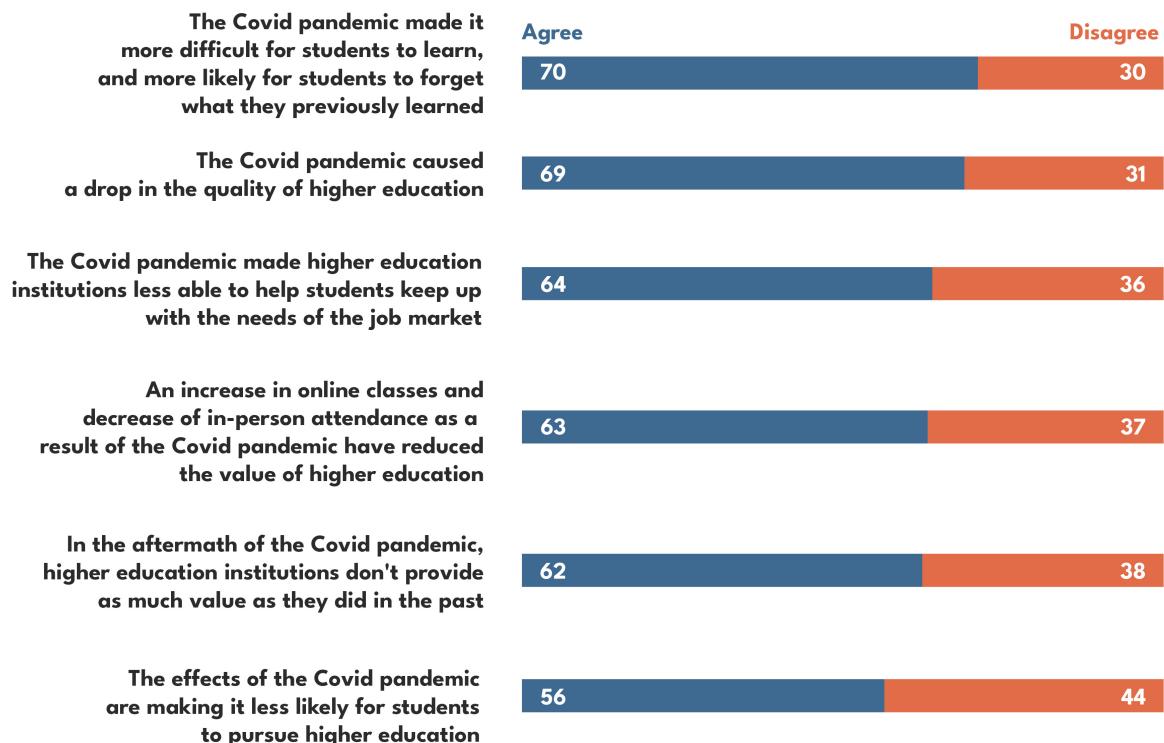
Yet voters also see a gap between the credentials students earn on campus and their connections to the workforce and the current economy—directly at odds with the outcomes they want to see from higher ed. When asked about higher education adapting to remain valuable in the job market, over two-thirds of voters (68%) said that students need new types of degrees to adjust to a changing economy and succeed in the job market. In addition, voters see challenges stemming from the

COVID-19 pandemic still impacting higher education, resulting in questions about the quality of education offered and its connection to workforce needs.

- Sixty-nine percent of voters believe that the pandemic caused a drop in the quality of higher education. This view is held across the political spectrum, with 75% of Republicans, 68% of Independents, and 64% of Democrats either “strongly” or “somewhat” agreeing that there has been a drop in quality.
- Voters believe that in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions don’t provide as much value as they did in the past (62%). Similarly, 64% feel the pandemic has made higher education less able to help students keep up with the job market and 63% believe there has been a drop in quality due to the increase in online classes and decrease of in-person attendance.
- All things considered, 65% of voters believe that fewer high school graduates will pursue higher education in the next decade because it doesn’t offer the same value and advantages in the job market as it once did. This should ring the alarm for higher education advocates and institutional leaders that approximately two-thirds of voters see the value of higher education depreciating over the next ten years.



Voters' Opinions on Recent Higher Education Trends



Source: Third Way/Global Strategy Group and GS Strategy Group poll of 1,500 eligible voters nationwide from March 21–26, 2024.

Despite 77% of voters worrying that rising student loan debt makes higher education not worth it, 57% feel that pursuing higher education may cost money now but is ultimately worth it in the long run—a view held by a majority of Democrats and Republicans. The question for policymakers and institutions moving forward is how to deliver the value and return on investment that the public expects and restore trust in higher education institutions.

