

Beyond Free College and Free Markets: Voters Want Greater Accountability in Higher Ed



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When it comes to the state of America’s higher education system, there are three lines of conventional wisdom that the political punditry has preached over the last few years:

Democrats just want to make college free, Republicans want to keep government out and let the markets decide, and the American people are losing faith that college is worth it in the first place. And in an era of deep polarization and government mistrust, there is little faith that Congress will be able to find agreement on the biggest higher ed challenges we face, let alone on the solutions needed to fix them.

But a new national survey of likely 2020 voters finds that there is far less daylight than you’d think between Republicans and Democrats when it comes to both the problems and the solutions that would improve outcomes for students in our higher ed system. Moreover, voters on both sides of the aisle believe higher education is essential when it comes to helping more students secure the jobs they need to be successful in today’s economy. They also believe that institutions can and should do more to provide value to the students they are supposed to serve—not just enroll them

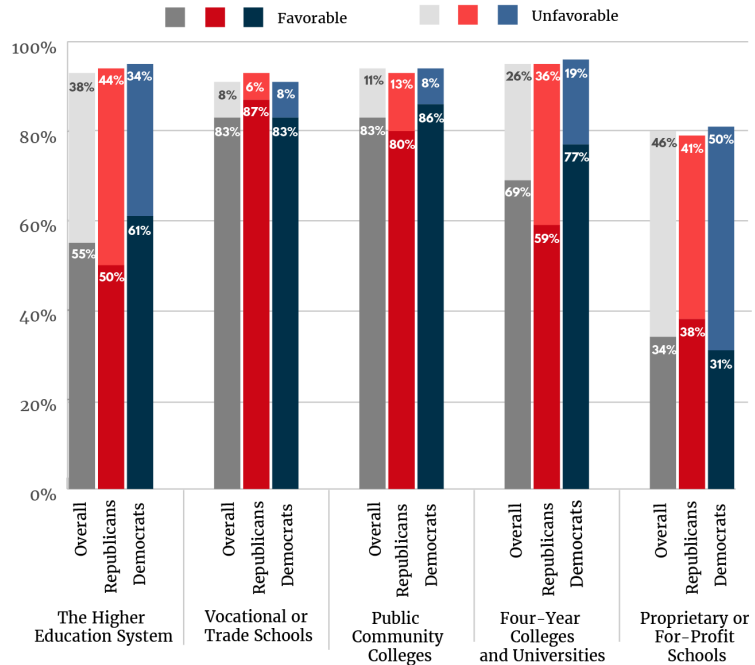
and cash their checks, but get them to graduation and equip them with the skills they need to get a good-paying job and pay off their loans. That's why, as this poll shows, there is widespread bipartisan support for implementing stronger federal guardrails across the entire system to make sure that both students and taxpayers are getting a real return on their huge investment in higher ed.

The analysis that follows is based on an online, nationwide survey of 1,389 likely 2020 voters conducted by Global Strategy Group for Third Way from April 30th through May 9th, 2019.¹

Conventional Wisdom #1: Americans No Longer Think College is Worth It.

Despite a recent deluge of negative news coverage surrounding institutions of higher education, Americans continue to view the overall system favorably. This rings true for trade schools, public community colleges, and four-year colleges and universities, boasting overall favorability ratings of 75, 72, and 43 points, respectively. Only proprietary or for-profit schools elicited a negative reaction from voters.

Favorability of Higher Education by Party



This positive viewpoint persists because an overwhelming majority of Americans believe that bachelor’s degrees (70%), associate’s degrees (69%), and vocational training certificates (90%) are “worth the investment and usually pay off,” with broad support for each of these credentials across party lines. In fact, there is near unanimous agreement (93%) that the skills required in today’s job market have changed, underscoring why all voters continue to see the value in higher ed—even when news stories about cheating admissions scandals, school closures, and rising student debt dominate the headlines.

Yet while faith in the long-term payoff of education beyond high school remains strong across the ideological spectrum, there is also widespread acknowledgement that the system is not currently reaching its full potential. Across the board, Americans believe that institutions should be doing more to ensure the students they enroll graduate, get good jobs, and pay off their loans.

