



EDUCATION  
POLICY

HIGHER  
EDUCATION

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# VARYING DEGREES

New America's Annual Survey  
on Higher Education

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Americans believe in the tremendous potential of higher education—but they also feel that higher education is falling short of that promise. New America’s inaugural annual poll about perceptions of higher education reveals a gap between what higher education could, and should, be and what higher education currently is.

*Varying Degrees: New America’s Annual Survey on Higher Education* surveys 1,600 Americans ages 18 and older to better understand their perceptions of and knowledge about higher education and economic mobility. The survey shows unifying themes as well as differences across age, gender, generation, region, and socioeconomic status when it comes to the value of a college education, who is responsible for student success, the ideal role of government, and the goal of higher education.

Our top findings include:

- Americans are split about whether there are lots of well-paying jobs that do not require a college degree. About half (51 percent) agree that there are lots of well-paying jobs that do not require college attendance.
- There is wide agreement (75 percent), however, that it is easier to be successful with a degree than without.

- Only a quarter of Americans agree that our higher education system is functioning fine just the way it is.
- Over half (57 percent) of Americans believe that colleges and universities should help their students succeed.

This survey provides an important opportunity to see how the opinions of and knowledge about higher education of older generations such as the Silent Generation and the Baby Boomers compare to Millennials and their younger counterparts, Generation Z.

The survey data can help inform education policy and funding decisions that affect all Americans, but particularly current and prospective college students. This year’s findings will also serve as a baseline to measure shifts in beliefs and perceptions over time.

## Methodology

Our findings come from an Ipsos dual frame landline/cellphone poll conducted from February 24 to March 9, 2017. A sample of 1,000 adults from the continental U.S., Alaska, and Hawaii were randomly selected and interviewed in English or Spanish. There were oversamples of

150 African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and current college students, respectively, for a total sample size of 1,600.

All sample surveys and polls may be subject to sources of error, including, but not limited to, coverage error and measurement error. Based

on the sample size, common assumptions about the distribution of the underlying population and potential design effect (DEFF),<sup>1</sup> our poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.3 percentage points for all respondents.

# INTRODUCTION

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From a young age, Megan<sup>2</sup> wanted to be an artist. But even as early as middle school, she realized that it would be difficult to make a living that way. So, she turned her attention to pursuing a career working in a museum. Megan interned at a prestigious art museum while in high school. She enjoyed the experience so much that in college she landed more internships and museum work experience and became more certain of her career choice with each passing year.

In the months before she graduated from a small, private liberal arts college in the spring of 2008, Megan began to search for jobs in her field and found a few leads. But as summer came, with the Great Recession taking root, the leads dried up. Her dream career started to feel further and further out of reach. Meanwhile, Megan, who grew up in a moderate-income family, had taken on a significant amount of debt to pay for college. As her student loans became due, she took a job at a chain craft store, framing artwork. She later took

part-time work in a museum, and, in addition, at an historical society, and at a local library. It was not until she was 28 that she got a full-time job in an art museum as an attendant, basically a security guard who monitors the various collections. It is not the job she dreamed about, but it is a job that provides a decent salary and benefits.

Megan is part of generation that did everything “right” but landed in the labor market during a financial crisis, when jobs were disappearing. “I never pictured living in a penthouse apartment in New York City even in my wildest dreams as a kid, but I never imagined I’d be living in an apartment with roommates at 28,” she says. “I think a lot of Millennials are dismissed as being whiny and entitled, but many of us have put ourselves into crippling student debt just to have a similar opportunity as our parents and we still find ourselves struggling to get a foothold in the middle class.”

Megan is right: it is getting harder to achieve the American dream. According to research led by Raj Chetty, an economist at Stanford University, it is becoming, with each passing generation, less and less likely that children will earn more than their parents.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the decline in economic mobility has been steep. Over 90 percent of children born in the average American household in 1940 made more money than their parents. But only half of Millennials, many of whom were born in the 1980s and entered the workforce during the Great Recession,<sup>4</sup> will earn more over their lifetimes than their parents.<sup>5</sup>

Megan realizes that without her college degree she might be facing an even harsher reality. “It’s easier to be successful with a college degree than without,” she says. “In my personal experience, I’ve seen people who would otherwise qualify be overlooked when applying for jobs because they have no college experience.”

In the long term, according to David Autor from MIT, getting a college degree, even when accounting for the increase in college costs, still pays off with regard to lifetime earnings.<sup>6</sup> However, not nearly enough students enroll in some type of education beyond high school, and many students who start programs do not finish. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey reveal that in 2013, only 66 percent of high school graduates enrolled in college right after graduation.<sup>7</sup> And according to U.S. Department of Education statistics, just over half of first-time, full-time undergraduates manage to obtain a bachelor’s degree within six years.<sup>8</sup>

In the new post-recession economic reality where most jobs go to those with postsecondary degrees, ensuring that low-, moderate-, and middle-income adults have access to affordable, high-quality higher education is fundamental to helping to increase or maintain middle-class economic mobility.

Americans of all generations seem to understand this. In the winter of 2017, New America commissioned a survey of the general public ages 18 and older to better understand perceptions of higher education and economic mobility. The results show that people are aware that the American Dream is increasingly out of reach. They recognize, however, that higher education is an important social good. Not only do individuals with a college education make more over their lifetimes, but a more educated populace benefits society in multiple ways, including by increasing tax revenues and lowering unemployment.

In this report, we explore this pessimism about the American Dream, the undelivered promise of American higher education, and the value of public colleges and universities.<sup>9</sup> Although we explore opinions across multiple demographics, our report provides an opportunity to understand how the opinions and knowledge about higher education of older generations compare to Millennials and their even younger counterparts, Generation Z.<sup>10</sup>



# THE AMERICAN DREAM

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Despite the recession being officially over and unemployment the lowest it has been since 2007, the recovery has been felt unevenly. Barry Ritholtz in *Bloomberg View* explained why Americans hate the recovery from the Great Recession: many people are still unemployed or underemployed, and any wage increases have mostly been wiped away by escalating housing and healthcare costs.<sup>11</sup>

It is unsurprising, therefore, that our survey shows that Americans believe the American Dream—from finding a well-paying job to supporting a family—is becoming more difficult to attain compared to their parents. Overall, 60 percent of respondents said that it is more difficult to find a well-paying job compared to their parents. The exception is the Silent Generation (ages 72 and over), whose parents grew up during the Great Depression (see Figure 1).

This pattern also holds true when respondents are asked if it is becoming harder to afford a family than in previous generations. Overall, 64 percent of Americans believe it has become more difficult. In stark contrast, only 40 percent of the Silent Generation agrees (see Figure 1).

Only about half of Americans (51 percent) believe that there are lots of well-paying jobs that do not require a college degree. Members of Generation X, who are in their prime earning years, are the least likely Americans to believe

there are lots of well-paying jobs that do not require a college degree (see Figure 2).

And while Americans are split on whether or not there are well-paying jobs available without a college degree, there is wide agreement (75 percent) that it is easier to be successful with a degree than without. Generation Z, which is just entering higher education or the workforce, overwhelmingly believes this to be the case (84 percent agree) (see Figure 3).

About half of Americans believe society respects those with a college degree more than those without. For the younger generations, this is especially the case: only 37 percent of Generation Z, 32 percent of Millennials, and 35 percent of Generation X believe that American society respects those who have not gone to college (see Figure 4).

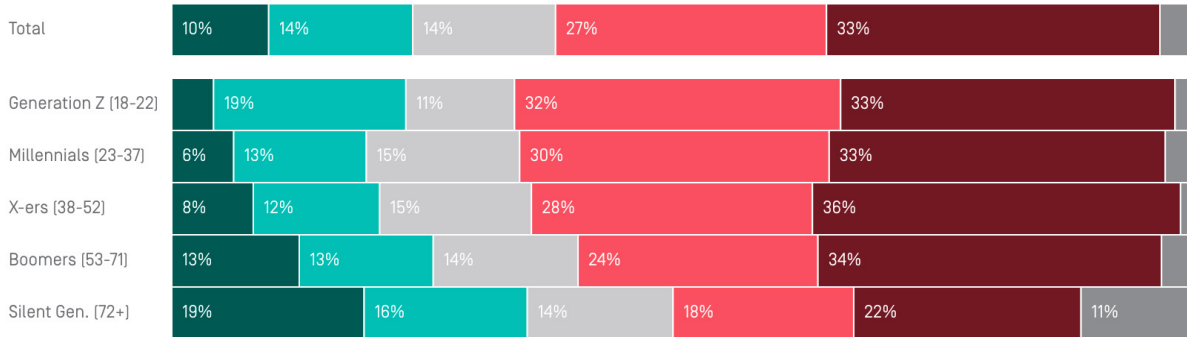
## Findings by Race

Following the 2016 presidential election, an analysis by Jeff Guo of the *Washington Post's Wonkblog* revealed that while white working-class voters helped Donald Trump win the presidency, his victory is not connected to any *actual* decline in their economic mobility over the past four years.<sup>12</sup> As it turns out, according to Guo, Trump outperformed Hillary Clinton in areas that have been in economic

