Some Pandemic-Era Challenges to (Private) Higher Education

Doubts about the value of college have intensified during the pandemic (and related economic disruptions).

Data Points:

- Public perceptions of the value of higher education have been in steady decline for a decade. In 2013, 70% of American adults agreed that a college education is “very important”; by 2019, just 51% agreed with this statement. Source: Gallup.

- Even before the pandemic (February 2020), there were significant gaps in public perceptions about the value of public versus private colleges:

  ![Figure 12. Americans believe public colleges and universities are worth the cost.](image)


- In summer 2020, 72% of college presidents surveyed by Inside Higher Ed said they were somewhat or very concerned about a "perceived decrease in the value of higher education" because of COVID-19. Source: Doug Lederman, “Presidents’ Growing Worry? Perceived Value of College,” Inside Higher Ed (June 29, 2020).
• A survey conducted just after the 2020 presidential election showed a further decline in voters’ perceptions of the value of higher education since the onset of the pandemic:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change in the perception on the return of investment</th>
<th>Pre-Pandemic (%)</th>
<th>Post-Pandemic (%)</th>
<th>Δ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Likely Voters (Nationwide)</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Likely Voters</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Likely Voters</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Leaders</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Third Way/Global Strategy Group national survey of 1,000 likely voters, with oversamples of 215 Hispanic voters, 185 African American voters, and 193 higher education institutional leaders, conducted Nov. 17–Dec. 1, 2020.


• In February 2021, 44% of current college students reported that “the value of college has declined due to the pandemic.” Source: Barnes & Noble Education, “College 2020: Transforming the Student Experience.”

• In the short term, college students surveyed at the start of the fall 2020 semester expressed “significant concern about finding any type of job once they graduate (52 percent) and being able to pay non-education related bills in the next year (40 percent).” Source: New America and Third Way, “New Polling from New America & Third Way on COVID-19’s Impact on Current and Future College Students” (August 2020).

• In the longer term, just “26 percent of working U.S. adults with college experience strongly agree that their education is relevant to their work and day-to-day life”—and that was before the pandemic. Source: Strada Education Network/Gallup, “From College to Life: Relevance and the Value of Higher Education” (May 2018).
Public trust in higher education has (probably) declined since the start of the pandemic.

Data Points:

- In February 2020, just before the pandemic, just 70% of American adults said that “overall ... colleges and universities are having a positive ... effect on the way things are going in this country today,” with sharp divisions by political affiliation:

  ![Figure 6. Overall, do you think colleges and universities are having a positive or negative effect on the way things are going in this country today?](image)


- When Education Next asked a large sample of American adults in May 2020 to assign a letter grade to private colleges, the results were still quite positive: 74% assigned an A or B to private colleges and 71% gave top marks to private colleges nationally. (Public colleges received slightly lower marks, while K–12 schools scored significantly worse.) Source: “Results from the 2020 Education Next Poll.”

- By the end of AY2019–2020, 23% of college seniors said they have “no confidence” or “little confidence” that colleges and universities will “do the right thing” in response to arrange of social or moral challenges. Source: National Survey of Student Engagement.

- This level of mistrust may be related to the 100-plus lawsuits filed by students and parents in spring 2020, demanding refunds from colleges and universities when in-person classes were cancelled and dorms evacuated. Source: MarketWatch (May 22, 2020).
New stresses on the higher education business model have called into question the viability of smaller private colleges.

Suggested Readings:


The pandemic exacerbated inequalities in college access and outcomes.

Data Points:

- “In the spring and fall of 2020, 1 in 3 Latinos and 1 in 4 Black Americans reported they had either canceled education plans or delayed enrollment, compared to 1 in 6 white Americans.” Source: Strada Education Network, “What Learners Taught Us in 2020 — and What Those Takeaways Mean for 2021” (January 5, 2021).
- The percentage of high school graduates enrolling immediately in colleges dropped sharply in AY2020–2021 (down nearly 7%). “The pandemic disproportionately affected graduates of low-income, high-poverty, and high-minority high schools, with their enrollments dropping more steeply than their more advantaged counterparts.” Source: National Student Clearinghouse, “Fall 2020 College Enrollment Update for the High School Graduating Class of 2020” (March 25, 2021).