- Eighty-three percent of Democrats and 70% of Republicans think that higher education institutions have a responsibility to ensure that most students who enroll in college graduate.
- Nine in 10 voters believe that institutions can do more to make that happen.
- An overwhelming majority of voters think that students who attend higher education institutions should be able to get jobs that earn more than a high school graduate (91%) and enable them to repay their loans (83%).
- Yet only 58% think colleges are doing a “good” or “very good” job at providing students a return on their investment.

Mirroring what we found when we polled college administrators earlier this year, voters simply reject the notion that schools cannot control whether their students graduate or are equipped to get good-paying jobs. When given the opportunity to select which statement they agreed with more, by approximately 60 points voters said that the federal government should stop subsidizing institutions that fail to provide value to students (such as those with graduation rates under 10% or those who leave their students more likely to default than graduate) rather than letting them off the hook.

 **THIRD WAY**

Which statement do you agree with more, even if you don't agree with either statement completely?	Overall	Dem	GOP
Student Responsibility: It is unfair to hold higher education institutions accountable for things like graduation rates and what students earn in the future. Many students drop out a little early because they've already learned what they need to get a good job, and it's certainly not the schools' fault if a student gets a job in a lower paying field.	19%	15%	26%
Federal Oversight: Of course students have the ultimate responsibility when it comes to choosing their field and finding a job. But students invest in higher education to gain the skills and tools to succeed. There are many institutions with graduation rates under 10% that continue to take student tuition and government grants while leaving 9 in 10 students without a degree. These institutions are simply cashing checks without providing any value to students, and the federal government shouldn't continue to encourage students to take out loans to attend those schools.	81%	85%	74%

Conventional Wisdom #2: Democratic Voters Think Free College is the Most Important Proposal to Improve Higher Education.

If you read the national news, it would be easy to believe that the only thing Democrats want to do to improve our higher education system is to make college free. But when asking 2020 Democratic voters exactly what higher ed policies they would like to see the federal government enact, it's clear there's a menu of policy options on the table that spans well beyond the free college and affordability debate. In fact, when given the choice of a variety of policy proposals, eliminating tuition at public colleges and universities was not even one of the top three policies Democrats said they support.

Instead, Democratic voters ranked “eliminating tuition at all public colleges and universities to help more students gain access to a college degree” 11 out of 17 as a policy they “support” and 13 out of 17 as an idea they “strongly support” (See Appendix for full list of policies). And while making community colleges free fared slightly better, Democrats showed higher support for ideas like increasing investment in the Pell Grant program (90%), establishing a grant program that provides additional resources to institutions dedicated to improving outcomes among low-income students and students of color (89%), and requiring college accreditors to consider student outcomes as part of their review of institutions (85%).

That's right—Democratic voters ranked *accreditation reform* higher than free college.

Democratic Voter Support for Various Policy Proposals	Support (%) Strong support (%)
Increase Pell Grants	90 65
New grant program for better outcomes for low-income students and students of color	89 53
Require college accreditors to consider student outcomes	85 48
Free tuition at community colleges	84 54
Allow students to earn a year of full tuition at any public institution per year of service	84 50
Increase transparency by lifting federal ban on collecting student data	82 49
Withhold resources from higher education institutions that do not spend at least a third of a student's tuition on teaching	80 38
Restrict access to aid unless graduation rate is above 15%	78 42
Free tuition at all public colleges and universities	75 46
Restrict access to aid if most students cannot repay loans within 3 years of leaving school	63 30
Restrict access to aid if most graduates do not earn more than the typical person with only a high school degree	63 29
Remove limits that say for-profit higher education institutions cannot receive more than 90% of their revenue from federal financial aid	47 22
Allow colleges to offer degree programs even if most classes are taught by a separate third party that may or may not be accredited	30 12

At the end of the day, Democrats understand that regardless of what students pay or borrow to attend college, it won't fix the problems in our higher ed system if the institutions they attend fail to make them better off than if they hadn't attended in the first place. And while another prevailing narrative would have you believe that Democrats only care about stricter oversight of the for-profit sector, seven out of ten voters—including more than three-quarters of Democrats and nearly two-thirds of Republicans—think that the federal government should ensure that students are getting a return on their investment at for-profit, non-profit, *and* public institutions—as opposed to just the for-profit sector alone.

