



America's Hidden Common Ground on Public Higher Education:

What's Wrong and How to Fix It

By David Schleifer, Will Friedman and Erin McNally
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Executive Summary

Americans think higher education can help people economically, particularly in their home states, according to this Public Agenda/USA TODAY Hidden Common Ground (HCG) research. But by a variety of measures, Americans question whether the benefits of college are worth the cost. Young people without degrees are especially skeptical. Based on a nationally representative survey fielded in May 2022 and focus groups conducted in January 2022, the research finds that Americans across partisan lines worry about high tuition and student debt in an economy that most think is rigged to benefit the wealthy. Most see college education as time-consuming and see colleges as stuck in the past. Although most Americans recognize that higher education helps people become informed, engaged citizens, fewer think it benefits democracy overall.

However, there is strong agreement across the political spectrum that all Americans should have the opportunity to get a college education if they want one. There is also very strong support, across partisan lines, for state investments in specific initiatives to make public higher education more affordable, accessible, and responsive to today's students, including working adults. Although few Republicans view racism as making it more difficult for Black and Latino Americans to get a college education, there is nonetheless majority cross-partisan and cross-racial support for state investments in initiatives to support Black and Latino students and the institutions that serve them. Findings from the research include:

1. Strong cross-partisan, cross-racial majorities believe that higher education can benefit working adults. The consensus is weaker on how much it benefits the economy overall or our democracy. But when people focus on their states, more are confident about the economic benefits of higher education.

- Most Americans (86 percent) across political affiliations agree that a college education can help working adults advance their careers. Fewer (64 percent) believe that people with a

high school diploma would make a better living if they got a college education. Only half (52 percent) believe higher education strengthens the economy overall.

- Most Americans (71 percent) think a college education helps people become informed, engaged citizens. But only 51 percent think our democracy would be stronger if more people had college educations. Some focus group participants objected to the idea that people without degrees are less capable, responsible citizens than those with degrees.
- At the state level, Americans are confident in higher education's shared economic benefits: 75 percent believe that there would be positive impacts on people's ability to earn a good living if more people in their state had a college education, and 71 percent believe that there would be positive impacts on their state's capacity to attract employers—including majorities across the political spectrum.

2. While recognizing its potential benefits, many Americans question whether a college education is worth it. In an economy that most see as fundamentally unfair, Americans view college as expensive and time-consuming, and they see colleges as stuck in the past.

- Only half of Americans (49 percent) think the economic benefits of a college education outweigh the costs. Young people without degrees are particularly skeptical.
- Most Americans (83 percent) see college costs as prohibitive to low-income students. Most think both debt and inadequate financial aid are serious problems. Two-thirds (66 percent) see colleges as stuck in the past, not meeting the needs of today's students.
- Meanwhile, most Americans (72 percent) think the economy is rigged to advantage the rich and powerful. This view is shared by majorities across the political spectrum and across racial/ethnic identities.
- Among different types of public higher education institutions, more people view community colleges as offering good value for students and taxpayers.
- The largest share of Americans think the primary goals of their state's public higher education institutions should be career readiness and providing a well-rounded education.

3. Very strong cross-partisan and cross-racial majorities agree on a broad range of approaches to making public higher education more affordable.

- Americans' top priorities for their state's public higher education institutions are affordability, access, and teaching career-relevant skills.
- Most Americans (67 percent) believe that there are many qualified people who do not have the opportunity to attend college.
- Substantial majorities of Americans across the political spectrum and across racial/ethnic identities support many approaches to making public higher education more affordable. For example, two-thirds or more Democrats, Independents, and Republicans support tax incentives for employers to pay employees' tuition; state governments offering interest-free loans; students paying back loans based on post-graduation earnings; and requiring public higher education institutions to be transparent about student debt.

- Half or more Democrats, Independents, and Republicans support increasing taxes on the wealthy to make public higher education more affordable and making public community colleges free.

4. There is surprising cross-partisan and cross-racial agreement on state investments to support Black and Latino students as well as low-income students.

- Substantially fewer Republicans (24 percent) than Democrats (72 percent) or Independents (49 percent) believe that racial discrimination makes it more difficult for people of color to get a college education.
- Yet majorities of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents, and majorities across racial/ethnic identities, support various state investments to improve college access, affordability, and degree completion for Black and Latino students.
- These include providing additional resources for public higher education institutions that are doing an especially good job of helping Black and Latino students complete their degrees, increased oversight of institutions that are not, and providing effective advising and financial aid to Black and Latino students.
- Stronger majorities favor such investments to support low-income students.

5. When people know what they're paying for, substantially more are willing to invest in public higher education.

- Across political affiliations, Americans largely think that public higher education should either be funded mostly by government with some student contribution or equally by government and students.
- When asked about state investment in general, 61 percent of Americans overall support increased funding for public higher education, including 75 percent of Democrats but less than half (46 percent) of Republicans.
- But strong majorities across the political spectrum support investing in specific public higher education initiatives to help students succeed in college and beyond.
- This includes strong support for state investments in flexible short-term credential programs; providing students with job experience while they learn; partnerships with K-12 systems so students graduate from high school with college credits; hiring more faculty so students can take the classes they need to graduate on time; and colleges tailoring curricula to meet employers' needs.
- Cross-partisan majorities believe that states should maintain funding for public higher education institutions during hard economic times. Support is even stronger when people learn that the vast majority of college students attend public institutions.

Methodology in Brief

This report summarizes findings from a nationally representative survey of 1,662 adult Americans 18 years and older. The survey was designed by Public Agenda, fielded May 3-6, 2022 by Ipsos. Respondents completed the survey in English. Public Agenda conducted three demographically diverse online focus groups in January 2022. When referencing this report, cite Public Agenda. The sample was randomly drawn from Ipsos' online panel, partner online panel sources, and "river" sampling. Ipsos calibrates respondent characteristics to be representative of the U.S. population using standard procedures such as raking-ratio adjustments. The source of these population targets is U.S. Census 2018 American Community Survey data. Post-hoc weights were made to the population characteristics on gender, age, race/ethnicity, region, and education. For a complete methodology and topline with full question wording, email research@publicagenda.org or go to www.publicagenda.org/reports/americas-hidden-common-ground-on-public-higher-education/

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About the Hidden Common Ground® Initiative

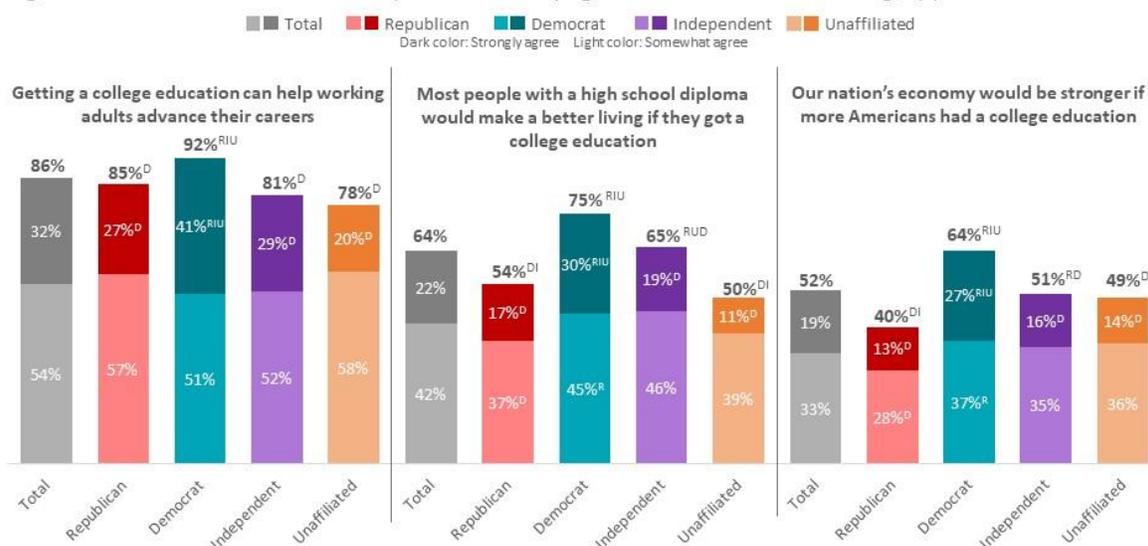
The Public Agenda/USA TODAY Hidden Common Ground (HCG) initiative challenges the narrative that Americans are hopelessly divided and incapable of working together. Through research and public engagement, HCG helps Americans identify and strengthen their common ground, productively navigate their differences, and create equitable and productive solutions to the challenges of our time.

FINDING 1. STRONG CROSS-PARTISAN, CROSS-RACIAL MAJORITIES BELIEVE THAT HIGHER EDUCATION CAN BENEFIT WORKING ADULTS. THE CONSENSUS IS WEAKER ON HOW MUCH IT BENEFITS THE ECONOMY OVERALL OR OUR DEMOCRACY. BUT WHEN PEOPLE FOCUS ON THEIR STATES, MORE ARE CONFIDENT ABOUT THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

While there is a strong cross-partisan consensus that getting a college education can help working adults advance their careers, more Democrats than people of other political affiliations believe that people with a high school diploma would make a better living if they got a college education. Only half of Americans—again including more Democrats—believe that our nation’s economy would be stronger if more people had college degrees; see Figure 1.¹

Most Americans across political affiliations agree that a college education helps working adults advance their careers. But there is less consensus on whether it benefits high school graduates or strengthens the economy overall.

Figure 1. Percent of Americans who say how much they agree with each of the following, by political affiliation:



Base: All respondents, N=1,662; Republican, N=378; Democrat, N=694; Independent, N=388; Politically Unaffiliated, N=202
 Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^U are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.

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¹ The Independent group includes those who self-identify as Independents, without respect to whether they “lean” Democratic or Republican. The “politically unaffiliated” group includes those who have no preference towards political affiliation with the three dominant categories of political affiliations (Republican, Democrat, or Independent) or who skipped the question, “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as...”. A small number of these respondents may be affiliated with small political parties.

