

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



MAKING THE CASE

By *Karin Fischer*

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In 1980, the U.S. Department of Education polled parents of high-school students on the question of who should pay for college.

It was the dawn of the Reagan Revolution, with its emphasis on small government and personal responsibility, and attitudes, even those of parents, reflected that: Eight in 10 of those asked in the High School & Beyond survey said students and their families should cover college costs. More than half, 55 percent, said parents should have the “main responsibility” for tuition expenses, and another quarter said it should be up to students themselves. Only about a fifth of respondents said the state or federal government should pay tuition bills.

After 1980, the Education Department dropped the question from its survey. It wasn’t until three decades later that it was asked again, this time as part of a national survey fielded by Indiana University. The researcher, Brian Powell, a professor of sociology at Indiana, studies family and education, and he was curious about how public opinion might have shifted.

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Not much, he found. Although the Indiana survey was of adults, not parents specifically, the breakdown was exactly the same as it had been all those years earlier: The view of college as primarily a personal or family responsibility dominated. The only change was that a greater share of respondents in 2010, about a third, thought students, rather than their parents, should pay the bill.

Still, Powell and a graduate student, Natasha Quadlin, decided to include the question again when they conducted a similar survey in 2015, and they also asked which group should be second-most responsible. This time, there was a change: The share who said government had the main obligation climbed to 31 percent, from 18 percent. When the researchers factored in the second-choice responses, they found that half of Americans thought government should pay at least some of the costs of college.

That shift might not seem like much. But over such a short period of time, the researchers say, it was a swing as huge as the rapid evolution in public views on same-sex marriage or the legalization of marijuana.

“In terms of public opinion, that’s a radical change,” Powell says. And when he and Quadlin, now an assistant professor of sociology at the University of California at Los Angeles, ran a third version of the survey, in 2019, they found attitudes had moved further, with a plurality, 43 percent, now saying that government should have the main responsibility for college costs. Sixty percent said government should have a key role, either as the main stakeholder or along with parents or students.

For years, the idea of a degree as a personal benefit has dominated the narrative around higher education. After all, why shouldn’t college students, or their parents, foot the bill, since they reap the rewards of middle-class job security and lifetime earnings that dwarf those of high-school graduates? They’re making a private investment, the thinking goes, to raise their individual prospects.

Tuition policy has reflected that logic. In 1980, student tuition accounted for only about a fifth of [revenues at public colleges](#), according to the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. By 2021, as state dollars per full-time enrollee shrank, the student share had risen to more than 40 percent, and in 20 states, it was above 50 percent — even as the overall cost of a college degree continued to climb.

But Quadlin and Powell’s findings, which they discuss in their book, [Who Should Pay? Higher Education, Responsibility, and the Public](#), suggest a break with that thinking. With a degree becoming both increasingly necessary and hugely expensive, Americans may be looking to government for help shouldering some of the burden. Even as college pays off for the individual graduate, recognition may be growing of a broader societal responsibility to make degrees more affordable.

President Biden sounded that note in August when he [announced](#) a plan for student-loan forgiveness, an idea once on the political margins that has entered the mainstream. Canceling debt could help struggling borrowers pay their bills, buy a house, or start a family, Biden said. “By the way,” he added, “when this happens, the whole economy is better off.”

If Powell and Quadlin are right, we may be in the midst of a perceptual shift, a reframing of the narrative about college into one that sees it as a public good. A good that, like clean water or public parks, will require collective investment to maintain and make available, but that could pay communal and societal dividends.

If so, that shift comes at a critical moment. The forces arrayed against college have become more vocal — and frequently, more virulent — in their opposition, attacking curricula they disagree with, challenging professors’ expertise, and even questioning the value of a degree in helping graduates get ahead. Presidents, chancellors, and other higher-education leaders have long parried that last move by asserting that degrees amount to golden tickets for those who hold them. In emphasizing higher education’s value in the marketplace, they have failed to make a more full-throated argument for its importance in fostering an engaged citizenry.