Which of the following statements do you agree with more?	Overall	Dem	GOP
The federal government should regulate for-profit, non-profit, and public higher education institutions to make sure they are providing a good return on investment to their students.	70%	78%	61%
The federal government should only regulate for-profit higher education institutions to make sure they are providing a good return on investment to their students.	30%	22%	39%

Conventional Wisdom #3: Republican Voters Believe in Free Markets, Not Federal Oversight.

There’s long been a disagreement between the parties about the role the federal government should play in improving our nation’s schools. Especially when it comes to K-12 schools, Republicans have historically been wary of allowing the federal government to weigh in too heavily in a system they believe should be under local or state control. And while it would be easy to assume that this aversion to federal oversight and regulation would hold true in higher education, too (especially given the current Department of Education’s actions to roll back crucial Obama-era consumer protections), our poll revealed that *all* voters—including Republicans—are currently eager for more, not less, federal oversight in higher ed. In fact, a healthy majority (67%) of Republicans agree that, “the federal government should provide basic guardrails to ensure that students aren’t encouraged to take out loans to attend predatory institutions that will leave them worse off than when they first enrolled,” compared to only 33% who said “the federal government should not try to influence where students choose to attend college and spend their taxpayer-funded grants and loans.”

Across the board, more than eight in ten voters said it was important (with 52% saying it was *very* important) for Congress to prioritize increasing guardrails to protect students from predatory and poor-performing schools. And while it’s not surprising that Democrats would feel this way (and 86% did), more than three-quarters of Republican

voters echoed the same sentiment. The same number of Republicans said it was important for Congress to prioritize ensuring higher education institutions provide a return on investment for students—only 4 points below the number who said it was important for Congress to prioritize addressing the cost of higher education—a much more salient issue in the popular debate about higher ed.



On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means “not important at all” and 5 means “very important,” how important do you feel it is for Congress to act on each of the following?

Policy	Mean			Important			Not Important		
	All	Dem	GOP	All	Dem	GOP	All	Dem	GOP
Addressing the cost of college	4.45	4.64	4.21	86%	92%	78%	4%	1%	9%
Increasing guardrails to protect students from predatory & poor-performing schools	4.27	4.40	4.10	82%	86%	76%	5%	2%	8%
Ensuring higher education institutions are providing a return on investment to students	4.26	4.39	4.09	83%	88%	76%	4%	1%	8%

All voters—including Republicans—ranked the federal government as having the most power (more so than students, institutions, state government, or employers) when it comes to improving student loan repayment rates. In fact, only 8% of voters (6% of Democrats and 10% of Republicans) said that institutions should *not* face sanctions if they’re receiving federal money and are leaving most of their students unable to pay back their loans. Instead, when asked what should happen to these schools:

- Sixty-five percent (including 70% of Democrats and 59% of Republicans) said they should be required to submit a plan for improvement to the Department of Education;
- Fifty-eight percent (including 63% of Democrats and 52% of Republicans) said they should be required to disclose their student outcomes publicly; and
- Fifty-one percent (including 49% of Democrats and 52% of Republicans) said they should lose access to federal financial aid.

When given a range of options for how to improve our higher education system, Republicans strongly support an array of nuanced accountability policies, including proposals like accreditation reform that focuses more on student outcomes, increased transparency of higher education data, and setting clear federal bottom lines for institutions that make students worse off on a number of metrics. Perhaps most surprisingly given the conventional wisdom, Republican voters squarely rejected policies that would roll back important consumer protections, such as eliminating the 90-10 rule or allowing institutions to farm out their programming to unaccredited third parties.



