



# Squeeze Play 2009

## The Public's Views on College Costs Today:

Public Agenda and The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

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A Report Prepared by Public Agenda for the  
National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

# THE PUBLIC'S VIEWS ON COLLEGE COSTS TODAY

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**For increasing numbers of Americans, a crucial facet of the American Dream appears to be at risk. A solid majority consider a college degree an indispensable ticket to the middle class. At the same time, even more people believe college is financially out-of-reach for many qualified students.**

This is the message from new public opinion research by Public Agenda and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education Policy. The two organizations have been tracking public attitudes toward higher education since 1993. Our last survey, “Squeeze Play: How Parents and the Public Look at Higher Education Today,” was conducted in early 2007 when the economy was strong. It seemed essential to tap into public opinion again, now that the country is struggling with what many believe will be a prolonged recession. To probe the changes in attitudes, we repeated a series of questions from our 2007 study in a survey conducted in late December 2008.

## ■ Americans increasingly view higher education as out-of-reach

The series of studies from Public Agenda and the National Center have monitored two different trends:

- **The necessity of higher education.** In repeated surveys since 1993, people have consistently held that obtaining a college degree is important for a young person trying to enter the middle class. But respondents seem to distinguish between the importance of a college education and its necessity. In earlier surveys, a significant number of respondents also felt that while college was important, there were also other paths to success in America; college dropout Bill Gates was frequently mentioned in focus groups as an example of how one can succeed without a college degree.

In our recent studies, however, we have seen a dramatic shift in the public’s views about the necessity of a higher education. Increasing numbers say that obtaining a college degree is the only way to succeed in America, that is, a college degree is not only important, it is a necessity. The percentage of people who believe this has now reached 55 percent, up five points since 2007, and the highest percentage we’ve seen in any of our previous surveys. As recently at 2000, just 3 in 10 Americans held this view. This is a remarkable change in a fairly short period, with a 24 point increase in eight years, nearly doubling from 2000 to 2008 (Graph on page 4).

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▪ **The availability of higher education.** We have also tracked attitudes on how people feel about the availability of a college education for qualified students. Initially, attitudes on this topic seemed to track with the state of the economy. In the recession years of the early 1990s, 6 out of 10 were worried that many qualified people could not get access to a college education. As the economy improved toward the late 1990s, the percentage of people who were concerned about access fell significantly.

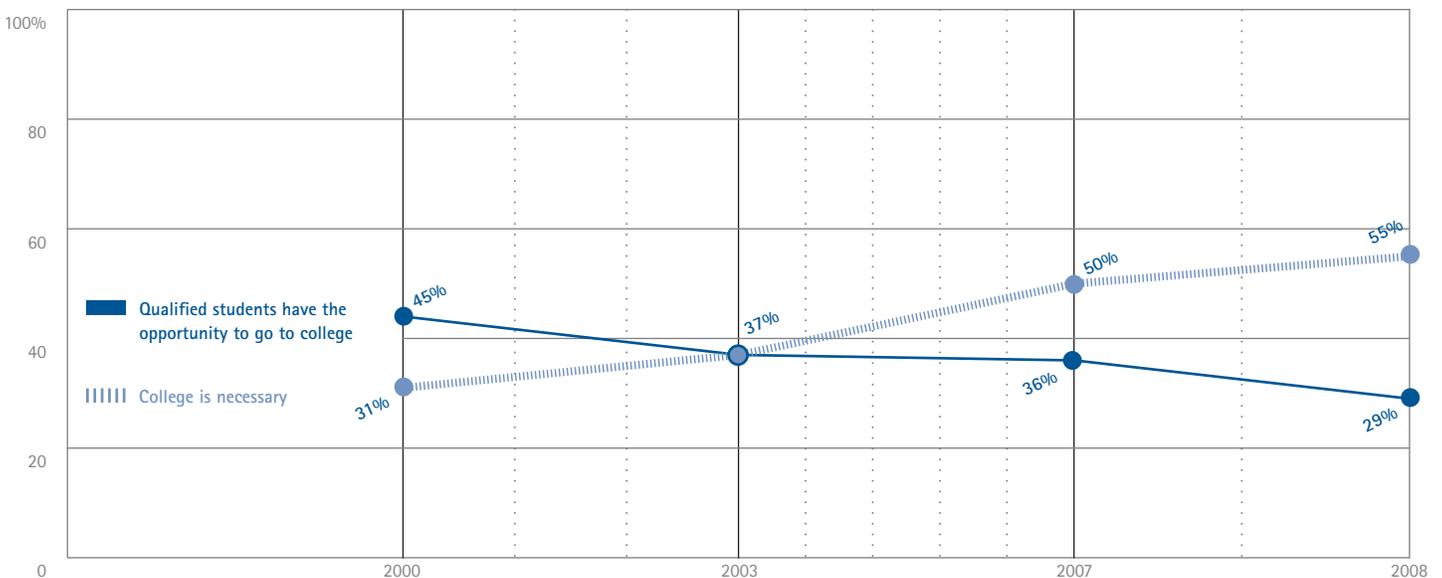
But the pattern changed after 2000. Despite the fact that by many measures the economy was still vibrant, concern about access to college started to increase again. By 2007, it had reached and exceeded the level of the early 1990s,