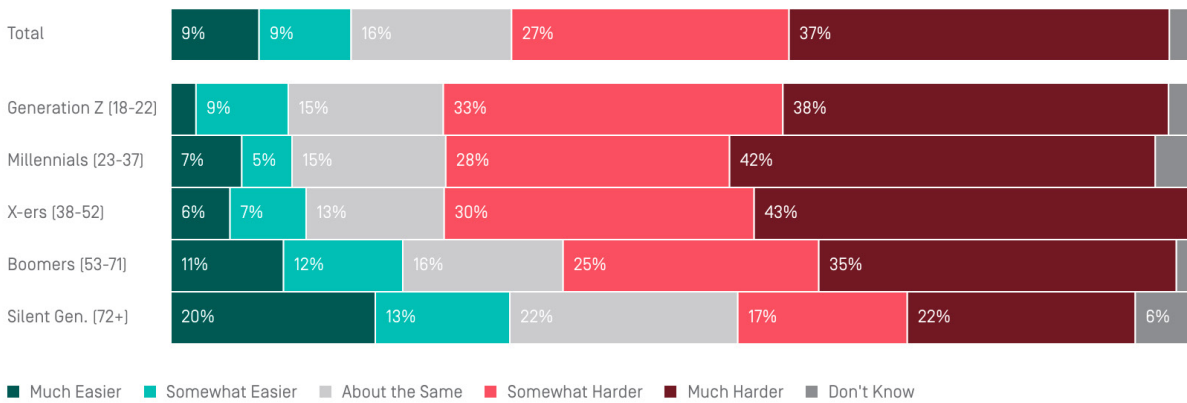
Figure 1

**Compared to when your parents were your age, do you think doing the following goals have gotten easier to attain, harder to attain, or are about the same?**

**Finding a good paying job** (n=1600)



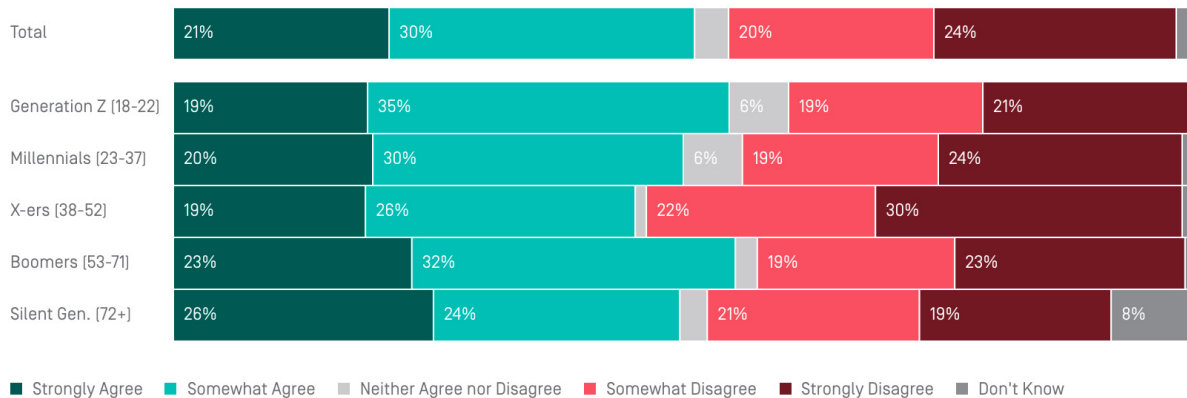
**Being able to afford a family** (n=1600)



■ Much Easier ■ Somewhat Easier ■ About the Same ■ Somewhat Harder ■ Much Harder ■ Don't Know

Figure 2

**Agree or disagree: There are lots of good-paying jobs that do not require college.** (n=1262)



■ Strongly Agree ■ Somewhat Agree ■ Neither Agree nor Disagree ■ Somewhat Disagree ■ Strongly Disagree ■ Don't Know



Figure 3

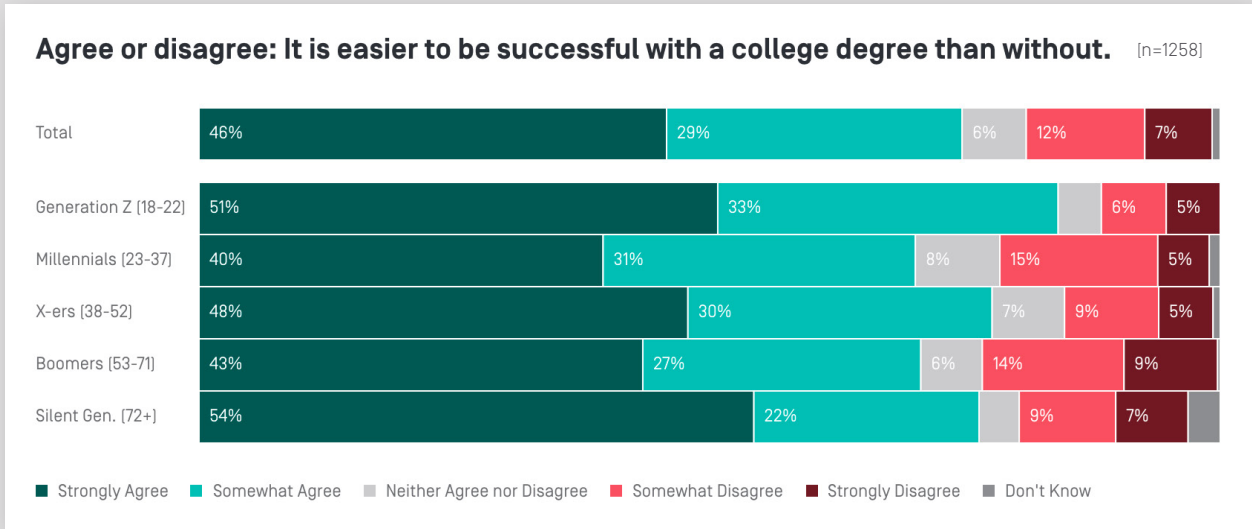
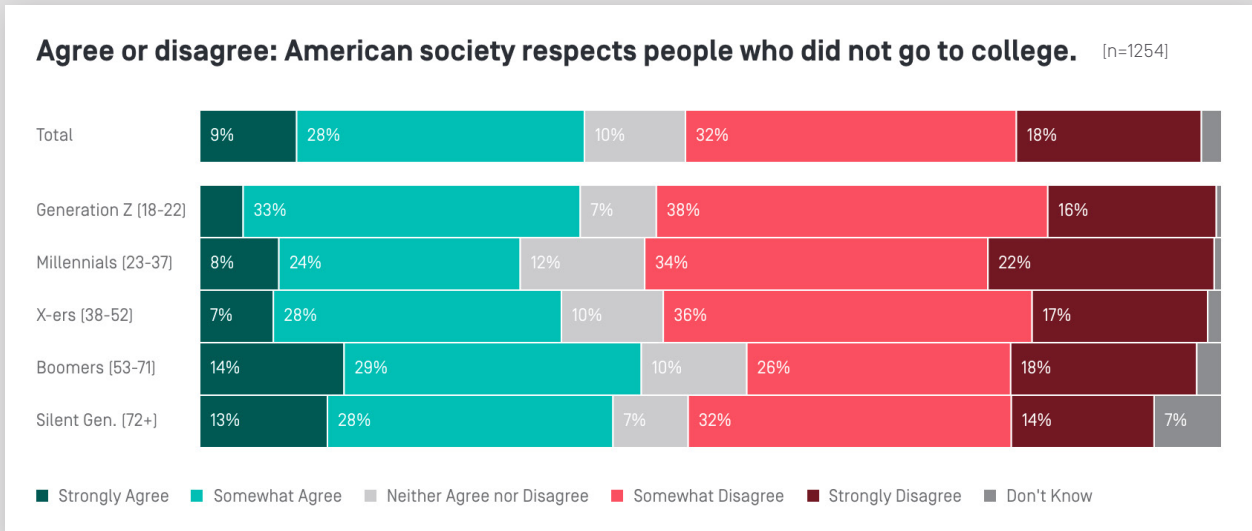


Figure 4



decline for years, places where unemployment was a little higher and median incomes were a little lower than the national average.<sup>13</sup>

Our data, which were gathered right after the Trump inauguration, reflected this anxiety. White Americans were more likely to say in the survey that it is harder to find a well-paying job than it was for their parents (62 percent), compared to African Americans (56 percent), Asians (48 percent), and Hispanics (57 percent). Whites were also more likely to say that it is getting harder to afford a family (71 percent), than African Americans (55 percent), Asians (49 percent), and Hispanics (66 percent).

This is unsurprising, given that familial history across the past two generations will be different for different ethnic groups. For example, a recent Hispanic immigrant might see current prospects as better than his parents' prospects. An African American Baby Boomer might see her prospects as better than the pre-Civil Rights prospects of her parents (see Figure 5).

Regardless of race, however, at least three out of four people think it is easier to be successful with a college degree than without (see Figure 6).

## THE EXPECTATIONS GAP

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Three-quarters of Americans believe it is easier to be successful with a college degree than without. What is more, nearly three out of four (72 percent) believe higher education is primarily a social good or both a social good and a private benefit. This finding holds true across generations (and other demographic characteristics) (see Figure 7).

However, there is a sense among Americans that institutions of higher education are not helping students succeed. When asked whether if success in college is solely up to students, two out of three (68 percent) of Americans believe that colleges and universities should help their students succeed. Baby Boomers (73 percent) are more likely than

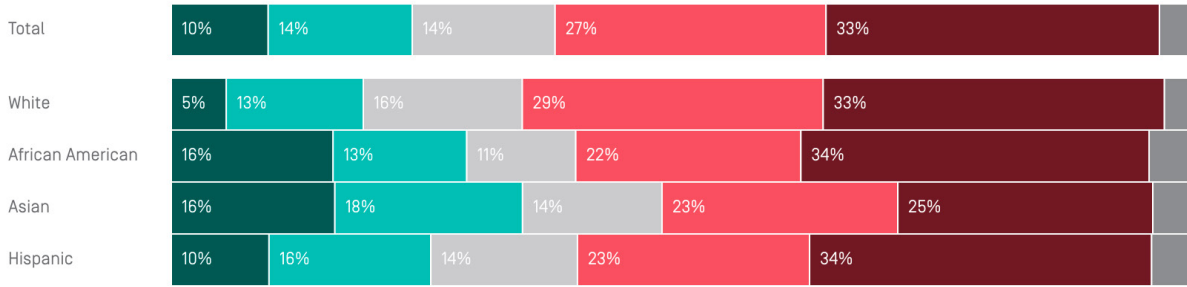
members of other generations to think institutions should help students succeed, perhaps in part because many from this generation have children who are currently in or were recently in college (see Figure 8). (For examples of institutions that put students first, see institutional profiles on page 17.)