Suggested Readings:

Some responses to the health crisis raised doubts about the true priorities of colleges—i.e., the health and safety of students and employees versus lost revenues.

Data Points:

- “Over half (51%) of college students [surveyed in December 2020] agree that ‘the way my institution handled the pandemic this past semester made me trust its leadership less,’ which rises to 62% among caregiver students and 63% among Black students. Half (50%) of college students agree with the statement that my institution only cares about the money it can get from me,’ including 55% among Latinx students and 59% among Black students.” Just 71% of students say “my institution cares about my health and well being.” Source: New America and Third Way, “One Semester Later: How Prospective and Current College Students’ Perspectives of Higher Ed Have Changed between August and December 2020” (January 21, 2021). Note: The published results do not distinguish between students at public and private institutions.

- Reopening college campuses became a political issue—or simply reinforced existing partisan divisions in the United States:

  ![Big partisan divide in whether colleges made the right call in bringing students back to campus](image)

  Source: Pew Research Center

Suggested Reading:

Nobody likes online instruction—but will it be the future of residential private colleges?

Data Points:

- Many surveys have documented student dissatisfaction with online instruction. One of the most comprehensive surveys was conducted by Gallup for the Lumina Foundation in fall 2020 and found that “29% of students currently pursuing a bachelor’s degree who transitioned from mostly/completely in-person to mostly/completely online say the quality is about the same as before the pandemic, 44% say it is slightly worse and 16% say it is much worse.” Source: Gallup Blog (December 15, 2020).

- The general public is also skeptical about online instruction:

![Chart showing most Americans say online classes don’t provide same value as in-person instruction](chart)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provides equal educational value</th>
<th>30%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does not provide equal educational value</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


- Yet “six in 10 Americans say they would prefer either an online or hybrid option [for postsecondary education for careers] even if COVID-19 weren’t a threat.” Source: Strada Education Network.
Students report that they badly missed the residential campus experience during the pandemic—but not necessarily the in-person classroom experience:

**What Aspects of Campus Life Students Are Missing Most**

- 73% Friends and social life
- 44% In-person lectures
- 30% Participating in clubs/organizations
- 25% Study spaces/libraries
- 19% Sports/athletics
- 17% In-person labs/group work
- 14% On-campus living
- 13% In-person resources (e.g., career center and academic help)
- 9% Study abroad
- 6% I don’t miss anything

*Source:* Inside Higher Ed/College Pulse survey (March 2021), chart modified by CIC.

**Suggested Readings:**

- Ian Bogost, “America Will Sacrifice Anything for the College Experience,” *The Atlantic* (October 20, 2020): [https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/10/college-was-never-about-education/616777/](https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/10/college-was-never-about-education/616777/). **Key passage:** “The pandemic has made college frail, but it has strengthened Americans’ awareness of their attachment to the college experience. It has shown the whole nation, all at once, how invested they are in going away to school or dreaming about doing so. Facing that revelation might be the most important outcome of the pandemic for higher ed: An education may take place at college, but that’s not what colleges principally provide.”

- Michael Feldstein, “Online Learning Student Experience is the New Climbing Wall,” *eLiterate* (September 2, 2020): [https://eliterate.us/online-learning-student-experience-is-the-new-climbing-wall](https://eliterate.us/online-learning-student-experience-is-the-new-climbing-wall). **Key passage:** “Increasingly, colleges and universities are going to have to develop their own, distinctive approaches to online and blended learning. They will have to differentiate in different ways. And without the same kinds of person-to-person serendipitous contact that happens when everybody is physically co-located full-time, they will have to create distinctive and valuable experiences that are just as meaningful and just as easy as bumping into your professor at the coffee shop or meeting your classmates for pizza at the dining hall.”