That could make it more difficult to shift their approach — the equivalent of trying to wage a battle on ground that was previously ceded. Have academic leaders waited too long to mount a public-good defense?

College was once widely considered a public good.

A young America poured resources into higher education. Building colleges and educating students was seen as [key to national growth and prosperity](#). Wisconsin wrote the public mission of its higher-education system into statute. California pledged to make its new state colleges free. Congress passed the Morrill Act in 1862 establishing land-grant colleges to serve the working class.

After World War II, elected officials enacted the GI Bill as a way to thank veterans for their wartime service and to integrate them back into society and the economy. Through the program, more than 2 million former service members went to college, and another 3.5 million pursued some sort of postsecondary training. “We had this nice life in the suburbs because my father got to go to college on the GI Bill,” says Gavin McCormick, a New York City public-school teacher who grew up in Stockton, Calif.

But in the next few decades, the tide began to turn away from college as a public benefit underwritten by the government. For one, the post-World War II surge in birth rates made it expensive to maintain generous levels of public support for colleges. “The weight of the baby boom crushed schools,” says Dowell Myers, a public-policy professor at the University of Southern California who specializes in demography and urban planning.

At the same time, state governments were faced with [competing, and mounting, fiscal demands](#), some of which, like Medicaid and elementary and secondary education, are required by law. Today, nearly half of state general-fund spending goes to Medicaid and public schools, according to the National Association of State Budget Officers. Because most states are not permitted to run budget deficits, that left a small portion of state revenues for higher education.

But the shift away from public spending on colleges was not simply fiscally driven. It was also philosophical. More than a decade before he was elected president, Ronald Reagan, then governor of California, [articulated](#) that changing view: Taxpayers, he said during a 1967 press conference, “shouldn’t be subsidizing intellectual curiosity.”

Reagan’s vision, which emphasized the practical purposes of college, became the accepted wisdom about the value of a degree. These days, landing a good job is the [single most important reason](#) students give for going to college.

The framing of a degree as an individual benefit, one that accrues to the graduate, was also reinforced by changes in the economy that occurred around the same time. As the United States shifted away from an economy driven by manufacturing, the salaries of college graduates rose, while the earnings of those with a high-school diploma fell. In 1980, young, college-educated Americans made 23 percent more than high-school graduates, and by the end of the decade, the college-earnings premium had doubled. By 2019, it had stretched to 77 percent.

“That’s the origin story,” says Nicholas Hillman, a professor of educational leadership and policy analysis at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. “There became this general acknowledgment that individuals benefit a lot from college, so it justified a shift toward individuals paying.”

But one other factor may have been at play in the move away from public investment in higher education: The students going to college were becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. Some experts argue that taxpayers were more likely to foot the bill when the student body looked more like them. “We have been systematically disinvesting in higher education,” Gary D. Rhoades, a professor of higher education at the University of Arizona, [told](#) *The Chronicle* in 2016. “And that is precisely at the time when the people who want higher education — lower-income kids, students of color, and immigrant kids — have increased.”



DEREK BRAHNEY FOR THE CHRONICLE

If the private-good sense of college had become firmly established, what might have shaken public opinion in recent years?

The swiftness of the change documented by Powell and Quadlin defies one common explanation for attitudinal shifts, cohort replacement — that is, younger people with newer perspectives becoming part of the adult population as the number of older people with more-entrenched viewpoints decreases. The Indiana survey did find generational differences: The oldest Americans, those aged 65 and older, were the least likely of any age group to see paying for college as a government responsibility, and the youngest, between 18 and 29 years old, were the most likely. But the generational makeup of the population did not change significantly in the five years between surveys.

“The rate of change exceeds anything you would expect to see from cohort replacement,” Quadlin says. “This suggests there was change on the individual level.”

