



COMMENTARY

How to Sway Higher Ed's Skeptics

By Peter Salovey | FEBRUARY 27, 2018



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

Many Americans today are skeptical about the value of higher education.

Last summer, a study from the Pew Research Center found that only 55 percent of Americans say that colleges "have a positive effect on the way things are going in this country." When Gallup pollsters asked how much confidence they had in colleges and universities, 56 percent of Americans said

some or very little.

These findings are deeply troubling. Confidence in and support for higher education are essential to our nation's future. Leaders in higher education, including myself, must work to regain the public's trust. This begins with empathy — listening to people's concerns and trying to understand them.

There is a significant gap between what many Americans think about higher education and what we know about graduates' success. More than anything else, Americans worry about the cost of higher education. They are afraid students, saddled with debt, won't find jobs after graduation. They read about rising tuition costs and hear stories about college graduates living in their parents' basements.

According to the American Council on Education, many Americans believe that the economic value of a college degree is declining, although that is not true. Likewise, they think that colleges are charging more in tuition than it costs to educate a student. And many say they do not believe graduates with a liberal-arts degree will have good job prospects after graduation. These assumptions all contradict what we know about our institutions and our graduates: The value of a college education is greater than ever.

It can be difficult for those of us who work in higher education to understand these misperceptions. I, like many of my peers, have spent my entire career on a college campus. I believe deeply in my institution's mission and in the liberal-arts tradition. I am confident that the education we offer students will help them live more successful and meaningful lives.

Yet most Americans do not understand our institutions as we do, and they may not have experienced personally the benefits a college degree confers. A recent *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll found that the drop in confidence in higher education was due "almost entirely to growing skepticism among Americans without four-year degrees."

In addition to these concerns over the value of higher education, social media provides 24-hour coverage of campuses, often focusing on select incidents that are not representative of the entire student body or, at times, of anything at all. As a result, much of the public has a distorted view of undergraduates today. Moreover, critics question whether research done at universities — paid for mostly by taxpayer dollars — contributes to society or remains only within our "elitist" institutions.

Given these false narratives, people are understandably worried about their children's and grandchildren's experience in higher education. If we can first empathize with their concerns, rather than dismissing them as ill-founded or anti-intellectual, we will be better able to regain their trust.

We can begin in two ways: first, through better communication, and second, through self-examination.

As other higher-education leaders have urged, we must do a better job of communicating what our institutions contribute to students and to society.

A college education remains an excellent investment. Pew research shows "college-educated millennials outperforming their less-educated peers on virtually every economic measure, and the gap between the two groups has only grown over time." In 2012, the median annual earnings for those with a bachelor's degree or higher were \$45,500, compared with \$28,000 for high-school graduates. Nine in 10 college graduates say the investment was worth it.

Although many students will take out loans to pay for college, they will be rewarded with better job prospects and higher lifelong earnings. None of us can be sure how technology will reshape the 21st-century economy, but a liberal-arts education — teaching students critical-thinking skills relevant across disciplines and professions — remains the best preparation for an uncertain future.

A college degree is also a significant factor in social mobility. Many of our top colleges have been working for years to increase access for low- and moderate-income students, and those efforts are accelerating. Yale is one of over 80 colleges that have joined the American Talent Initiative — a commitment to help these students attend an excellent college and graduate within six years.

We must tell better stories about how our institutions create knowledge and spur innovation. Universities are home to scientific and biomedical research with the potential to save and improve millions of lives. Vaccines, seat belts, lithium batteries, and so many other important breakthroughs were made in a university laboratory in the last century. What will we discover next?

Colleges are economic incubators, creating prosperity in our communities. University of California researchers found that for every dollar spent by a university, average incomes within the host city increased by 89 cents. Yale, for example, is the largest employer and a major taxpayer in the city of New Haven, Conn. Our economic impact is an estimated \$8.8 billion statewide. The public needs to hear these important stories.

Our second challenge is even greater. As leaders in higher education, we must do everything in our power to fulfill the trust the public has placed in us.

We are the foundation of the country's prosperity, essential partners in a knowledge-driven economy where innovation confers competitive advantage. At the same time, we also are expected to develop novel ways to educate students while keeping costs down. Finding ways to curb costs without losing the depth of student-faculty interaction, a distinguishing feature of American higher education, is a difficult challenge. Solutions will depend on the size and type of our institutions and the populations we serve.

Greater collaboration among colleges may be part of the answer. Institutions of all kinds can help develop creative yet practical approaches to educating students. Various approaches are necessary, including postsecondary options that do not lead to a four-year degree. We can achieve our goals — to foster human capital, provide financial security, and contribute to society — in distinctive ways.

As we listen and respond to the public's concerns, we must remember our institutional missions. At Yale, our mission statement articulates our fundamental purpose and our highest aspirations. It guides every program, every building project, and every investment. Ensuring that our campuses and our strategies are faithful to our missions will help us serve the American public as we have vowed to do.

We cannot allow the public's trust in higher education to erode further. Our colleges and universities are the bedrock of our democracy, places where the next generation learns how to think, communicate, and solve problems. They are incubators of new ideas and engines of prosperity. Our institutions serve the public good, and they need public support.

The challenge for us is to share our stories of success and service with an anxious public.

Peter Salovey is president of Yale University. This essay is adapted from remarks delivered at the Higher Education Leadership Summit at the Yale University School of Management in January.

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