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Americans Hold Positive Views About Colleges, but Question Their Costs and Operations, Survey Finds

By [SARA HEBEL](#)

A growing proportion of Americans believe that a college education is essential to succeeding in the workplace, according to survey findings scheduled for release today.

But the survey also found that Americans' generally favorable impressions of higher education are beginning to erode.

The national survey was conducted by Public Agenda and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, two independent nonprofit research groups, as part of a project sponsored by the Lumina Foundation for Education.

Half of the respondents said they viewed college as necessary for achieving success. That is up from 31 percent who said so in a similar poll the research groups conducted in 2000.

The new survey found that people were generally positive toward higher education, with about two-thirds of respondents saying that colleges teach students what they need to know. But the public is voicing more skepticism about colleges and their operations, especially as their prices rise, the report's authors said.

A total of 1,001 adults, ages 18 and older, from across the nation were randomly selected and interviewed by telephone between February 13 and 25 for the survey. Researchers also conducted seven focus groups and separately interviewed about 25 leaders in business, politics, and other fields.

"The public is just beginning to get this sense that all is not perfect," Jean Johnson, executive vice president of Public Agenda, said in an interview on Wednesday. Most people tended to remain "very respectful" of higher education, she said, but the survey found "a little bit more of a questioning and skeptical stance."

For instance, more than half of the survey's respondents said they viewed colleges as businesses that mainly care about the bottom line, and nearly half of those interviewed said their state systems of higher education needed to be fundamentally reformed. More than two in five of those surveyed also said that waste and mismanagement were major factors in the rising price of college.

Ms. Johnson said that people in focus groups also brought up their views of colleges as businesses without prompting. And she said she was surprised that such a high proportion of survey respondents supported major reforms of their state systems when the economy is relatively strong.

In past public-opinion surveys, she said, support for a major overhaul tended to decline when the economy was performing well and to increase when the economy soured.

Much of the dissatisfaction, Ms. Johnson said, seems to stem from the rising cost of attending college. Nearly two-thirds of those surveyed who were parents of high-school students said they did not believe that higher tuition was leading to more learning on campuses. More than half of survey respondents also said they thought colleges could spend less money and still maintain quality.

On the topic of college access, 62 percent of those surveyed said they believed that many qualified and motivated students did not have the opportunity to obtain a higher education. The response varied by ethnicity: Black and Hispanic parents, even those from middle- and upper-income families, were more likely than white parents to say they believed that many qualified students do not have the opportunity to attend college.

Nevertheless, 86 percent of those surveyed said that they thought that anyone who really wanted to get a college education could find a way to do so if they were willing to make sacrifices.

A majority of respondents supported various ideas for changes that could make college more affordable or accessible. For instance, more than two-thirds of those surveyed favored greater use of community colleges in the first two years of study as a means of keeping down the costs of obtaining a four-year degree. More than half of respondents said qualified students should take college courses in high school to trim their higher-education expenses.

"There is a real opportunity to engage in reforms that the public would be very supportive of," said Joni E. Finney, vice president for the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. She said the survey showed that policy makers and college leaders need to tackle Americans' growing concerns about rising college costs while also seeking to maintain institutions' quality and improve access to higher education. A report describing the survey, "Squeeze Play: How Parents and the Public Look at Higher Education Today," is expected to be available today on the Lumina project's [Web site](#).

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