One likely catalyst? Perceptions of college affordability — or perhaps more precisely, college unaffordability.

Since the Department of Education first surveyed Americans about who should pay for college four decades ago, the [average price tag](#) for an undergraduate education has soared 175 percent. The 2008-9 recession accelerated cost increases. In just a dozen years, the amount Americans spent for college rose by 21 percent. And in the interval between Quadlin and Powell’s two surveys, 2010 to 2015, the cost of a degree climbed 13 percent.

A big reason for the tuition hikes is that the recession worsened state disinvestment in higher education. In fact, state spending per public-college student is still nearly 5 percent below pre-recessionary levels, according to 2021 data from the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association.

Today, only a small fraction of the budget at many public flagship universities comes from state taxpayers, says Michael Fabricant, a professor of social work at the City University of New York Graduate Center, and a co-author of a book about disinvestment in public education, [Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education](#). “Calling them public universities is a misnomer,” Fabricant says. “And how to make up for it? Students.”

What’s more, tuition bills were swelling at a time when most Americans were not seeing increases in their paychecks; for most of the post-recessionary period, wage growth was [sluggish](#). Although salaries have picked up in the last couple of years, inflationary price hikes on everyday items from gas to breakfast cereal have left many with a sense of financial insecurity.

Taken together, these developments may have heightened Americans’ concerns about how to pay for college. Only half of Americans in a recent [New America survey](#) thought it was possible to get a high-quality education after high school. In California — which began to charge tuition in the 1970s but where in-state rates at four-year colleges remain below the national average — about six in 10 respondents in a [statewide poll](#) said state universities were unaffordable.

Quadlin herself graduated from college in 2009, the heart of the recession. Worries about paying for college, and the student-loan debt she took on as an undergraduate at Northwestern University, were a source of stress and conflict in her own family. “I would describe it as a traumatic experience,” she says.

Many students and families may have hit a ceiling of what they were willing, or able, to pay. A [2021 analysis](#) by the Southern Regional Education Board found that across 16 southern states, the average family spent a third of its household income to send a son or daughter to a four-year college after financial aid was factored in. Families making \$30,000 or less would have to spend more than they earned in a year, the group estimated.

Kara Prado, a 26-year-old recruiter in Lodi, Calif., near Sacramento, says her family didn’t have the money to pay for college. “Petrified” of taking on debt for a residential-college experience, she took part-time classes online from a variety of sources, eventually earning enough credits for a degree in business from Thomas Edison State University in New Jersey. “Is it worth it to go to school for four years and get decades of debt?” Prado says.

Yet Prado, like many Americans, continues to see a college degree as a prerequisite for job and economic security. Indeed, three-quarters of [recent college graduates](#) told Handshake, a job and networking site for college students, that college was worth the cost.

As a result, a growing number of Americans may be looking for another funding source, says Rachel Fishman, acting director for research with the educational-policy program at New America. “It has gotten so expensive that people want government intervention.”

Like Powell and Quadlin, New America has found that people think government should help defray the costs of college. When asked who should be more responsible for funding higher education, 57 percent of respondents think

tank's [recent survey](#) chose “the government, because it is good for society” over “students, because they personally benefit.”

Still, New America has documented a slight drop in support for government funding since it began asking the question, in 2019. The survey also found significant partisan differences over government's role.

Not only has college become more difficult to afford, it's also become more difficult to afford for more people. Since the mid-1990s, the average amount of student debt has more than [doubled](#), and the share of students with student loans has increased. Today, seven in 10 bachelor's degree students graduate with at least some student-loan debt.

While low-income students are still more likely to take on educational debt than their wealthier classmates, in recent decades borrowing rates increased the most among students from affluent families, a [Pew Research Center analysis](#) shows. The share of students from the highest income quartile who graduated with debt doubled.