with 62 percent of the public saying that many qualified people did not have the opportunity to attend college.

The most recent numbers are even more striking, with more than two thirds of Americans (67 percent) now saying that access is a problem, the highest documented level since we started following these trends.

Today, American public attitudes seem to be on a virtual collision course. At a moment when college is more frequently perceived as absolutely essential, more Americans think that a college education is out of reach for many. Our previous surveys also show that this frustration is felt even more keenly by minority members of the public.

## Opportunity Declines as Importance Rises



SOURCE: Public Agenda and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

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## ■ The college access agony index

Another marker of public distress is that more people seem to feel that college costs are spinning out of control at the same time that more Americans see college as a make-or-break factor in a person's life. Sixty-three percent believe that college prices are rising faster than the cost of other items (up from 58 percent in 2007). Nearly 8 in 10 (77 percent) of those who think college prices are rising believe that they are going up as fast or faster than health care.

The squeeze may be tightening in yet another respect. Most Americans (57 percent) continue to believe almost anyone who needs financial help can find the loans and financial aid they need. Yet anxiety about the availability of financial help has jumped 10 points in the last 18 months. In 2007, about 3 in 10 Americans (29 percent) worried that financial help was not easily available for students; that number is now closer to 4 in 10 (39 percent).

Our research also confirms that significant numbers of Americans have questions about whether these cost increases are justified and whether colleges are operating in the most cost effective manner. More than half of Americans (53 percent) say colleges could spend less and still maintain a high quality of education. Fifty-five percent say that higher education today is run like most businesses, with more attention to the bottom line and the educational mission of secondary importance.

## ■ A message from the American public

So what are the implications of the evolving public views? The findings suggest strong messages for two groups:

- **The first is a red flag for policymakers.** What the public is saying is that higher education is becoming more of a stretch given the economic difficulties American families are facing. In other words, more of the public has come to believe that access is threatened. Public perceptions are not always accurate, but in this case, they are right on the mark. "Measuring Up 2008," a 50-state analysis of higher education performance, shows that since 2000, tuition prices have gone up while family incomes have stagnated or declined. The report concluded that "the financial burden of paying for college costs has increased substantially, particularly for low- and middle-income families, even when scholarships and grants are taken into account." These findings hold true for both four-year institutions and lower-cost community colleges.<sup>1</sup> College is becoming less affordable precisely at the time when attending college is more important for both individuals and the economy. This is clearly a problem that policymakers should understand and seek to address.

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<sup>1</sup> "Measuring Up 2008: The National Report Card on Higher Education." San Jose, CA: The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008.

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- [The results also contain warning signs for higher education institutions.](#) Our previous reports have documented that higher education still enjoys a great deal of public good will. Americans have voiced concerns about college costs for many years, but to date, voters have not rallied to demand that government curb college costs. Paying for college has been generally accepted as being well worth the money. Easily available college loans have eased public anxiety. The availability of low-cost community colleges also takes some of the edge off public concerns.