Yet even though roughly two-thirds of Americans believe that higher education leaders should assist students, 58 percent believe that colleges overall put their own long-term interests ahead of those of their students. Members of the Silent Generation are more likely than those from other generations to believe that schools put students' needs first or consider them equally (48 percent) (see Figure 9).

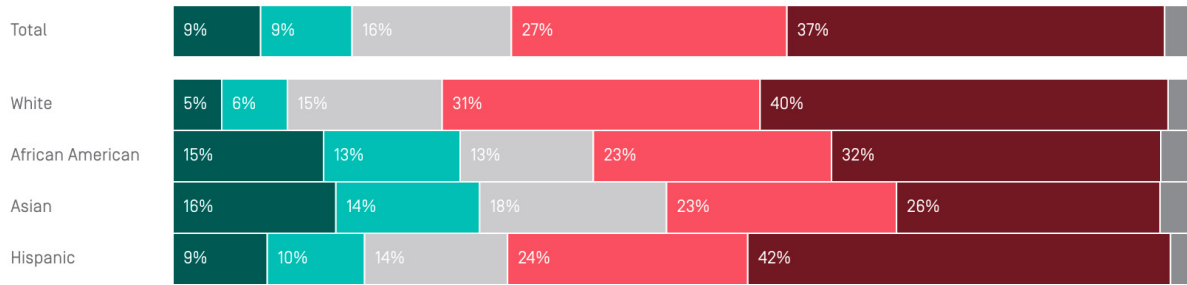
Figure 5

**Compared to when your parents were your age, do you think doing the following goals have gotten easier to attain, harder to attain, or are about the same?**

**Finding a good paying job** [n=1600]



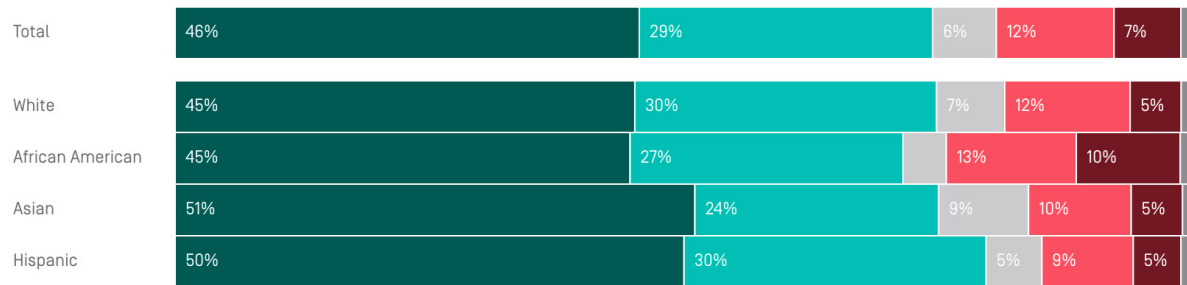
**Being able to afford a family** [n=1600]



■ Much Easier ■ Somewhat Easier ■ About the Same ■ Somewhat Harder ■ Much Harder ■ Don't Know

Figure 6

**Agree or disagree: It is easier to be successful with a college degree than without.** [n=1258]



■ Strongly Agree ■ Somewhat Agree ■ Neither Agree nor Disagree ■ Somewhat Disagree ■ Strongly Disagree ■ Don't Know

Figure 7

**In your opinion, is a higher education system good for society or is higher education mostly a private benefit for individual graduates?** [n=1600]

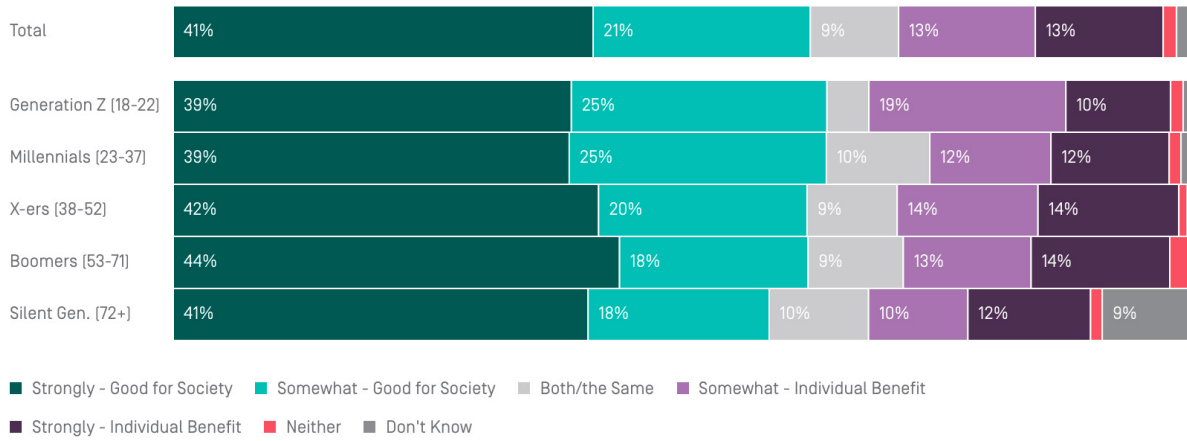
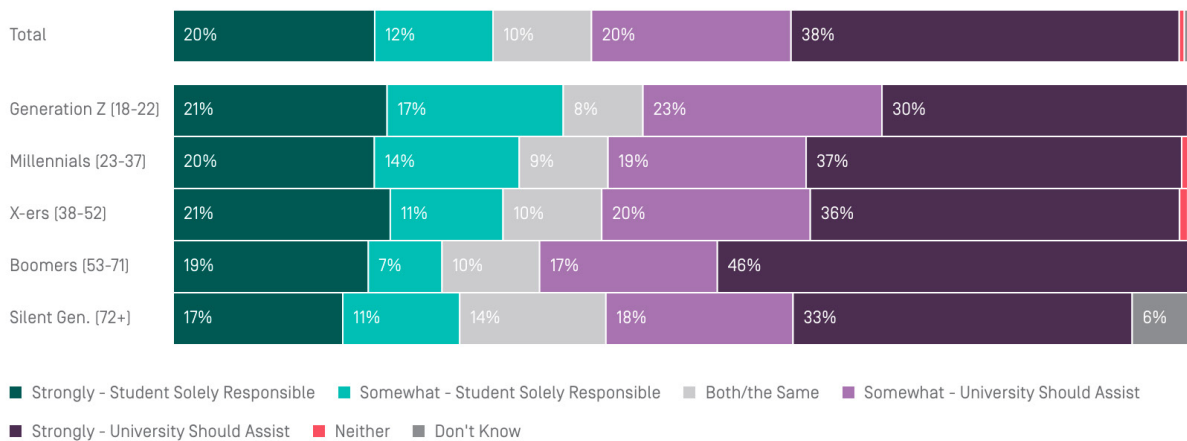


Figure 8

**Which of the following is closer to your point of view regarding success of students in higher education? The student is solely responsible, or the university needs to assist in the success of its students.** [n=1600]



Maybe in part because they generally believe that colleges put their own needs first, Americans see room for higher education to improve. Only one in four Americans agrees that our higher education system is fine just the way it is. Millennials, who are on track to be the most educated generation to date, according to the Pew Research Center,<sup>14</sup> and therefore have the most experience with the system, are more likely than other generations to think it is not working as well as it could. Only 13 percent agree higher education is fine how it is. By contrast, members of the Silent Generation are more likely than other generations to think it is fine the way it is, but their 39 percent agreement rate shows that even they are not satisfied (see Figure 10).

Four out of five (79 percent) Americans believe that most people who enroll in college benefit. This is true regardless of generation and is in stark contrast to the 25 percent who say higher education is working fine. There is wide agreement, however, that not everyone has an equal opportunity regarding this benefit. Overall, only four in 10 believe that all Americans have a decent chance of getting into a good college. And there is recognition that many students are not graduating; only 46 percent of people think that most people who go to college finish with a degree. In fact, members of the youngest generation, Generation Z, are the ones who are most likely to recognize that not all students graduate (see Figures 11–13). Nationally, approximately 59 percent of full-time, first-time students at four-year institutions in 2009 who were seeking a bachelor's degree had managed to complete one six years later.<sup>15</sup> And only 32 percent of full-time, first-time students at two-year institutions in 2012 completed a degree within three years.<sup>16</sup>

Even though higher education is seen as a social good, Americans see students picking up a larger portion of the tab than federal and state governments. Regardless of age, Americans think students pay the majority of the costs associated with their education (68 percent). Younger generations (Generation Z, Millennials, and

Generation X) are more likely to believe this to be the case than those who are Baby Boomers and members of the Silent Generation (see Figure 14).

In general, there is wide belief (59 percent) that government pays less than half the costs associated with higher education. However, interesting generational differences emerge about whether federal and state governments have increased their spending in the past ten years on higher education. Slightly more than half of Generation Z thinks it is true that federal (53 percent) and state (59 percent) governments have increased their spending on higher education over the last decade, but that government currently pays less than half the associated costs (63 percent). Generation Z may be keenly aware of the fact that although government spending may have increased, that spending increase has not kept pace with the price of that students pay out of pocket (see Figure 14).

## Findings by Political Ideology

When examining the survey results across the political spectrum, there is some convergence when it comes to perceptions of higher education. Liberals and conservatives believe that higher education is mostly a social good rather than private benefit (66 percent and 65 percent, respectively). Additionally, 7 percent of conservatives and 8 percent of liberals believe higher education is both a social good and private benefit (see Figure 15).

