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What's AHEAD Poll # 9: What Presidential Candidates Need to Know About Promoting College Student Success

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Additional commentary is available at https://ahead-penn.org/commentarypoll9

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Keywords

Higher education outcomes, college accountability, measuring higher education success, success metrics, barriers to completion, higher education policy agenda, college leader perceptions

Comments

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What's AHEAD
KEY TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

POLL #9

WHAT PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES NEED TO KNOW ABOUT PROMOTING COLLEGE STUDENT SUCCESS

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 views about what presidential candidates need to know about promoting college student success.

Although most higher education leaders believe that federal attention to college student outcomes is appropriate, only a fourth of respondents believe that a "college rating system" is an effective approach for improving completion. Higher education leaders believe that many forces influence college completion, and encourage presidential candidates to consider the diversity of student characteristics and institutional missions when evaluating completion rates.

Most Higher Education Leaders Believe That Federal Attention to College Student Outcomes Is Appropriate

Most respondents (72%) agree or strongly agree that attention by the federal government to college student outcomes is appropriate.

FIG. 1   Agreement Among Higher Education Leaders That Attention by the Federal Government to College Student Outcomes Is Appropriate

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL / NO OPINION	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
22%	50%	10%	11%	7%
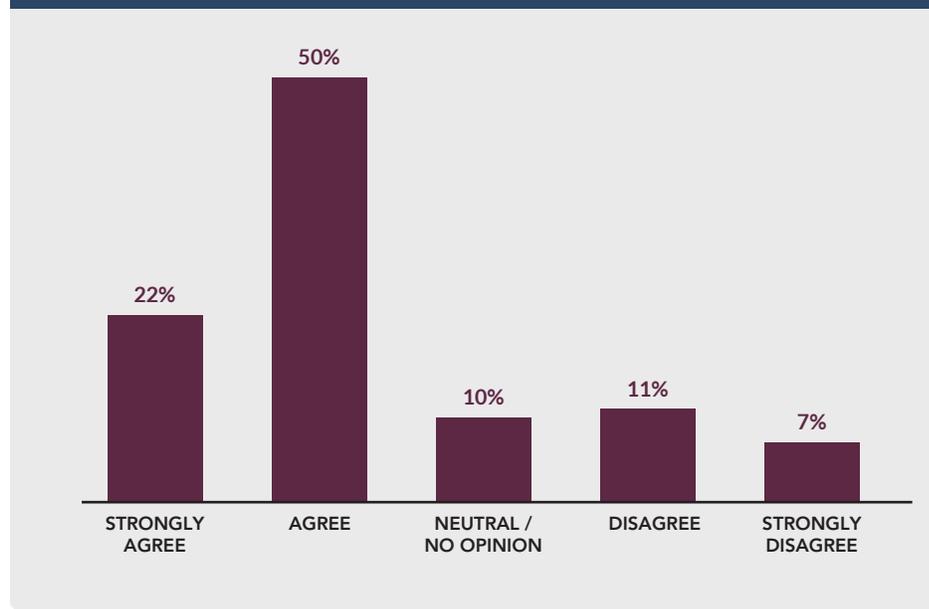
One in Four Respondents Believe That a "College Rating System" Will Improve Completion

A fourth (26%) of responding higher education leaders believe that some version of a "college rating system" is a potentially useful mechanism for improving college student outcomes.

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One respondent implied the challenges of creating one college rating system for all institutions, writing:

> Colleges serve different people with different levels of readiness. If outcomes are to be measured, and best practices shared, then colleges should be compared on the basis of like populations served, and funding should follow to the populations/ institutions that could most benefit in improving student success.

A few respondents urge the federal government to take a minimal role in higher education. One higher education leader articulates this view, writing:

> We all want students to succeed. This aim is firmly embraced at most higher education institutions. The federal government doesn't need to interfere. The next president needs to enable the states, individual campuses and higher education associations to do what they do best—educate and graduate students for productive lives.

FIG. 2 **Agreement Among Higher Education Leaders That a "College Rating System" Is a Potentially Useful Mechanism for Improving Student Outcomes**

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL / NO OPINION	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
3%	23%	14%	43%	18%
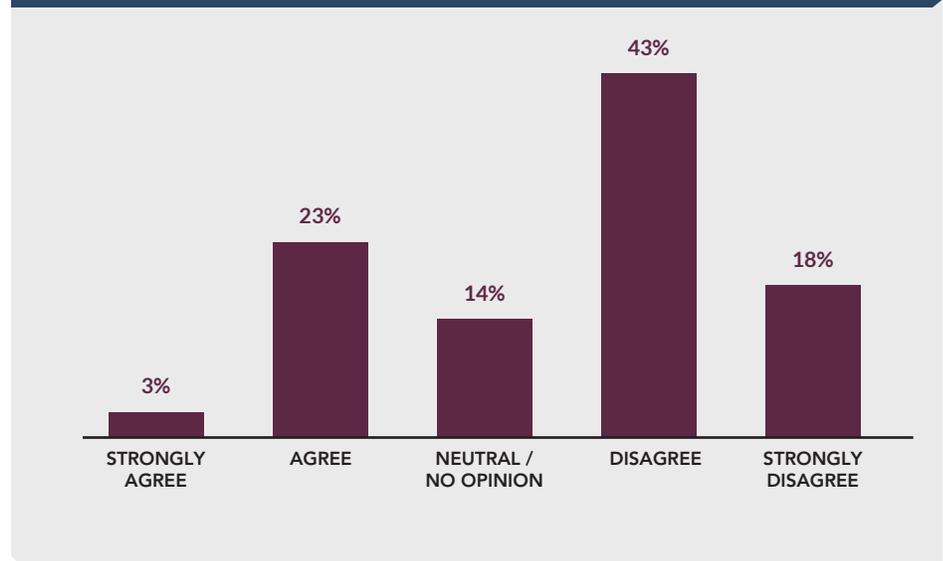
There Is No "Silver Bullet"