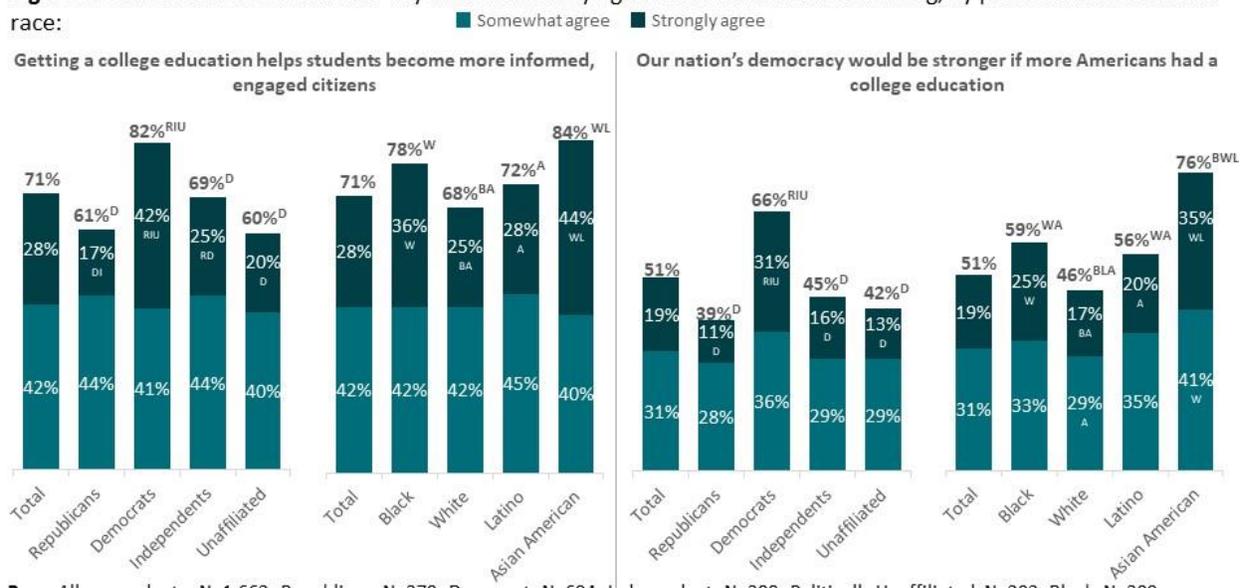
POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF HIGHER EDUCATION TO AMERICA’S DEMOCRACY?

Amid profound challenges to our democracy, most Americans agree that getting a college education helps students become more informed, engaged citizens, with only modest differences of opinion across partisan lines; see Figure 2.

But only half of Americans believe that our nation’s democracy overall would be stronger if more Americans had a college education. There are substantial differences by political affiliation and by race/ethnicity on this question; see Figure 2. More people with a college degree (61 percent) believe that our nation’s democracy would be stronger if more Americans had a college education compared to 41 percent of those without a degree and 47 percent of those who have some college experience but have not earned a degree.

Most Americans believe that getting a college education helps people become more informed, engaged citizens. But only half believe that our nation’s democracy would be stronger if more Americans had a college education.

Figure 2. Percent of Americans who say how much they agree with each of the following, by political affiliation and race:



Base: All respondents, N=1,662; Republican, N=378; Democrat, N=694; Independent, N=388; Politically Unaffiliated, N=202; Black, N=309; White, N=729; Latino, N=374; Asian American, N=218

Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^U are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates indicated with a ^B are statistically significant from the Black estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^W are statistically significant from the white estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^L are statistically significant from the Latino estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^A are statistically significant from the Asian American estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.

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When focus group participants discussed lower rates of voting by people without college degrees, many acknowledged that education in general—including but not only college education—helps people develop critical thinking skills and understand the political system.

“In the K-12 system, I was never really taught [about voting] until I went to community college. If you aren’t learning that in grade school and you don’t go to college, then you’re not gonna show up to vote.”

—Native American and White Independent from Texas in his 20’s with a college degree

“Public school literally will teach you the bare minimum to get you in and out. When you go to college and when you’re actually learning, it kind of wakes up a lot of people. They’re finally understanding how America works. Maybe things would actually work if people had access to college and people went to college.”

—Latina Democrat from California in her 20’s with some college experience but no degree

“The more people can think independently and reason things out, the more reasonable society becomes. Lack of education just leads to ignorance and ignorance doesn’t help any society, unless of course you’re a dictator and you want to keep your people ignorant.”

—White Republican from Texas in his 60’s with a college degree

But some participants also objected to the implication that people without college degrees are necessarily less capable and responsible participants in our democracy compared to those with degrees.

“In my culture I don’t see that. I learned to vote from my dad. He used to sit us down and told us how important it was as an African American to vote. None of us has college degrees but we all speak our mind. I talk to my nieces and nephews the same way. I tell them how important it is to vote. If you don’t vote you don’t have a voice.”

—Black Democrat from Texas in her 60’s with some college experience but no degree

“I don’t think people are better or make the community better just because they’ve got a degree. My grandmother used to say you got a lot of educated fools out here.”

—Black Democrat from Tennessee in her 50’s with a college degree

“I don’t think that you’re necessarily a better person because you went to college.”

—Politically unaffiliated Latina from Tennessee in her 30’s with no college degree

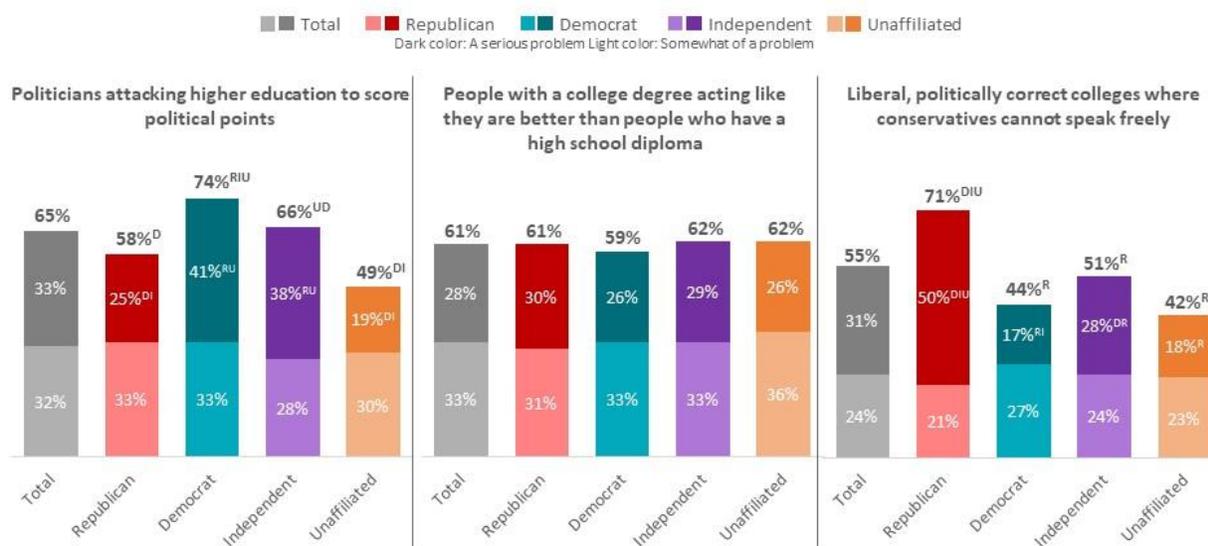
The discussion of lower voting rates by people without degrees seemed snobbish to focus group participants—particularly since they saw college as expensive and time-consuming, especially for people who need to work fulltime, and since they often pointed out that inequitable K-12 systems do not prepare all students of all races/ethnicities for higher education. In fact, the survey found that 61 percent of Americans think it is a problem that people with a college degree act like they are better than people who have a high school diploma, with no differences by political affiliation; see Figure 3. Nor are there differences by educational attainment or race/ethnicity in this view.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AND ATTACKS ON HIGHER EDUCATION:

When it comes to the politics of higher education, most Republicans think politically correct colleges where conservatives cannot speak freely are at least somewhat of a problem. But four in ten Democrats and half of Independents think so too. Meanwhile, most Democrats think that politicians attacking higher education to score political points is at least somewhat of a problem, as do majorities (albeit smaller) of Republicans and Independents; see Figure 3.

Most Republicans see political correctness on campus as a problem, while more Democrats see politicians attacking higher education as a problem. They are equally concerned about people with college degrees acting superior.

Figure 3. Percent of Americans who say how serious of a problem each of the following are, by political affiliation:



Base: All respondents, N=1,662; Republican, N=378; Democrat, N=694; Independent, N=388; Politically Unaffiliated, N=202
 Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^U are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.

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AT THE STATE LEVEL, PEOPLE ARE CONFIDENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION’S ECONOMIC BENEFITS:

Strong cross-partisan majorities believe that if more people in their state had a college education, there would be positive impacts on people’s ability to earn a good living and on their state’s capacity to attract employers, see Figure 4. Hardly anyone thinks there would be any negative impacts in their states of more people having college degrees. However, Democrats are especially likely to believe that more people having a college education in their state would have positive impacts. For example, more Democrats (69 percent) than Republicans (42 percent) say that more people having a college education in their state would positively impact people’s ability to participate more thoughtfully in elections.

Most Americans believe there would be positive economic impacts if more people in their state had a college education. The consensus is less solid regarding community and democratic impacts.

Figure 4. Percent of Americans who say, if more people in their state had a college education, how much of an impact that would have on each of the following:



Base: All respondents, N=1,662

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding

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FINDING 2. WHILE RECOGNIZING ITS POTENTIAL BENEFITS, MANY AMERICANS QUESTION WHETHER A COLLEGE EDUCATION IS WORTH IT. IN AN ECONOMY THAT MOST SEE AS FUNDAMENTALLY UNFAIR, AMERICANS VIEW COLLEGE AS EXPENSIVE AND TIME-CONSUMING, AND THEY SEE COLLEGES AS STUCK IN THE PAST.

Considering the costs and benefits, only half of Americans believe that a college education is still the best investment for people who want to get ahead and succeed. Half believe that a college education is a questionable investment because of high student loans and limited job opportunities. These views are largely unchanged since 2016, when a Public Agenda survey last asked this question.²

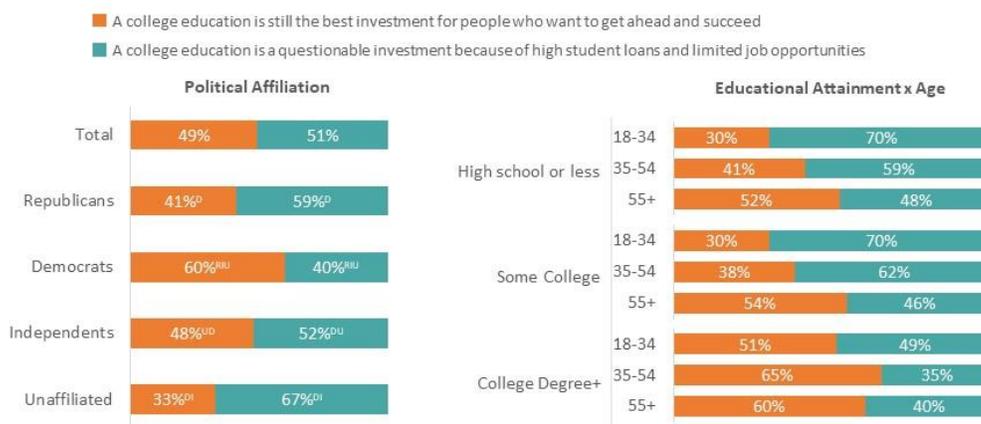
Importantly for colleges concerned about declining enrollment, younger people without degrees are especially skeptical of whether college is a worthwhile investment. Older people with degrees tend to be more confident in its value; see Figure 5.