Majorities among those who identify as liberal (62 percent) and as conservative (57 percent) agree that colleges and universities put their own long-term interests before the needs of their students (see Figure 16).

And although there are differences in how liberals and conservatives hope to improve higher education, only a minority of liberals (22 percent) and conservatives (29 percent) agree that higher education is fine how it is now (see Figure 17).

Figure 9

**In your opinion, do higher education leaders generally put the needs and interests of students first or put the long-term interests of their schools first?** [n=1600]

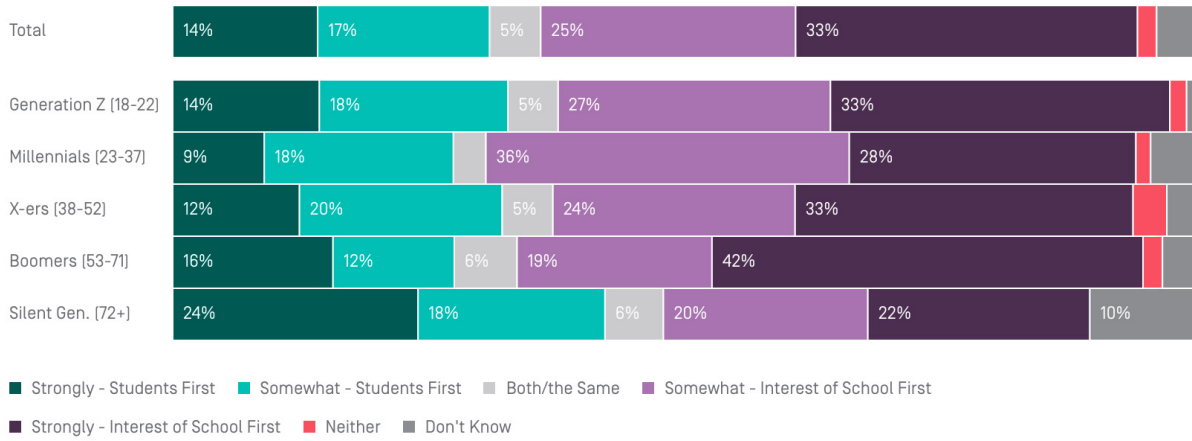


Figure 10

**Agree or disagree: Higher education in America is fine how it is.** [n=1254]

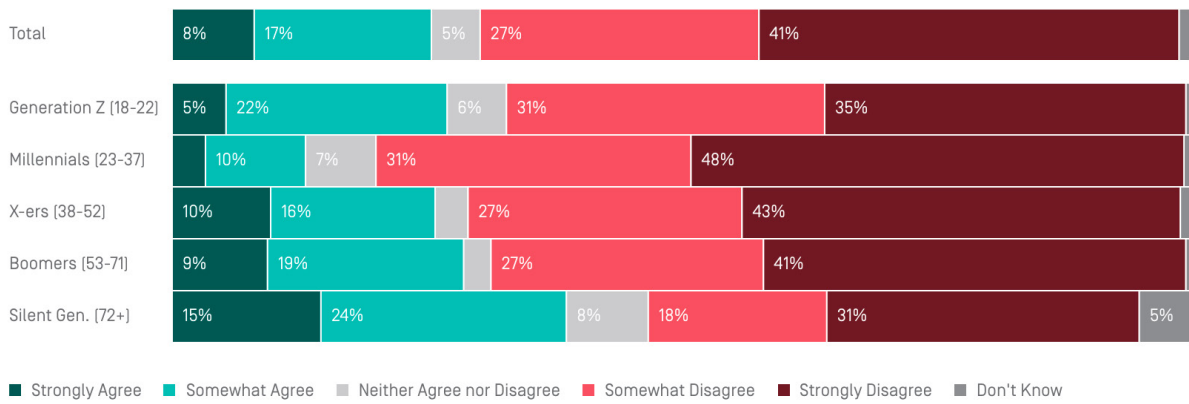


Figure 11

**Agree or disagree: Most people who enroll in higher education benefit.** [n=1253]

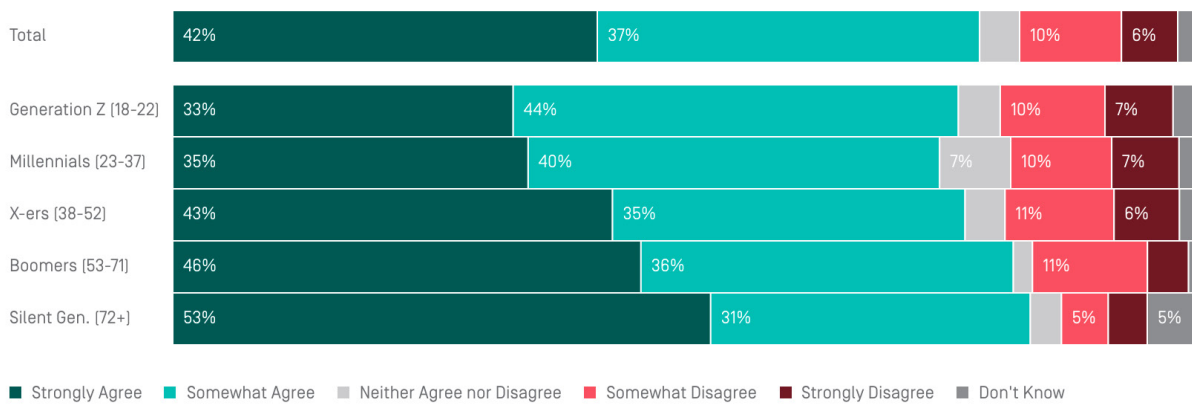




Figure 12

**Agree or disagree: All Americans have a decent chance of getting into a good college.** [n=1255]

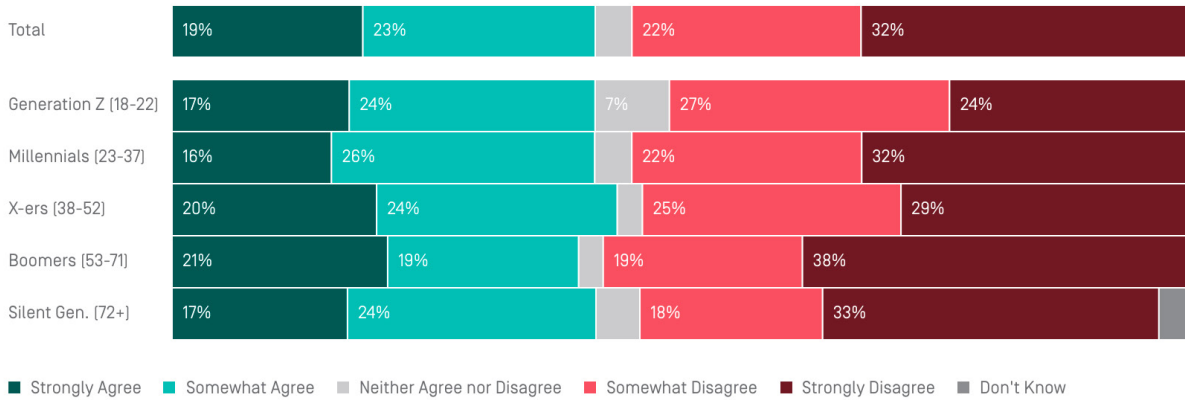


Figure 13

**To the best of your knowledge, please tell me if the following statements about the typical college student are true or false.**

**Most people who go to college finish with a degree.** [n=1142]

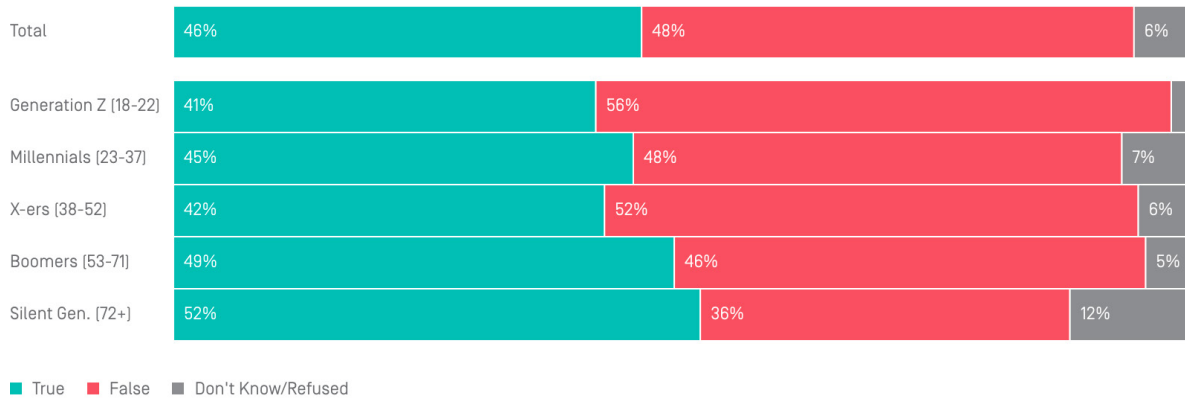


Figure 14

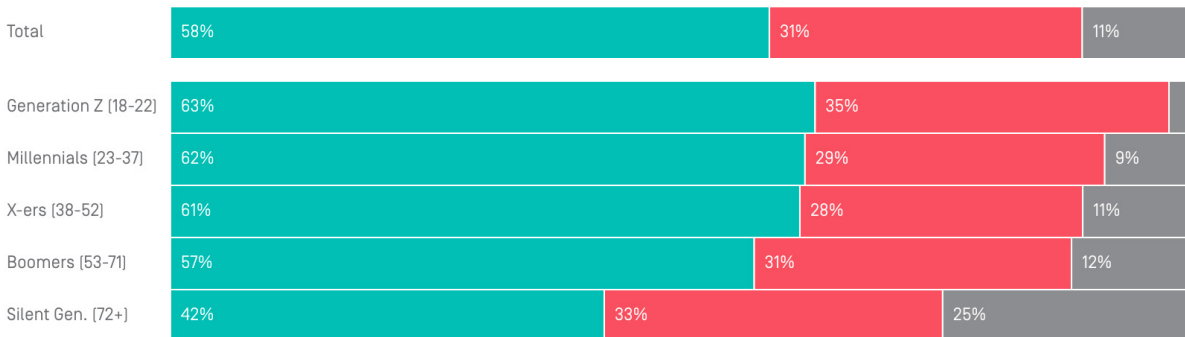
To the best of your knowledge, please tell me if the following statements about higher education funding are true or false.

