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## Research Brief

# WHAT'S THE PAYOFF?

## Americans Consider Problems and Promises of Higher Education

A research brief from  
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support from The  
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## INTRODUCTION

Policymakers and experts overwhelmingly agree that the United States needs more people with college degrees or other postsecondary credentials and are working on many fronts to fulfill that goal. This brief aims to help them do so in ways that are informed by and responsive to the needs and perspectives of the American public.

This brief summarizes findings from two national surveys of American adults. A survey of 1,006 Americans 18 and older was conducted by telephone from July 20 to July 24, 2016. A survey of 1,002 Americans 18 and older was conducted by telephone from August 10 to August 14, 2016. The research was conducted by Public Agenda and funded by The Kresge Foundation. For more details about the methodology, see page 8 of this brief.

### Waning Confidence in the Necessity of Higher Education for Success.

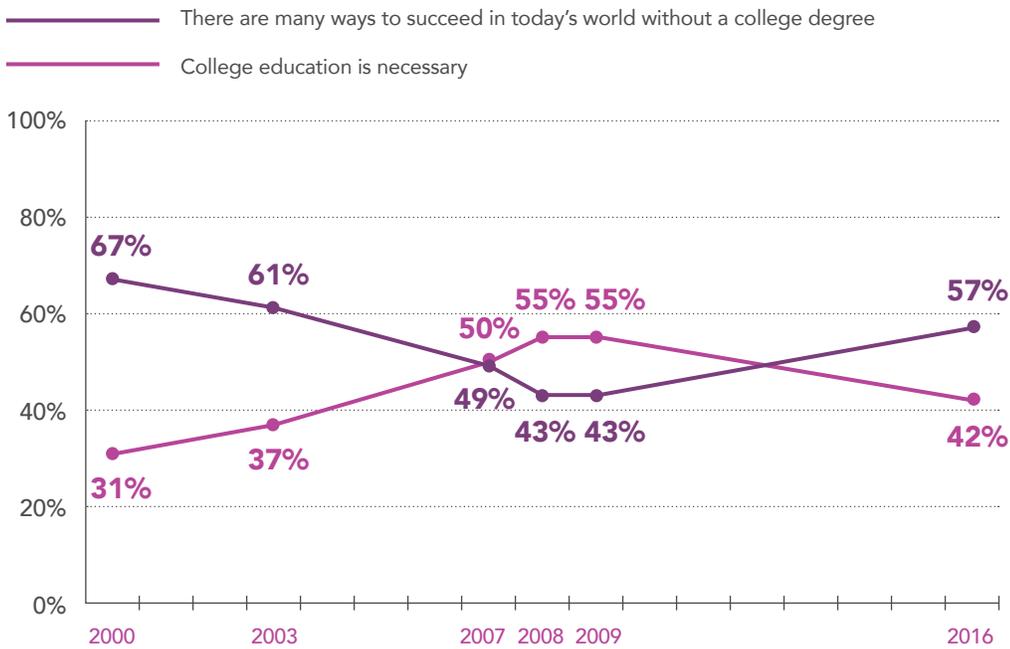
The context for these findings is a surprising shift in public opinion regarding the importance of higher education. In past surveys from Public Agenda, the percentage of Americans saying that a college education is necessary for success in today's working world increased steadily from 31 percent in 2000 to 55 percent in 2009. But today, just 42 percent of Americans say a college degree is necessary, a 13 percent drop from 2009, the last time the question was asked. Over half of Americans—57 percent—say there are many ways to succeed in today's work world without a college degree, a 14 percent increase from 2009.<sup>1</sup> (See figure 1).

<sup>1</sup>Public Agenda, "Americans Are Increasingly Uncertain About the Necessity of a College Education" (New York: Public Agenda, 2016). <http://www.publicagenda.org/press-releases/new-survey-suggests-public-confidence-in-higher-ed-waning>



## Americans increasingly uncertain about the necessity of college.

Figure 1. Percent who say that:



2016 base: All respondents, July survey, N=1,006.

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 percent. Chart does not include the small number of respondents who replied with "Don't know" or refused the question.

