



Survey: College vital but less accessible

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By Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY

The poor economy is ratcheting up anxieties about college affordability at a time when more Americans than ever say a college degree is essential to success, a report says today.

Those findings, based on a survey of 1,009 Americans in late December, are hardly mind-boggling, but they represent dramatic shifts in public attitude in a short period of time:

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- 55% in 2008 said a college degree is necessary vs. 31% in 2000.
- 43% in 2008 said there are many ways to succeed without college vs. 67% in 2000.
- 67% in 2008 said most people who are qualified for college don't have the opportunity to attend vs. 47% in 2000.

"These changes are quick given what we usually see in public opinion (polling)," says John Immerwahr, senior research fellow for Public Agenda, a New York-based non-profit that has been tracking attitudes about higher education since 1993. It conducted this survey with the National Center on Public Policy and Higher Education, a non-profit in San Jose that promotes access.

National Center president Patrick Callan says the survey points to "a growing sense of unfairness" and anxiety about the economy and American society. "This is not just about higher education, but it's very important that higher education not be seen as (making) it worse."

Terry Hartle of the non-profit American Council on Education, an umbrella group for colleges and universities, says perceptions may or may not reflect reality, but they matter because they drive behavior.

"If any student fails to enroll because they fear college is unaffordable, it's a tragedy," he says.