

Enduring Values, Changing Concerns

Increasing necessity and declining availability of higher education creates a challenge for many Americans

By John Immerwahr

OVER THE LAST eighteen years *National CrossTalk* has featured a number of articles about the National Center's remarkable collaboration with Public Agenda. The two organizations have conducted a series of studies of public and leadership opinion on higher education, from "The Closing Gateway" (1993) up to our most recent study, *Squeeze Play 2010: Continued Public Anxiety on Cost, Harsher Judgments on How Colleges Are Run*.^{*} The studies have tracked attitudes as both the national economy and higher education itself have gone through a number of dramatic changes, including those associated with the recent financial collapse and recession.

Because we asked many of the same questions from survey to survey, the studies have allowed the researchers to tease out two different strains in public opinion. On the one hand, the research highlights stable and unchanging values that have had rock-solid consistency over a decade and a half. While these fundamental values have remained constant, the studies have also allowed us to understand changes in the public's fears, concerns and attitudes toward specific issues. These shifts are apparently driven by changing perceptions of economic, global and technological realities. Understanding and distinguishing between the public's deeply held values and its changing concerns is profoundly important for policymakers interested in higher education.

In this article we draw on past *National CrossTalk* articles and the studies themselves to reflect on how these changing attitudes have played out over the years; we then go on to speculate briefly about the implications of these findings for higher education policy.

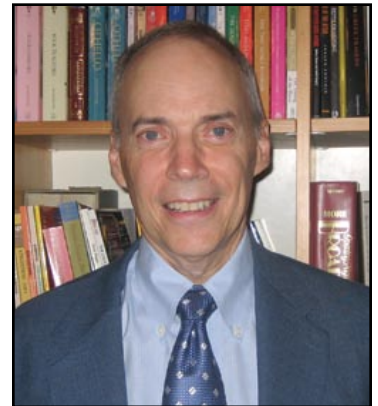
^{*}Previous reports from Public Agenda and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education include the following. Note that in most cases the actual survey was conducted in the year before the study was published. In the text of this article we give data by the year the study was done.

2010 <i>Squeeze Play 2010: Continued Public Anxiety on Cost, Harsher Judgments on How Colleges Are Run</i>	n=1,031
2009 <i>Squeeze Play 2009: The Public's Views on College Costs Today</i>	n=1,009
2008 "The Iron Triangle: College Presidents Talk About Cost, Access and Quality"	N/A
2007 <i>Squeeze Play: How Parents and the Public Look at Higher Education Today</i>	n=1,001
2004 "Public Attitudes on Higher Education: A Trend Analysis, 1993 to 2003"	n=801
2000 "Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African-American and Hispanic—View Higher Education"	n=1,015
1998 "The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education"	n=700
1993 "The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System"	n=502

Fundamental Values

The *National CrossTalk* articles have discussed two deeply held attitudes toward higher education:

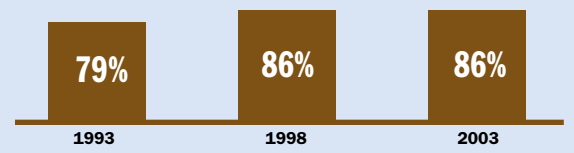
1. *The importance of higher education as a gateway to the middle class.* As social scientists have long observed, the vast majority of Americans aspire to be middle class, which can be roughly defined to include a complex of elements such as home ownership, a good job, healthcare, a secure retirement, and the hope of a better life for one's children. Throughout the period of our study, a college education (and its promise of a better job) has been perceived as an important gateway to those goals. Huge majorities have consistently held, for example, that it is far better for a high school graduate to go to college rather than take a decent job offer right out of high school.



Americans have emphasized the importance of a higher education for a number of years

Should high school graduates go on to college because in the long run they'll have better job prospects, or should they take any decent job offer they get because there are so many unemployed people already?