² Schleifer and Silliman, "What's the Payoff? Americans Consider Problems and Promises of Higher Education," Public Agenda: 2016. <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/research-brief-whats-the-payoff-americans-consider-problems-and-promises-of-higher-education/>

Furthermore, only one-third of politically unaffiliated people believe that a college education is still the best investment, compared to Democrats (60 percent), Republicans (41 percent) or Independents (48 percent); see Figure 5. More Asian Americans (68 percent) believe that a college education is still the best investment than Black (53 percent), Latino (48 percent) or white Americans (48 percent).

Half of Americans believe that a college education is a questionable investment. Younger people without degrees and the politically unaffiliated are especially skeptical.

Figure 5. Percent of Americans who say which of the following statements come closest to their view, by political affiliation, and by education and age:



Base: All respondents, N=1,662; Republican, N=378; Democrat, N=694; Independent, N=388; Politically Unaffiliated, N=202; Total High school or less, N=388; Total Some college*, N=382; Total College Degree+*, N=892; 18-34 High school or less, N=128; 18-34 Some college, N=126; 18-34 College degree+, N=205; 34-54 High school or less, N=124; 34-54 Some college, N=124; 34-54 College degree+, N=321; 55+ High school or less, N=136; 55+ Some college, N=141; 55+ College degree+, N=366

*Some college does not include Associate's Degree. College Degree+ includes Associate's Degree

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding

Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate.

Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^U are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate.

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In cross-partisan focus groups, participants felt torn over the value of a college education, grappling with how to afford it in the short term and its value in the long term. Younger participants expressed worry about student loan debt, the amount of time required to earn a degree, and questionable pay-offs when it comes to jobs and careers.

“Some people went to college for four years and then don’t even have a job with the degree they have. It’s money wasted and time wasted. I think college is very overrated and overpriced. The amount of people that go to college and the people that drop out doesn’t add up.

Universities would have more people enrolled and stay in college if it was very affordable.”

—Black Independent from Tennessee in her 20’s, with some college experience but no degree

“My question would be to a prospective student, what do you want to do? Do you really want to go to school? Because going to school and not being sure of what you want to end up doing is not worth all the debt and all the money that you have to pay back. It’s just not worth it.”

—Black Independent from California in her 20’s with a college degree

“I was supposed to go for game design and it was gonna cost me like 80Gs but they don’t mention that only five of us out of the whole class are going to get a job. The rest of us are going to be just sitting there with debt to pay and hoping we can find a job.”

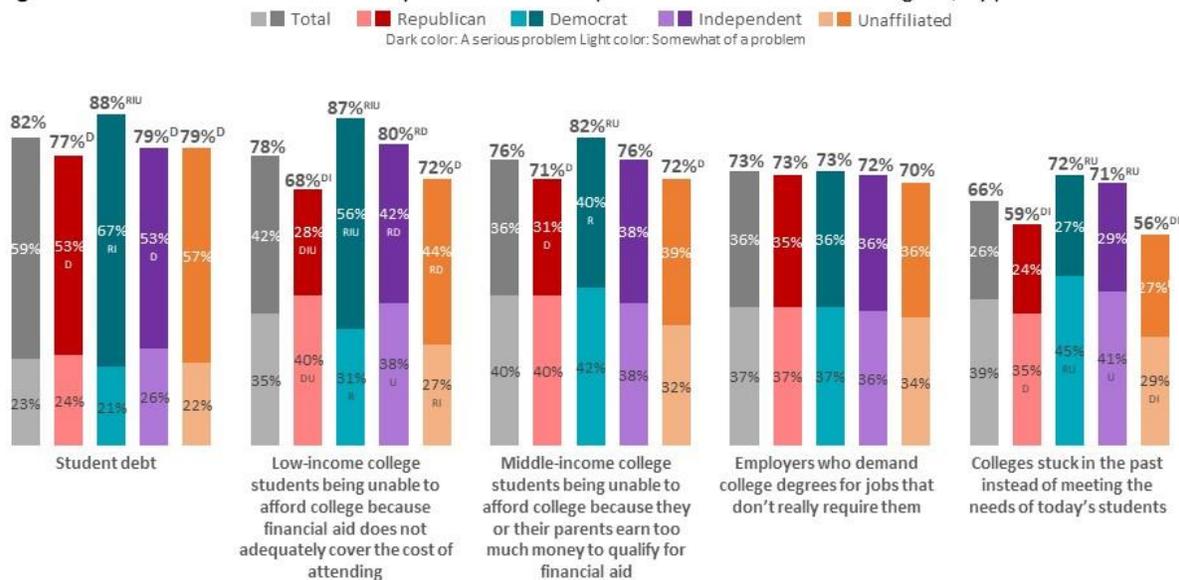
—White Republican from California in her 20’s without a college degree

DEBT, COSTS, AND COLLEGES STUCK IN THE PAST:

More than seven in ten Americans see student debt, inadequate financial aid for both low- and middle-income students, and employers demanding college degrees for jobs that don’t really require them as a problem. Two-thirds of Americans also say it is a problem that colleges are stuck in the past instead of meeting the needs of today’s students; see Figure 6.

Americans see debt, inadequate financial aid, and employers unnecessarily demanding degrees as problems. Most see colleges as stuck in the past.

Figure 6. Percent of Americans who say how serious of a problem each of the following are, by political affiliation:



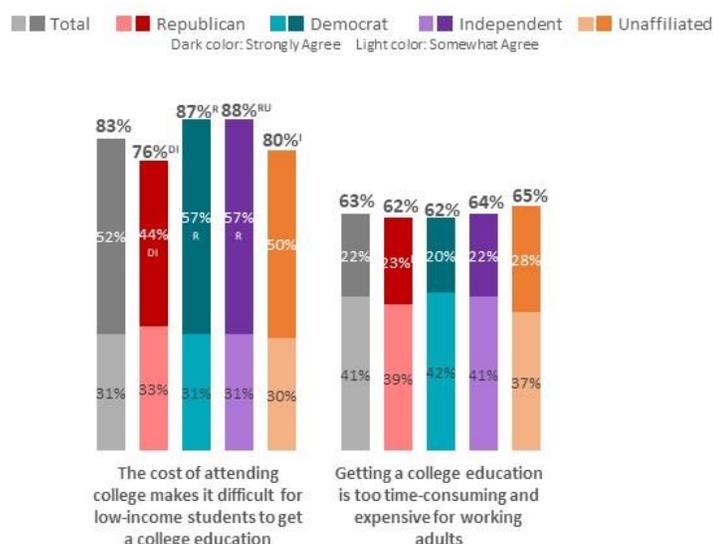
Base: All respondents, N=1,662; Republican, N=378; Democrat, N=694; Independent, N=388; Politically Unaffiliated, N=202
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Majorities across the political spectrum, racial/ethnic identities, and levels of educational attainment believe that the cost of attending college makes it difficult for low-income students to get a college education. Most also believe that getting a college education is too time-consuming and expensive for working adults; see Figure 7.

Most Americans believe college is too expensive for both low-income students and working adults, and is too time-consuming.

Figure 7. Percent of Americans who say how much they agree with each of the following, by political affiliation:



Base: All respondents, N=1,662; Republican, N=378; Democrat, N=694; Independent, N=388; Politically Unaffiliated, N=202. Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^U are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.
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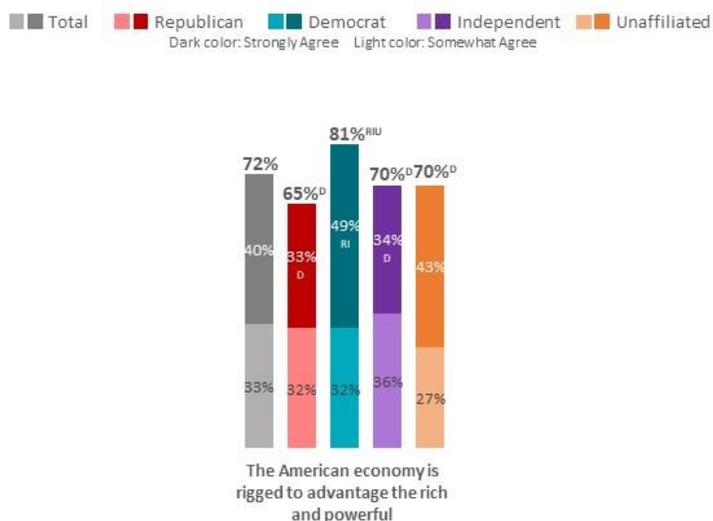
AN ECONOMY THAT MOST AMERICANS BELIEVE IS UNFAIR:

Skepticism about higher education may be symptomatic of broader concerns about economic fairness. Most Americans think the economy is rigged to advantage the rich and powerful, a view shared by majorities across the political spectrum; see Figure 8. This view is also widely held by people without and without college degrees, across racial/ethnic identities, and across generations, with only minor differences by age.

People who think that the economy is rigged are more likely to believe that there are many people who are qualified to go to college but don't have the opportunity to do so and are modestly more likely to believe that a college education is a questionable investment because of high student loans and limited job opportunities.

Most Americans think the economy is rigged.

Figure 8. Percent of Americans who say how much they agree with each of the following, by political affiliation:



Base: All respondents, N=1,662; Republican, N=378; Democrat, N=694; Independent, N=388; Politically Unaffiliated, N=202
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CAREER PREPARATION AND A WELL-ROUNDED EDUCATION SHOULD BE THE GOALS FOR PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION:

When asked to choose their two primary goals out of a list of five for the public colleges, universities, and community colleges in their state, Americans across political affiliations choose preparing students for success in careers (57 percent) and providing them with a well-rounded education (50 percent). This view likely corresponds to employers' desire for both technical skills as well as skills like strong communications and critical thinking capacities.