For many upper- and middle-income families, the challenge of paying for college is no longer abstract or remote, something for others to grapple with. It's personal. If they were hesitant to seek a communal solution to college costs when the issue was someone else's problem, they could be more willing now that it is their own.

“I don't think it's an accident that these proposals hit at a time that student debt is ballooning,” Fabricant of CUNY says of debt-relief plans.

“It's not so much that it's a new issue,” says Hillman, the Wisconsin professor, “but that there's a new constituency that's affected. Maybe I'm cynical, but I think the discussion is around ‘what's in it for me.’”

Is greater openness to a government role in paying for college, then, a desire for a private benefit masquerading as a commitment to the public good? Perhaps, in part.

But several of Powell and Quadlin's findings suggest that the shift in public opinion isn't driven by self-interest alone. For one, the pair found no significant difference in attitudes between respondents who were parents and those without children. Parents, in fact, were slightly more likely than nonparents to say that college costs were a parental responsibility and slightly less likely to believe the government should have a role.

When the pollsters asked those who viewed paying for college as primarily a governmental responsibility why they took that position, the reason they cited, more than any other, was that it serves a collective good. In open-ended responses, more than half of respondents sounded the collective-good theme in explaining their position. Assisting students in paying for college was good for the workforce, helped the United States remain economically competitive, and produced responsible citizens, they argued.

“It's ultimately to the benefit of the nation that the populace is educated,” one respondent replied. “Why do we educate them through the twelfth grade and all of a sudden we think we shouldn't pay at all for it?”

And the survey findings show an understanding that the doors of college may be closed to some Americans without help — 55 percent of those surveyed in 2015 said students from low-income backgrounds have less of a chance to go to college than their peers.

McCormick, the New York City public-school teacher, has been saving for his 15-year-old daughter's college education all her life. Back in the late 1980s, he took on minimal debt to go to Bard College. His daughter is only a sophomore, so she hasn't seriously begun her college search, but despite the resources of a two-income family, they could still find it challenging to finance a college education.

McCormick thinks the government should step in to help make college affordable for more Americans. "I don't buy the argument, 'By golly, I paid off my loans, so why should I pay yours, too?'" he says. "Education is something I think government should value."

McCormick traces his views back to the difference his father's GI Bill-funded degree made for his family, but Quadlin and Powell hypothesize that the recession may be one reason the period between 2010 and 2015 was a tipping point for broader public opinion. Stories of recent graduates forced to move back in with their parents or fearing that staggering college debt would prevent them from buying a home or starting a family were a staple of news coverage of the recession's impact. "It put a human face on what was happening," Quadlin says.

Many people didn't need to turn on the nightly news to see the burden of college debt, says Myers, the Southern California professor. The children of their friends and neighbors, even their own children, were struggling, he says. "They knew they didn't have that kind of debt when they went to college."

Another contemporaneous event may also have contributed to the shift, and on the face of it, it would seem to have little relation to college costs: the 2010 passage of the Affordable Care Act. Yet a number of respondents specifically mentioned the expansion of government coverage of health insurance in explaining their support for a greater role for government in funding college, citing it "as an example of how the government should be involved in daily issues that affect people's lives," Powell says.

In a way, it turns the individual-responsibility arguments of the Reagan Revolution on their head and could signal greater openness to a more collectivist approach to higher education and other social programs.

But that openness may have its limits. And when people who share a belief in college as a public good talk about precisely how the government ought to invest, cracks can begin to show.

This summer, as speculation heated up about a presidential plan for student-loan forgiveness, Powell and Quadlin fielded another survey, asking people specifically about debt cancellation. They hadn't asked about the idea in earlier surveys, as policy proposals like free college were then far more common in political debates.

Powell is hesitant to talk about the detailed findings of the latest survey, which are still being analyzed. But he says that they largely tracked with [public polls](#), which have found a narrow majority support debt cancellation but believe that the amount of assistance should be limited and targeted to those who need it most: low- and middle-income Americans. "A Little Red Riding Hood approach," Powell calls it.