**Students pay the majority of the costs [tuition, room and board, etc.] involved in their higher education.**

[n=1143]



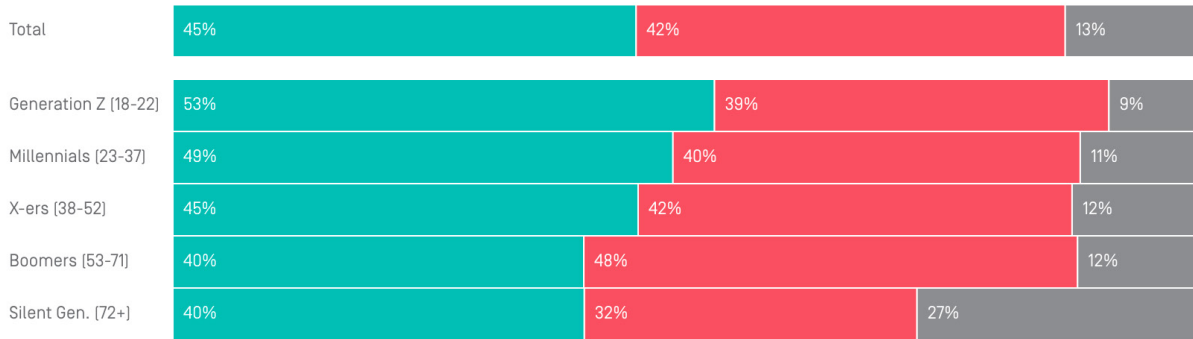
**Government currently pays less than half the costs associated with higher education.** [n=1142]



■ True ■ False ■ Don't Know/Refused

Figure 14 (cont'd.)

**The federal government has increased its spending on higher education in the last ten years. [n=1141]**



**State governments have increased their spending on higher education in the last ten years. [n=1136]**

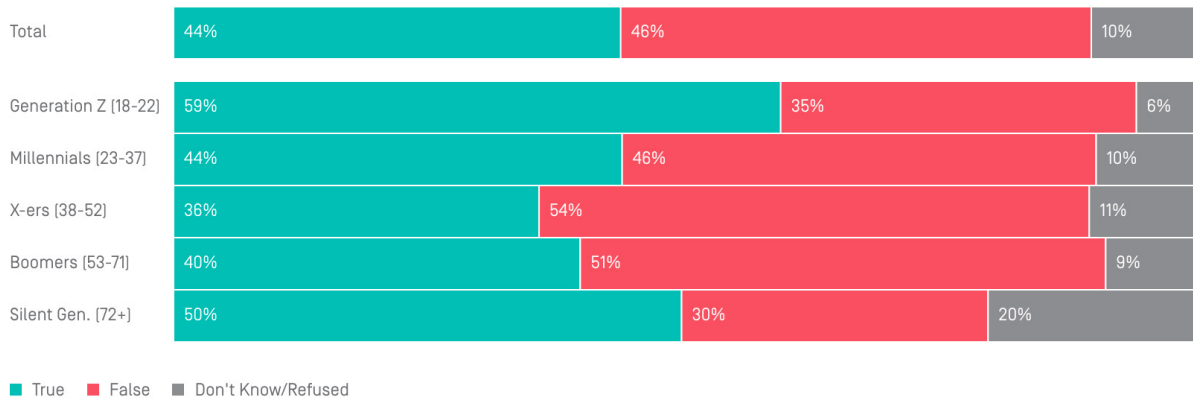


Figure 15

**In your opinion, is a higher education system good for society or is higher education mostly a private benefit for individual graduates?** [n=1600]

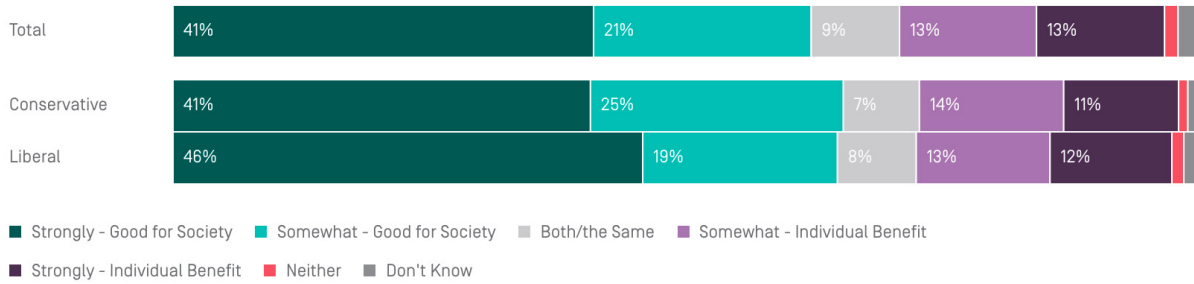


Figure 16

**In your opinion, do higher education leaders generally put the needs and interests of students first or put the long-term interests of their schools first?** [n=1600]

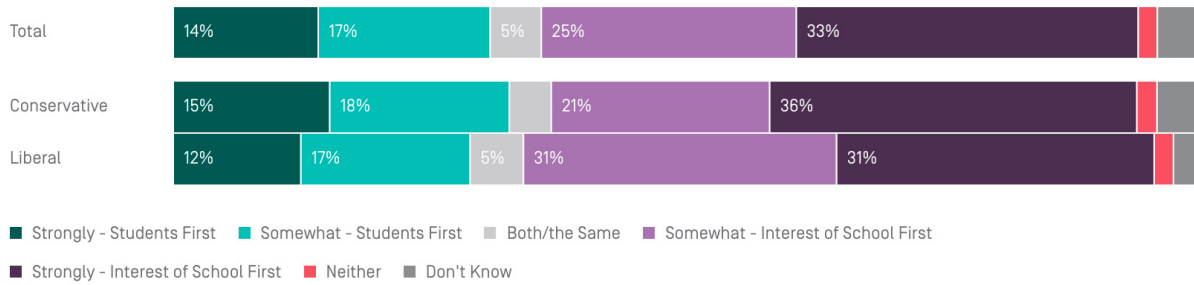
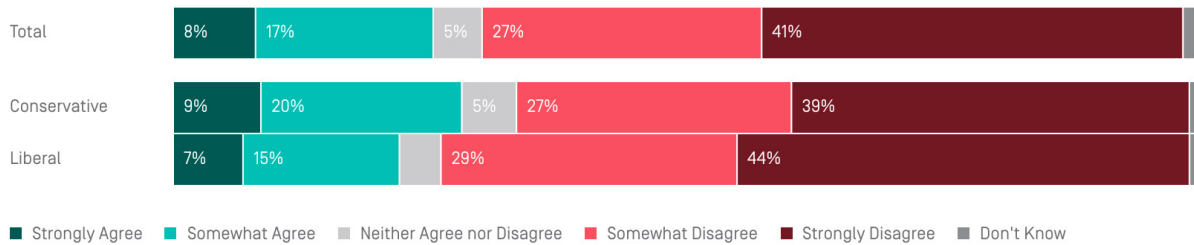


Figure 17

**Agree or disagree: Higher education in America is fine how it is.** [n=1254]



## Putting Students First: Walla Walla Community College and Lehman College

### *Helping Students Get a Taste of a Better Future*

Chardonnay. Sauvignon Blanc. Rosé. Cabernet Sauvignon. These are some of the popular wines—enjoyed by many around the world—that are studied, created, and sold by college students at Walla Walla Community College in Washington state.

Tim Donahue, director of winemaking at the Institute for Enology and Viticulture, says that 20 or so community college students at a time are pursuing an associate in applied arts and sciences (AAAS) degree in enology and viticulture. The institute was founded in 2001, when the community came together to spur economic development in a region that had suffered high unemployment when one of its local industries—canning locally-produced vegetables—went out of business.

On the surface, winemaking may not sound like a serious academic discipline. But it is. Walla Walla's two-year program prepares students to pursue careers as vineyard technicians and managers, cellar masters, enologists (individuals who conduct chemical analysis on wines in laboratories), winemakers, and even small business owners. These are jobs in high demand in the region and in an industry experiencing rapid growth.

The first year of the AAAS degree program ensures that students learn by doing. In year one, students are taught the basics of maintaining a vinifera vineyard (a popular grape vine), how to care for crops, and generally supervise the overall health of a vineyard. In year two, students learn wine analysis. Courses like the "Science of Winemaking II" and a winemaking practicum provide hands-on learning opportunities to analyze the chemical makeup of wines.

The most exciting part for Donahue is how the program is changing the local wine industry's culture, starting with who participates. He

describes how when he came to Walla Walla in 2010, men made up 90 percent of students in the degree program, which was unsurprising for a male-dominated industry. They now make up 65 percent. Bringing in more women was due partly to a change in recruiting and the need to fill the industry's labor shortage with workers. Donahue fully embraces the change. He admits that winemaking can be physically demanding, which may in part be why the industry tends to skew male, but, he believes, "it's nothing a forklift can't solve. You don't have to be superhuman."

