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Ep.88: The Public's Growing Concerns About Higher Ed's 'Value'

DOUG LEDERMAN:

For decades, colleges and universities enjoyed almost unquestioned public support as some of America's most important institutions. Like most institutions, they've been knocked off that pedestal in recent years. Made growing questions, not about whether higher education remains important, but whether it's available, affordable, and valuable enough. Hello and welcome back to The Key Inside Higher Ed's News and Analysis Podcast. I'm Doug Lederman, editor, and co-founder of Inside Higher Ed. And I'm glad to be back in your earbuds, or your car stereos, or wherever you listen to us. The Key took some time off this summer, but we're back to stay as the new academic year cranks up. Hope all of you got at least a little time to refresh yourselves and indulge in some self-care. This week's episode of The Key is the first in a three-part series on the concept of value in higher education, made possible by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The topic has gotten increasing attention as college prices and student debt continue to rise, policymakers develop data showing the return on investment for specific academic programs, and employers seek to expand their hiring pools beyond people with traditional credentials.

Today's episode looks at several recent surveys of public attitudes about higher education, by organizations, such as Public Agenda, New America, and Morning Consult. Among the findings just under half of Americans agreed that a college education is still the best investment for people who wanna get ahead and succeed. And while most respondents said they believed getting some post-secondary education helped ensure economic security, younger Americans were more skeptical about the value of college than their older peers. I'm joined today by three guests, Sophie Nguyen, Senior Policy Analyst with New America's education program, which publishes 'Varying Degrees' and numerous other surveys about higher education. David Schleifer, Vice President and Director of Research at Public Agenda, a national research organization, and Natasha Quadlin, an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles, and co-author of 'Who Should Pay? Higher Education, Responsibility, and the Public,' published this year by the Russell Sage Foundation.

In the discussion that follows, we'll share some of the findings of their work and the implications for colleges and for policy makers. We've got a lot of ground to cover, so that's enough for me, but before we turn to the conversation, here's a quick word from the Gates Foundation.

SPEAKER:

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DOUG LEDERMAN:

Sophie, Natasha and David, welcome to The Key and thanks a lot for being here. How would you characterize this current state of public opinion about higher education and how those views are trending? Maybe, Sophie, start with you since you've been doing this annual survey for, I guess, five-plus years now.

SOPHIE NGUYEN:

Sure, thanks Doug. Varying Degrees are annual surveys on what Americans think of high education's, just come out in the summers. The findings from our surveys this year show that Americans generally still pretty much believe in the value, or the return on investment of higher education or education after high school, which include not only the bachelor's degrees but also the certificate and the associate degree. At the same time, they are just not happy with how things are going. More than 80% of Americans say that having a certificate or associate degree, or a bachelor degree, will help make it easier for them to have a well-paid, stable career. And, you know, new questions that we asked this year, like what's the minimum level of education that you recommend your child, a close family member, have to ensure financial security? Think 73% of people say at least a certificate. They still believe education after high school, will lead to a better economic outcome. But at the same time, when we ask them, do you believe higher ed is by how it is?

Only 38% of Americans think so. When we asked if colleges and universities are having a positive or negative impact on the way things are going in the country today, around 50% of people say so. And that's a significant decline from when we asked the question in 2020, right before the pandemic, when over 60% of people say positive. Most of the numbers stay pretty much the same, are pretty stable compared to when we first conducted the surveys in 2017.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

David, how do Public Agenda's results from its survey about higher education compare to what we just heard from Sophie at New America?

DAVID SCHLEIFER:

This Public Agenda's survey that we did, which was supported by Lumina Foundation and Gates Foundation, the findings are telltale, I would say, a pretty similar story to the New American findings. I think the kind of big picture of it is that we did see that by a variety of different measures. Americans do understand that higher education can help people economically, particularly when we asked about impacts in people's own mistakes, like when we sort of brought it home a little bit, like people do understand the economic benefits of higher education. However, we also see a lot of questions about the value of higher education. That essentially comes down to sort of like whether the investment really

pays off for people. I would never call this a loss of faith in higher ed, but I think that what we see is people saying that higher education is too expensive, it's too time-consuming. We asked a question about colleges being stuck in the past and not really meeting the needs of today's students.