Voters Want Policymakers to Put the Spotlight on Value in Higher Ed

This polling makes clear that voters across the aisle want policymakers to take urgent action to make the higher education system work for students and taxpayers: 68% believe that higher education has its problems but can be fixed with reforms that make changes to what's broken while leaving in place what works—and they don't want a complete overhaul of the system. A majority of Democrats (72%), Independents (69%), Republicans (64%), and voters aged 18–44 (63%) share this view.

Cost is a main area that isn't working for voters, with over 80% believing that the cost of college is increasing. This includes 86% of those who hold student debt (and 80% of those who don't), 83% of Democrats, 81% of Republicans, and 73% of voters aged 18-44. Addressing value, though, means addressing issues beyond cost: voters think that higher ed has a transparency problem that interferes with value: 62% of voters believe that students don't have enough information about how higher education institutions spend their money, and only 50% believe that students have all the information they need to determine which institution will provide them the best ROI. Voters clearly see the connection between cost, transparency, and value—and want policymakers to do more to ensure that the cost of higher ed is worth the student outcomes it delivers.

- Nearly two-thirds of voters (62%) feel that the federal government should provide basic guardrails to ensure students aren't taking out loans to attend institutions that will leave them worse off than when they first enrolled.
- To help control cost and reaffirm value, 71% of voters believe that policymakers need to implement changes that require colleges and universities to provide value to students and make sure those who enroll get a return on their investment. The principles behind policies that condition federal funding on positive student outcomes (like the gainful employment rule), increase transparency (like the *College Transparency Act* and financial value transparency framework), and emphasize student success (like the Postsecondary Student Success Grant program) are not only supported by voters, but recognized for their role in drawing more students to attend and complete college.
- To protect the investment students and taxpayers make in higher education, 66% of voters believe that the federal government should regulate *all* institutions of higher education—public, private non-profit, and for-profit—to make sure they are providing a good return on investment to their students. On this point, both voters with current or previous student debt and those who did not take out student loans agree, at 62% and 67%, respectively.

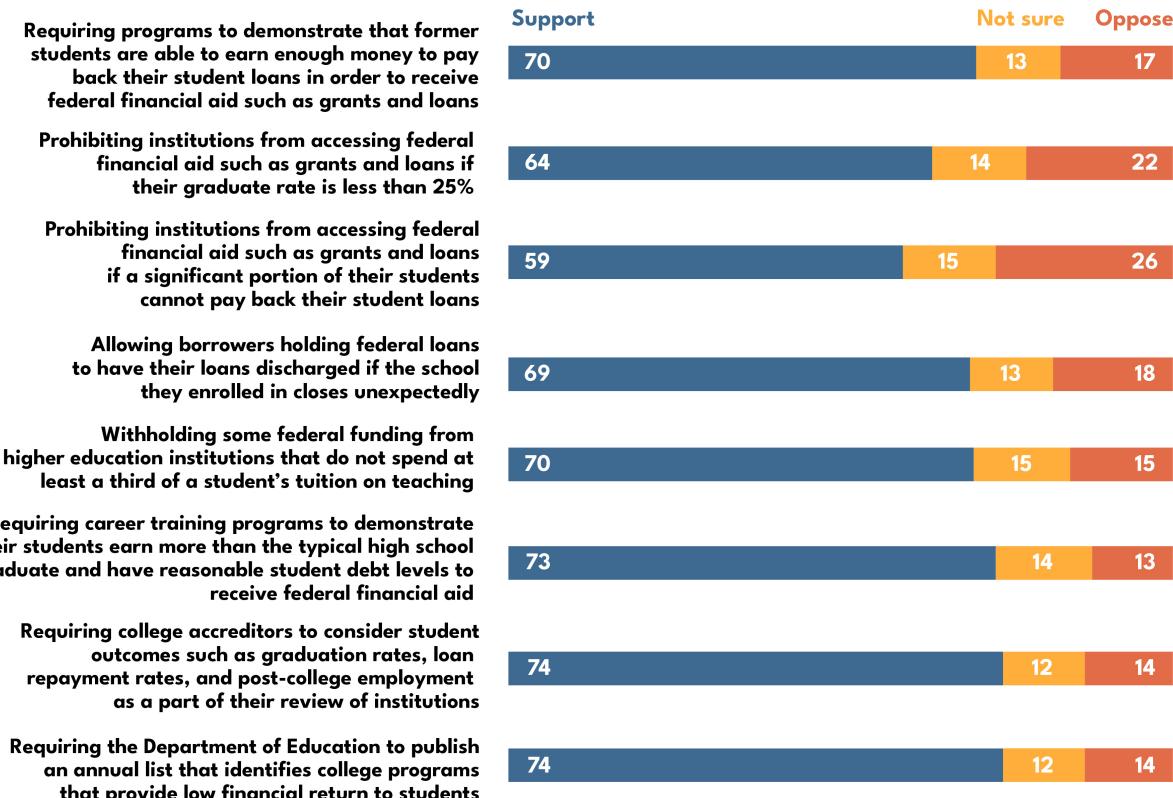
Voters Want Institutions to Be Accountable for Delivering a Return on Taxpayer Dollars