Sources for pre-2016 data: Public Attitudes on Higher Education: A Trend Analysis, 1993 to 2003, Squeeze Play 2007, Squeeze Play 2009, Squeeze Play 2010, all Public Agenda.

In order for policymakers and experts to address Americans' waning confidence in the necessity of higher education, it is critical for them to understand the public's views on what students should gain from a college education, on problems facing higher education and on approaches to higher education reform. Highlights of our findings include the following:

- Job skills are an essential college outcome for most Americans.
- Most Americans favor requiring colleges to do more for students' career prospects.
- A majority of Americans are concerned about high schools that fail to prepare students for college-level work.
- About 2 in 5 Americans are worried about cuts in state government funding of public colleges. But about 2 in 5 are also worried about colleges that waste their money.
- Most Americans favor making public colleges free for students from low- and middle-income families. Democrats and Independents are much more likely than Republicans to say that this is a very or somewhat good idea.

# MAIN FINDINGS

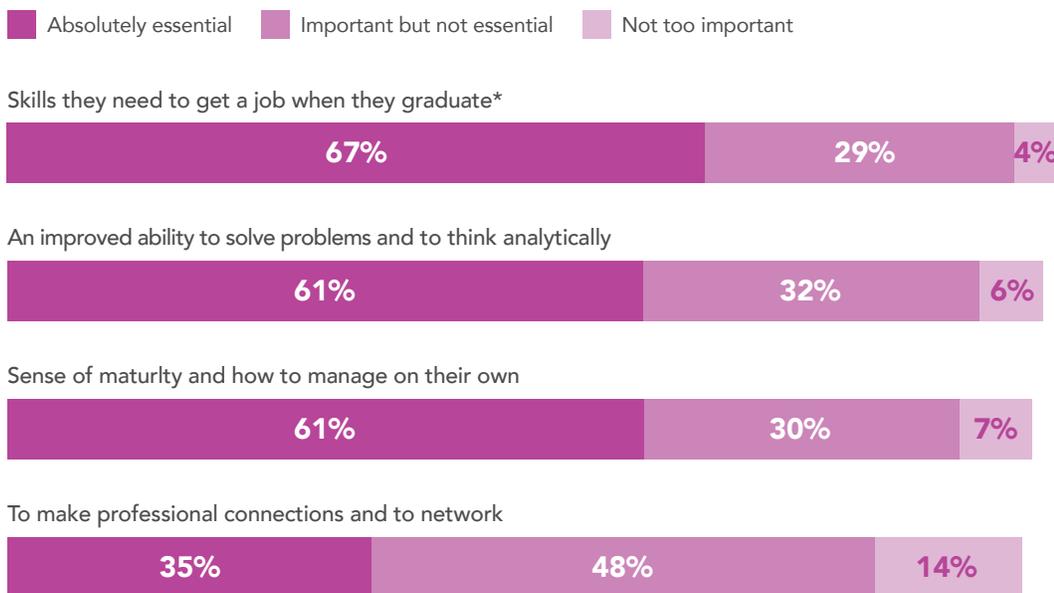


## Most Americans think that colleges should prepare students for jobs and careers.

In 2016, 67 percent of Americans say it is absolutely essential for students to gain the skills they need to get a job when they graduate from college, up from 60 percent when we asked this question in 2007. (See figure 2). A majority of Americans, 61 percent, say it is absolutely essential for students to gain a sense of maturity and how to manage on their own from attending college. But that percentage is down slightly from the 68 percent who said it was absolutely essential in 2007.<sup>2</sup>

### Gaining job skills is an essential outcome for most Americans.

Figure 2. Percent who say how important each of the following are in terms of what students should gain from attending college:



Base: All respondents, July survey, N=1,006.

\*Question was only asked to random half of sample, n=490.

