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## What's AHEAD Poll # 7: College Affordability: Is Free Community College Tuition the Answer?

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Additional commentary is available at <https://ahead-penn.org/commentarypoll7>

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### Keywords

College affordability, free tuition, college promise programs, college cost, tuition, community colleges, college leader perceptions

### Comments

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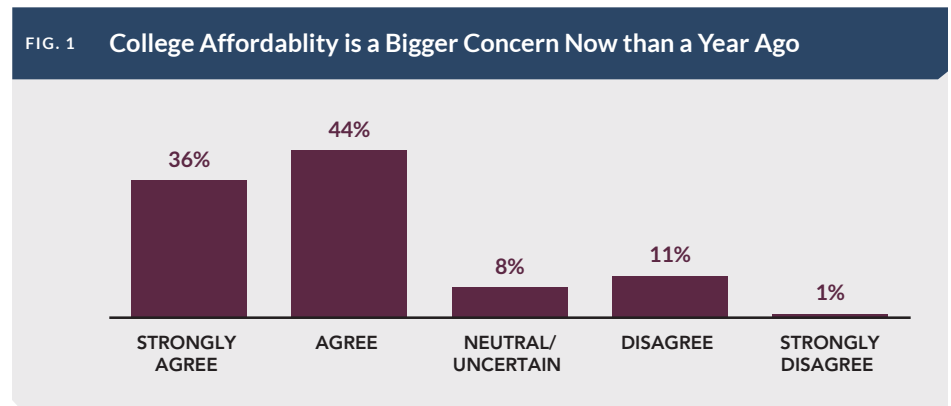
**POLL #7:**  
**COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY:**  
**IS FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE**  
**TUITION THE ANSWER?**

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 about college affordability and the possibility of making community colleges tuition-free.

Most respondents agree that college affordability is a growing concern—and about half believe that rising tuition is the primary driver of this concern. However, higher education leaders are divided about whether making community colleges tuition-free is a worthwhile approach or whether it will increase enrollment or associate degree production. Higher education leaders stress that multiple forces in addition to tuition influence completion, and worry about the implications of a “free tuition” policy at community colleges for other sectors of higher education.

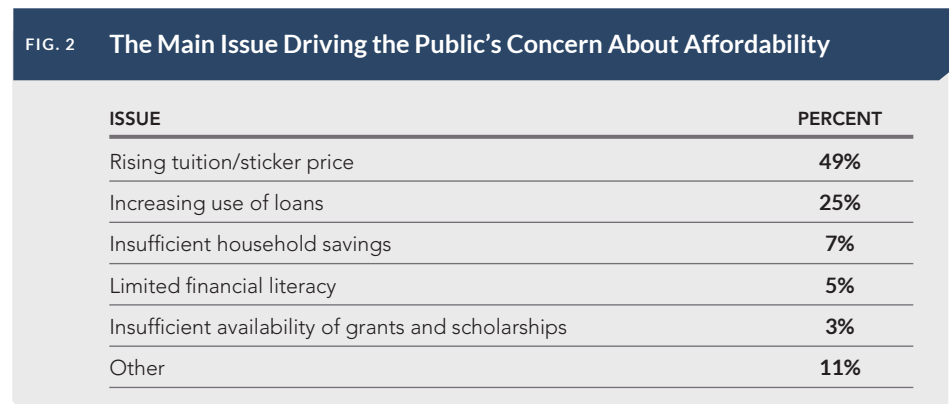
**College Affordability is a Growing Concern**

Most responding higher education leaders “strongly agree” (36%) or “agree” (44%) that college affordability is a more important concern now than a year ago.



**Higher Education Leaders Recognize the Public's Concerns About Rising Sticker Price**

Respondents perceive that the most important issue driving the public's affordability concerns is rising tuition or sticker price (49%). A smaller but still noteworthy share of respondents pointed to the increasing use of loans (25%) as the primary reason for these concerns.



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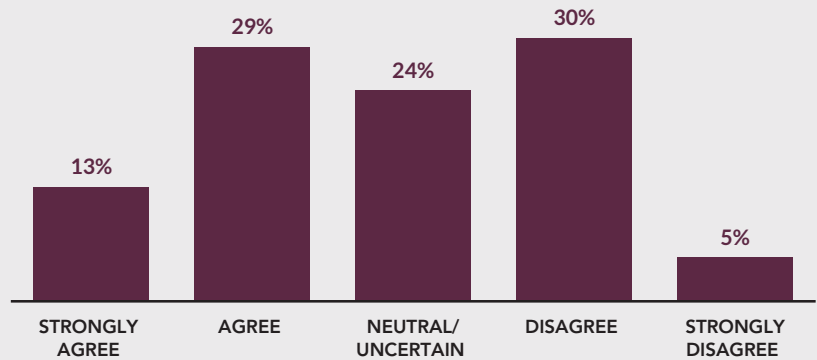
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COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY: IS FREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE TUITION THE ANSWER?

Higher Education Leaders Hold Sharply Divided Views About “Free Tuition”

While 42% of responding higher education leaders agree or strongly agree that “free tuition” at community colleges is a good idea, nearly as many (35%) disagree or strongly disagree. The comments that respondents volunteered about “free tuition” reflect these divergent views. Some respondents indicated strong support (“I love it”), others voiced strong skepticism (“A political ploy”), and others reported uncertainty (“It’s too early to tell”).