Such findings are in keeping with the idea that people may look to government to ensure college access and affordability. But the polling also suggests that even when people support a government role in higher education, they may have very different ideas about the form it should take. In the Indiana survey, for instance, student loans ranked a distant third, behind grants/scholarships and work study, as a means for government to help students pay for college.

Bruce Haymes, who worked in corporate finance before becoming an adviser to colleges and tech start-ups on strategic planning, says he doesn't have a problem with debt forgiveness, but he questions whether it is the most effective way for government to address college affordability.

"Let's get serious," says Haymes, a father of three who would like to see the federal student-loan program overhauled to limit subsidies to students at less-wealthy institutions, as well as other efforts to push colleges to change their financial model. "It's like removing the tumor but leaving the cancer behind."

And while Quadlin and Powell have documented growing support for a government roles, they also found deep opposition to paying for college among some Americans. Younger people and those from underrepresented minority groups favored a more collective approach, but six in 10 white respondents said students and parents should be the top two stakeholders with the greatest responsibility for college costs.

Some higher-education scholars are skeptical that the United States is on the cusp of a sea change in public opinion. "I don't think we've revolutionized how we think about higher ed," Hillman, the Wisconsin professor, says.

When it comes to public sentiment, there is a wide partisan gulf. Two-thirds of respondents who identified as conservative said paying for college was an individual, not a government, responsibility. Republicans' lack of willingness to have taxpayers help foot the tuition bill may reflect their outlook on higher education: Just a third of Republican voters in the New America survey said colleges and universities had a positive effect on the country.

In other words, even as some Americans may be more open to embracing college's public benefits, others may be even more entrenched in their skepticism of its value. That means college presidents in more-conservative regions could be in a particular bind, left to make a case to an unreceptive audience. In red states, the public-good argument could fall on deaf ears.

For decades, college leaders have played to a different narrative — perhaps at the ultimate peril of their institutions. Given the views of parents and students, it was natural to make the case for college in terms of its benefits to individual graduates. But that's a losing argument for securing more taxpayer support, say some observers. They contend presidents and chancellors [ceded ground](#) by talking about college in private-benefit terms that they thought would resonate with lawmakers.

"University leaders were basically adopting the market model of higher education," says Chad Alan Goldberg, a professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin and editor of an anthology, [Education for Democracy: Renewing the Wisconsin Idea](#). "If you convince people that university is a private good, rather than a socialized public good, it's easier to privatize the costs."

If now a sizable and growing share of the public believes that a higher education should be more universal, it could alter how colleges make their pitch. Katherine A. Rowe, president of the College of William & Mary, says that in recent years she has become “more intentional” in how she thinks about, and articulates, her institution’s role in the community.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, William & Mary and community leaders adopted a joint public-health approach, keeping positivity rates on campus and in Williamsburg low even as students returned in fall 2020. The pandemic strengthened town-gown ties: Students helped local businesses apply for emergency federal grants and delivered meals to housebound residents when it was too risky for older volunteers. But the university’s public outreach isn’t all Covid-related; for instance, Rowe has named a special assistant to act as a cultural liaison to local preservation and community groups in the history-rich corner of Virginia.

“I think I’m newly fluent” in talking about William & Mary’s public impact, Rowe says. “What happened in the pandemic is that we got stripped down to the core mission.”

It can be difficult to measure the impact of a single institution’s approach, but in a [2021 poll](#) commissioned by the Virginia Business Higher Education Council, 76 percent of Virginians agreed with the statement that the state’s college presidents were helping meet economic and other challenges facing the state and the country.

In neighboring Kentucky, the University of Kentucky stood up a 400-bed Covid hospital during the pandemic and converted its football stadium to a mass vaccination site.