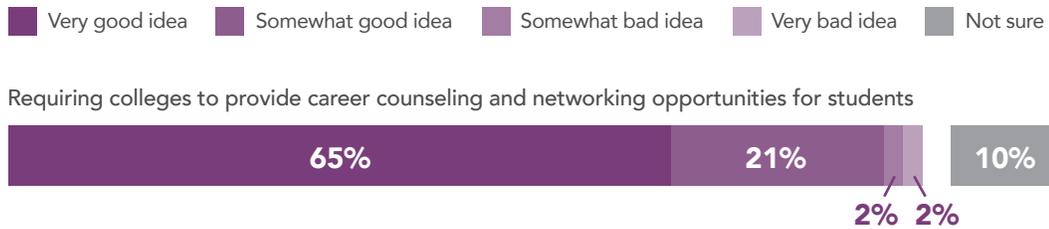
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 percent. Chart does not include the small number of respondents who replied with "Don't know" or refused the question.

<sup>2</sup> John Immerwahr, Jean Johnson, Paul Gasbarra, Amber Ott and Jonathan Rochkind, "Squeeze Play: How Parents and the Public Look at Higher Education Today" (New York: Public Agenda, 2007).

Many colleges voluntarily provide some form of career services to students. A strong majority of Americans—86 percent—say that requiring colleges to provide career counseling and networking opportunities for students is a very or somewhat good idea. (See figure 3).

**Most Americans favor requiring colleges to do more for students' career prospects.**

Figure 3. Percent who say that each of the following is a very good idea, somewhat good idea, somewhat bad idea, very bad idea or not sure:



Base: All respondents, August survey, N=1,002.

However, only 35 percent of Americans see making professional connections and networking as absolutely essential for students to gain from attending college. (See figure 2).

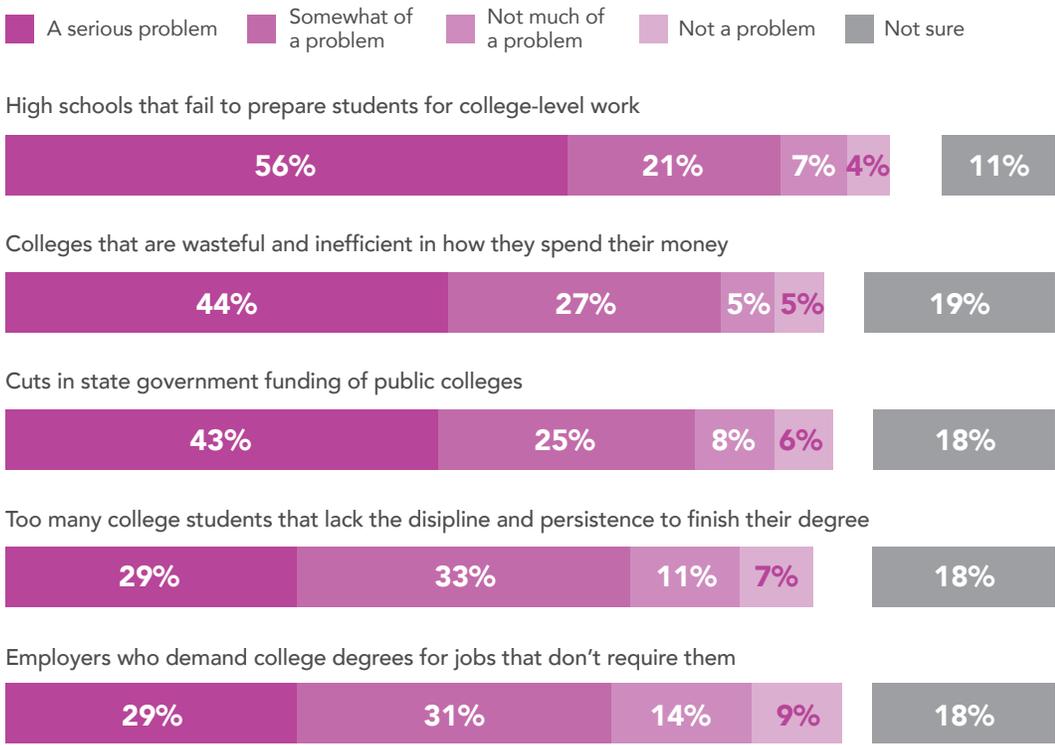


## Americans view college preparation and higher education finances as serious problems.

Fifty-six percent of Americans view high schools that fail to prepare students for college-level work as a serious problem. (See figure 4). Americans' concern about college preparation by high schools is arguably justified, since about one-third of all first- and second-year bachelor's degree students have taken remedial courses, according to recent research from the United States Department of Education.<sup>3</sup>

