

# VARYING DEGREES

Amid concerns about affordability and access, New America's seventh annual survey on higher education shows public support for community colleges – and funding them.

BY MARK TONER

**W**HILE AMERICANS STILL RECOGNIZE THE VALUE of education after high school, affordability and equity are concerns that weaken their confidence in higher education, according to New America's annual survey.

"We have learned that a majority of Americans believe in the value that an education after high school can bring to their lives and their communities," the *Varying Degrees 2023* survey states. "At the same time, they would like to see colleges and universities lower the cost of education, improve the quality of educational programs, [and] increase the transparency of student outcome data, among other changes."

Large majorities, however, do believe community colleges are worth the cost and spend their money wisely — and think they should be supported with tax dollars. And three-quarters of Americans agree "that federal and state government and colleges and universities should work to ensure that students from historically underrepresented backgrounds have access to higher education opportunities," the survey states.

However, *Varying Degrees* confirms a continuing challenge that has been repeated in other public opinion surveys in recent years: even as Americans continue to believe that higher education is a requirement for financial stability, their confidence in the system is weakening — falling 10 percent since before the pandemic.

"A majority of Americans still do not think higher education is fine how it is, which has been one of our key findings since we conducted

the survey for the first time in 2017," the survey report states. "For opinions of higher education to trend better, Americans likely need to see consistent and effective changes to the system, including dramatically lower costs and better outcomes."

## Education Remains Essential

Now in its seventh year, *Varying Degrees* asks "Americans for their opinions on critical questions related to the value of educational opportunities after high school, how higher education is funded, and how we hold colleges and universities accountable for that funding," according to its authors. With a sample size of 1,497 adults, this year's survey also explored "Americans' perspectives on the benefits that education after high school can bring to individuals and society at large, and whether they think students can equitably access college and succeed in obtaining their degrees."

Seven in 10 Americans believe that the minimum level of education their close family members need to complete to ensure financial stability is a postsecondary certificate — a belief that is consistent across party lines and racial backgrounds, according to the survey. About 40 percent believe a bachelor's degree is required for financial stability.

Nearly 90 percent believe that individuals with postsecondary credentials "contribute to a skilled workforce," while smaller but significant majorities believe that they increase tax revenues, support

for local businesses, civic engagement, unemployment rates, and public health. “The individual and societal benefits of higher education show bipartisan alignment,” the survey states.

However, less than half (48 percent) of Americans believe that “higher education is affordable for anyone who wishes to pursue it,” the survey states.

### Community College Confidence

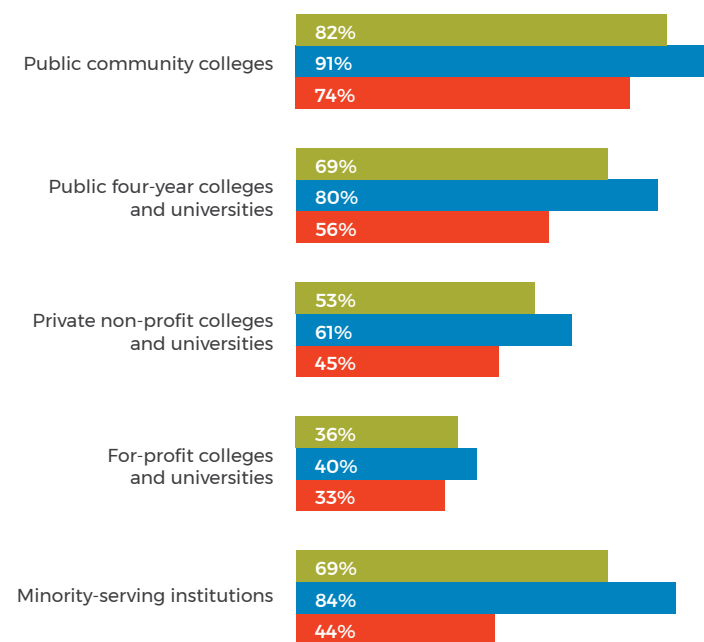
Eighty-five percent of Americans think community colleges are worth the cost, compared to 66 percent who believe the same about public four-year colleges. More than 82 percent said they were “comfortable” supporting community colleges with tax dollars, compared to 69 percent for their four-year counterparts, according to the survey. By contrast, only 36 percent support tax dollars funding for-profit colleges and universities (see chart below). And while there are partisan differences in whether government or individual students should be more responsible for funding higher education, “Democrats and Republicans both support more federal and state government spending on higher education,” the survey states.

#### How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

(% agree)

■ All adults (n=1,497) ■ Democrats (n=518) ■ Republicans (n=400)

**You are comfortable supporting the following institutions with your taxpayer dollars.**



More than half of Americans also believe that community colleges spend their money wisely (51 percent) and run efficiently (55 percent). No other sector received majority support (see chart below).

Nearly six in 10 (58 percent) respondents also believe community colleges are underfunded by state and federal governments. “Half or less than half of Americans think other sectors of higher education are,” the survey states.

### Outcomes – and Transparency – Matter

The topic that saw the greatest agreement among respondents was transparency. Since 2019, about 90 percent of Americans — across all party lines, generations, and racial backgrounds — say that it is important that colleges and universities provide publicly available data about graduation rates, employment rates, and earnings. “In the history of the *Varying Degrees* survey, no question comes this close to universal agreement year over year,” the survey states.