But our current studies show rising anxiety and skepticism. The findings reveal a chipping away of public support for higher education and a growing suspicion about how well colleges and universities use the money they have. This coincides with another development: more state and national policymakers are demanding “greater accountability” and some have called for increased regulation. The first question higher education leadership might well ask is whether public anxiety and skepticism will trigger greater support for more aggressive regulation. A second question might be whether higher education would be well-advised to address public concerns before government becomes even more involved in shaping its future.

# FULL SURVEY RESULTS

The findings in *Squeeze Play 2009* are based on telephone interviews with a national random sample of 1,009 adults aged 18 and over. Interviews were conducted from December 23rd through December 28th, 2008. The margin of error for total respondents is plus or minus 3.09 percentage points. It is higher when comparing percentages across subgroups.

The response rate for this study was calculated to be 14.3 percent, and six attempts were made to reach each respondent. The survey data was weighted to provide nationally representative and projectable estimate of the adult population 18 years of age and older. The weighting process takes into account the disproportionate probabilities of household selection, and the sample is post-stratified and balanced by key demographics – age, sex, region and education.

Results of less than 0.5 are signified by an asterisk (\*). Results of zero are signified by an en dash (-). Data not available is signified by an em dash (–). Responses may not always total 100% due to rounding. Combining answer categories may produce slight discrepancies between the numbers in these survey results and numbers in the report. Trend data from previous reports may be based on questions with slightly different wording.

	2008 (%)	2007 (%)	2003 (%)	2000 (%)	1998 (%)	1993 (%)
<b>01. Do you think that a college education is necessary for a person to be successful in today's work world, or do you think that there are many ways to succeed in today's work world without a college education?</b>						
College education is necessary	55	50	37	31	–	–
There are many ways to succeed in today's world without a college degree	43	49	61	67	–	–
Don't know	2	1	2	3	–	–
<b>02. Compared to other things, are college prices going up at a faster rate, are college prices going up at a slower rate, or are they going up at about the same rate?</b>						
Faster rate	63	58	–	–	–	64
Slower rate	2	3	–	–	–	17
Same rate	25	20	–	–	–	5
Going down	*	–	–	–	–	–
Don't know	10	19	–	–	–	–
<b>03. Compared to HEALTH CARE, do you think college prices are going up at a faster rate, are college prices going up at a slower rate, or are they going up at about the same rate?</b>						
<b>Base: Asked of total who think college prices are going up at a faster rate compared to other things.</b>						
Faster rate	35	20	–	–	–	–
Same rate	42	39	–	–	–	–
Slower rate	17	22	–	–	–	–
Going down	*	*	–	–	–	–
Don't know	6	19	–	–	–	–

# FULL SURVEY RESULTS

	2008 (%)	2007 (%)	2003 (%)	2000 (%)	1998 (%)	1993 (%)
<p>04. I am going to read you some statements about colleges meaning both two-year institutions such as community colleges, and four-year institutions, such as state universities and private four-year colleges. For each statement, please tell me if you agree or disagree.</p>						
<p>We should not allow the price of college education to keep students who are qualified and motivated to go to college from doing so.</p>						
Strongly agree	74	72	73	78	66	70
Somewhat agree	15	16	18	15	23	19
Somewhat Disagree	3	5	3	3	5	3
Strongly Disagree	5	4	3	2	3	2
Don't know	3	3	3	2	2	1
<p>Students have to borrow too much money to pay for their college education.</p>						
Strongly agree	67	60	55	56	—	—
Somewhat agree	19	18	22	24	—	—
Somewhat Disagree	7	12	13	11	—	—
Strongly Disagree	5	8	6	4	—	—
Don't know	2	3	4	5	—	—
<p>Almost anyone who needs financial help to go to college can get loans or financial aid.</p>						
Strongly agree	30	38	35	33	—	—
Somewhat agree	27	29	27	29	—	—
Somewhat Disagree	17	14	16	17	—	—
Strongly Disagree	22	15	16	15	—	—
Don't know	4	3	6	6	—	—

