



6-2015

## What's AHEAD Poll # 6: Public Perceptions of Higher Education: Is it Worth the Cost?

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Additional commentary is available at <https://ahead-penn.org/commentarypoll6>

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## What's AHEAD Poll # 6: Public Perceptions of Higher Education: Is it Worth the Cost?

### Keywords

Public perceptions of higher education, value of higher education, cost of higher education, cost/benefit analysis, college leader perceptions

### Comments

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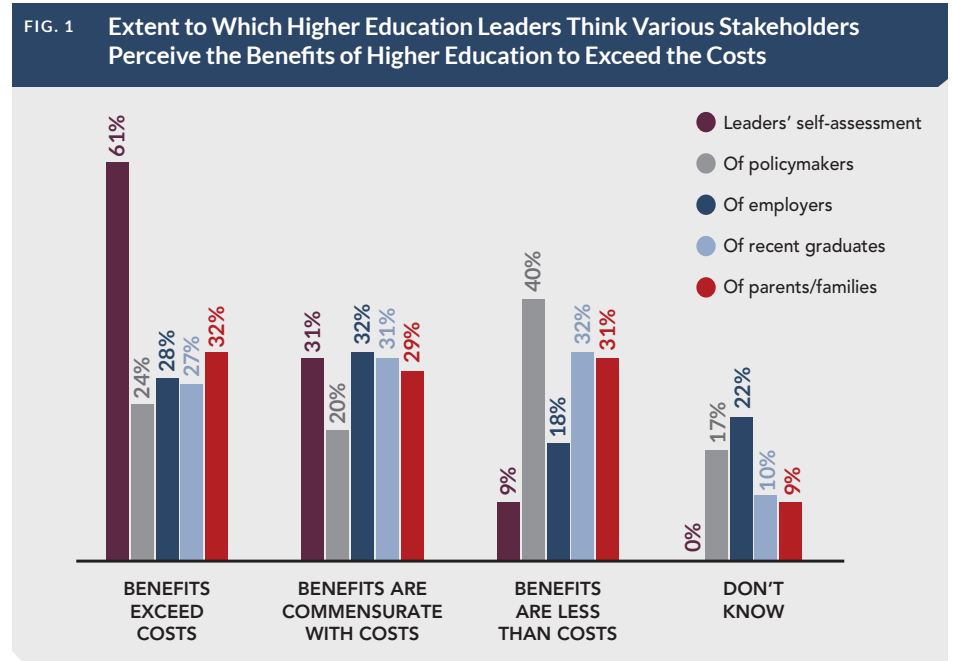
**POLL #6**  
**PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION:**  
**IS IT WORTH THE COST?**

What's AHEAD draws on the expertise of higher education trend-spotters to offer insights into important issues in higher education management. In this poll, we asked higher education leaders to share their perceptions on the cost and value of postsecondary education. We then asked these leaders to assess the perceptions of higher education's value proposition among key stakeholders, responsiveness to stakeholders, and most common criticisms.

Commencement season often comes with renewed commentary about employment prospects for recent graduates, and the return on investment in college relative to the costs. Most higher education leaders believe that higher education adds value but fewer perceive that key higher education stakeholders—particularly policymakers—view an investment in higher education as positively. Furthermore, many leaders note that higher education struggles to be responsive to the needs of policymakers and employers. While critics focus on higher education's high costs, institutions prioritize other issues.

**Higher Education's Shaky Value Proposition**

Most (61%) responding higher education leaders believe that higher education's benefits exceed its costs. This favorable view is expected given the leadership roles poll respondents have in higher education.



Considerably smaller shares of higher education leaders believe that other stakeholders hold the same positive view. Those polled believe that policymakers are most skeptical about higher education's value proposition, with only 24% of respondents believing that policymakers perceive the benefits of higher education to exceed the costs. Although virtually all respondents (92%) believe that the benefits of higher education are at least commensurate with the costs, only about 60% of respondents believe that employers, recent graduates, and parents/families hold the same view. There clearly is a disconnect.



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PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION: IS IT WORTH THE COST?