Republican Voter Support for Various Policy Proposals

	Support (%)
	Strong support (%)
Require college accreditors to consider student outcomes	82
	42
Restrict access to aid unless graduation rate is above 15%	78
	46
Increase transparency by lifting federal ban on collecting student data	78
	44
Allow students to earn a year of full tuition at any public institution per year of service	76
	38
Increase Pell Grants	73
	35
Withhold resources from higher education institutions that do not spend at least a third of a student's tuition on teaching	72
	35
Restrict access to aid if most students cannot repay loans within 3 years of leaving school	64
	32
Restrict access to aid if most graduates do not earn more than the typical person with only a high school degree	59
	29
New grant program for better outcomes for low-income students and students of color	54
	22
Remove limits that say for-profit higher education institutions cannot receive more than 90% of their revenue from federal financial aid	47
	20
Free tuition at community colleges	44
	19
Free tuition at all public colleges and universities	36
	15
Allow colleges to offer degree programs even if most classes are taught by a separate third party that may or may not be accredited	28
	8

Conclusion

Too often in Washington, it's easy to let popular narratives define how policy agendas are set. But as this round of public opinion research reveals, when it comes to higher education, the most frequent headlines don't always reflect what voters in both parties think it will take to make our colleges and universities better serve their students. Voters from across the ideological spectrum believe that having a well-functioning higher ed system is crucial to the broader success of our economy, which is why they are hungry for a greater return on our significant federal investment in this area. As Congress looks to reauthorize the *Higher Education Act*, this new data shows that there are several policies to improve higher education that garner broad support outside of the traditional party-line talking points. This makes clear that the building a higher education system that is more accountable for the success of its students not only the right thing to do, but a winning political strategy, too.

Methodology

Global Strategy Group conducted a national online survey of 1,389 likely November 2020 voters from April 30th to May 9th, 2019. The precision of online surveys is measured using a credibility interval and in this case, the interval is +/-2.6%. The margin on the subsamples is larger. Care has been taken to ensure the geographic and demographic divisions of the expected electorates are properly represented based on historical turnout.

Full topline of the survey [can be found here](#).

Appendix

Percentage of Voters Who Support/Strongly Support Higher Ed Policies

(Strongly support data in bold)

Proposal	All	Dem	GOP
Increasing investment in the Pell Grant program	82 51	90 65	73 35
Simplifying the federal financial aid form	78 47	84 54	72 40
Increasing transparency by lifting the federal ban on collecting student data	78 46	82 49	78 44
Requiring college accreditors to consider student outcomes	83 45	85 48	82 42
Allowing students to earn a year of full tuition at any public institution in exchange for every year of service	80 45	84 50	76 38
Prohibiting institutions from accessing federal financial aid if their graduation rate is less than 15%	77 43	78 42	78 46
Eliminating tuition at community colleges	66 38	84 54	44 19
Allowing the Department of Education to automatically enroll delinquent federal student loan borrowers in income-driven repayment plans	74 38	78 44	70 31
Establishing a new grant program dedicated to improving outcomes among low-income students and students of color	73 38	89 53	54 22
Withholding some federal funding from higher education institutions that do not spend at least a third of a student's tuition on teaching	75 36	80 38	72 35
Eliminating tuition at all public colleges and universities	57 32	75 46	36 15
Providing additional resources to schools that are spending at least a third of a student's tuition on teaching.	75 31	83 41	65 21
Prohibiting institutions from accessing federal financial aid if most of their students cannot repay their loans within 3 years of leaving school	63 30	63 30	64 32
Prohibiting institutions from accessing federal financial aid if most of their graduates do not earn more than the typical person with only a high school degree	61 29	63 29	59 29
Requiring colleges whose students regularly cannot repay their loans to pay back a portion of the federal funds the school receives and give that money to other institutions that are better serving students	58 22	60 23	56 21
Eliminating rules that say for-profit higher education institutions cannot receive more than 90% of their revenue from federal financial aid	47 22	47 22	47 20
Allowing colleges to offer degree programs even if most classes are taught by a separate third party that may or may not be accredited	30	30	28

TOPICS

HIGHER EDUCATION 247**ENDNOTES**

1. Global Strategy Group conducted a national online survey of 1,389 likely November 2020 voters from April 30th to May 9th, 2019. The precision of online surveys is measured using a credibility interval and in this case, the interval is $\pm 2.6\%$. The margin on the subsamples is larger. Care has been taken to ensure the geographic and demographic divisions of the expected electorates are properly represented based on historical turnout.