Percent who say that high school graduates go on to college because in the long run they'll have better job prospects:



A woman from New Jersey (quoted in the spring 2000 issue of *National CrossTalk*) said it this way: "Today you don't even question whether you are going to college. It is a sign of the times. When I was growing up, what was important was to make the home front, with marriage and children, but today it is college." We heard exactly the same sentiments in our 2007 study (*Squeeze Play 2007: How Parents and the Public Look at Higher Education Today*), such as the remarks of a respondent in Atlanta who said, "Once you have that degree, all of a sudden it just puts you into a whole new career field

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of opportunity or a whole new segment of opportunity to get work. You just totally disassociated yourself from the high school graduate.”

Given the importance of higher education, it is hardly surprising that access to higher education has assumed, at least in the public’s mind, the status of a virtual right. The public’s logic is straightforward. Since a college degree is closely linked to a good job, to deny a motivated and qualified student access to a higher education is to say to that person, in effect, “You have no chance to become full partner in American life.” This idea is clearly unacceptable to the vast majority of Americans. Nearly nine out of ten Americans have consistently endorsed the idea that no qualified and motivated student should be priced out of obtaining a higher education.

Percent who agree strongly or somewhat that we should not allow the price of a college education to keep students who are qualified and motivated to go to college from doing so:					
1993 (n=502)	1998 (n=700)	1999 (n=1,015)	2003 (n=801)	2007 (n=1,001)	2008 (n=1,009)
89%	89%	93%	91%	88%	89%

2. *Reciprocity.* The demand for access to higher education, however, has always been balanced in the public’s mind by a second equally important value, which we call “reciprocity.” Although people believe that no deserving person should be locked out of the American middle class, they also do not believe that people should “get something for nothing.” There is a deep attachment to the view that people don’t really appreciate things that they don’t have to work for. The public seems to prefer a sense of reciprocity, where there is a balance giving and getting. As much as Americans stress the importance of higher education, they have also emphasized the idea that students should “pay for part of their education”

and that financial aid should go only to those who “work hard and seem to take individual responsibility.” (*National CrossTalk*, spring 2000)

As a result, most Americans seem to reject the European conception that higher education should be a free entitlement. The respondents in our surveys believe instead that students should contribute at least something to the cost of their higher education. An Alabama man articulated a sentiment that we heard in virtually all of the dozens of focus groups and

interviews conducted over the years: “I think that anyone, no matter how destitute they are, should work or do something to help defray their educational expenses, because they will appreciate it more than if it was just a gift handed to them on a silver platter.” (“Great Expectations,” May 2000)

Many people also believe that having to make sacrifices for a college education actually increases the benefits of a college education. In our 2007 survey, large majorities said that students who have to make sacrifices (such as going part-time or living at home) actually learn more than students who get an education entirely paid for by their parents. A California

woman, interviewed for *Squeeze Play 2007* put it frankly: “I think the ones who work for it are actually more on the ball than the ones who went to Stanford, and Daddy paid for it and gave them the yacht in the summertime. When I see the kids who don’t work for college and have been handed everything, they don’t seem to have gotten anything out of their degree.”

Students who sacrifice to get an education learn more and appreciate their education

Percent who say they agree with the following:

Strongly agree Somewhat agree

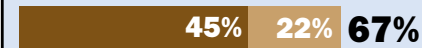
People who make sacrifices will appreciate college because they sacrifice to get it



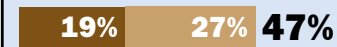
They will learn more because they are more disciplined



Students don’t appreciate the value of a college education when they have no personal responsibility for paying for it



Students who sacrifice will miss out on the best parts of the college experience



Although people like the idea of students working for their education, in reality the option of students working and going to school at the same time may be more problematic than many realize. A recent Public Agenda survey of young adults ages 22 to 30 conducted for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation showed that many college students who drop out say they do so because they are attempting to work and go to school at the same time. For many, this becomes a balancing act that eventually overwhelms them. (“With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them,” Public Agenda, 2009)

Another aspect of the public’s belief in reciprocity and the emphasis the public places on student effort is the long-held conviction that what a student gets out of a higher education depends largely on what the student puts into his or her experience in higher education (as opposed to the quality or reputation of the school). People seem to believe that a motivated student can learn a great deal even in a college that does not have the latest equipment or the smallest classes, while an unmotivated student won’t learn much even at the best institution.