Comments from the respondents shed light on the perceived skepticism stakeholders may have about the benefits of higher education relative to the cost. In the words of one respondent:

*In addition to lifetime financial value, higher education builds a foundation that individuals can use to explore new challenges, innovate and create professional opportunities; education offers hope and confidence that others might struggle to find in adversity. Sadly, relatively few parents, legislators, and students see these benefits and instead focus only on that first job.*

Another worries about the continued value of a higher education degree in the future:

*There is a point where the costs will be perceived by all to exceed the benefits. We're getting close to that tipping point now given the continuing rising costs, the indebtedness of graduating students and the job outlook in general.*

A few respondents indicate the need for higher education to better communicate its value—and ensure that higher education is actually delivering on its promises. In the words of one respondent:

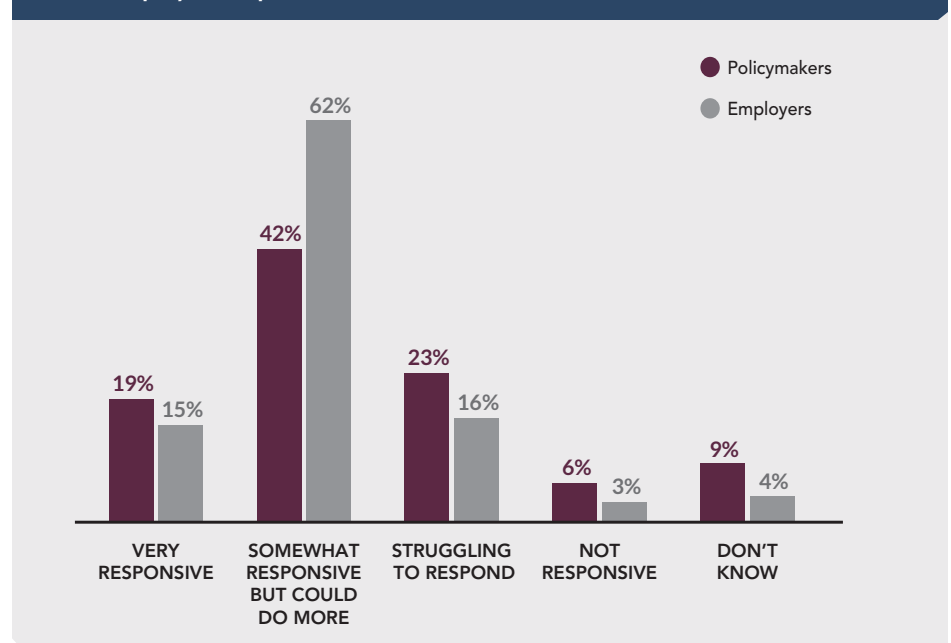
*We do a terrible job of selling the value proposition. We also need to address retention/time to degree in a proactive and intrusive way so that more who start do see the value.*

**Higher Education's Responsiveness**

Higher education's value proposition is not simply its benefits relative to its costs, but also how well higher education is perceived to be responding to changing needs and expectations, particularly those of policymakers and employers.