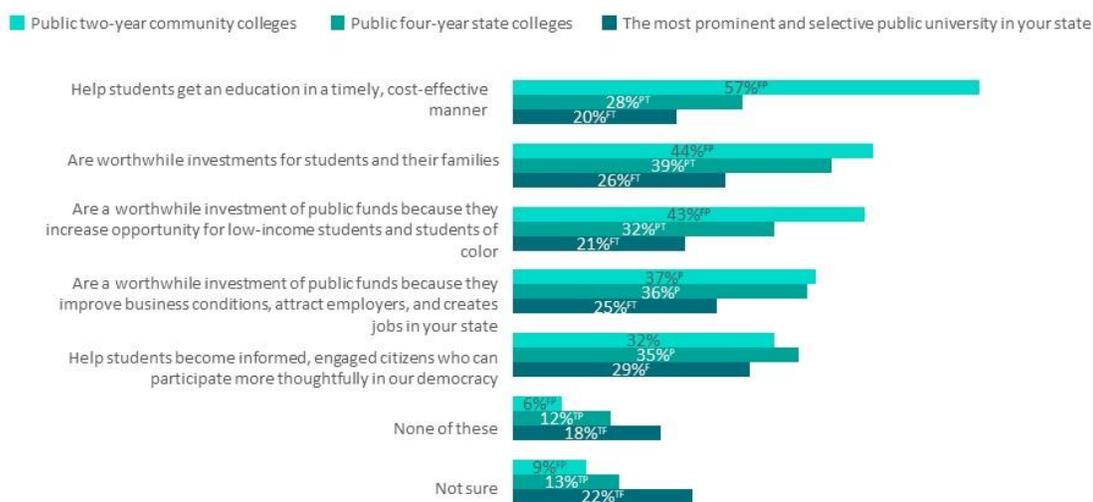
Fewer people believe that public higher education institutions' primary goals should be helping students become more informed and engaged citizens (29 percent), attracting employers and creating jobs (28 percent), or enriching the state's cultural and civic life (9 percent). This does not mean that people necessarily see these other goals as irrelevant, but when forced to choose, they do not emerge as top priorities.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES SEEN AS OFFERING A BETTER RETURN ON INVESTMENT FOR STUDENTS AND STATES:

When asked to compare the value of public community colleges to public four-year state colleges and to their state's most prominent and selective public university, enthusiasm for all public higher education institutions is limited. But people rate community colleges more highly than those other public institutions on helping students get an education in a timely, cost-effective manner and as a worthwhile investment for students and families. More also rate community colleges as worthwhile investment of public funds than their state's most prominent and selective public university; see Figure 9.³

Americans' enthusiasm for public higher education institutions is limited, but they see community colleges as better investments for students and states.

Figure 9. Percent of Americans who say which statements describe each of the following:



Base: All respondents, N=1,662

Estimates indicated with a ^T are statistically significant from the public two-year community colleges estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^F are statistically significant from the public four-year colleges estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^P are statistically significant from the most prominent and selective public university in your state estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.

Public Agenda/USA Today Hidden Common Ground Survey—Higher Education

Focus group participants talked about the many advantages of attending community colleges, including finding a career path and gaining workplace skills at a reasonable cost.

³ This survey did not ask respondents to compare public higher education institutions to private institutions. A New America national survey found that more people rate public community colleges as worth the cost than public four-year colleges and universities, which they rate more highly than private nonprofits, which they rate more highly than for-profits. Fishman et al, 2021 <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/varying-degrees-2021/>

“If they aren’t sure of their career path, they should go to community college. While they’re getting their basics, they’re figuring out their career path. And if they chose a career path that doesn’t require college, they’re not out a whole bunch of money.”

—Native American and White Independent from Texas in his 20’s with a college degree

“There’s too many kids in [college] that don’t know what they’re doing yet and therefore they’re increasing their personal costs and their debt. They probably need to go to a tech school or a community college. Then they can decide how they want to progress.”

—White Democrat from Tennessee in his 70’s with a college degree

FINDING 3. VERY STRONG CROSS-PARTISAN AND CROSS-RACIAL MAJORITIES AGREE ON A BROAD RANGE OF APPROACHES TO MAKING PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION MORE AFFORDABLE.

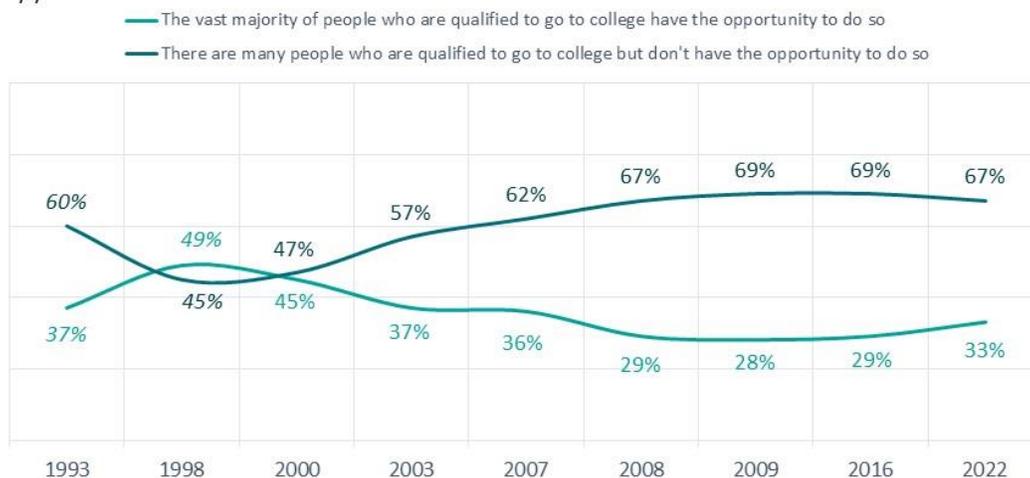
Two-thirds of Americans (67 percent) say there are many people who are qualified to go to college but don’t have the opportunity to do so. More politically unaffiliated people (80 percent) perceive this lack of opportunity than Independents (69 percent) or Republicans (59 percent), with very minor differences by race/ethnicity and educational attainment.

Public Agenda has periodically asked this question in surveys of the general public since 1993. In 1998, the perception that the majority of people who are qualified to go to college do have the opportunity to do so peaked at 49 percent and has been declining since; see Figure 10.⁴

⁴ Surveys conducted prior to 2022 were fielded by telephone, which may contribute to some of the differences observed.

Americans have long believed that there are many qualified people who do not have the opportunity to attend college.

Figure 10. Percent of Americans who say which of the following statements come closest to their view, by year:



***Note:** Data collected prior to 2022 was conducted via telephone interviews. This methodological change may contribute to some of the differences observed.

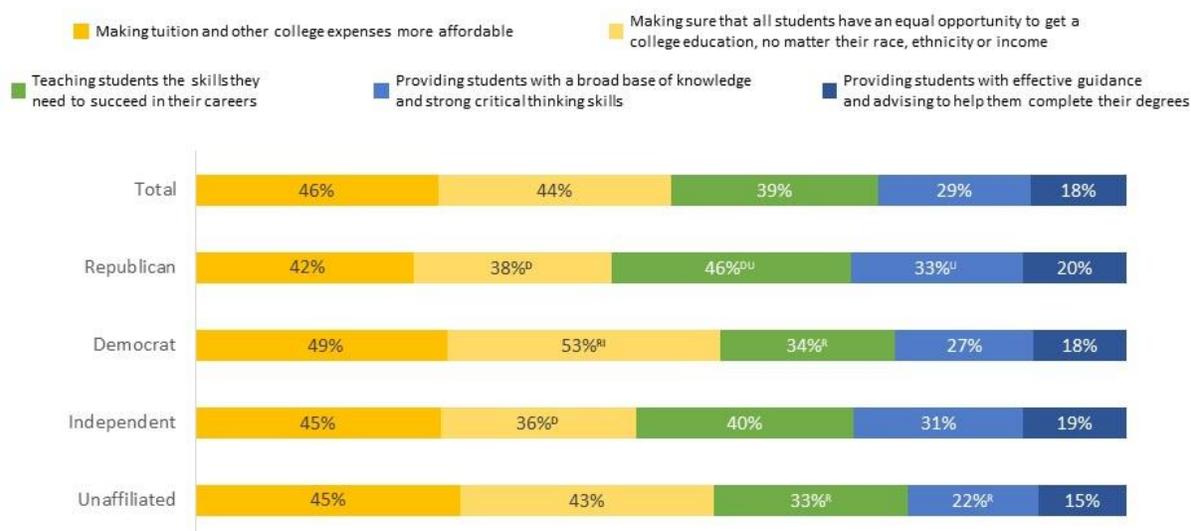
2022 Base: All respondents, N=1,662

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In this context, people’s priorities for their state’s public higher education institutions include ensuring equal opportunity to get a college education and making tuition and other expenses more affordable, as well as teaching students the skills they need to succeed in their careers; see Figure 11.

Americans want their state's public higher education institutions to prioritize affordability, equal opportunity and career-relevant skills.

Figure 11. Percent of Americans who say which of the following should be the two highest priorities for the public colleges, universities and community colleges in their state, by political affiliation:



Base: All respondents, N=1,662; Republican, N=378; Democrat, N=694; Independent, N=388; Politically Unaffiliated, N=202
 Numbers may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding
 Estimates indicated with a ^a are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^o are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^l are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^u are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.

Public Agenda/USA Today Hidden Common Ground Survey – Higher Education

STRONG AGREEMENT ON MANY APPROACHES TO MAKING PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION MORE AFFORDABLE:

Majorities of Americans across the political spectrum and across racial/ethnic identities—including supermajorities in many cases—agree on many specific approaches to making public higher education more affordable.

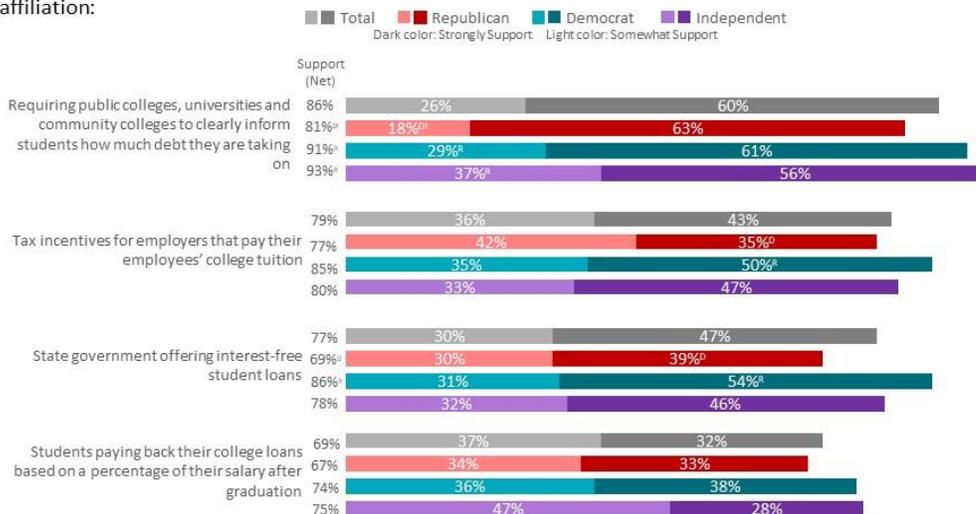
For example, two-thirds or more Democrats, Independents, and Republicans support tax incentives for employers that pay their employees' tuition, their state government offering interest-free student loans, and students paying back their college loans based on a percentage of their salary after graduation; see Figure 12.⁵

Half or more Democrats, Independents, and Republicans support making public community colleges free; increasing taxes on wealthy households to make public higher education more affordable; and colleges waiting to charge tuition until after students graduate and start jobs; see Figure 13.

⁵ The politically unaffiliated sample was too small in this split sample question to report on their views.

Two-thirds or more Democrats, Independents, and Republicans support transparency about debt, tax incentives for employers to pay tuition, interest-free state loans, and loan repayment based on post-graduation salary.