Gender equity is not the only area where Walla Walla is trying to make progress. Racial equity is becoming more of a focus for the college too, especially for the community's Hispanic migrant workers. Donahue says two years ago, Walla Walla launched a night class to teach English language skills, but in the context of enology and viticulture. The class serves between 10–20 students a year, comes with free child care, and costs only \$20. This ESL class allows migrant workers to make more money when they return to work and lets workers see firsthand the link between education and a prosperous future. This is important because, for Donahue, "they work harder than any human in the wine industry."

Between the physical labor and learning the hard science of wine, winemaking may not be for the lightweight. "Winemaking is a trade. It's no different than being an electrician or plumber. It's a skilled trade and it's not fancy," says Donahue.

A typical Walla Walla AAAS graduate who worked full-time made \$35,000–\$45,000 a year in 2011, which Donahue says is a reasonable wage for a small town in southeast Washington. Tuition and fees for the AAAS degree are low, at a little over \$13,000 for the two-year program. The maximum federal Pell grant award was \$5,920 in 2015, and the maximum award this year for the state's need-based grant for full-time students at community colleges is \$3,541. Thus, a low-income student could cover the cost of her degree without incurring debt.

Donahue is proud of the program's 67 percent graduation rate and the fact that 84 percent of graduates are working in the wine industry. The three-year graduation rate at community colleges nationally is only 32 percent.

The wines Walla Walla students create are good: good enough to sell at the college's on-campus winery, College Cellars, and good enough to win multiple awards. Donahue says that students' wines have taken home over 600 medals from local and international competitions. Six hundred wins—and counting.

For a program that serves relatively few students, it is making a pretty big impact. Gender and racial equity are important, and so is ensuring that students who graduate are better off than when they started the degree. That is something we can all raise our glasses to.

### *Adult Students are Key*

When Michael Paull, the founding dean of the School of Continuing and Professional Studies at the City University of New York (CUNY)-Lehman College in the Bronx, first had the idea to create a program tailored to adults re-entering college in 1978, he recognized that for older students, returning to school was a daunting task. Using money from the college's Continuing Education program, Paull founded Lehman College's adult degree program (ADP) to provide case management and advising services. The reason was simple: Paull recognized that it was one thing to get adults re-enrolled, but another to help them overcome obstacles on their way to graduation.

Now approaching its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Lehman College's adult degree program is the oldest program of its kind in the CUNY system. It is also fully integrated into the college itself. The ADP has served over 15,000 students since its founding, including nearly one out of ten students currently enrolled at Lehman.

Lehman College's adult degree program is even more impressive when considering the demographics of the students who enroll. Although students must be at least 25 years old to qualify for the program, the average student in the ADP is 40. Like most adult students, Lehman's ADP students balance life, work, and school. Four out of five ADP students work while attending school either full- or part-time, with 61 percent of students in full-time, off-campus jobs. Lehman works to accommodate and support students, directing them to classes that work with their schedules. Slightly over half of all ADP students attend school part-time, and 71 percent of students are enrolled primarily in evening or weekend classes.

Lehman's adult degree program is representative of the local community: 73 percent of its students are Hispanic or African American, reflecting the surrounding community. Just over a quarter of students in the adult degree program were referred to the program by word of mouth, and another quarter were referred to the program through the main admissions office by way of other programs within the School of Continuing and Professional Studies. "Students who are, for example, in our workforce development program [within the School of Continuing and Professional Studies] are told about ADP [by faculty and staff] and they often filter in," said Jane MacKillop, the interim dean of the School of Continuing and Professional Studies.

ADP introductory courses are a cornerstone of the program, not only reintroducing students to skills like time management and studying, but also welcoming them into a community of similar students on a large campus. "What we find is [adult students] take one of [the ADP's] introductory classes, look around and say, 'people here look like me, they talk like me, I can be comfortable here,' and then they matriculate into the program," said MacKillop.

One unique class, Prior Learning Assessment: Portfolio Development, is a 3-credit course where students create a portfolio of their prior work experience, knowledge, and skills. ADP



students can earn up to 15 additional liberal arts elective credits based on the content of their portfolios. The benefit is twofold: these credits go a long way in the quest to obtain a degree while helping boost the morale of adult students who might feel as if their experiences do not measure up to college-level work.

“Because the portfolio is based on who I am and what I’ve achieved, it made me feel like I wasn’t just a student at Lehman, but a member of the [Lehman] community.” said Maria Camaj, a graduate of the ADP.

ADP’s students also benefit from advising that goes beyond suggesting courses to take. ADP staff members are very aware that their students are

vulnerable to a number of issues that stem from a higher education system that favors traditionally-aged students, including how to pay for college.

Holistic support that considers the various complexities of being an adult student is the theme that runs through everything Lehman College’s ADP provides.

“Adult students do best in a one-stop shop environment. We try to be that one-stop shop,” said Pamela Hinden, director of the program. To Camaj, this commitment towards holistic support and understanding is what made the ADP so effective. For her, “ADP validates us, and that’s a large part of the success, to know that someone sees your experiences as valid.”

# THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF PUBLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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For years, tuition and fees have been rising much faster than the rate of inflation. From 2006 to today, the Consumer Price Index for tuition and fees increased 63 percent, compared with 21 percent for all other items (such as food, energy, and housing).<sup>17</sup> And students and families are not just feeling the crunch over the price of tuition and fees. The cost of textbooks and college housing has increased 88 percent and 51 percent, respectively, over the past 10 years.<sup>18</sup> Given that Americans believe that it is easier to be successful with a college degree than without, and that many jobs require a college degree, what types of institutions are most worth the cost?

Americans believe both community colleges (82 percent) and public four-year colleges (61 percent) are worth the cost. They also strongly believe that these public institutions prepare students to be successful and contribute to the American workforce. They see public colleges and universities as being for people in their situation and putting students first.

But while a majority of Americans think all types of colleges and universities contribute to a strong workforce and prepare people to be successful, there is a drop-off compared to public institutions when it comes to “being worth the cost,” “being for people in my situation,” and “always putting

students first.” People do not believe that private and for-profit universities are worth the cost (43 percent and 40 percent, respectively) and also do not believe that private and for-profit universities are for “people in my situation” (42 percent and 41 percent, respectively).

Although, when asked generally, a majority of Americans believe that institutions overall put their own long-term interests before those of their students, when then asked about each type of institution, this seems to be more the case for private, for-profit institutions. Most Americans believe that public and private institutions always put students first; they do not feel the same way about for-profit colleges and universities, where only 39 percent believe this to be the case (see Table 1).

When looking at generational differences, Generation Z—people currently the same age as traditionally-aged college students—are most likely to believe that community colleges are for people like them (75 percent), prepare people to be successful (85 percent), and always put their students first (71 percent). Generation Z is also more likely to say that public four-year colleges and universities are for students in their situation (80 percent) and put their students first (57 percent).

Interestingly, the oldest respondents and the youngest align in their perceptions of the for-profit sector. While most people agree that for-profit colleges and universities prepare people to be successful, this is especially the case for Generation Z (71 percent) and the Silent Generation (67 percent). Generation Z and the Silent Generation are also more likely to believe that for-profits contribute

to a strong American workforce (67 percent and 65 percent, respectively). In addition, about half the members of Generation Z (50 percent) and the Silent Generation (50 percent) believe that for-profits are worth the cost, compared to 31 percent of Millennials, 38 percent of Generation X, and 37 percent of Baby Boomers (see Tables 2–5).

**Table 1 | American Sentiments Towards Different Higher Education Sectors**

	<b>Contribute to a Strong Workforce</b>	<b>Are Worth the Cost</b>	<b>Prepare People to Be Successful</b>	<b>Are for People in my Situation</b>	<b>Always Put Their Students First</b>
Community College [n=1335]	83	82	80	64	62
Public, Four-year [n=1342]	79	61	78	65	52
Private, Nonprofit n=[1345]	70	43	76	42	53
Private, For-profit n=[1343]	59	40	60	41	39

**Table 2 | America’s Perception of Community College [n=1335]**

	<b>Contribute to a Strong Workforce</b>	<b>Are Worth the Cost</b>	<b>Prepare People to Be Successful</b>	<b>Are for People in my Situation</b>	<b>Always Put Their Students First</b>
Overall	83	82	80	64	62
Gen. Z	83	85	85	75	71
Millennials	84	83	78	65	59
Gen. X	85	82	82	63	58
Baby Boomers	83	82	81	60	66
Silent Gen.	79	76	76	58	57

**Table 3** | American Perceptions of Public Four-Year Colleges and Universities [n=1342]

	<b>Contribute to a Strong Workforce</b>	<b>Are Worth the Cost</b>	<b>Prepare People to Be Successful</b>	<b>Are for People in my Situation</b>	<b>Always Put Their Students First</b>
Overall	79	61	78	65	52
Gen. Z	83	65	82	80	57
Millennials	81	62	76	67	50
Gen. X	76	58	77	61	49
Baby Boomers	79	63	76	61	50
Silent Gen.	76	58	83	59	56

**Table 4** | America's Perceptions of the Private Nonprofit Sector [n=1345]

	<b>Contribute to a Strong Workforce</b>	<b>Are Worth the Cost</b>	<b>Prepare People to Be Successful</b>	<b>Are for People in my Situation</b>	<b>Always Put Their Students First</b>
Overall	70	43	76	41	53
Gen. Z	76	40	78	44	55
Millennials	71	38	77	42	47
Gen. X	70	43	77	41	54
Baby Boomers	67	45	72	40	54
Silent Gen.	71	51	78	44	57

**Table 5 | America’s Perception of For-profit Colleges and Universities [n=1343]**

	<b>Contribute to a Strong Workforce</b>	<b>Are Worth the Cost</b>	<b>Prepare People to Be Successful</b>	<b>Are for People in my Situation</b>	<b>Always Put Their Students First</b>
Overall	69	40	60	41	39
Gen. Z	67	50	71	48	48
Millennials	55	31	53	38	35
Gen. X	60	38	59	42	38
Baby Boomers	56	37	58	40	38
Silent Gen.	65	40	67	43	44

### Findings by Household Income

Americans believe that public colleges and universities are for people in their situation and are worth the cost. There are some interesting differences that emerge, however, when looking at the data by income. Lower- and middle-income (68 percent for both) Americans are much more likely to see community colleges as being for people in their situation compared with upper-income Americans (58 percent). Upper-income individuals agree more that community colleges are worth the cost (88 percent) compared with lower- (76 percent) and middle-income (83 percent) Americans.