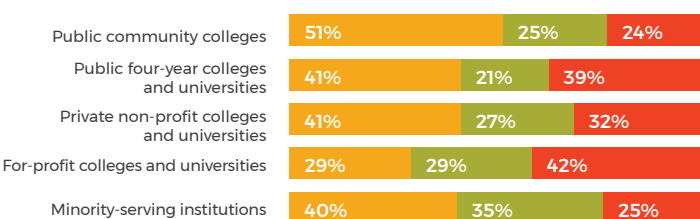
*Varying Degrees* also surveyed Americans’ opinions about two regulatory approaches embraced by the Biden Administration: borrower defense to repayment and gainful employment. “Our survey

#### Americans’ thoughts on how institutions of different sectors spend money and operate:

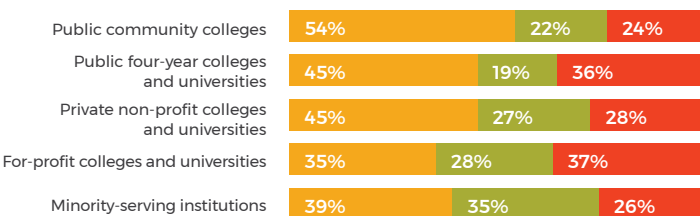
(n=1,497)

■ Agree ■ Don’t know/skipped ■ Disagree

**How much do you agree or disagree that the following institutions of higher education spend money wisely?**



**How much do you agree or disagree that the following institutions of higher education run efficiently?**



Note: The numbers in this figure and the narrative may not match due to rounding. In case of mismatch, please refer to the narrative.

Source: *Varying Degrees*  
NEW AMERICA

In the midst of growing emphasis on racial equity and justice, as well as this summer’s Supreme Court decision overturning race-conscious admissions, *Varying Degrees* found that about three-quarters of Americans “believe that the federal and state [governments] and colleges and universities should work to ensure that students from historically underrepresented backgrounds have access to higher education opportunities.”

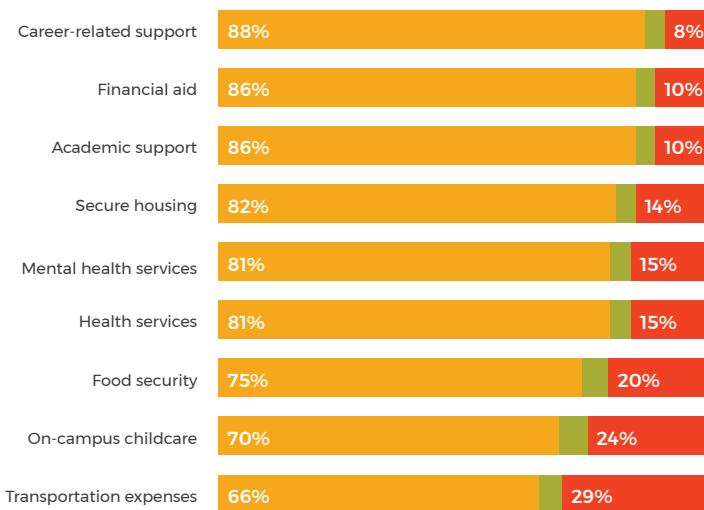
shows that these new regulations have strong support nationwide, across all demographics,” the survey states.

Some 82 percent of respondents supported borrower defense, agreeing that colleges and universities should be required to repay the federal government for outstanding student loans that were canceled because “colleges misrepresented information about their programs of study and student outcomes,” the survey states. Nearly as many (79 percent) agree with gainful employment requirements, saying that programs should lose eligibility for federal financial aid if they “consistently failed to help graduates earn more than those who completed only high school” or “left students deeply in debt relative to their earnings.”

### How much, if at all, do students attending colleges and universities need support or services from their schools in the following areas?

(n=1,497)

Very much/somewhat    Very little/not at all (%)  
 Don't know/skipped (%)



Note: The numbers in this figure and the narrative may not match due to rounding. In case of mismatch, please refer to the narrative.

Source: *Varying Degrees*  
 NEW AMERICA

### Supports for Students

*Varying Degrees* found that large majorities agree that institutions need to provide a wide range of supports to students. Nine in 10 Americans believe that “colleges and universities should provide adequate support services to students who need them,” including 96 percent of Democrats and 85 percent of Republicans. However, the partisan divide is greater when it comes to federal and state support for these services, with 94 percent of Democrats and 69 percent of Republicans agreeing that government should provide adequate funding.

Large majorities also support the growing array of supports institutions are providing students. “A majority believe that students need career-related support (88 percent), financial aid (87 percent), and academic support (85 percent). They also strongly believe that colleges and universities must provide more, and favor the provision of housing (82 percent) and food (76 percent) support and on-campus child care (70 percent),” the survey states (see chart to the left).

### Equal Opportunities for All

In the midst of growing emphasis on racial equity and justice, as well as this summer’s Supreme Court decision overturning race-conscious admissions, *Varying Degrees* found that about three-quarters of Americans “believe that the federal and state [governments] and colleges and universities should work to ensure that students from historically underrepresented backgrounds have access to higher education opportunities.” And despite partisan differences,” three-fourths of Americans agree that all students benefit when colleges and universities reflect the racial diversity of the U.S. (78 percent). A majority also believe that higher education institutions should admit more students (69 percent) and hire more faculty and staff members (68 percent) from racially diverse backgrounds,” the survey states.

To read more, visit [www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/varying-degrees-2023/](http://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/varying-degrees-2023/).



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