So, sort of this kind of understanding that the potential benefits of higher education are out there, but they're just, it's expensive. It's not accessible to everyone. It's really not designed for today's students. On the kind of fundamental question of whether the benefits are worth the risks or not. Where we see this kind of 50-50 split, that was the same in 2016. We didn't see a ton of change, and I actually think that these questions that people have been raising about whether higher education is worth the investment, I think are much longer standing than just the past two or three years.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Natasha, initial thoughts from you based on the work you've done?

NATASHA QUADLIN:

Sure, I like that this conversation is really focusing on these contradictory opinions that Americans can have. So, in our data, too, I think we find very consistently that Americans do see great value in higher education. You know, it depends on how we ask these questions. And so when you ask about kind of broader dimensions of higher education, we can really see where a lot of those benefits come out to. So, Americans in our data recognize the intellectual value of college. They see how universities enrich communities. And then they also talk about these personal income and other benefits that might accrue to individuals that are really important. And that's been really consistent over time in our data too. We asked people a couple of questions about the possibility of success with and without higher education and what that looks like for people. We find that Americans really do lean in to this possibility of success without higher education. So, they really latch on to these examples like plumbers and electricians and other skilled trades where they say it's very possible to earn a good living without a college degree.

But then we ask them, is it easier to succeed in the world with a college degree than without one? This is kind of similar to the data Sophie talked about. And overwhelmingly they say, yes, it is. So, I think people recognize that, yes, you can. It's possible to succeed without college, and you can have a successful career without accruing this educational debt. But people also don't see this as an easy path or perhaps even a preferable path. Something other folks have kind of touched on to that I think is important to keep in mind is that people aren't necessarily forecasting their own behavior or what they would tell their friends and family to do. So, something we see a lot in our data is that people will say, yes, like other people and other people's children cannot go to college and take this circuitous path to success. But when it comes to themselves and their own children and the people that they care about, they're perhaps not as willing to take that risk.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Yes, there's sure been a tendency for a lot of politicians and sometimes Silicon Valley investors to question whether going to college is right for people. But you don't typically see them sending their kids to a welding institute or a cosmetology school. Thinking about sort of our audience, what are the findings that you think are sort of most concerning to people who either work in higher education, or who are advocates for higher education, and want it to be central in our society? David, maybe start with you.

DAVID SCHLEIFER:

It's very easy, I think to look at maybe our findings and other findings that have come out over years. I think there's a risk for higher education leaders in looking at that data and saying that Americans are losing faith in higher education because of ideological reasons. Like there's some kind of anti-intellectualism or that everyone wants to be an Uber driver or something like that. And I really think that that is the wrong takeaway here. I think the takeaway is that the prices are too high. There's no simpler way to say it. Prices are too high and people know that completion is not a guarantee and then people are, and even if they do complete, they're luck with debt. I do not think that the takeaway here should be some kind of hand-wringing about ideology. I think it's like, it's just has to be a conversation about costs and completion because that's what people are seeing as problems. And in a way that's kind of a good thing for higher ed as a field, because those are theoretically at least problems that someone could address.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

I assume you'd agree that there is ideological stuff happening as well, but the focus on that can tend to be sort of a shirking of responsibility by people within higher education and within the industry. Because if you can just say, oh, those guys don't like us, it's out of our control. That's not exactly helpful. So, I do want us to come back to the extent to which the public attitudes are encouraging the politicians who might also have it out for higher Ed, which I do think is happening out there. Sophie, what findings do you find most troubling for those who care about higher education?

SOPHIE NGUYEN:

What I'm concerned most about is the difference in how younger generations compared to older generation think about certain issues in higher Ed, such as affordability of financing for higher Ed, younger generation, the generation Z millennials tend to feel more negative about the values of the return on investment of higher education. And particularly this year, I think when we ask the questions about whether or not colleges and university provide enough support to students who help them complete, we see that in a lot of areas. That is to me concerning because they are the one that make up the significant group of undergraduate populations right now. And colleges and university are faced with a significant enrollment decline, especially in the community college sector.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Some people out there may be uncomfortable with referring to students as customers or consumers, but I think it's apt in this context, the young adult population is higher education's primary customer. And when your primary customer views you with more skepticism than the general public, that is probably troubling. Natasha, what science do you see as most concerning?

