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Americans losing faith in college education



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We've all seen the bumper stickers that proclaim, "My child and my money go to X University." I'm a college professor, and when my students gripe about \$50,000 annual costs and associated debt, I tell them they don't want to know what I paid a quarter-century ago (60 times less in current dollars).

But new research by Public Agenda and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education indicates that Americans' unease - even bitterness - toward higher education runs deeper than Mercedes-a-year tuition bills.

College administrators and education policy makers would be wrong to ignore the growing chorus of complaints among millions of American parents and students.

Going to college long has been the apotheosis of the American dream. Not only did college graduation signify that one had "made it," but the glamour of a four-year intellectual respite in ivy-draped classroom buildings with the world's great scholars attracted millions seeking the surest ticket to a better life.

American universities have been world-beating institutions, and the vast post-World War II expansion of public higher education and college loans and scholarships made college affordable to most Americans. From V-J Day to today, the number of U.S. college students soared from fewer than 1 million to more than 17 million, and the correlation between learning and earning has never been stronger.

More students than ever, of all ethnic backgrounds and ages, attend college. The world's best, most ambitious students flock to American universities. Most young people and their parents believe that college and, perhaps, graduate school are extremely desirable.

Yet slowly but perceptibly, this faith has been eroding - even before the recent college-loan scandal. Stratospheric college costs, coupled with a surprisingly widespread belief in educational mismanagement and the accurate perception that all young people do not have equal access to college, have led ever more Americans to believe that something has gone seriously awry with the once-vaunted system of U.S. higher education.

A new Public Agenda study, "Squeeze Play: How Parents and the Public Look at Higher Education Today," finds deep and growing worries about many aspects of U.S. higher education.

Rapidly rising costs are high on many Americans' lists of complaints. Public Agenda found that 76 percent of parents are more than a little worried about tuition bills, and only 44 percent believe students get their money's worth. Nearly four-fifths of Americans think students have to borrow too much for college.

Most troubling for a nation that has prided itself on its belief in upward mobility, the percentage who say that many qualified, motivated students do not have the opportunity to attend college has risen sharply, from 45 percent in 1998 to 62 percent today.

Such beliefs are disproportionately common among black and Hispanic parents.

Although Americans still give colleges generally high marks for quality, higher education is increasingly perceived less as a noble purveyor of knowledge and skills than as a business. Fifty-two percent said that colleges "mainly care about the bottom line," with 44 percent blaming "waste and mismanagement" and 46 percent fingering cutbacks in state aid.

These streams of discontent led nearly half the people surveyed to call for their states' higher-education systems to be "fundamentally overhauled." Americans are divided about raising taxes for higher education, yet 75 percent believe it is a very high priority to make more grants and tax breaks available to students, and many believe that less-expensive community colleges should be expanded.

Americans recognize the importance of a college education, but the halcyon days of the mid- to late 20th century, which contributed to higher education's enormous public esteem, are waning. The clear message is: Americans still value higher education, but the love affair is not the passionate romance that it once was.

Defenders of the higher-education status quo need to make college more affordable, restore more equitable access and ensure that students and parents - their consumers - feel their hard-earned dollars are used as fairly and effectively as possible.

If higher-education and education policy leaders do not respond to this growing discontent, we may be in for a new era of campus protests - one in which students are joined by their parents in besieging campus administrators with demands for accountability and reform.

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