Figure 12. Percent of Americans who say how much they support each of the following in their state, by political affiliation:

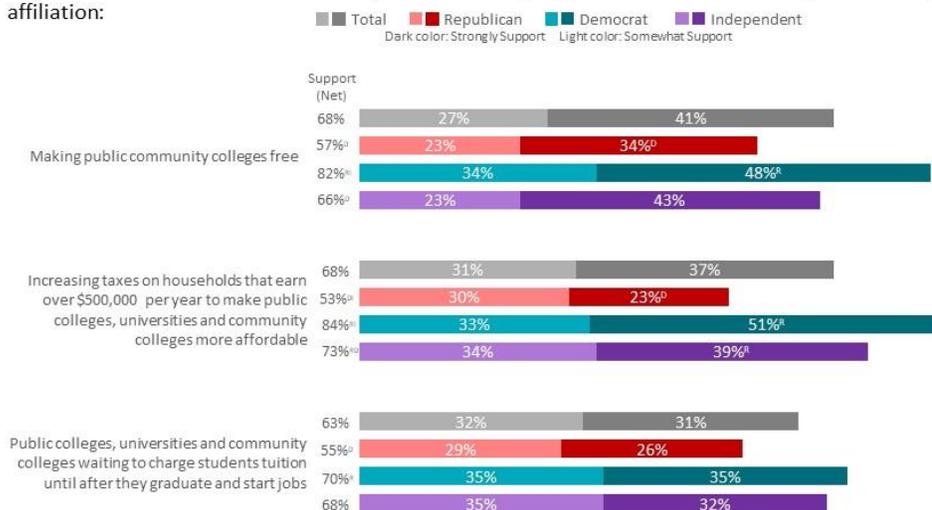


Base: Half of respondents, N=826; Republican, N=200; Democrat, N=344; Independent, N=192
 Estimates indicated with a ^o are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^o are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^l are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.

Public Agenda/USA Today Hidden Common Ground Survey – Higher Education

Half or more Democrats, independents and Republicans support making community colleges free, increasing taxes on the wealthy to make public higher education more affordable, and colleges waiting to charge tuition until after graduation.

Figure 13. Percent of Americans who say how much they support each of the following in their state, by political affiliation:



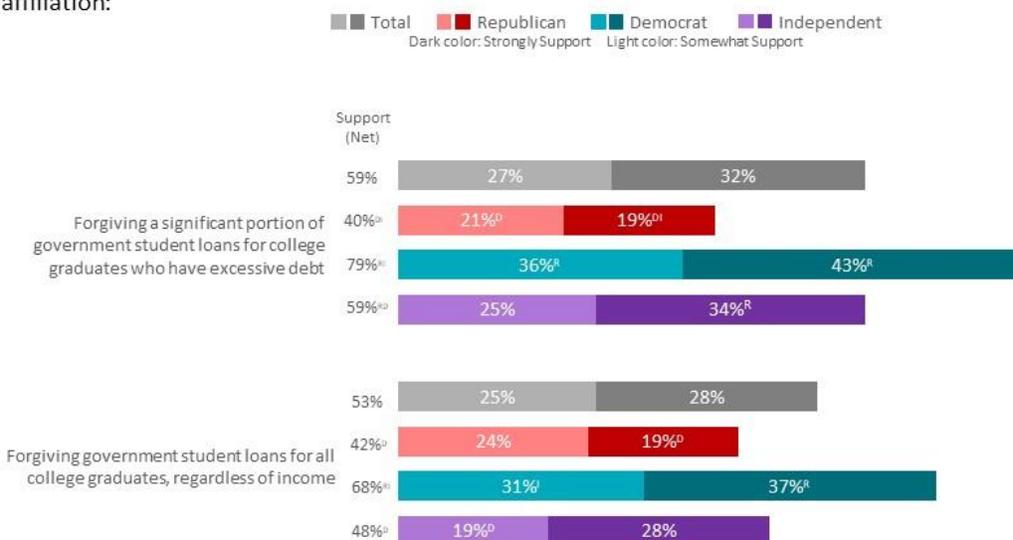
Base: Half of respondents, N=826; Republican, N=200; Democrat, N=344; Independent, N=192
 Estimates indicated with a ^o are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^o are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^l are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.

Public Agenda/USA Today Hidden Common Ground Survey – Higher Education

Only two of the approaches to making college education more affordable that this survey asked about failed to attract majority support across the political spectrum. Both involved forgiving student loans; see Figure 14.

More Democrats than Independents or Republicans support student loan forgiveness

Figure 14. Percent of Americans who say how much they support each of the following in their state, by political affiliation:



Base: Half of respondents, N=826; Republican, N=200; Democrat, N=344; Independent, N=192. Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.

Public Agenda/USA Today Hidden Common Ground Survey – Higher Education

FINDING 4. THERE IS SURPRISING CROSS-PARTISAN AND CROSS-RACIAL AGREEMENT ON STATE INVESTMENTS TO MAKE PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION MORE RACIALLY EQUITABLE AND TO SUPPORT LOW-INCOME STUDENTS.

Strong majorities of Americans across partisan affiliations and across racial/ethnic identities say that all high school graduates deserve an equal opportunity to get a college education, no matter their race, ethnicity, or income; see Figure 15.

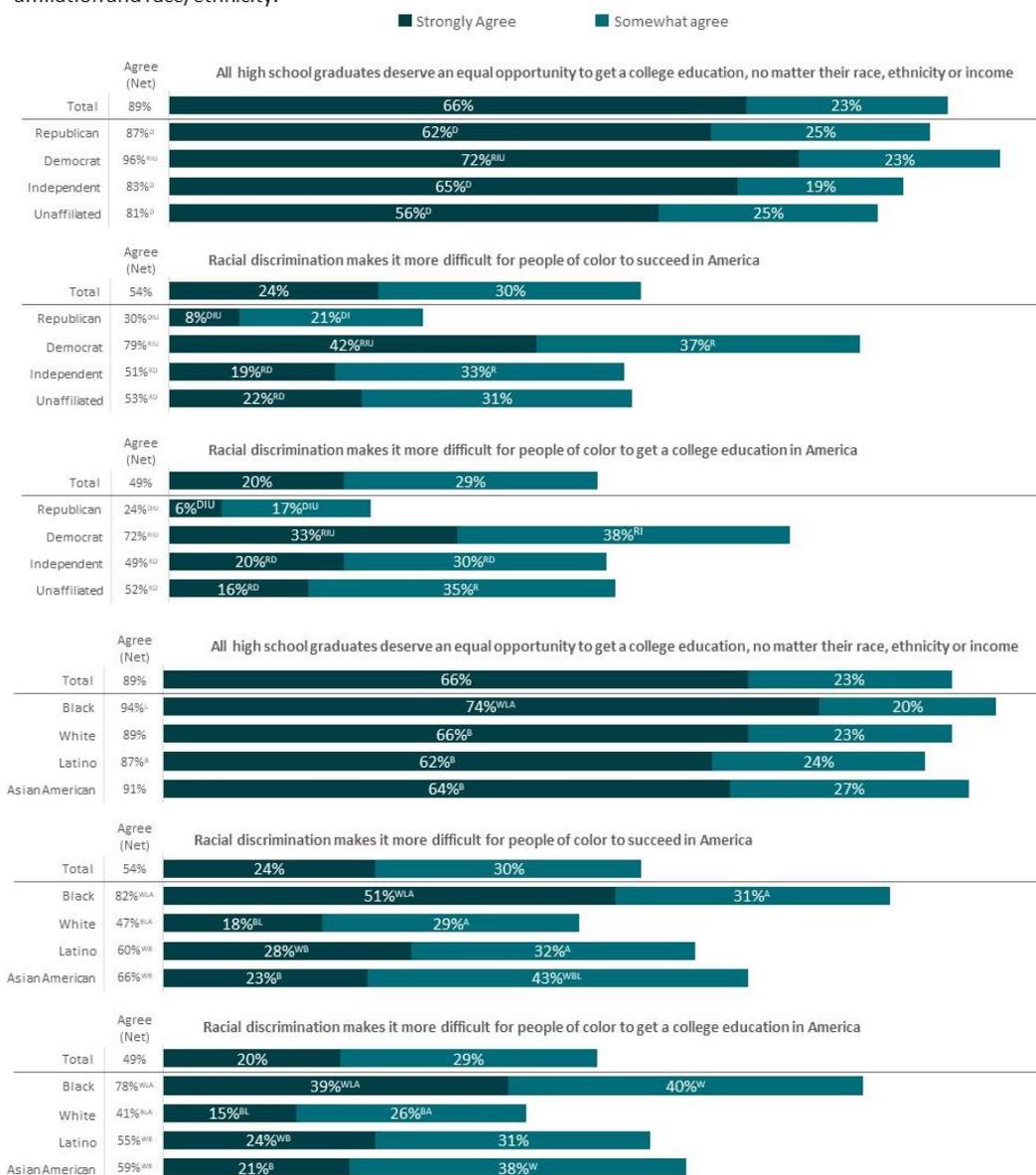
However, as previous Public Agenda surveys have also found, there is partisan disagreement over the systemic impacts of racism.⁶ Specifically, far more Democrats than Republicans believe that racial discrimination makes it more difficult for people of color to get a college education and to succeed more generally. Independents' and unaffiliated people's views fall in between; see Figure 15.

Differences of opinion by political affiliation on these questions are far greater than differences of opinion by race/ethnicity, a pattern also found in previous Public Agenda surveys. That said, more Black Americans than Latino or Asian Americans say that racial discrimination makes it more difficult for people of color both to succeed in general and to get a college education, compared to fewer white Americans; see Figure 15.

⁶ See for example Public Agenda, 2021, "Putting Partisan Animosity in Perspective," <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/partisan-animosity/>; Public Agenda, 2020, "America's Hidden Common Ground on Racism and Police Reform," <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/americas-hidden-common-ground-on-police-reform-and-racism-in-america/>

Americans agree on the importance of equal opportunity in higher education. But they differ by political affiliation and by race/ethnicity on the impact of racial discrimination on college success.

Figure 15. Percent of Americans who say how much they agree or disagree with each of the following, by political affiliation and race/ethnicity:



Base: All respondents, N=1,662; Black, N=309; White, N=729; Latino, N=374; Asian American, N=218
 Numbers may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding
 Estimates indicated with a ^B are statistically significant from the Black estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^W are statistically significant from the white estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^L are statistically significant from the Latino estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^A are statistically significant from the Asian American estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.