Which of the following two statements comes closest to your own view?	1993	1999	2007
The benefit a student gets from attending college depends on how much of an effort he or she puts in	71%	88%	86%
The benefit a student gets from attending college mostly depends on the quality of the college he or she is attending	23%	11%	11%
Don’t know	7%	2%	3%

Nearly nine out of ten Americans have consistently endorsed the idea that no qualified and motivated student should be priced out of obtaining a higher education.

Changing Concerns

The public's commitment to the importance of higher education and to the concept of reciprocity has remained largely unchanged over the years, but in many other ways the public's views on higher education have been surprisingly fluid. The biggest driver of these changes appears to be the public's perception of changing economic conditions, and, in that sense, the history of public attitudes has mirrored the state of the economy. The first *CrossTalk* analysis of our public opinion research was issued in October 1993 and reflected the public's position during the recession years of the early 1990s. That issue discussed the deep anxiety about higher education that we found, especially among Californians who were hit especially hard by the recession. As the economy eased up through the boom years of the 1990s, people's fears lessened, and we saw a decrease in the public's anxiety about higher education. Our studies in 1998 and 1999 documented the high-water mark in public optimism about the accessibility of higher education.

Some of the most striking results, however, were from a series of our three most recent studies. The first was done in 2007 just before the financial crisis hit; we followed that research with studies in both 2008 and 2009, which documented how attitudes changed as the financial crisis developed. Not surprisingly, public anxiety and concern rose sharply as the economic disaster unfolded. Two indicators are especially significant:

Most Americans seem to reject the European conception that higher education should be a free entitlement, believing instead that students should contribute at least something to the cost.

1. *Increasing belief in the necessity of higher education.*

As long as we have been tracking public opinion on this topic, Americans have always believed that

higher education is *important* for success in society. When we began these studies, however, most people thought that higher education was not strictly *necessary* for success. In focus groups, respondents consistently stressed that there were other paths to success. Bill Gates, a college dropout who became the richest man in the country, was frequently mentioned as an obvious example. But in our recent studies, we see a significant change, with growing numbers of Americans believing that a higher education is not only important but necessary for success. They increasingly believe that it is nearly impossible to climb up to a higher economic status without the benefit of higher education. A woman in a 2006 Detroit focus group said it this way: "At this point in time, a lot of places, in order to even chicken pluck, you need to have an undergrad degree." (*Squeeze Play 2007*).

As the chart below indicates, this shift increased even further after the financial crisis, so that by 2009 the percentage

of people who believed that it was impossible to succeed without a college degree had risen to 55 percent, almost twice what it had been when we first started tracking this in 1999. In public opinion research, such a sharp increase in such a short period of time in responses to a general question is extremely unusual.

Do you think that:	1999	2003	2007	2008	2009
A college education is necessary for a person to be successful in today's work world, or	31%	37%	50%	55%	55%
There are many ways to succeed in today's work world without a college education	67%	61%	49%	43%	43%
Don't know	3%	2%	1%	2%	2%