### More Americans view preparedness, compared to persistence, as a serious problem.

Figure 4. Percent who say that each of the following is a serious problem, somewhat of a problem, not much of a problem, not a problem or not sure:



Base: All respondents, August survey, N=1,002.

Note: Some percentages may add up to more than 100 percent due to rounding. Some percentages may add up to less than 100 percent due to the small number of respondents who refused the question.

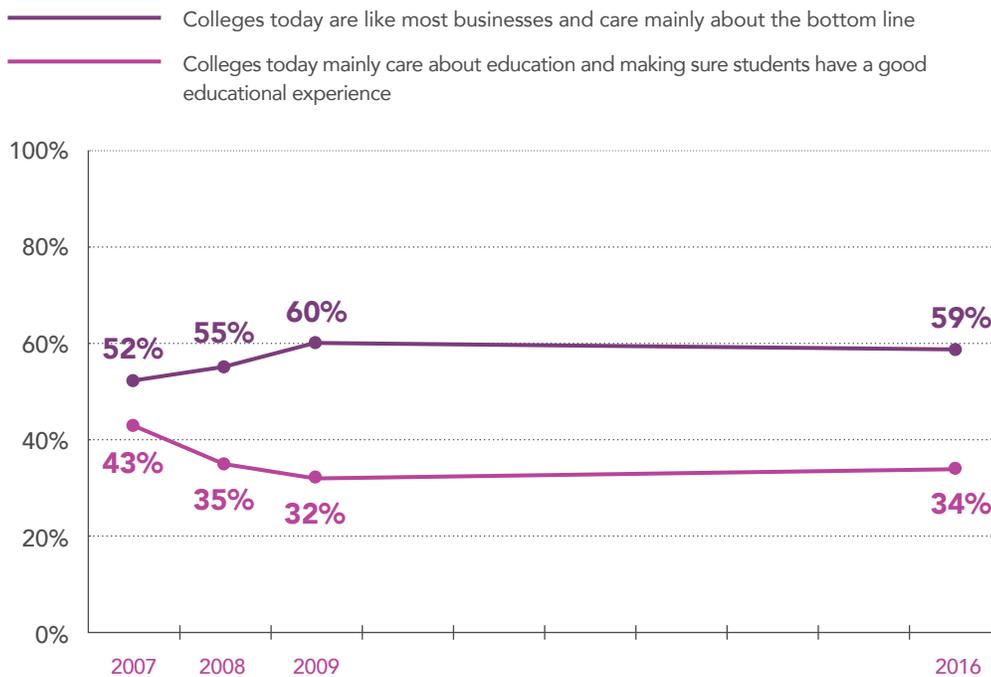
<sup>3</sup> Paul Skomsvold, "Profile of Undergraduate Students: 2011-12" (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

When it comes to higher education finances, Americans see problems with both funding cuts and how colleges spend their money. State government funding of higher education declined from 2008 to 2012, recovering modestly in the years since.<sup>4</sup> According to our 2016 survey, 43 percent of Americans view cuts in state government funding of public colleges as a serious problem. However, about the same proportion of Americans—44 percent—say that colleges that are wasteful and inefficient in how they spend their money are a serious problem. (See figure 4).

Furthermore, 59 percent of Americans say colleges today are more like businesses and care mainly about the bottom line, versus 34 percent who say colleges today mainly care about education and making sure students have a good educational experience. (See figure 5).

### Many Americans say colleges care most about the bottom line.

Figure 5: Percent who say one of the following statements comes closest to their view:



2016 base: All respondents, July survey, N=1,006.

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 percent. Chart does not include the small number of respondents who replied with "Don't know" or refused the question.