Higher education leaders are divided on the "most important reason" why students do not complete their higher education programs. Nearly half of respondents report academic challenges, including students' academic readiness for college-level work (31% of respondents) and academic support once students are enrolled (14%), while about a third point to financial issues, including the ability to pay college costs (21% of respondents) and the complexity of the financial aid process (7%).

Respondents also note that there is not one force that influences college completion. In a representative comment, one higher education leader succinctly writes, "There is not a single reason—different for different students and contexts." Another explains:

There are many variables impacting student success, not just one. [Presidential] candidates may be quick to state financial obstacles and bring up the issues of student loan debt but the academic preparedness or lack thereof is just as critical—among other things—that impact a student's success.

FIG. 3 — The Most Important Reason Why Students Who Enter Higher Education Do Not Complete Their Educational Program

RESPONSE	PERCENT
Insufficient academic readiness for college-level work	31%
Inability to pay college costs	21%
Insufficient academic support once enrolled	14%
Insufficient information about how to navigate financial aid processes	7%
Insufficient student motivation	6%
Insufficient social support from the institution attended	4%
Other	17%

Diversity Matters

Most responding higher education leaders believe that federal policymakers should take "diversity" into account when trying to understand college completion. Half (48%) of respondents report that the most important issue that federal policymakers should recognize when trying to understand college completion rates is diversity of students' backgrounds, circumstances, needs and goals. An additional 26% urge policymakers to account for differences in institutional missions and characteristics of students served.

Several higher education leaders stress that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. One higher education leader writes, "Outcomes at elite schools are not the basis to measure outcomes at open access schools or schools that serve high percentages of non-traditional students." Another argues that, "There are different definitions of success based upon individual student goals and institutional mission." Other higher education leaders urge recognition of the characteristics of enrolled students. In a representative comment, one leader explains, "Higher ed is populated mostly by students who are considered 'non-traditional' and their needs vary widely from traditional-aged students attending residential campuses."

FIG. 4 — The Most Important Issue That Federal Policymakers Should Take Into Account When Trying to Understand College Completion Rates

RESPONSE	PERCENT
The diversity of student backgrounds, circumstances, needs, and goals (e.g., some students require more support than others)	48%
Differences between higher education institutions in missions and students served	26%
Variations in academic-readiness for college across and within states	19%
The value of credentials other than bachelor's degrees	3%
Other	4%

There Is No Obvious Federal Solution to Improving College Completion

Respondents offer many answers to the question: What is the most important issue presidential candidates should advance in order to improve college student success? The most common recommendations are to increase federal and state funding to improve K-12 academic preparation (reported by 26% of respondents) and increase the availability of Federal Pell Grants and/or other need-based grants (16% of respondents). A few respondents offer comments that call for a comprehensive approach that simultaneously recognizes multiple factors. Articulating this view, one leader writes: "If we think that there is one quick fix, we are kidding ourselves. I think we have to tackle educational improvement P-20 from as many angles as possible."

A small number of higher education leaders urge the federal government to reduce the regulatory burden on colleges and universities. Others urge the federal government to recognize the broader contextual issues that limit college completion including childhood poverty and insufficient K-12 preparation.

A few respondents encourage presidential candidates to work directly with higher education leaders to identify productive solutions, with one leader encouraging presidential candidates to "gather higher education leaders from a variety of institutions and listen closely to the challenges they face. The Obama Administration has begun such conversations, and it's important that they continue."

FIG. 5 **The Most Important Issue Presidential Candidates Should Advance in Order to Improve College Student Success**

RESPONSE	PERCENT
Increase federal and state funding to improve K-12 academic preparation	26%
Increase the availability of Pell and/or other need-based grants	16%
Increase availability of income-based loan repayment and forgivable loans	10%
Increase investments in student access and success programs (e.g., TRIO)	9%
Use federal resources to incentivize states to increase/maintain appropriations to public higher education institutions	7%
Strengthen particular sectors of higher education (e.g., minority-serving institutions, community colleges)	7%
Lower the interest rate on federal loans	6%
Develop a mechanism that holds higher education institutions accountable for student outcomes	6%
Rethink the role of accrediting agencies (e.g., to enable more innovative, low-cost providers of higher education)	4%
Other	10%

About This Poll

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