Public Agenda/USAToday Hidden Common Ground Survey – Higher Education

COMMON GROUND EMERGES IN FAVOR OF INVESTMENTS IN SUPPORT OF BLACK AND LATINO STUDENTS:

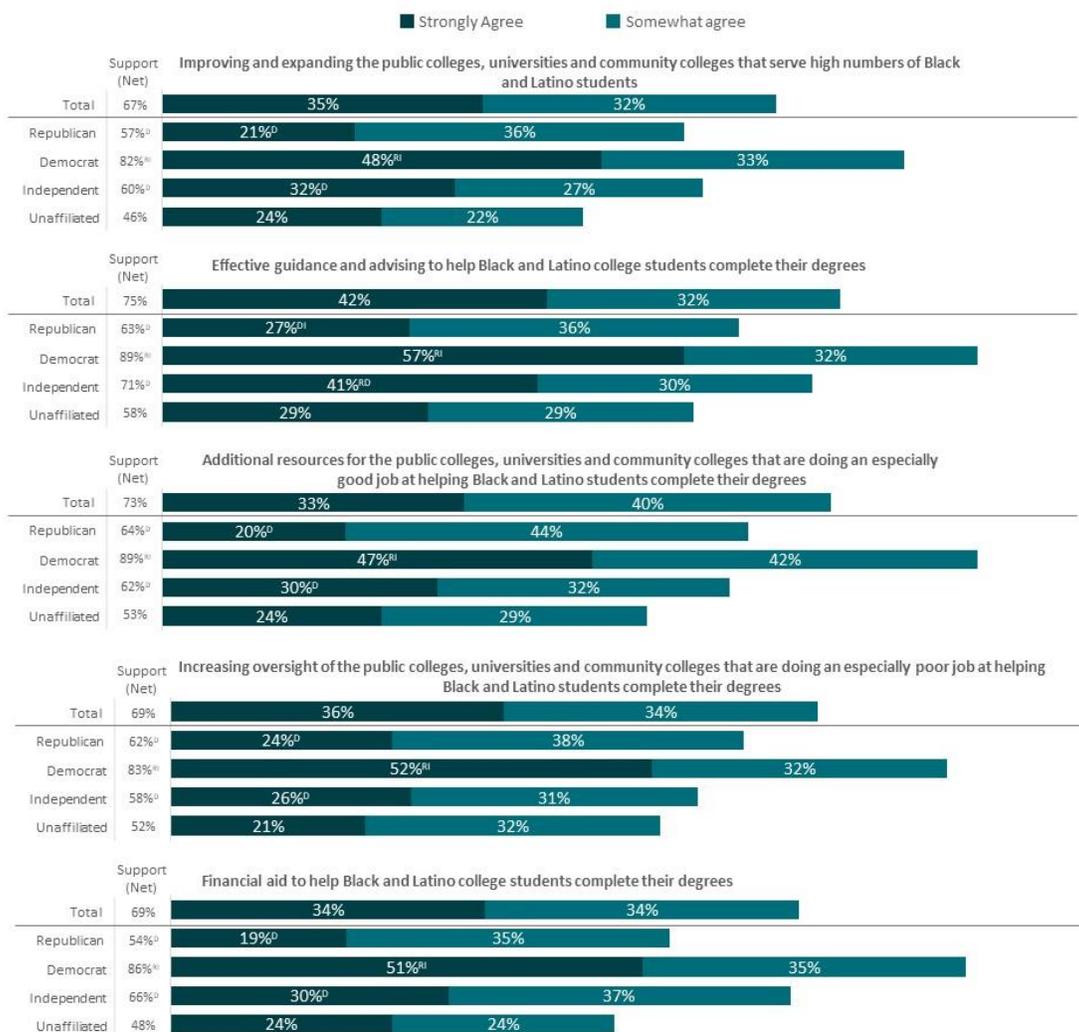
However, alongside these differences of opinion regarding systemic racism, there is nonetheless cross-partisan agreement that state government funding should be dedicated to supporting Black and Latino college students. Specifically, when survey respondents were informed that many more Black and Latino Americans want a college education than are able to get one, majorities favored their state government providing more funding for a range of initiatives to improve access, affordability, and completion for Black and Latino students at public higher education institutions.

For example, support is particularly strong for greater state investments in effective guidance and advising to help Black and Latino students complete their degrees and for investments in the institutions that are doing well at helping Black and Latino students complete. There is also considerable support for investments in improving and expanding Black- and Latino-serving institutions and in providing financial aid to Black and Latino students to help them complete their degrees. And there is considerable support for increased oversight of colleges that do a poor job of helping Black and Latino students succeed.

Half to two-thirds of Republicans support these and other investments. Support from Democrats is stronger; see Figure 16. Majorities across racial/ethnic identities support all of these investments, with support from Black Americans modestly stronger than from Latino or white Americans; see Figure 17.

Most Americans across the political spectrum favor state investments to support Black and Latino college students.

Figure 16. When told that many more Black and Latino Americans want a college education than are able to get one, percent who support or oppose their state government providing more funding for each of the following at public colleges, universities and community colleges, by political affiliation:

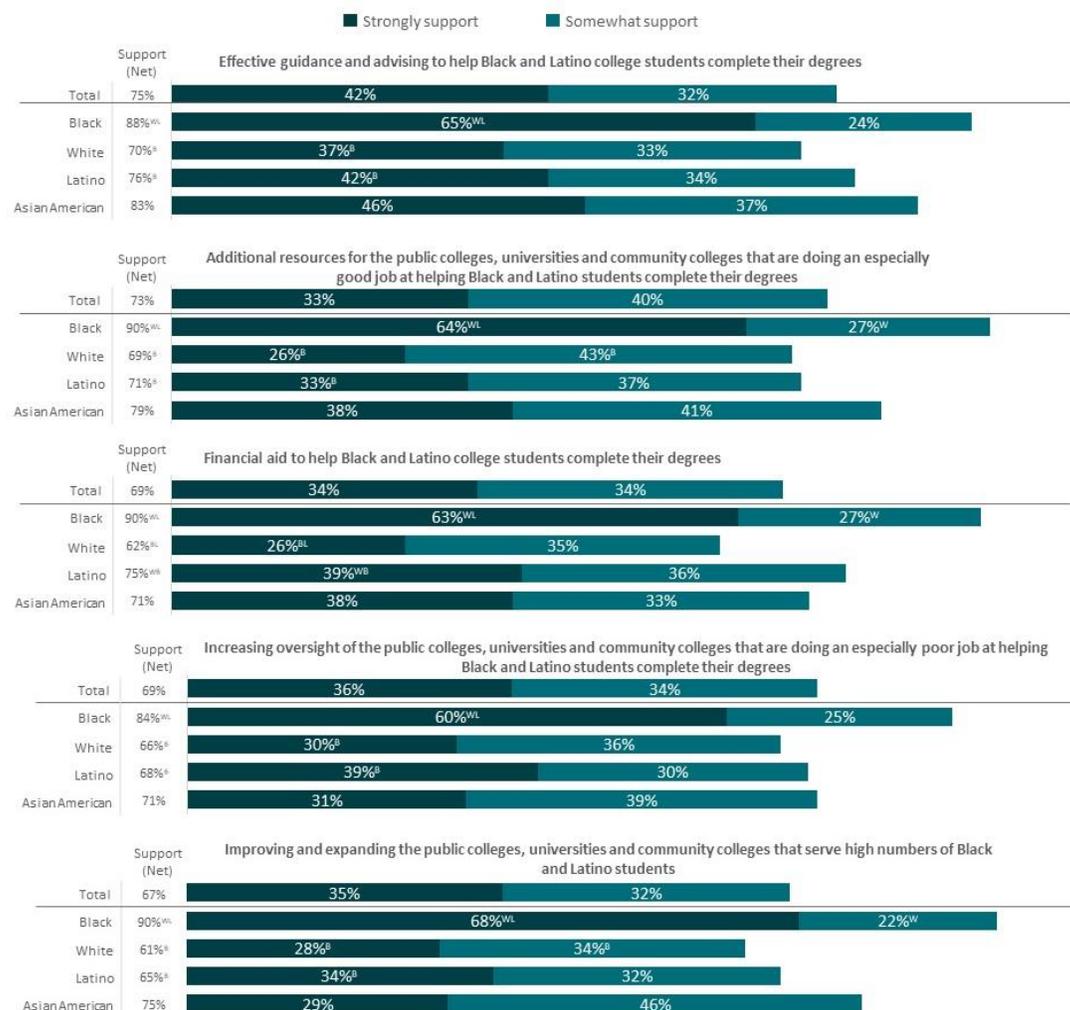


Base: Half of respondents, N=805; Republican, N=178; Democrat, N=346; Independent, N=188; Politically Unaffiliated, N=93
 Numbers may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding
 Estimates indicated with a ^h are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^o are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate.
 Estimates indicated with a ⁱ are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^u are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.

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Most Americans across races/ethnicities favor state investments to support Black and Latino college students.

Figure 17. When told that many more Black and Latino Americans want a college education than are able to get one, percent who support or oppose their state government providing more funding for each of the following at public colleges, universities and community colleges, by race/ethnicity:



Base: Half of respondents, N=805; Black, N=158; White, N=350; Latino, N=191; Asian American, N=90
 Numbers may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding
 Estimates indicated with a ^b are statistically significant from the Black estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^W are statistically significant from the white estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^L are statistically significant from the Latino estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^A are statistically significant from the Asian American estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.

Public Agenda/USA Today Hidden Common Ground Survey – Higher Education

SUPPORT IS EVEN STRONGER FOR INVESTMENTS AIMED AT HELPING LOW-INCOME STUDENTS SUCCEED:

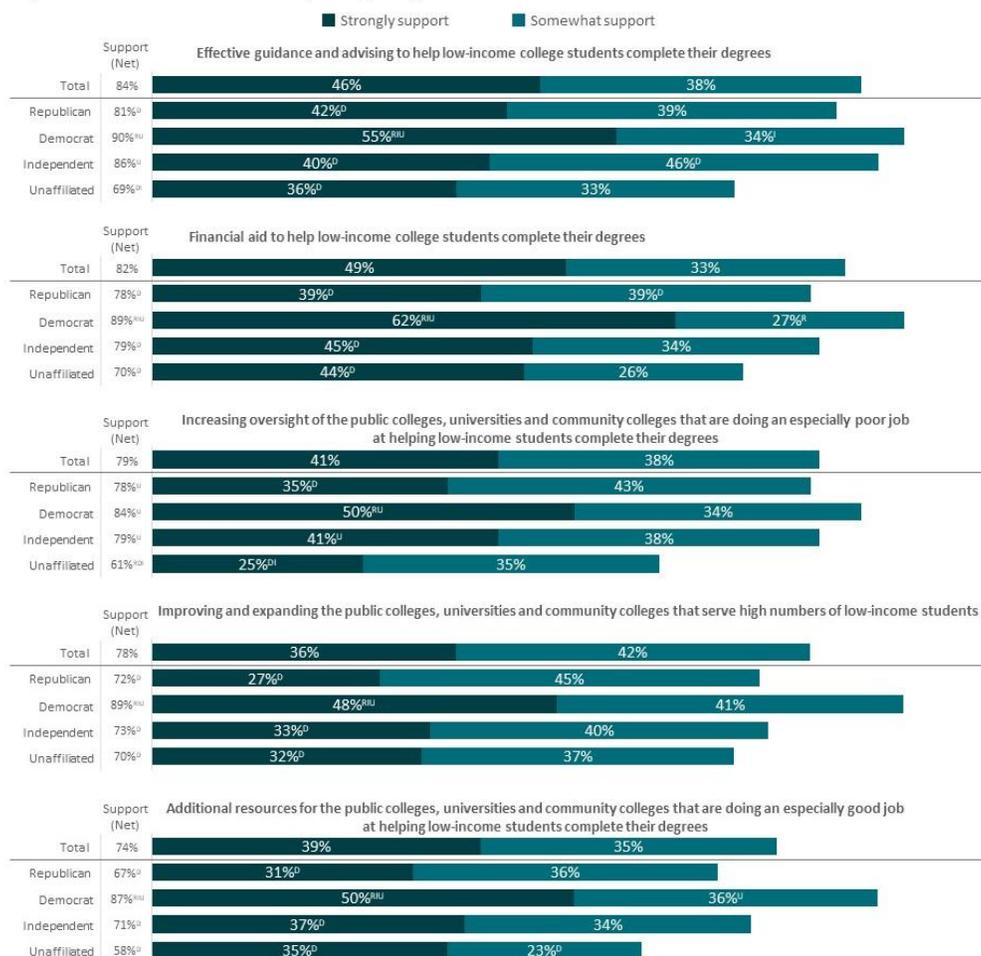
Cross-partisan and cross-racial support is even stronger for state funding of similar initiatives designed to support low-income students. When survey respondents were informed that many more low-income Americans want a college education than are able to get one, strong majorities favored their state

government providing more funding for public higher education institutions to improve access, affordability and completion for low-income students.

Support is particularly strong for state investments in effective guidance and advising to help low-income college students complete their degrees and for financial aid for low-income college students. Few people oppose any of these investments; see Figure 18 and Figure 19.

Most Americans across the political spectrum favor state investments to support low-income college students.

Figure 18. When told that many more low-income Americans want a college education than are able to get one, percent who support or oppose their state government providing more funding for each of the following at public colleges, universities and community colleges, by political affiliation:

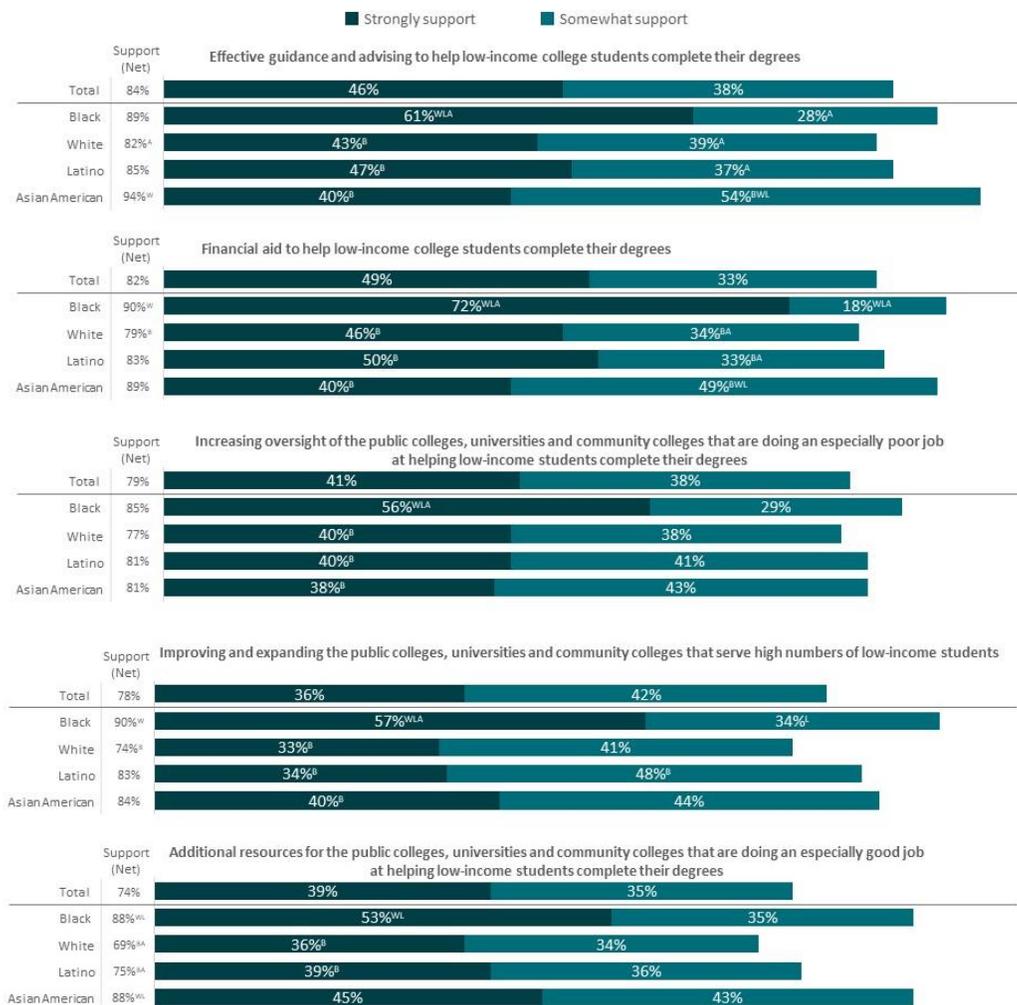


Base: Half of respondents, N=857; Republican, N=200; Democrat, N=348; Independent, N=200; Politically Unaffiliated, N=109
 Numbers may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding
 Estimates indicated with a ^a are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^b are statistically significant from the Republican estimate.
 Estimates indicated with a ^c are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^d are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.

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Most Americans across races/ethnicities favor state investments to support low-income college students.

Figure 19. When told that many more low-income Americans want a college education than are able to get one, percent who support or oppose their state government providing more funding for each of the following at public colleges, universities and community colleges, by race/ethnicity:



Base: Half of respondents, N=857; Black, N=151; White, N=379; Latino, N=183; Asian American, N=128
 Numbers may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding
 Estimates indicated with a ^b are statistically significant from the Black estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^w are statistically significant from the white estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^a are statistically significant from the Latino estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^A are statistically significant from the Asian American estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.

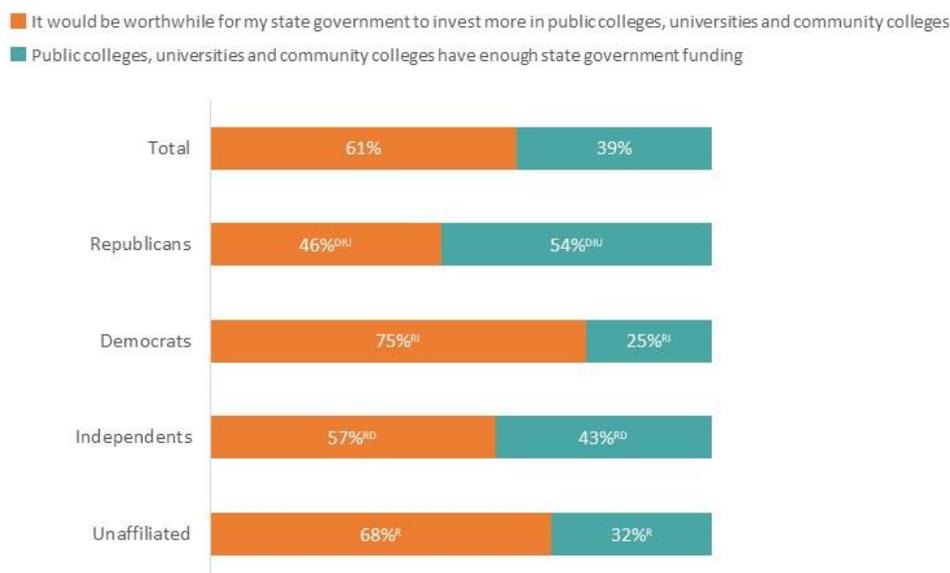
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FINDING 5. WHEN PEOPLE KNOW WHAT THEY’RE PAYING FOR, SUBSTANTIALLY MORE ARE WILLING TO INVEST IN PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION.

When asked in general terms if it would be worthwhile for their state government to invest more in public colleges, universities, and community colleges, a 61 percent majority of Americans say yes, while 39 percent say that these public institutions have enough state funding. Three-quarters of Democrats and just under half of Republicans say these investments would be worthwhile; see Figure 20. There are only modest differences by race/ethnicity in views on this question and no differences between people with and without college degrees.

Most Americans overall favor more state government investment in public higher education in general, including more Democrats than Republicans.

Figure 20. Percent of Americans who say which of the following statements come closest to their view, by political affiliation:



Base: All respondents, N=1,662; Republican, N=378; Democrat, N=694; Independent, N=388; Politically Unaffiliated, N=202

Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate.

Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^U are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.

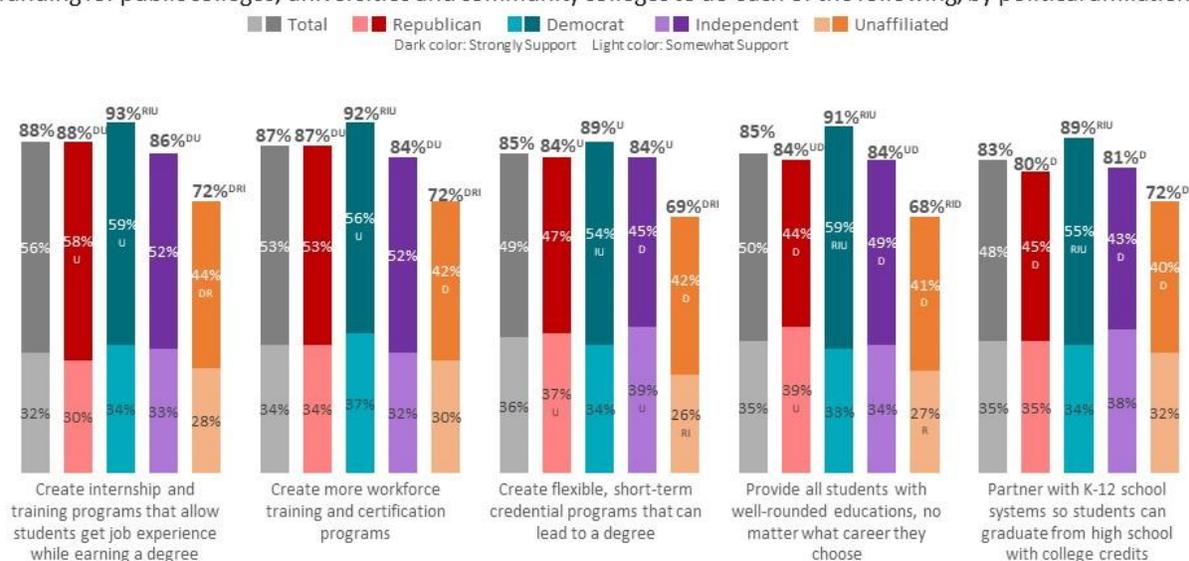
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But stronger majorities across the political spectrum support investing in specific initiatives at public higher education institutions to help students succeed in college and beyond. In other words, support is tepid and uneven for increased investment in general but is stronger and cross-partisan when people consider investing in specific approaches to helping students succeed.