# FULL SURVEY RESULTS

	2008 (%)	2007 (%)	2003 (%)	2000 (%)	1998 (%)	1993 (%)
<b>05. Do you think that currently, the vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college have the opportunity to do so, or do you think there are many people who are qualified to go but don't have the opportunity to do so?</b>						
Have the opportunity	29	36	37	45	49	37
Don't have the opportunity	67	62	57	47	45	60
Don't know	4	2	7	8	5	4
<b>06. Which comes closer to your own view?</b>						
Colleges today mainly care about education and making sure students have a good educational experience	35	43	—	—	—	—
Colleges today are like most businesses and mainly care about the bottom line	55	52	—	—	—	—
Don't know	9	5	—	—	—	—
<b>07. Which comes closer to your own view?</b>						
Your state's public college and university system needs to be fundamentally overhauled	48	48	—	—	—	—
Your state's public college system should be basically left alone	39	39	—	—	—	—
Don't know	13	12	—	—	—	—
<b>08. Which comes closer to your own view?</b>						
If colleges cut budgets, the quality of education will suffer	42	40	—	—	—	—
Colleges could spend less and still maintain a high quality of education	53	56	—	—	—	—
Don't know	5	4	—	—	—	—

## Previous reports covering public attitudes toward higher education:

2007: Squeeze Play: How Parents and the Public Look at Higher Education Today

2004: Public Attitudes on Higher Education: A Trend Analysis, 1993 to 2003

2000: Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents – White, African American and Hispanic – View Higher Education

1998: The Price Of Admission: The Growing Importance Of Higher Education

1993: The Closing Gateway

# CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

	2008 (%)
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Single	25
Single, living with a partner	6
Married	50
Separated	1
Widowed	8
Divorced	9

	2008 (%)
<b>Employment status</b>	
Employed	56
Full-time	45
Part-time	11
Not employed	44
Retired	18
Housewife	7
Student	5
Temporarily Unemployed	8
Disabled/Handicapped	4
Other not employed	*

	2008 (%)
<b>Summary of ages of children in household</b>	
No children	63
Households with Children	36
5 yrs. or younger	18
6 - 11 yrs.	16
12 - 17 yrs.	15

	2008 (%)
<b>Age of respondent</b>	
18 - 29 yrs	23
30 - 39 yrs	16
40 - 49 yrs	18
50 - 59 yrs	18
60 - 70 yrs	12
71 - 98 yrs	10

	2008 (%)
<b>Level of Education</b>	
Less than high school graduate	15
High school graduate	28
Some college	27
Graduated college	17
Postgraduate school or more	9
Technical school/other (unspecified)	3

	2008 (%)
<b>Total Annual Household Income</b>	
Under \$14,999	12
\$15,000 - \$24,999	12
\$25,000 - \$29,999	7
\$30,000 - \$39,999	8
\$40,000 - \$49,999	6
\$50,000 - \$74,999	13
\$75,000 or more	27

# CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

	2008 (%)
<b>Race of Respondent</b>	
White, Non-Hispanic	66
Hispanic	11
Black	12
Unspecified	4
Other Race	6
<b>Political Party Affiliation</b>	
Republican	24
Democrat	35
Independent	33
Other	2

	2008 (%)
<b>Sex of Respondent</b>	
Male	49
Female	51
<b>Division</b>	
Northeast Region	18
North Central Region	22
South Region	37
West Region	23
<b>Metro Status</b>	
Metro	84
Non-metro	16

# ABOUT THE PARTNERS

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## About PUBLIC AGENDA

Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view and to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues. Our in-depth research on how citizens think about policy has won praise for its credibility and fairness from elected officials of both political parties and from experts and decision-makers across the political spectrum. Our citizen education materials and award-winning Web site, [publicagenda.org](http://publicagenda.org), offer unbiased information about the challenges the country faces. Recently recognized by Library Journal as one of the Web's best resources, Public Agenda Online provides comprehensive information on a wide range of policy issues.

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## About THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education promotes public policies that enhance Americans' opportunities to pursue and achieve high quality education and training beyond high school. As an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, the National Center prepares action oriented analyses of pressing policy issues facing the states and the nation regarding opportunity and achievement in higher education – including two- and four-year, public and private, for-profit and nonprofit institutions. The National Center communicates performance results and key findings to the public, to civic, business, and higher education leaders, and to state and federal leaders who are in positions to improve higher education policy.

Established in 1998, the National Center is not affiliated with any institution of higher education, with any political party, or with any government agency.

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