

U.S. Public Confidence in Higher Education: What It Is and What It Should Be

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Abstract

In the United States of America, negative public sentiments toward higher education by adults is an emerging phenomenon. Unfortunately, this concern seems to be in contrast to the benefits due to higher education that an overwhelming majority of the population enjoys. The purpose of this brief commentary is to highlight some of the pervasive benefits due to higher education experienced by the adult population that are enjoyed by many U.S. inhabitants—young or old, with or without a college education—that should serve as a foundation to furthering the premise that higher education continues to be an essential catalyst and facilitator of the high standard of living experienced by the U.S. citizenry. In light of these benefits, public confidence in higher education should be at an all-time high due to these myriad, pervasive benefits; thus, proponents of higher education should do a better job educating the general public in this regard in order to improve public sentiment, increase political support, and decrease both public and political interference.

Keywords: Public confidence, Public benefits, Return on investment

1. Introduction

In 2022, only 55% of U.S. adults believed that higher education has a positive effect on the nation's direction (New America, 2022). In 2023, 62% of U.S. adults had very little to some confidence in higher education (Brenan, 2023). These data suggest a pervasive negative attitude toward higher education among U.S. adults.

In 2021, 8.9% of U.S. adults (25 and older) had not completed high school or its equivalent, 27.9% had completed high school but not college, and 14.9% had completed some college without earning a degree (United States Census Bureau, 2022); these data indicate that approximately half of U.S. adults (~48%) have earned a college degree. Although median weekly earnings for those who hold a bachelor's degree was \$1,432 in 2022 as compared to \$853 for those holding a high school diploma (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023) thus highlighting the earnings benefit of attendance, there are many other benefits of higher education due to the work of its graduates that are experienced by a vast majority of U.S. adults regardless of their level of education.

2. Method

In order to support my argument that U.S. adults regardless of their education level experience numerous benefits due to higher education, I conducted an internet search to determine the participation percentages for various common activities associated with a high standard of living (e.g., entertainment, medical services, travel, etc.).

3. Findings

The benefits realized by a majority of U.S. adults include the following:

- In 2021, 97% of U.S. adults owned a cellphone (Pew Research Center, 2021).
- In 2021, 66% of U.S. adults consume prescribed medication (Health Policy Institute, 2021, as cited in SingleCare, 2023).
- In 2023, 64% of U.S. adults utilized a TV pay service via a cable, direct broadcast satellite, telecommunication, or internet-based virtual multichannel video programming distributor service provider (Stoll, 2023).
- In 2019, 93% of U.S. households had access to one or more cars (The Zebra, 2023).
- In 2021, 80% of U.S. adults watched movies, shows, or series via television and internet-based subscription services (Motion Picture Association, 2021).
- In 2022, 87% of U.S. adults have flown commercially in their lifetime (94% of those 55 and older); 68% had flown commercially in the past 5 years; 44% had flown commercially in the past 12 months (Airlines for America, 2024).
- In 2022, 83.4% of U.S. adults had a physician or other health care provider visit in the past 12 months (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).
- In 2019, 74% of U.S. adults owned a desktop or laptop computer (Alsop, 2022).

- In 2022, 79% of U.S. adults were literate (Zauderer, 2023).
- In 2021, 91% of U.S. adults (25 and older) had completed high school (United States Census Bureau, 2022).
- In 2021, 74% of U.S. adults were satisfied with the military's strength/preparedness (Brenan, 2021).
- As of 2023, there were 268.2 million online shoppers in the U.S. (Capital One Shopping Research, 2023).

In addition, access to clean water, clean air, and safe foods benefits 100% of the population.

Each of these benefits are ostensibly argued as being facilitated by those with a collegiate-level education such as engineers, scientists, mathematicians, technologists, computer scientists, physicians, nurses, artists, pilots, air traffic controllers, teachers, military personnel, and business people. Thus, the question remains, why is public sentiment not more positive?

4. Discussion

Over the past few years, there has been an increase in political rhetoric from conservative politicians providing invectives against higher education similar to the views expressed by U.S. Congressional representative Virginia Foxx: "Postsecondary education is in a tailspin. There has been hostile takeover of postsecondary education by political activists, woke faculty, and partisan administrators. College campuses are a breeding ground for illiberal thought" (Committee on Education & the Workforce, 2024, para. 3). Though a direct causal inference regarding how political views affect public confidence in higher education cannot be made, because 40% of U.S. adults describe their overall political view as conservative whereas only 26% describe it as liberal (Jones, 2023), it is certainly quite reasonable to expect that conservative adults are adopting the views of their elected politicians with respect to higher education. In addition, the burgeoning student loan debt (\$1.7 trillion; Mir & Toor, 2023) and its negative effects on college graduates (Hembree, 2018; Williams, 2021) have likely also fomented negative public sentiment and questions regarding the worth of higher education.

The unfortunate limited view of higher education as a mere purveyor of illiberalism (though I would argue that this view is itself illiberal; higher education should be a facilitator of liberal thought that frees students to think critically about the world around them and, thus, empowers them to develop their own educated, tenable positions on myriad issues of personal and societal interest) and a financial burden completely neglects its very real and pervasively-experienced instrumental purpose to educate those who directly improve the quality of life for all able to enjoy such benefits often on a daily basis. Though not the highest in the world, the United States still represents a country with a very high standard of living (cf. World Population Review, 2024).

The benefits highlighted are not esoteric benefits (though I could argue that there are many of these as well). Rather, these benefits are easily understood by all beneficiaries in the U.S.

population. Although I would not expect children to be aware of the benefits highlighted in this article, I would have hoped that adults would be aware thereby making the realization that their quality of life is a fruit of higher education; unfortunately, this awareness is not as pervasive as it should be based upon the number of beneficiaries that seemingly exceeds the number who have confidence in higher education.

I contend the solution is for supporters of higher education to better educate the public regarding its return on investment—defined as truly an investment and not merely a cost—that is realized by all. Though this may appear to be a rather simplistic approach, it is not occurring. Instead, opponents of higher education (politicians, pundits, private citizens) are defining its purpose and value (or lack thereof) and have engendered increasing influence over public sentiment. There is a considerable void in the national discussion by proponents who can easily outline the benefits I have highlighted in this very brief article as well as many others. If such proponents remain silent, they are complicit in allowing opponents to create the narrative that higher education is illiberal indoctrination and not worth the cost of attendance or public support.

5. Conclusion

In the United States, weak public confidence in higher education is not congruent with its instrumental benefits that directly improve the entire citizenry's quality of life. Many of these benefits are realized not only by U.S. citizens but also by those living in other countries; that is, those who have attended higher education in the United States have affected the entire world in many positive, evident ways. In order to improve public confidence, I argue that this clear evidence be communicated to the entire population in order to help enlighten them to the notion that their daily lives benefit from higher education regardless of the level of their own education. Higher education is a public good, and this public good is easily observed and understood. If advocacy does not dominate the discussion, the voices and limited views of its opponents will continue to influence public sentiment and lead to not merely the demise of higher education but more tragically the demise of the instrumental and esoteric benefits that it foment, facilitates, and provides.

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