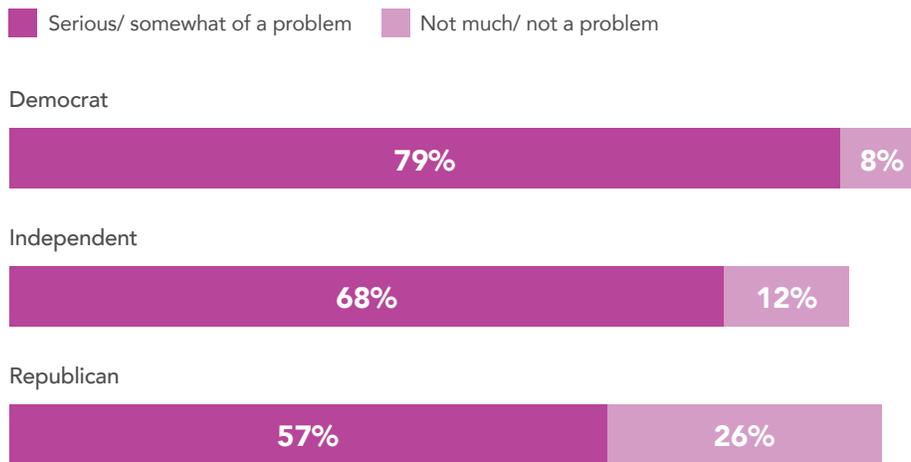
Sources for pre-2016 data: Public Attitudes on Higher Education: A Trend Analysis, 1993 to 2003, Squeeze Play 2007, Squeeze Play 2009, Squeeze Play 2010, all Public Agenda.

<sup>4</sup> State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, "State Higher Education Finance: FY 2015" (Boulder, CO: SHEEO, 2016).

While many findings in this research were bipartisan, views on cuts in state government funding of public colleges vary substantially by political affiliation. Democrats and Independents are more likely than Republicans to view cuts in state government funding as a serious problem. (See figure 6).

**Americans are divided by political affiliation on cuts in state funding of public colleges.**

Figure 6. Percent who say “cuts in state government funding of public colleges” is a serious problem or somewhat of a problem, or not much of a problem or not a problem, by political affiliation:



**Base:** All respondents, August survey N=1,002; Democrat n=333, Independent n=377, Republican n=235.  
All three group estimates for “serious/ somewhat of a problem” are statistically different from each other at the p<.05 level. Democrat and Independent group estimates for “not much/ not a problem” are statistically different from Republican group estimates at the p<.05 level, but they are not statistically different from each other.  
**Note:** Percentages may not add up to 100 percent. Chart does not include respondents who replied with “Don’t know” or refused the question.

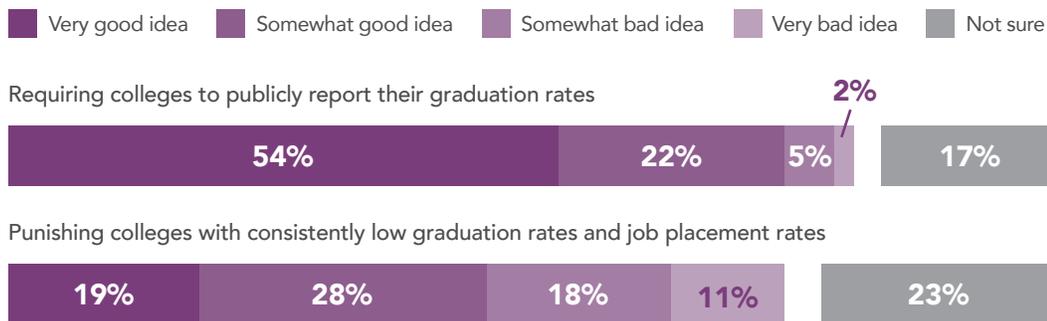


### Most Americans favor requiring colleges to publicly report graduation rates. Fewer favor punishing colleges with low graduation and job placement rates.