For example, 80 percent or more Democrats, Republicans, and Independents support state government funding for public colleges, universities, and community colleges to create workforce training and certification programs; create flexible, short-term credential programs; and partner with K-12 systems so students graduate from high school with college credits; see Figure 21. Support from politically unaffiliated people is lower largely because they often are not sure whether or not they support these investments.

Americans across political affiliations favor state government funding of public higher education initiatives including workforce training and certification, short-term credentials, and partnerships with K-12 systems.

Figure 21. Percent of Americans who say they strongly or somewhat support their state government providing funding for public colleges, universities and community colleges to do each of the following, by political affiliation:

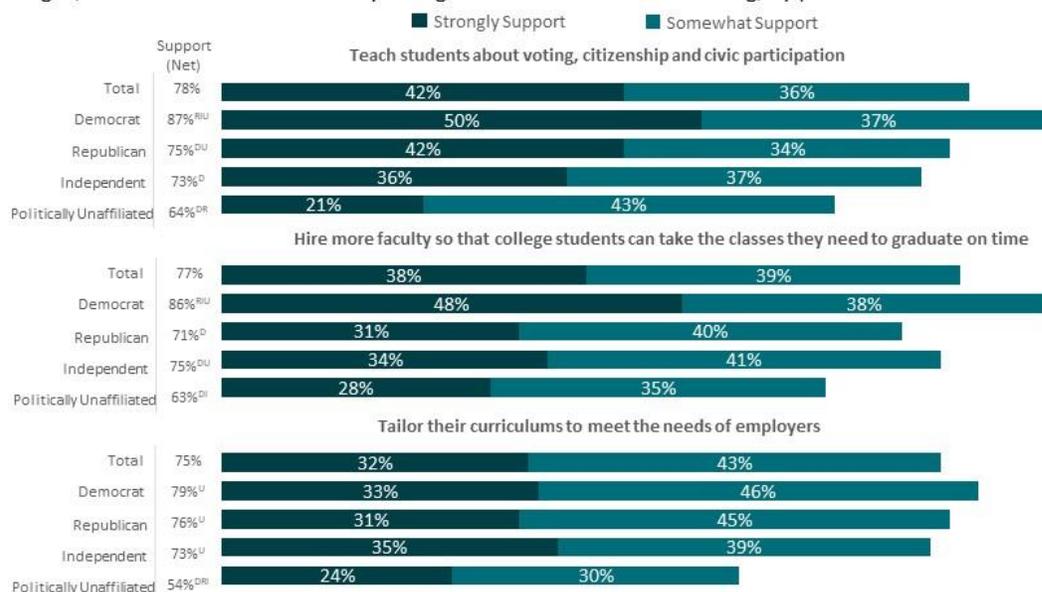


Base: All respondents, N=1,662; Republican, N=378; Democrat, N=694; Independent, N=388; Politically Unaffiliated, N=202
 Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^U are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.
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Similarly, 70 percent or more Democrats, Republicans, and Independents support increased state investment in public colleges, universities and community colleges hiring more faculty so that students can take the classes they need to graduate on time; tailoring curricula to employers’ needs; and teaching students about voting, citizenship, and civic participation; see Figure 22.

Americans across political affiliations favor state government funding of public higher education initiatives including civic education, hiring more faculty so students graduate on time, and tailoring curricula to employers' needs.

Figure 22. Percent of Americans who support or oppose their state government providing funding for public colleges, universities and community colleges to do each of the following, by political affiliation:



Base: All respondents, N=1,662; Republican, N=378; Democrat, N=694; Independent, N=388; Politically Unaffiliated, N=202

Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^U are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.

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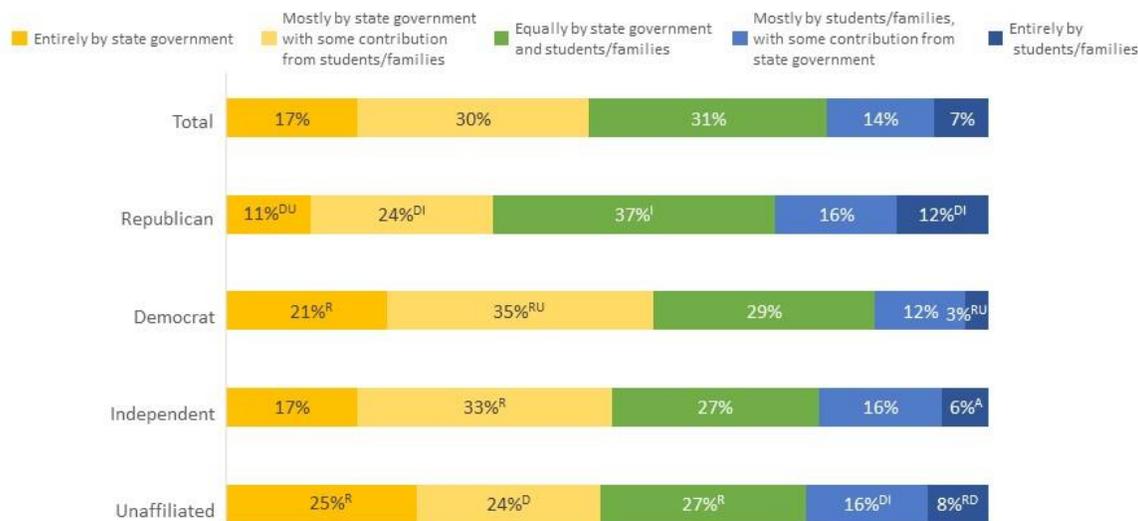
SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR FUNDING PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION:

Across political affiliations, most Americans think that public higher education institutions should be funded either mostly by government with some student contribution or equally by government and students; see Figure 23.⁷ There are only modest differences in views on this question between people with and without college degrees.

⁷ Quadlin and Powell documented a historic growth in the share of Americans who believe that government should have responsibility for funding college. See “Responsibility for the funding of college: Where does the public stand?,” Brookings Institution, 2022: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2022/04/14/responsibility-for-the-funding-of-college-where-does-the-public-stand/>

Most Americans believe that their state government has a major role to play in funding public higher education.

Figure 23. Percent of Americans who say how the public colleges, universities and community colleges in their state should be funded, by political affiliation:



Base: All respondents, N=1,662; Republican, N=378; Democrat, N=694; Independent, N=388; Politically Unaffiliated, N=202
 Numbers may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding
 Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^U are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.

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SUPPORT FOR MAINTAINING HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING THROUGH HARD ECONOMIC TIMES

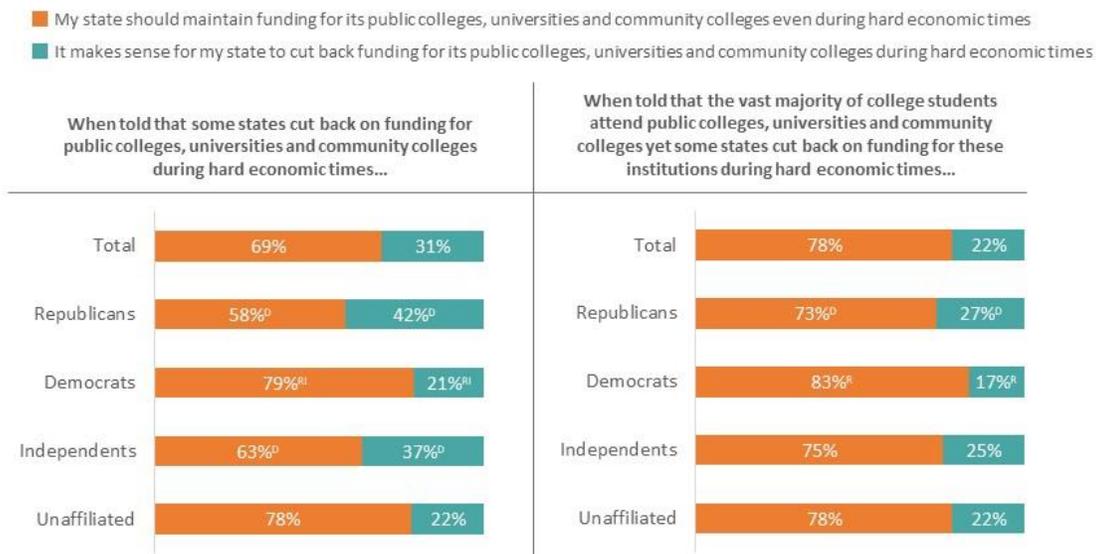
Nearly two-thirds of Americans (64 percent) believe that cuts in state funding of public colleges are a very or somewhat serious problem, including more Democrats (78 percent) than Republicans (51 percent), Independents (62 percent) or politically unaffiliated people (57 percent).

Most Americans—but only modest majorities of Republicans and Independents—believe that their state should maintain funding for public colleges, universities, and community colleges even during hard economic times; see Figure 24.⁸ But when informed that the vast majority of college students attend public institutions, support for maintaining funding during hard economic times becomes stronger for Republicans and Independents; see Figure 24.

⁸ The politically unaffiliated sample was not large enough to report their responses to these questions.

Republicans' and Independents' support for maintaining funding for public higher education institutions increases when they learn that the vast majority of college students attend public institutions.

Figure 24. Percent of Americans who say which of the following statements come closest to their view, by political affiliation:



Base: All Respondents, N=838/824; Republican, N=186/192; Democrat, N=345/349; Independent, N=209/179; Politically Unaffiliated, N=98/104
 Estimates indicated with a ^o are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^a are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^U are statistically significant from the politically unaffiliated estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level. Estimates with bases below 100 are not tested for statistical significance.

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Public Agenda is a national nonpartisan organization dedicated to creating a better, more inclusive and informed democracy for everyone. Through research, engagement and communications, Public Agenda focuses on building trust and opportunity, raising up the voices of the public, and bridging divides to facilitate progress. Areas of focus include K-12 education, higher education, health care, economic opportunity, and democracy. Find Public Agenda online at PublicAgenda.org, on Facebook at facebook.com/PublicAgenda and on Twitter at [@PublicAgenda](https://twitter.com/PublicAgenda).



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About Lumina Foundation

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. We envision a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's need for talent through a broad range of credentials. Our goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and for success in a global economy.



About the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people's health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in Seattle, Washington, the foundation is led by CEO Mark Suzman, under the direction of Co-chairs Bill Gates and Melinda French Gates and the board of trustees.