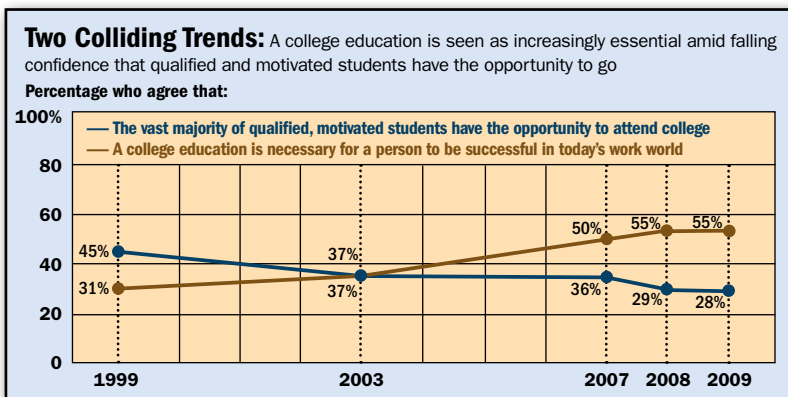
2. *Growing perception of the inaccessibility of higher education.* This increase in the perception of the necessity of higher education has been accompanied by an equally sharp increase in the percentage of those who believe that a college education is becoming unavailable to many qualified and motivated individuals. Over the years, we asked the public if it is true that there are many qualified and motivated students who don't have an opportunity for a higher education. Back in 1993 during the recession years, six out of ten Americans endorsed that sentiment. In the later 1990s, as the economy improved and people became more optimistic, the percentage of people who felt that college was unavailable dropped significantly. Even before the financial crisis the trend began to reverse itself, with more and more people feeling that a higher education was inaccessible. When the financial crisis hit, the numbers jumped even higher, reaching 69 percent in 2009, the highest percentage we had ever measured.

Do you think that currently:	1993	1998	1999	2003	2007	2008	2009
The vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college have the opportunity to do so, or	37%	49%	45%	37%	36%	29%	28%
There are many people who are qualified to go but don't have the opportunity to do so	60%	45%	47%	57%	62%	67%	69%
Don't know	4%	5%	8%	7%	2%	4%	3%

This concern about inaccessibility is paralleled by another concern about the growing price tag of a higher education. The public has been concerned about higher education tuition and fees for a long time; our recent studies show that many people think that higher education expenses are escalating rapidly. In our most recent study, 65 percent said that college prices are growing faster than other things, and of those who said this, more than seven out of ten said that college prices are growing as fast or even faster than healthcare. And while loans may be widely available, many people are concerned that students are borrowing too much. In 2009 we found that more than eight out of ten agreed that students have to borrow too much money to attend college.

Squeeze Play

When taken together, these two trends—increasing necessity and declining availability—create a difficult conflict for many Americans, which we have described as a “squeeze play,” where people perceive a college education as simultaneously more essential and less obtainable.



The numbers speak for themselves, describing a situation where a fundamental element of full participation in our society is becoming both more important and less available. As we will see, this painful dilemma has also been accompanied by a growing frustration with higher education itself.

Implications for Public Policy

What is the message in these findings for higher education administrators and state officials concerned with higher education? On the one hand, the conviction that attending college is the key to a secure economic future remains steadfast. Interestingly, the combination of rising college prices and a financial crisis has not made families reconsider the option of sending their children to college. Even after two years of the financial crisis, we found that most parents are still optimistic about their own children's ability to go to college. In 2009 we found that 80 percent of parents felt that it was somewhat or very likely that their oldest child would go to college.

Our focus groups suggest that people may be responding to financial problems not by taking their children out of

college, but by “trading down” to less expensive alternatives such as community colleges. Indeed, given the lack of jobs for young people, many may be thinking that college is a better alternative for their children than ever, despite its rising prices. In other words, the concerns about accessibility voiced in our studies are—at least for now—at a more abstract level about higher education accessibility in general. The results here do not suggest that the public is ready to turn its back on higher

education, dismiss its importance, or stop encouraging their children to attend.

But the results do suggest that the public may be becoming less receptive to the argument that is often made by college

presidents—that their institutions need more resources if they are to continue their mission. This line of thinking among higher education leaders emerged in “The Iron Triangle,” another recent study from Public Agenda and the National Center, which was based on interviews with 25 college presidents, published in 2008. In these interviews, many college presidents say that they were caught in an unbreakable relationship between the cost of running their operations, the number of students they can educate, and maintaining educational quality. Specifically, they argued that if they were to increase the number of students or the quality of education they would need more money, and conversely, cuts in their budgets would inevitably translate to either a decrease in the number of students they could educate or diminished educational quality. The solution that many of the college presidents offered was a major reinvestment in higher education. Several of our interviewees remarked that the country needs to make a mental shift away from thinking of higher education as a private good, toward seeing it as a public good that deserves more public support.

