



Public Policy Outlook: Demonstrating Value to a Skeptical Public

Higher education's public policy landscape was already complicated with declining public confidence and myriad economic challenges. Then COVID-19 brought lawsuits over online learning, politically charged debates about vaccine and mask mandates, and increased fiscal strain. The trend lines in higher education public policy today point to both obstacles and opportunities ahead, with areas of uncertainty and challenge but also areas of great potential as highlighted below.

The cancellation of student debt for about 20 million people could herald a turning point in supporting college affordability:

Protracted litigation will create uncertainty for the foreseeable future. Multiple lawsuits challenging the plan have been filed, and the issue has made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) predicts an influx of questions as details are sorted out. Several states are debating taxing the write-off as income. Forward-thinking universities will:

- Proactively reach out to students and alumni to explain eligibility requirements and processes.
- Actively participate in the national conversation on affordability and access to help shape public policy moving forward.

Uncertainty around Title IX will impact compliance and efforts to combat sexual harassment and assault:

Pending [proposed rules](#) from the Biden administration would expand the definition of sexual harassment (narrowed under the Trump administration) and would establish rights for LGBTQ students. These changes are opposed by conservative groups. The rules would eliminate requirements for live hearings and cross-examinations in sexual assault disciplinary cases, established by the Trump administration, which have been criticized for deterring reporting and re-traumatizing survivors. These provisions are opposed by some advocates who say it compromises due process for the accused. It's uncertain when or if the rules will be adopted and what changes may be made. Regardless, litigation is a near certainty. Leading universities are considering the following:

- **Having a voice:** Closely monitoring development of the rules and shaping them through active engagement with policymakers, as individual institutions and through their various national associations.
- **Enhancing resources:** Investing in their Title IX compliance operations to be prepared for whatever adjustments will be necessary under whatever new rules are implemented.

- **Engaging constituents:** Actively communicating with their campus communities to help them understand public policy discussions and reaffirm their commitment to gender equity and a campus free from sexual harassment and violence.

The continued trend of public skepticism about the value of higher education can be an opportunity:

The percentage of [Americans who said higher education positively affects the country](#) dropped 14 points in just two years, as illustrated in figure 1. Polls consistently show a partisan divide on trust in colleges and universities. Culture war battles affect institutional reputation and can threaten funding and bring excess regulation. Universities must work to demonstrate return on investment. Leading institutions will:

- **Make the case and shape the narrative:** It is vital that the fundamental value of a college education and the role of the university in the economic ecosystem is a catalyst for upward mobility.
- **Continue to support diversity, equity, and inclusion as fundamental:** A more diverse and equitable system of higher education will require sustained effort, but the return on investment is the creation of a more diverse and equitable society that values universities' central role in strengthening society through improved individual opportunity.

Uncertainty and opportunity often go hand in hand. The public policy arena for higher education presents several challenges and unanswered questions but also the possibility of advancing long-elusive goals and enhancing public confidence in universities across the nation.

Public Opinion Declines

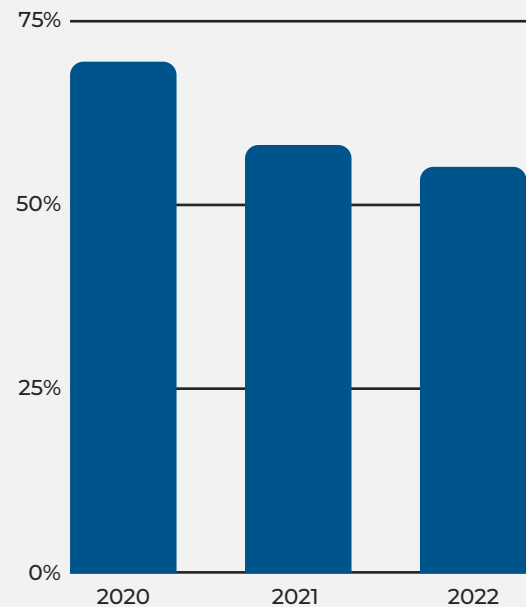


Figure 1. Percentage of Americans surveyed that said universities have a positive effect on the country.

Credit: [New America, "Varying Degrees 2022: New America's Sixth Annual Survey on Higher Education"](#)



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