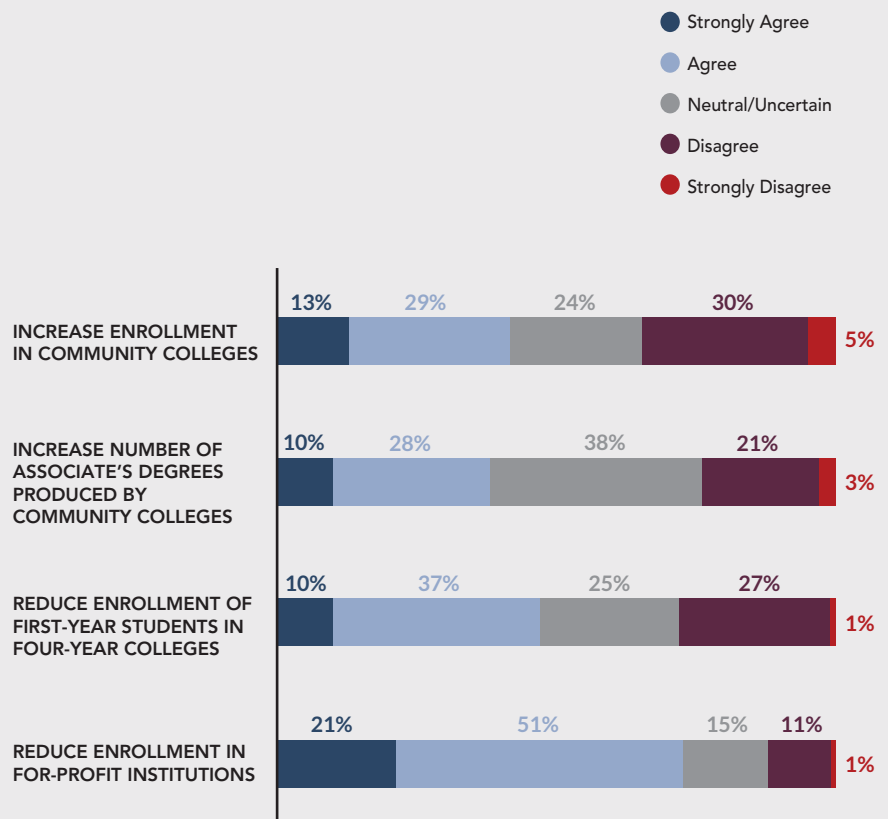
FIG. 3 “Free Tuition” at Community Colleges is a Good Idea



Respondents also offered mixed views about the likely effects of free community college tuition. High shares of respondents both agree/strongly agree and disagree/strongly disagree that “free tuition” at community colleges will increase enrollment in community colleges (42% versus 35%) or increase the number of associate’s degrees produced by community colleges (38% versus 24%). Many higher education leaders believe that “free tuition” at community colleges will have some redistribution effects, with 47% agreeing that such a policy will reduce enrollment of first-year students in four-year colleges and 72% agreeing that it will reduce enrollment in for-profit institutions.

In written comments, a few respondents questioned why a “free tuition” policy should apply only to community colleges. Others noted the negative implications for enrollment especially “at many small liberal arts schools” and “HBCUs and MSIs which compete for many of the same students.”

FIG. 4 Likely Effects of “Free Tuition” at Community Colleges



## The Need to Recognize Other Forces that Influence Enrollment and Completion at Community Colleges

The most commonly reported concern about a “free tuition” policy at community colleges is that it will not address the forces that influence persistence to program completion (37% of respondents).

FIG. 5 Most Important Concern About “Free Tuition” at Community Colleges

CONCERN	PERCENT
Not address the forces that influences persistence to program completion	37%
Not recognize limitations on enrollment capacity of community colleges	14%
Not target the financial needs of students from low-income families	13%
Not come with adequate attention to transfer and articulation policies	8%
Increase concentration of low-income students in community colleges	7%
Increase strain/tension between sectors of higher education	6%
Incentivize community colleges to award bachelor's degrees	3%
Reduce funding for institutional support services	1%
Other	11%

Some higher education leaders wrote that available financial resources should be targeted to financially needy students. Among the related views, respondents wrote that “people who can afford to pay, should,” that low-income students face other costs not recognized by a “free tuition” policy, and that tuition at community colleges is currently free for most low-income students (with the Pell grant). Others noted the potential negative consequences for student motivation, stating that without some “skin in the game,” students will not engage in and complete their educational programs.

Several higher education leaders noted that a “free tuition” policy would not address other issues facing community colleges, including the adequacy of state and local funding to provide academic and student support, low levels of academic readiness among entering students, and the limited capacity of community colleges to enroll additional students. One higher education leader explained:

*The tuition-free option only addresses the issue of access. It places a great financial burden on community colleges to identify necessary resources to maintain critical academic and student support services. This is especially true in this era of diminishing financial support. In the absence of appropriate financial allocations to support these services, tuition-free community colleges would become the equivalent to an unfunded mandate and an unintended obstacle to the mission of community colleges.*

Others wrote that a “free tuition” policy reflects insufficient understanding of the role and mission of community colleges. One respondent explained:

*Community colleges serve real needs in the education market, but that need is not necessarily focused on the completion of a four-year university degree. Many of these schools have a technical curriculum preparing students for positions in various trades, a real need and service, but not linked to a university education. A sudden influx of students seeking a bachelor's degree into a school where such courses are a fraction of their portfolio will not serve either the students or the universities.*

### About This Poll

We invited alumni of the [Executive Doctorate program in Higher Education Management at the University of Pennsylvania](#) to participate in the poll (n = 252); 152 alumni responded during the 9-day period in which the poll was open (September 15 through September 23, 2015). About half (55%) of respondents work at private not-for-profit four-year institutions, 16% work at public four-year institutions, 6% at public two-year institutions, and 3% at for-profit institutions. The remaining respondents work in organizations other than colleges and universities.

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