We asked survey respondents to weigh in on a few higher education reform ideas. Most Americans—76 percent—think it is a very or somewhat good idea to require colleges to publicly report their graduation rates, which the federal government already requires higher education institutions to do. However, 17 percent are unsure, perhaps indicating that this may be an unfamiliar idea to a fair number of people. (See figure 7).

#### Most Americans say reporting graduation rates is a good idea.

Figure 7. Percent who say that each of the following is a very good idea, somewhat good idea, somewhat bad idea, very bad idea or not sure:



Base: All respondents, August survey, N=1,002.

Note: Some percentages may add up to less than 100 percent due to the small number of respondents who refused the question.

Experts and policymakers are grappling with ways to incentivize colleges to increase graduation and job placement rates. Just under half of Americans (47 percent) say it is a very or somewhat good idea to punish colleges with consistently low graduation and job placement rates. Another 29 percent think doing so is a very or somewhat bad idea, and nearly a quarter of Americans—23 percent—are unsure. The relatively high “not sure” response suggests that there could be significant swings in future public opinion regarding how to encourage better performance by higher education institutions. (See figure 7).



## Americans are divided by age and political affiliation regarding free college for low- and middle-income students.

While 66 percent of Americans overall say it is a very or somewhat good idea to use taxpayer money to make public colleges free for students from low- and middle-income families (See figure 8), this idea exposes considerable partisan and generational divides.

### Most Americans favor free college for low- and middle-income students.

Figure 8. Percent who say that each of the following is a very good idea, somewhat good idea, somewhat bad idea, very bad idea or not sure:

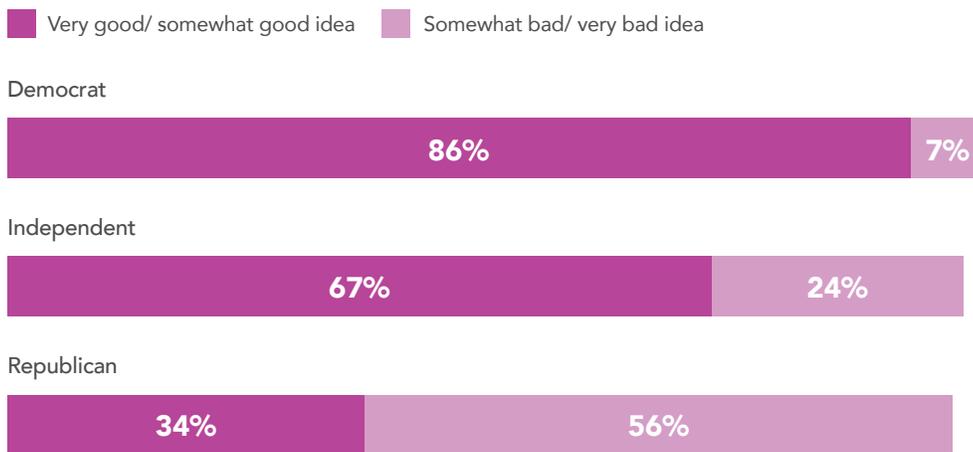


Base: All respondents, August survey, N=1,002.

Democrats are much more likely than Republicans to say it is a very or somewhat good idea to use taxpayer money to make public colleges free for students from low- and middle-income families. A majority of Independents also say it is a very or somewhat good idea, although fewer Independents than Democrats favor it. (See figure 9).

### Americans are divided by political affiliation on free college.

Figure 9. Percent who think it is a good or bad idea to use taxpayer money to make public colleges free for students from low- and middle-income families, by political affiliation:



Base: All respondents, August survey N=1,002; Democrat n=333, Independent n=377, Republican n=235. All three group estimates for "very good/ somewhat good idea" and for "somewhat bad/ very bad idea" are statistically different from each other at the p<.05 level.