Kentucky has a Democratic governor, but both chambers in its General Assembly are controlled by Republicans, and it has voted reliably for the GOP on the national level since the 2000 presidential election. In red-hued states like this, it may be especially challenging to make the public-good case for higher education, and college leaders will have to be rigorous in their arguments.

Kentucky is not immune to the public skepticism and political critique of higher education, says Eli Capilouto, who has been president of the state’s flagship institution for the past decade. But Capilouto has been able to sidestep some of the divisiveness by emphasizing the university’s value to Kentuckians in concrete ways that have impact on their daily lives: the regional medical campuses in underserved areas of the state, the \$90 million grant faculty researchers won to combat opioid use, how the university’s extension service helped coordinate relief during floods this summer.

“I’m the chief storyteller,” Capilouto says. “I like to say we are the university of, for, and with Kentucky.”

This year, state lawmakers approved some of the largest spending increases in years for the University of Kentucky and other public colleges, including funds for faculty hiring and to construct a new integrated-health building. “Here’s a time when they had money,” Capilouto said, “and they chose to invest it in higher ed.”

What will it take for higher education to be an investment priority of governments or of families setting aside hard-earned dollars to pay tuition bills? Attitudes may be changing, and many Americans want greater assurance that a college degree, and its benefits, can be more accessible for their fellow citizens. But arguing for college as a societal good — the equivalent of fresh air or well-paved roads or electricity available with a flick of a switch — may still be a tough case to make.

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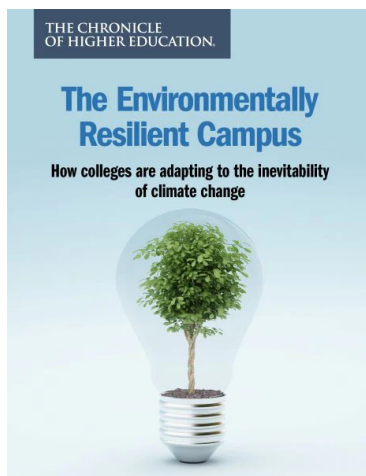
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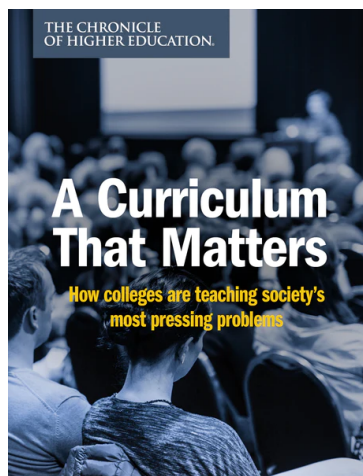
Karin Fischer

Karin Fischer writes about international education, colleges and the economy, and other issues. She's on Twitter [@karinfischer](#), and her email address is karin.fischer@chronicle.com.

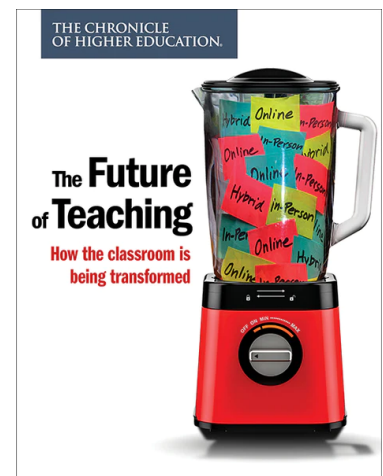
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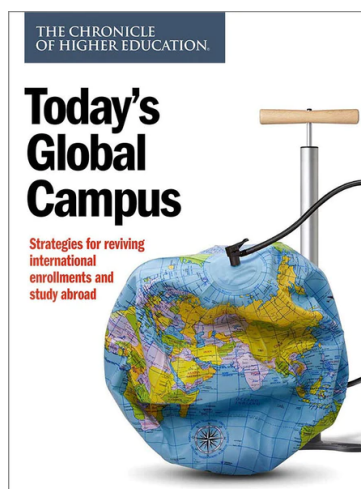
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