NATASHA QUADLIN:

David's comment at the beginning, about cost is the bottom line is also the conclusion that I come to, that I think that people in higher education should be very concerned about the public's awareness of these cost issues. And that, we currently haven't to use the consumer's language again. We haven't pushed our consumers to the point yet where they don't see value in higher education, but the question becomes, at what point does this become a real issue? And we're seeing evidence of this and hints of this, but as a sector, I don't think that we should feel as if this game can just go on forever. The other point that I really see in our data is that we've seen a real shift in how Americans think about responsibility for college costs and who should bear that responsibility. So, 10 years ago in our data,

Americans overwhelmingly said that students and parents should be the ones that pay for college. But increasingly we're seeing that people want government to play a much more active role in the funding of higher education.

So, not only because this will reduce their individual contribution, but also because this will theoretically broaden access to students who haven't had access in the past. So, I think that people in higher education and also people in government more broadly should be really aware of this pattern and they should know that again, we've historically pushed these high costs onto students and parents, but the public really does see government investment as a viable alternative to our current funding mechanisms. And that this is also seen as a really important step forward for reducing costs for consumers.

SOPHIE NGUYEN:

Yeah, I just really want to second what Natasha and David said earlier about ideology differences and cost is the underlying issues where absolutely, we see that in our survey as well. There's no hiding that American don't think that they can get high-quality education after high school that is also affordable. More people think that the government should be responsible for funding higher ed, because it's good for society rather than the students. We do see that number trending that way since we conducted the surveys. People seem in general agree that there's an affordability issues here, but what they don't agree on is how to solve it, and especially that is how to solve it, or how to fund it is the questions where we see there's a little like deep divide between Republican and Democrat and that is a huge issue because that means that we cannot come to a conclusion. How close can we come to a conclusion on how to solve this affordability issue.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

David, do you wanna jump in here?

DAVID SCHLEIFER:

On a question of public investment, I think one of the things that we found, that I would say is good news, potentially for people who work in the field is that we asked about investment in a few different ways, investment in public institutions that, you know, we kind of asked a general question about state investment in public higher education. And we saw sort of like modest support. 61% of Americans supported increased funding. That was stronger among Democrats, not nearly as strong among Republicans. That was the response to the general question. But when we asked about funding specific initiatives in public higher education to help students succeed, that's where we saw much stronger support. So, we asked about things like, funding for short term credential programs. We asked about partnerships with K12 systems. We asked about hiring more faculty, so students can get the classes they need. You know, just long series of specific investments. And when we asked about those, support was quite high across political affiliations.

And our kind of takeaway from that was that, people, they wanna know what they're paying for. And when they're told what they're paying for, we saw higher support. And I think kind of when people think about, when people in the field, kind of think about going to pursue funding, there's a takeaway here that talk about what the money is for and what the programs are for and who it's meant to support as opposed to just this kind of like throw some more money in this pot and trust us to do the right thing with it.

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DOUG LEDERMAN:

I'm speaking today with Sophie Nguyen from New America, Natasha Quadlin from UCLA, and David Schleifer from Public Agenda. David, you said early on that you didn't think that the public was losing faith in higher education. And I wanna dig into that a little more deeply. I tend to think that higher ed has been knocked off its pedestal, that it was on for a long time. And I wanted to know if you're seeing growing skepticism, maybe not about whether higher education is a good thing, but about whether it is worth my money. Do we think the public questioning is starting to affect individual decisions about whether to go to college? Is it becoming a factor in enrollment questions? Natasha, do you have thoughts about that?

NATASHA QUADLIN:

Yeah, I have a lot of thoughts. I think in a lot of ways, some of this questioning is necessary, right? So, we've seen so much diversification in the higher education landscape in the past several decades, not only in terms of costs, which we keep coming back to, but also in terms of predatory institutions that take people's money and don't offer a good return on investment. So, I think some of the hesitation surrounding higher education, you know, there are places where we're right to be concerned. But, I mean, yes and no, in terms of whether this is actually affecting people's enrollment decisions. So yes, I think that people will continue to resist programs where they don't see return on investment, especially these for-profit predatory institutions. But in the broader historical context of enrollments, I still remain pretty optimistic that enrollments are really thriving in a lot of areas. If we look at a larger time horizon. I mean, I've thought a lot about enrollments over the past few years, especially with COVID in terms of people's optimism.