When it comes to private and for-profit institutions, regardless of income, Americans do not see these institutions as being for “people in my situation” or as being worth the cost. Lower-income Americans are more likely to think that private, for-profit schools are for them (44 percent) compared with middle- (42 percent), and upper-income (40 percent) Americans. Lower-income Americans are also more likely to believe that for-profits are worth the cost (46 percent) (see Tables 6–9).

**Table 6** | Community Colleges: Perception by Income [n=1335]

	<b>Are for People in my Situation</b>	<b>Are Worth the Cost</b>
<\$35,000	68	76
\$35,000—\$99,999	68	83
>\$100,000	58	88

**Table 7** | Public Four-Year: Perception by Income [n=1342]

	<b>Are for People in my Situation</b>	<b>Are Worth the Cost</b>
<\$35,000	64	60
\$35,000—\$99,999	65	61
>\$100,000	70	67

**Table 8** | Private, Nonprofit: Perception by Income [n=1345]

	<b>Are for People in my Situation</b>	<b>Are Worth the Cost</b>
<\$35,000	39	45
\$35,000—\$99,999	42	42
>\$100,000	45	43

**Table 9** | Private, For-Profits: Perception by Income [n=1343]

	<b>Are for People in my Situation</b>	<b>Are Worth the Cost</b>
<\$35,000	44	46
\$35,000—\$99,999	42	38
>\$100,000	40	36



# POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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Higher education can increase an individual's economic mobility, and it has done so for millions of students who have earned degrees. But persistent gaps in educational attainment by race and income, the rising price of college and subsequent increase in student debt, and an increase in the number of students not completing their programs prevent college from being the springboard into the middle class that it should be. This may help explain why, according to our survey data, only one in four Americans thinks higher education is fine the way it is.

The sense that higher education needs to change is something Megan understands. "I had an idea that if I worked really hard—like my parents did—I could work in the field that I wanted," she explains. "I didn't want to do anything glamorous, but I realize that it's a pipe dream now. I think college and higher education is enriching and should be available to all who want it, but for me and many others in my generation, it hasn't delivered on its promise."

The public opinion data gathered by our survey provide insights into what Americans know about, and how they perceive, higher education. These can help policymakers and researchers consider new ways for college to deliver on its promise, such

as improving how it is financed, and meeting the needs of students who are older and more diverse than those in the past.

## Financing Higher Education

Nearly three out of four Americans (71 percent) believe that higher education is good for society, but only half of Americans (58 percent) believe that federal and state governments currently pay less than half the associated costs with higher education. If Americans think higher education is a social good, then why is it not funded that way?

Americans are not wrong in their perception of how higher education is funded, especially for public four-year institutions. According to a New America analysis published last year, in 2012, dependent students and their families picked up over half (51 percent) the cost of a public four-year degree.<sup>19</sup> In fact, data from the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) show state investments in postsecondary education have decreased by a billion dollars over the past 10 years.<sup>20</sup> That decline was most precipitous during the fallout from the Great Recession. In 2008, per-student state funding averaged nearly \$10,000. By 2012, it had fallen to approximately \$7,000.<sup>21</sup>

The high price of college and related expenses makes it difficult for many students to access and stay in school. Policymakers should consider two critical reforms when crafting approaches to reduce the price of college and other related expenses for students and families: account for living expenses, and increase college access through targeted low-cost or no-debt higher education.

### *Account for Living Expenses*

In American primary and secondary schools, a federal free and reduced-price lunch program helps students from low- and moderate-income families. After high school, however, this benefit disappears. Many of the rules about accessing food stamps make eligibility for college students difficult. Many students also find it challenging to find affordable housing. The Wisconsin Hope Lab surveyed 4,000 community college students across the nation and found that 13 percent reported being homeless.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, financial aid continues to fall short in providing for students, even when it helps to cover tuition and fees.

Benefits access programs may be one way to expand access to financial resources for low- and moderate-income students. These programs, as highlighted by the Center for Law and Social Policy, “audit” students to assess which local, state, and federal benefits they may be eligible for beyond financial aid, and then they help with the necessary applications.<sup>23</sup> These extra benefits can help provide a critical safety net for students struggling to make ends meet.

Federal, state, or local governments could also explore providing a universal basic income in which all Americans, regardless of student or employment status, receives a significant amount of extra income. This income could be structured so it is taxed, and so that the largest benefit would be targeted to low- and moderate-income individuals.<sup>24</sup> This money would be available in addition to financial aid and could be used to help pay for living expenses like food, housing, and transportation. By

helping cover these expenses, students could focus on taking more credits and working less, which would help hasten their time to degree.

### *Increase Access*

Since Americans believe higher education is a social good, policymakers need to explore how to fund it in a way to ensure equal access and success for all. This can include, at state, local, and institutional levels, the creation of low-cost or debt-free college programs targeted to low- and middle-income students. Policymakers should particularly consider how to make these programs available to students who are beyond the traditional 18-to-22-year-old age range. They should also consider making these scholarships first-dollar, meaning the scholarships would be used to cover tuition and fees, allowing all other aid, such as the Pell Grant, to be used for other academic and living expenses.

At the federal level, more must be done to ensure the Pell Grant—the cornerstone of federal financial aid for low-income students—maintains its purchasing power. The reinstatement of summer Pell—where full-time, year-round students can obtain Pell to cover summer enrollment—is a step in the right direction. At a minimum, Pell should be pegged to inflation to help keep up with the rising costs of college and with cost of living increases. Unfortunately, Congress has only provided this insurance through the end of this year, meaning the value of the Pell Grant will begin to deflate next year barring further legislative action.

A longer-term solution would be to transition federal financial aid to a block grant provided directly to states. In *Starting from Scratch: A New Federal and State Partnership in Higher Education*, we suggest that states should be required to distribute this funding to institutions. In order for institutions to participate, they would have to enroll a substantial share of low-income students, ensure students pay no more than their expected family contribution, and meet certain accountability benchmarks.<sup>25</sup> This proposed partnership would be

**To help students succeed in college, leaders of institutions of higher education and policymakers must design policies that help all students—academically, socially, and financially—in pursuit of higher education, not just traditional-aged students.**

a new way to envision funding higher education: it targets aid to reduce the price of college to what students and families can afford, accounts for all academic and related living expenses beyond tuition and fees, and guarantees a more equitable higher education system.

### **Educating Today's Student**

Over the last several decades, the profile of the traditional college student has changed considerably. It is not unusual, for example, for a college student to be much older than he or she would have been in the 1970s, and more likely to be attending school part-time while juggling work, family, and other responsibilities.<sup>26</sup> According to U.S. Department of Education data, the average age of an undergraduate in 2012 was 26 years old, not 20.<sup>27</sup> In addition, college campuses are also becoming increasingly diverse: many more students are first-generation, low-income, and non-white.<sup>28</sup> As more working adults return to college to gain new skills and advance their careers, these trends are likely to continue.

To help students succeed in college, leaders of institutions of higher education and policymakers must design policies that help all students—academically, socially, and financially—in pursuit of higher education, not just traditional-aged students. That 58 percent of Americans believe institutional leaders put their schools' long-term interests first, rather than students' best interests and needs, only further drives this point home.

Two policies that would go a long way in understanding students and facilitating their success: count all students in success metrics and scale practices proven to accelerate learning.

#### *Count all Students in Success Metrics*

One prerequisite for addressing students' needs is to include them all when measuring and accounting for college success. This, unfortunately, is not current practice. Simple questions like “do most people who go to college finish with a degree?” are not easy to answer. This is because federal graduation rates exclude part-time and transfer students, many of whom are low-income, underprepared, or non-white.<sup>29</sup> Other data, like the earnings of students, exclude those who did not receive federal financial aid, including many community college students who paid their tuition out of pocket.

In part, this data exclusion is a function of the federal ban on revising federal reporting mechanisms to make them more inclusive of the millions of diverse students pursuing higher education.<sup>30</sup> This ban should be reversed so policymakers and institutional leaders fully understand today's students, their trajectories, and where there are roadblocks to success. In addition, data on graduation rates, debt and repayment, and employment after graduation should be publicly available. Students have the right to this information before they invest thousands of dollars toward a degree.

Congress is pursuing legislative change to accomplish this. Members of the House and Senate introduced the Student Right to Know Before You Go Act in 2012 to repeal this ban; another bill, the College Transparency Act, introduced by the House and Senate education committees this spring, follows suit. The College Transparency Act, if it becomes law, would allow the government to link existing student data across federal agencies to produce information on college completion, costs, and employment outcomes. The bill would both permit the government to better understand how students are faring across various institutions and increase transparency to provide better, clearer information to students and their families. The reauthorization of the Higher Education Act—federal legislation providing support to colleges and students—presents an ideal opportunity to revisit and reverse this ban.

### *Scale Practices That Accelerate Learning and Degree Completion*

Higher education has begun to evolve to meet the distinct needs of diverse learners. These changes include granting credit for prior learning, providing competency-based education (CBE) so students can move through degree programs at their own pace, incorporating fully online courses or hybrid courses that blend online and in-person instruction, implementing predictive analytics to understand how students are performing and how to facilitate student success, and using open education resources (OER) to improve access to affordable and quality course materials.