Improving affordability and ensuring value by setting students up for future career and financial success are top of mind for voters, and accountability plays a key role in accomplishing that goal by holding institutions' feet to the fire. Voters recognize that institutions benefit from taxpayer dollars and want to see accountability and a return on *their* investment in higher education: 63% believe that any new investment should include requirements to ensure taxpayer dollars are used effectively, even if that means some programs don't qualify for federal financial aid.

- While cancelling federal student loan debt ranked dead last among federal higher ed policy ideas voters support, using debt and repayment measures for quality assurance remains popular. Seven in ten (70%) voters believe that college programs should have to demonstrate their students can earn enough money to pay back their student loans in order to receive federal financial aid—and 64% believe that institutions shouldn't be able to access such aid if their graduation rate is less than 25%. Fifty-nine percent of voters feel that institutions should be held accountable for ensuring their students complete their degrees and aren't left with debt levels they can't repay. And 69% believe that students who are defrauded and taken advantage of by their institution should be eligible for a discharge of their loans.
- Voters also support accountability metrics that keep institutions honest: 70% believe that institutions shouldn't get federal funding if they do not spend at least a third of a student's tuition on instruction.⁴ For career training programs, 73% of voters believe that students should earn more than a typical high school graduate and have reasonable debt levels in order for the program to receive federal financial aid.⁵
- Beyond colleges, voters recognize that there are others in the system who need to step up to the plate. Requiring college accreditors to consider student outcomes (like graduation rates, loan repayment rates, and post-college employment) and requiring the Department of Education to publish an annual list that identifies college programs with low financial returns to students are popular among nearly three out of four (74%) voters.



Voters' Support for Accountability in Higher Education



Source: Third Way/Global Strategy Group and GS Strategy Group poll of 1,500 eligible voters nationwide from March 21-26, 2024.

Fortunately, voters wrote the blueprint for how colleges and universities can address protecting value and restoring public trust: do more to help students make it to graduation and get good jobs that can allow them to pay off their student loans. Voters believe that institutions can be doing more to help make sure students graduate and set them on the road to future job and financial success.

- Voters overwhelmingly believe that institutions can do more to get students across the finish line (87%), and three-quarters agree that the federal government could do more to help make sure students succeed in higher education (75%).
- Seventy-eight percent of voters believe that colleges have a responsibility to ensure that most students who enroll graduate—a view held by 83% of Democrats, 75% of Independents, and 72% of Republicans.
- Seven in ten voters (72%) believe that institutions are providing a high-quality education to their students. Yet 87% recognize that the skills required to be successful in today's job market are different from those a decade ago.



Voters' Opinions on Higher Education Issues



Source: Third Way/Global Strategy Group and GS Strategy Group poll of 1,500 eligible voters nationwide from March 21–26, 2024.

Vast majorities of voters believe that policymakers should put the focus on reforms that ensure Americans can graduate with the skills they need for good, high-paying jobs. Zeroing in on debt and cost, voters want to see real accountability, with policymakers and institutions on the hook for higher education reforms that deliver for taxpayers. And lawmakers would be smart to prioritize value and the demonstrated connections between education and the workforce desired by their constituents—64% of whom want their representatives to focus on the mainstream and not the extremes, and 58% of whom want to see bipartisan solutions.

Conclusion

The challenges higher education faces are undoubtedly large but, as this poll shows, voters don't think they are insurmountable. Although conventional wisdom says there's a significant gap between positions of the political left and right, voters on both sides of the aisle want action on reforms that deliver for students and hold institutions accountable to make higher education work for everyone. Since most voters don't feel like policymakers are looking out for them, helping to reform higher education by reaffirming its value will be critical to preparing students for good jobs and showing voters that Washington can deliver and get things done. Focusing on value in higher

education reform is a political winner for policymakers, taxpayers, and most importantly—students.

Methodology

Global Strategy Group and GS Strategy Group conducted an online survey of 1,500 registered voters nationwide between March 21 and March 26, 2024. The precision of online surveys is measured using a confidence interval; in this case, the interval at the 95% confidence level is +/- 2.5%.

To view the topline results, [click here](#).

TOPICS

HIGHER EDUCATION 688

ENDNOTES

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