So, I've thought a lot about how investment in higher education really requires us to be optimistic about the future and about what we will be able to do in the labor market and in education. And for a lot of people in this time period, optimism has been kind of hard to come by. So, I'll be really interested to kind of wait and see how these enrollments continue to play out. But we're seeing so many things happening in this sector that it's hard to know what is causing what, and what is really having an effect here.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

David?

DAVID SCHLEIFER:

This is a very expensive investment for a lot of people. And it's an investment that can be delayed, right? So, like if someone isn't enrolling this year, maybe that's because they feel like they're afraid of going into debt and they wanna try at least to save up money and enroll next year, right? People always come back to the cost when they talk about higher ed. We do a lot of research in healthcare and these are two analogous fields that are very expensive for people, that can kind of bankrupt people. Unlike healthcare, higher ed is actually one where someone could wait a year, and in healthcare, people don't necessarily

have that choice. In both fields, it's like how long can you just keep raising the prices and expect people to continue walking through the door unless they have the means to come here.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

I probably have a slightly more pessimistic take than it seems like all of you do, about whether the public's questioning of the value of credentials is starting to have an impact on individual choices about whether to go to college and on secondary enrollment collectively. I totally agree that there are too many things going on right now for us to know, for sure, but as the impact of the pandemic begins to ease and wane a little bit, and the job market slows down, I'm concerned that questions of cost and benefit are beginning to have an influence in individual decisions. I wanna shift in the time we have left to talking about solutions. The good news in some ways about the affordability focus is that unlike say people just not liking higher ed or thinking it isn't a good thing, finding ways to make education more affordable and institutions more effective is at least theoretically something college leaders and policy makers can influence. Are there conclusions that we can draw from any of your work that point the way toward things that might be done to address the public's concerns, Natasha?

NATASHA QUADLIN:

The types of changes that I think Americans most want are not at the institutional level role, but they're instead requiring this great collective action. And that's part of the reason why this is so difficult, because a lot of these changes on the margins will affect some students and will improve things, but won't have the real sea changes in higher education that Americans are really hungry for. We talk about this in the book a little bit that some of the programs that some states have encouraged around free tuition for associates degrees and other community college credentials seem to be really great and are helping students in ways that will also help the higher education landscape. But we would love to see bigger, broader action that will be on a wider scale. But that's hard, like I said.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Especially at a time of increasing public division that we don't show a lot of signs of coming out of. David, thoughts from you on the potential solutions piece?

DAVID SCHLEIFER:

It's clear what people's priorities are, which is affordability, access, and also career relevant skills. So, that's clear, as I mentioned, we asked about a lot of different ways of addressing affordability, and sort of like we saw a strong cross partisan support for basically all of them, which I think just shows like people are sort of just like, please just do something. You know what I mean? Like all of these sound good to people, all of the various things we asked about appealed to people. So, I think, the necessary is like, well, just give something a shot. In the conversation about affordability, I would say, like not to lose sight of completion or student success, we could call it, whatever you want, call quality. We have this long list of things that there's cross-partisan support for, all these flexible credentials and stackable credentials and all partnerships. So, people graduate from high school with some college credits, working more closely with employers. There is a long list of things that there's cross-partisan support for in politicians and system leaders as well, take their cues from the public in this case.

And sort of say like, Hey, there is quite a mandate for some substantial change. And so like what could we actually do? And I feel like even in an environment where we do see a lot of polarization, we also see a lot of cross-partisan agreement, a lot of cross-partisan agreement on this issue and on other issues as

well. So, there's sort of no shortage of things that are doable, and it should be politically feasible, and politicians are willing to sort of take their keys from the public.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

That's the end of my conversation today with Natasha Quadlin of UCLA, David Schleifer of Public Agenda, and Sophie Nguyen of New America. Thanks to all of them for their time and their insights. And thanks again to the Gates Foundation for its support. Today's discussion tees up nicely the other two episodes in our series on value in higher education. Next week, I'll be joined by a panel of policy experts and researchers to talk about how the conversation about value is making its way into federal and state policy making and politics. And the week after that, we'll dig into the data that are being generated to try and define value in various ways. That's all for this week's episode of The Key. I'm Doug Letterman. And until next week stay well, and stay safe.