One reason for the relatively small-scale adoption of these innovative methods of teaching, learning, and reducing the price of college may be the lack of evaluation and evidence behind these practices. Until there is greater evidence that innovative approaches serve students better, helping them to earn high-quality degrees at an affordable price, institutions and policymakers should be cautious about adopting such new methods. Understanding exactly what strategies work for students, particularly underserved students, is crucial. For

example, there is concern—and evidence from researchers Eric Bettinger of Stanford University and Susanna Loeb of the Brookings Institute—that online education may not be best suited for some of the most vulnerable learners: those who enter college underprepared.<sup>31</sup>

The rigorous evaluation of particular approaches or interventions can help identify what works and what does not, and for whom; and it may allow researchers and policymakers to assess and share best practices. The complexity of the higher education system—including highly diverse students with different needs—presents an added challenge to scaling policies. For example, what has worked well for moderate-income white students in Tucson, AZ might not work well for low-income Latino students in El Paso, TX.

Practitioners and researchers need resources and support from federal, state, and institutional policymakers as they gather the evidence they need to cement their confidence in what works well across various student demographics and study how to implement strategies effectively so that low-income and disadvantaged students benefit.

Once a practice has been proven to meet the needs of today's learners, more must be done to ensure that new methods of instruction or support reach their full potential. Currently, there are few federal or state mandates for institutions to meet the diverse learning needs of students. The reauthorization of Higher Education Act in 2008 did enact new rules for disclosing information about textbooks and packaging them, enabling professors and students to make smarter and cheaper purchases.<sup>32</sup> But this change alone has not facilitated widespread adoption of OER by most institutions.

A majority of institutions also face challenges in adopting innovative programs because of how the financial aid system is structured. Few programs focus on CBE and give students credit for proving what they know rather than focusing on how much time they have spent in a classroom.<sup>33</sup> And this is because the financial aid and higher education

accreditation system is built around relatively rigid definitions of time and coursework not easily adapted to new contexts of competencies or learning. This makes it difficult for students to receive federal financial aid for these innovative programs. If students do not have federal financial aid available to them, innovative programs like CBE become a hard sell since many rely on this aid to afford college.

Once research has sufficiently demonstrated promising results of various innovative teaching and learning strategies, Congress and the U.S. Department of Education should work to test the best ways to implement promising practices before scaling them. Experimental sites and/or a demonstration project could provide valuable insights on the best and safest ways to implement new policies.

## **Conclusion**

In our inaugural year of this survey, we have explored how the public feels about achieving the American Dream, higher education's role in achieving it, and the value of particular colleges and universities. In coming years, we will explore how America's attitudes about higher education change over time and consider other areas of inquiry relevant to current events. As this body of work builds, we hope to help inform policy development by raising awareness of the public's attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs about higher education.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ipsos describes public opinion survey accuracy from a total potential error framework. This means that they take into account both the potential for sample variation (i.e., margin of error) and a design effect. The design effect (DEFF) is calculated based on the adjustments made by the weights used to ensure a representative sample, following the formula of Leslie Kish (1965). In this way, Ipsos can control for the proper amount of sample variability due to the design of the sampling method. This study had a margin of error of +/-2.8 percentage points and a DEFF=1.5. The adjusted Confidence Interval is 4.3 percentage points.

<sup>2</sup> At her request, we have changed Megan's name and other identifiable characteristics.

<sup>3</sup> Raj Chetty, David Grusky, Maximilian Hell, Nathaniel Hendren, Robert Manduca, and Jimmy Narang, "The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility Since 1940," *Science* 356 (2017): 398–406 in David Leonhardt, "The American Dream, Quantified at Last," *New York Times*, December 8, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/08/opinion/the-american-dream-quantified-at-last.html>.

<sup>4</sup> The National Bureau of Economic Research defines the Great Recession as beginning in December 2007 and ending in June 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Raj Chetty, David Grusky, Maximilian Hell, Nathaniel Hendren, Robert Manduca, and Jimmy Narang, "The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility Since 1940," *Science* 356 (2017): 398–406 in David Leonhardt, "The American Dream, Quantified at Last," *New York Times*, December 8, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/08/opinion/the-american-dream-quantified-at-last.html>.

<sup>6</sup> David Autor, "Skills, Education, and the Rise of Earnings Inequality Among the 'Other 99 Percent,'" *Science* 344 (2014): 843–851 in David Leonhardt, "Is College Worth it? Clearly, New Data Say," *New York Times*, May 27, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/27/upshot/is-college-worth-it-clearly-new-data-say.html>.

<sup>7</sup> As analyzed by Terry Hartle, "Where Have All the Low-Income Students Gone?" *HigherEducationToday*, November 25, 2015, <https://www.higheredtoday.org/2015/11/25/where-have-all-the-low-income-students-gone/>.

<sup>8</sup> Scott A. Ginder, Janice E. Kelly-Reid, and Farrah B. Mann, *Graduation Rates for Selected Cohorts, 2007–12; Student Financial Aid, Academic Year 2014–15; and Admissions in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2015: First Look (Provisional Data)* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, February 2017), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017084.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> This is the inaugural year for *Varying Degrees*, which will be a yearly survey. All products associated with this project, including the data, will be located on [varyingdegrees.org](http://varyingdegrees.org).

<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of this report Generation Z is defined as those ages 18–22, Millennials as those ages 23–37, Generation X as those ages 38–52, Baby Boomers as those ages 53–71, and the Silent Generation as those ages 72+.

<sup>11</sup> Barry Ritholtz, "Why So Many Hate this Recovery," *Bloomberg*, November 16, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-11-16/why-so-many-people-hate-this-economic-recovery>.

<sup>12</sup> Jeff Guo, "Yes, Working Class Whites Really Did Make Trump Win. No, it Wasn't Simply Economic Anxiety," *Wonkblog*, *Washington Post*, November 11, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/11/11/yes-working-class-whites-really-did-make-trump-win-no-it-wasnt-simply-economic-anxiety/?utm\\_term=.9d00e2f39d3f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/11/11/yes-working-class-whites-really-did-make-trump-win-no-it-wasnt-simply-economic-anxiety/?utm_term=.9d00e2f39d3f).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Eileen Patten and Richard Fry, "How Millennials Today Compare with Their Grandparents 50 Years Ago," *Fact Tank: News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center, March 19, 2015, [http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/19/how-millennials-compare-with-their-grandparents/ft\\_millennials-education\\_031715/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/19/how-millennials-compare-with-their-grandparents/ft_millennials-education_031715/).

<sup>15</sup> Scott A. Ginder, Janice E. Kelly-Reid, and Farrah B. Mann, *Graduation Rates for Selected Cohorts, 2007–12; Student Financial Aid, Academic Year 2014–15; and Admissions in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2015: First Look (Provisional Data)* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, February 2017), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017084.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Scott A. Ginder, Janice E. Kelly-Reid, and Farrah B. Mann, *Graduation Rates for Selected Cohorts, 2007–12; Student Financial Aid, Academic Year 2014–15; and*

*Admissions in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2015: First Look (Provisional Data)*, February 2017, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017084.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, “College Tuition and Fees Increased 63 Percent Since January 2006,” U.S. Department of Labor, *The Economics Daily*, August 30, 2016, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2016/college-tuition-and-fees-increase-63-percent-since-january-2006.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Jason Delisle, *Shifting Burdens: How Changes in Financial Aid Affected What Students and Families Paid for College from 1996 to 2012* (Washington, DC: New America, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> *SHEF: FY 2016: State Higher Education Finance* (Boulder, CO: State Higher Education Executive Officers, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Sara Goldrick-Rab, Katharine Broton, and Daniel Eisenberg, *Hungry to Learn: Addressing Food & Housing Insecurity Among Undergraduates* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Hope Lab, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield and Katherine Saunders, *Benefits Access for College Completion: Lessons Learned from a Community College Initiative to Help Low-Income Students* (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> For more on how universal basic income would help students, see Kim Dancy and Rachel Fishman, “More Than Tuition: Higher Education and the Social Safety Net,” *EdCentral* (blog), New America, May 24, 2016, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/more-than-tuition-9/>.

<sup>25</sup> Ben Barrett, Stephen Burd, Kevin Carey, Kim Dancy, Manuela Ekowo, Rachel Fishman, Alexander Holt, Amy

Laitinen, Mary Alice McCarthy, and Iris Palmer, *Starting from Scratch: A New Federal State Partnership in Higher Education* (Washington, DC: New America, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> For more on changing student demographics, see “Yesterday’s Nontraditional Student is Today’s Traditional Student,” Center for Law and Social Policy, January 14, 2015, <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/CPES-Nontraditional-students-pdf.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> New America analysis of U.S. Department of Education data, National Center for Education Statistics, 2011–12 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:12).

<sup>28</sup> “Facts and Figures Related to First-Generation Students in Higher Education,” Postsecondary National Policy Institute, <https://pnpi.org/factsheets/first-generation-students/>.

<sup>29</sup> For more on imperfect graduation rates, see *Time is the Enemy* (Washington, DC: Complete College America, September 2011).

<sup>30</sup> For more on the federal ban, see Clare McCann and Amy Laitinen, *College Blackout: How the Higher Education Lobby Fought to Keep Students in the Dark* (Washington, DC: New America, March 2014).

<sup>31</sup> Eric Bettinger and Stephanie Loeb, *Promises and Pitfalls of Online Education* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> For more about textbook disclosures, see “Federal Textbook Price Disclosure Law,” Student PIRGs, <http://www.studentpirgs.org/resources/textbook-price-disclosure-law>.

<sup>33</sup> One of the best-known CBE programs is Southern New Hampshire University’s College for America. It is the first program, in 2013, to receive federal financial aid through “direct assessment” of student learning rather than time spent in a classroom. Since then, less than a dozen programs have received approval.





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