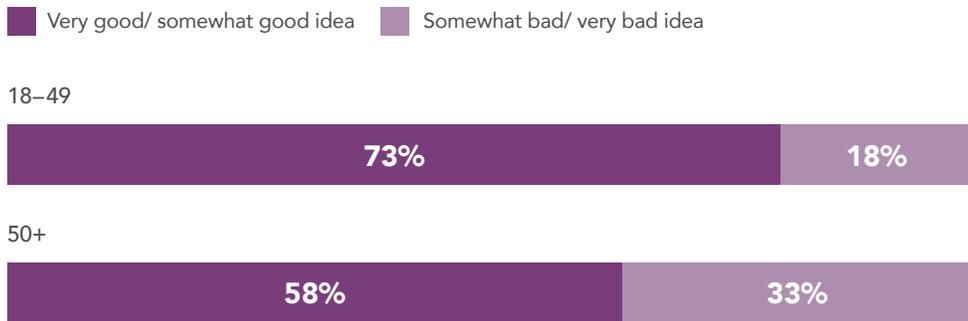
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 percent. Chart does not include respondents who replied with "Don't know" or refused the question.

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People ages 18 to 49 are more likely than people age 50 and over to say that it's a very or somewhat good idea to use taxpayer money to make public colleges free for students from low- and middle-income families. (See figure 10).

**Americans are divided by age on free college.**

Figure 10. Percent who think it is a good or bad idea to use taxpayer money to make public colleges free for students from low- and middle-income families, by age:



**Base:** All respondents, August survey N=1,002; 18-49 n=393, 50+ n=607.  
Group estimates for "very good/ somewhat good idea" and for "somewhat bad/ very bad idea" are statistically different from each other at the p<.05 level.  
**Note:** Percentages may not add up to 100 percent. Chart does not include respondents who replied with "Don't know" or refused the question.

# METHODOLOGY

This brief summarizes findings from two national surveys of American adults. A survey of 1,006 Americans 18 and older was conducted by telephone from July 20 to July 24, 2016. A survey of 1,002 Americans 18 and older was conducted by telephone from August 10 to August 14, 2016. Respondents could refuse to answer any question. The response rate for the first survey was 5.4 percent overall using the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Response Rate Three formula, with a response rate of 7.6 percent for the landline sample and 4.2 percent for the cell phone sample. The second study had an overall response rate of 4.9 percent, with 7.0 percent for the landline sample and 3.5 percent for the cell phone sample. For both surveys, the final data were weighted to correct for variance in the likelihood of selection for a given case and to balance the sample for known population parameters to correct for systematic under- or overrepresentation of key demographics. For both surveys, the margin of error for the original weighted data is +/-3.8 percent at the 95 percent confidence level. It is higher, however, for questions that were not asked of all respondents and for subgroup results.

The survey was fielded by Social Research Solutions Inc. (SSRS). SSRS was responsible for data collection only. Public Agenda designed the survey instrument and analyzed the data. When using these data, please cite Public Agenda. For more information, including topline findings, full question wordings and sample characteristics, please go to [www.publicagenda.org/pages/public-opinion-higher-education-2016](http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/public-opinion-higher-education-2016).

We conducted two demographically diverse focus groups before developing the survey instrument. Focus groups were conducted in June 2016 in Secaucus, New Jersey, and Detroit, Michigan. In total, 20 people participated in these focus groups.

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#### **About Public Agenda**

Public Agenda is a nonprofit organization that helps diverse leaders and citizens navigate divisive, complex issues. Through nonpartisan research and engagement, it provides people with the insights and support they need to arrive at workable solutions on critical issues, regardless of their differences. Since 1975, Public Agenda has helped foster progress on higher education affordability, achievement gaps, community college completion, use of technology and innovation, and other higher education issues.

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#### **About The Kresge Foundation**

The Kresge Foundation is a \$3.6 billion private, national foundation that works to expand opportunities in America's cities through grant-making and social investing in arts and culture, education, environment, health, human services and community development in Detroit. In 2015, the Board of Trustees approved 370 grants totaling \$125.2 million and nine social investment commitments totaling \$20.3 million.

*For more information, visit [kresge.org](http://kresge.org).*



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For more information about this study, visit:  
<http://publicagenda.org/pages/public-opinion-higher-education-2016>

Or contact [research@publicagenda.org](mailto:research@publicagenda.org), tel: 212.686.6610.