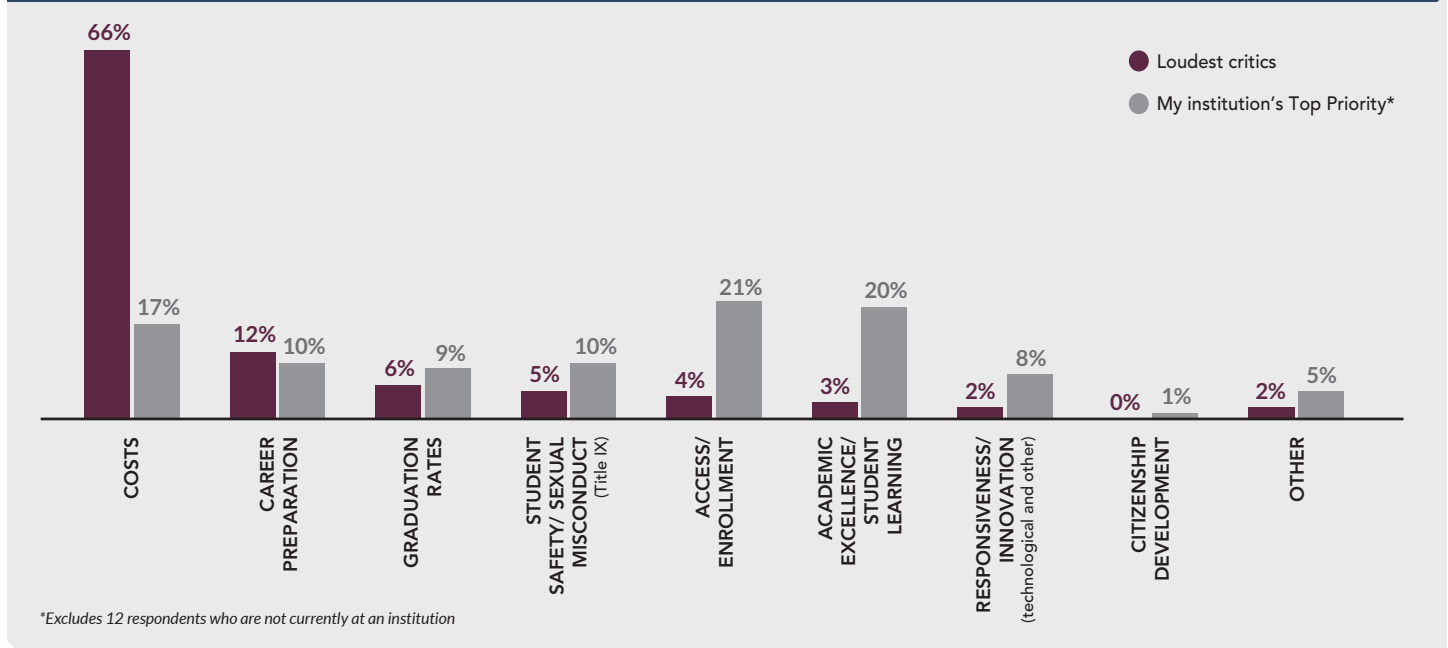
A sizable share of respondents believe that higher education is somewhat responsive but could do more to meet the needs that both policymakers and employers (42% and 62%, respectively) have of higher education. Fewer than one in five respondents agreed that higher education is very responsive to the needs of policymakers (19%) and employers (15%), and percentages smaller than those say the sector struggles to respond and is not responsive. Leaders acknowledge that the sector can do much more to meet the needs of influential stakeholders.

**FIG. 2 Perceived Responsiveness of Higher Education to Policymakers' and Employers' Expectations**



## Most Common Criticism

FIG. 3 Top External Criticism and Top Institutional Priority



Those responding to the poll overwhelmingly believe that the most common complaint of higher education's loudest critics is its costs (reported by 66% of respondents).

However, a mismatch exists between what critics want and the issues institutions are prioritizing. Only 17% of respondents indicated that addressing concerns about costs is their top institutional priority. The most important institutional priorities varied among respondents. The three most commonly reported institutional priorities were access and enrollment (21%), academic excellence/student learning (20%) and costs (17%).

## The Impact of a Possible Disconnect

Many respondents commented on the importance of considering variations in the value proposition, responsiveness of higher education institutions, criticisms, and institutional priorities across different types and sectors of higher education institutions. In the words of one respondent:

*It's difficult to answer the questions because there are vast differences of quality and cost between higher education institutions (public, private, for-profit) along with differences of perception on the part of students and parents regarding types of institutions.*

Although higher education leaders are frustrated by the lack of nuance and detail, other stakeholders—including the policymakers, employers, students, and the parents and families higher education needs to serve—may be less knowledgeable about or concerned with these distinctions.

To say that stakeholders don't understand or that the answers are complicated may do little to garner public support. Those within higher education may be relying on insider language and understanding, which very well may be contributing to the problem.

One respondent articulates the importance of identifying appropriate responses to the criticisms, writing:

*While the loudest critics focus on costs, we need to focus the dialogue on long-term value. The academy does a poor job of explaining its value and allows the critics to shape the conversation. Nonetheless, there are well-deserved criticisms of higher education's tone-deaf response to concerns about access, outcomes, career preparation, fairness, and the like. We must do more to engage our critics thoughtfully and then take action to address or eliminate those concerns.*

### About This Poll

We invited all alumni of the [Executive Doctorate program in Higher Education Management at the University of Pennsylvania](#) to participate in the poll (n = 242); 128 alumni responded during the 9-day period in which the poll was open (May 11 through May 19, 2015).

### Suggested Citation

Eckel, P. D. and Perna, L. (June 2015). *Public Perceptions of Higher Education: Is it Worth the Cost?* (What's AHEAD: Key Trends in Higher Education No. 6). Philadelphia, PA: Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania.

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