

Public Trust and the Public Good

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Higher education in the United States is facing a loss of public trust. This is troubling because strong support for higher education is an important characteristic of a well-functioning civil society. Like the free press and independent courts, universities and colleges are an essential part of the infrastructure of democracy. Their status, however, is dependent on the public's view that they, along with other societal institutions, contribute to the public good.

The polls generally confirm declining support. A Gallup survey indicated that from 2015 to 2018, public confidence in colleges and universities dropped by nearly 10 percent. Many Americans still aspire to enroll in higher education, but their eroding confidence grows from concerns about its accessibility and outcomes. The cost of higher education and its perceived value are central factors in their loss of trust. The combination of tuition prices and student debt has tested the faith of students and their families. Ultimately, this has prompted a critical question, "Is it worth it?"

Cost, Value, and Accountability

The question of value for price has played a central role in the accountability movement in the United States. Greater accountability is also cited as a way to restore public trust. Whereas only 48 percent of adults in the Gallup poll were confident about higher education, 76 percent thought that requiring institutions to report graduation rates would help. Whether at the institutional level, with the provision of more information to applicants, or through the government, with such vehicles as the College Scorecard, the aim is to make higher education more customer friendly and trustworthy.

New iterations of accountability will focus on student debt by academic program and short-term earnings of graduates. These disclosures are designed to enhance transparency as well as public confidence. The result is not only a narrow view of the intended outcomes of higher education, but also an indication that its compact with the public is increasingly built upon the premise that it is a private good based upon individual return on investment.

Rapidly rising tuition and debt must be addressed, but sustainable societal trust will need to be linked to more than individual benefits. This will be a challenge. A survey from Columbia University's Teachers College offers sobering insights. It shows how the current demographic and political landscape in the United States complicates the linkage between public trust and the public good.

Abstract

Higher education in the United States faces a loss of trust. Much of the response to the public's decreasing confidence has been through the accountability movement's focus on individual, private benefits. Public trust, however, will require proactive societal engagement that provides a compelling case for the contributions that higher education makes to the public good. While these challenges are discussed from a US perspective, there are global implications.

Bridging the Divides

Political divisions have not benefited public trust. Conservative critics have attacked colleges and universities on issues of free speech, politically biased faculty, and politically correct curricula. They have labeled higher education “the clubhouse of the elite,” out of touch with average citizens. The data confirms a deep political divide, but there is just as deep a fissure based upon respondents’ educational attainment. On questions related to higher education’s contributions to scientific advances that benefit society, national prosperity and development, and graduates’ personal enrichment and growth, the gap between college graduates and those not holding a degree was significant. The latter group had a much more negative view of higher education’s benefits.

Higher education’s relationships are mainly with those who are directly involved with the provision or receipt of its benefits. For traditional brick and mortar institutions, those relationships are built upon institutional culture that is often mysterious to the public at large. Outsiders do not readily comprehend much of the practice and language reflecting that culture. Admissions and financial aid practices in selective institutions need much more explanation in light of recent scandals. Compounding the problem, the denizens of higher education often speak in codes. Terminology such as institutional autonomy, peer review, academic freedom, internationalization, and the liberal arts tends to magnify the mystery.

Building Trust

Trust, based on an appreciation of higher education’s contribution to the public good, starts with recognition that what institutions do and why they do it require a clearer explanation and a better conversation with the public. This begins in the communities where colleges and universities reside, but it needs to go beyond building local relationships to a national dialogue.

Some of the criticism about higher education is well deserved and should be acknowledged as part of the discussion with the public. The moment for a more compelling conversation is now. Climate scientists are a good example of academics writing and speaking about an urgent and complex issue in ways that nonacademics can understand. They realize how important reaching a broad audience is for creating a narrative that counters the denial proponents. There is much that higher education needs to discuss with the public. The elements of that engagement will be based on strong, transparent institutional relationships that ultimately form a coordinated, collective voice at the national level about the value that colleges and universities bring, not only to individuals, but also to the common welfare.

Global Implications

The United States has its own challenges, but it is not alone in facing questions about higher education’s value and loss of public confidence. The social compact with higher education is fraying in other countries. Those that once heavily subsidized postsecondary education and have turned to increased cost sharing with students have entered the realm of commodification and value for price. In this scenario, outcomes, transparency, and ethical practices are important and legitimate expectations, but they fall short of making a robust case for higher education’s myriad connections to the public good. While institutions everywhere have an obligation for accountability to individual students, it cannot substitute for a more comprehensive narrative about the ways in which all aspects of institutional mission—research, teaching, and service—contribute in positive ways to the society as a whole.

Dominant national narratives that characterize higher education as elitist, irrelevant, or a danger to the public require a robust response. In the face of attacks on democratic institutions, rising nationalism, and antiglobalism, the counternarrative may mean much more engagement with the public than has traditionally been the case for colleges and universities. The global imperative for higher education is to be proactive in making the connection between its work and the public good, in order to keep the public trust. ▲

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