The findings from our most recent studies of public opinion suggest that the majority of the public doesn't buy this argument. Solid majorities believe colleges could increase enrollment without having to raise prices or cut quality. Most also say colleges could spend less and still maintain quality. Indeed, these views were held by healthy majorities of the public even before the current financial crisis.

Growing numbers of Americans believe that it is nearly impossible to climb up to a higher economic status without the benefit of higher education.

Which comes closer to your own view?	2007	2008	2009
If colleges cut budgets, the quality of education will suffer	40%	42%	40%
Colleges could spend less and still maintain a high quality of education	56%	53%	54%
Don't know	4%	5%	6%

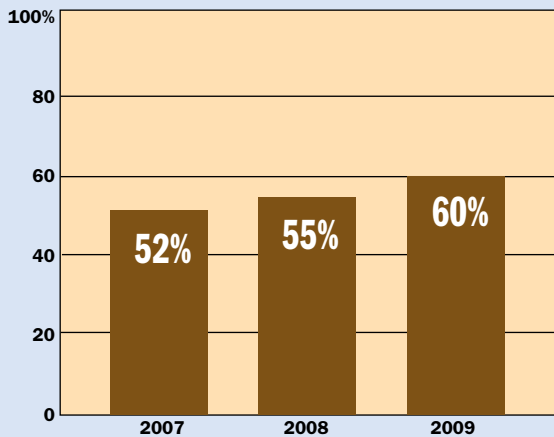
We have also seen a growing skepticism among the general public about the idealism and motives of higher education leadership. When we began this research, most of our respondents had a positive opinion about higher education in general, seeing higher education as different both from business and from K–12 schools. When we were doing focus groups for our 2007 study, however, we began to hear voices that suggested that people no longer saw any significant difference between the motives of higher education leaders and other institutions such as business. A man in Atlanta described higher education as “a growing business” with “money coming in from everywhere.” When

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we began to track this attitude in 2007, we found that a majority of Americans (52 percent) did, in fact, feel that colleges are like most businesses, and care mainly about the bottom line, as opposed to being primarily concerned about educating students. The percentage of people who felt this way continued to rise through the financial crisis to 60 percent in our most recent study.

**Rising Public Skepticism:
Americans increasingly believe colleges care more about their bottom line than the educational needs of their students**

Which comes closer to your view—colleges today care mainly about education and making sure students have a good educational experience, or colleges today are like most businesses and care mainly about the bottom line?



Percent who say, "Colleges today are like most businesses and care mainly about the bottom line"

A growing number of people seem to be saying something like this to America's colleges and universities: "Now that times are tough, we are getting a better idea of what you really care about, and it isn't the educational experience of your students." In part, this attitude might be a reaction to service cuts and tuition price hikes in colleges and universities around the country as they cope with reduced revenue from the state (for public systems) and/or declining endowments (for private institutions). As we have seen, most Americans are convinced that the institutions could do more with less.

This does not mean that the public is actively hostile to

higher education, but it does suggest that the public might not be especially sympathetic to the internal problems of the higher education system, either. Our findings suggest, in other words, that the public may be poised in a period of ambivalence and perhaps

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unpredictability toward the financial difficulties of higher education. On the one hand, people believe that higher education is important and necessary. But at the same time, we find no evidence of sympathy for the argument that colleges and universities are starved for financial resources. If higher education leaders want to make the argument for a significant reinvestment in higher education, they may find that their words fall on deaf ears, given the public's current state of mind, and that they will need to make a more specific and compelling argument to bring more Americans to their side.

To put this in another way, higher education leaders are now hearing calls from a variety of sources demanding greater productivity and, indeed, a fundamental change in higher education's "business model." While not denying that they can do things more efficiently, higher education leaders often say that they cannot meet the challenges that face the country merely by changing or streamlining their operations. Our research suggests that in this debate, the public is not currently sympathetic to the position of higher education. Education leaders thus will need to make a better case to the public, significantly change their operations, or look elsewhere for political support. ♦

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