



This expanded edition of *The Landscape* is Part Two of *A Report to Stakeholders on the Condition and Effectiveness of Postsecondary Education*. This three-part series is based on research conducted under the auspices of the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NCPI). Each report is based on a survey of a particular set of higher education stakeholders. This segment of the report describes the public's assessment of higher education.

The first installment, which appeared in the May/June 2001 issue of *Change*, reported key findings from the Collegiate Results Survey (CRS), administered to college and university graduates. A future report will focus on perspectives derived from the National Employer Survey (NES), an NCPI survey of employers' perspectives on higher education.

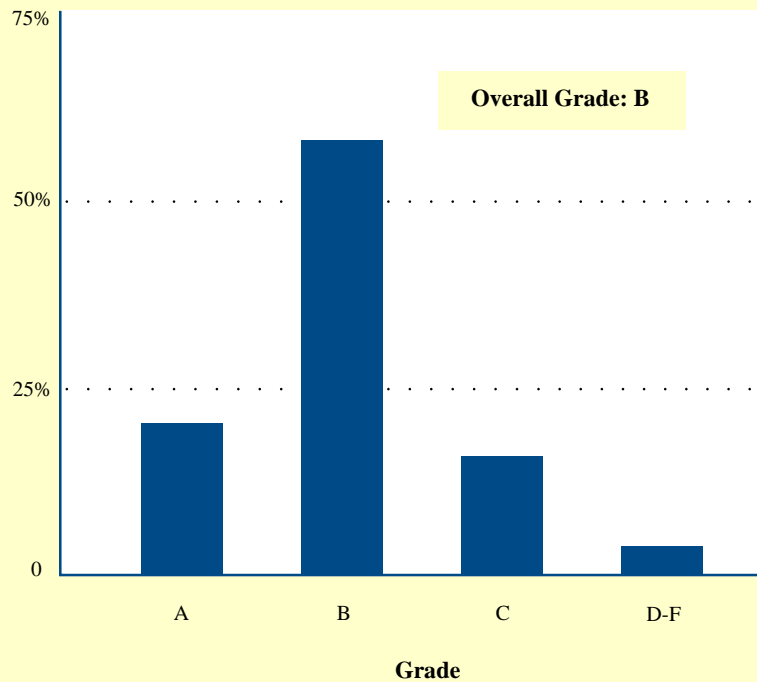
A Respectable B

The clear message from the American public is that the nation's colleges and universities are in good shape. When recently asked, "Overall, how good a job are the colleges in your state doing?" among a random sample of 1,000 adults who felt they knew their state's institutions of higher education well enough to make an assessment, 20 percent rated higher education's general performance as excellent, 59 percent thought it good, and 21 percent considered it just fair or poor (Chart 1). If an "A" is excellent, "B" is good, "C" is fair, and "D-F" is poor, then colleges and universities today are earning a respectable "B" in the public's perception.

Most of these same Americans rated the performance of colleges and universities as better than that of high schools.

The National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NCPI) is supported under the Educational Research and Development Center program, agreement number R309A60001, CFDA 84.309A, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed by NCPI do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the U.S. Department of Education. The Institute for Research on Higher Education retains the copyright for this column.

Chart 1.
The Public Grades Colleges and Universities.



Regardless of the grade they gave to the postsecondary institutions in their state, a majority assigned local secondary schools a full grade or more lower. Overall, American high schools received a C+ at best.

The Public Speaks

In general, college faculty and administrators are as suspicious of public opinion polls as they are of the growing number of agencies prepared to render judgment about the quality and efficiency of the nation's system of postsecondary education. Yet, done right, the systematic polling of higher education's stakeholders becomes an important tool for documenting how the American public views a wide range of issues important to higher education, including the quality of American colleges and universities; whether they are efficient or wasteful; and the extent to which members of

minority communities have truly equal access to educational opportunities.

The gauging of public opinion on higher education reported in this second installment of *A Report to Stakeholders* was derived from The Household Survey, designed by Public Agenda in conjunction with the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NCPI), the National Center on Public Policy and Higher Education, and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE). The survey consisted of telephone interviews conducted in December 1999 with just over 1,000 adults who were 18 years of age or older, with a representative sampling of African-American and Hispanic as well as white respondents.

Public Agenda's own report, "Great Expectations: How the Public and

Parents—White, African American and Hispanic—View Higher Education,” focused on the survey’s implications for public policy (see <http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/highered/highered.htm>). The analysis presented here examines the implications of the public’s opinion of higher education for institutions themselves, focusing on dimensions such as quality and costs, student motivation and responsibility, diversity and opportunity, and education and income.

Institutional Performance: Focus and Improvement

How are colleges and universities performing as institutions? What kinds of primary goals should they pursue? On what concerns should they expend organizational energy? The general

answer is that higher education’s stakeholders—like most faculty—view academic goals as being paramount.

Indeed, the public’s collective advice is simply that colleges and universities should continue to focus on what they do best. When selecting the single most important goal among those considered to be essential, the public centers squarely on goals concerning higher education’s academic mission (Chart 2).

In the language of the survey, “attract[ing] the best possible teachers and researchers to their colleges” and “ensur[ing] students work hard to achieve high academic standards” substantially outpace all other goals. Twenty-three percent of respondents believe attracting the best faculty to be

Chart 2.
What Is the Single Most Important Priority for Colleges and Universities to Pursue?

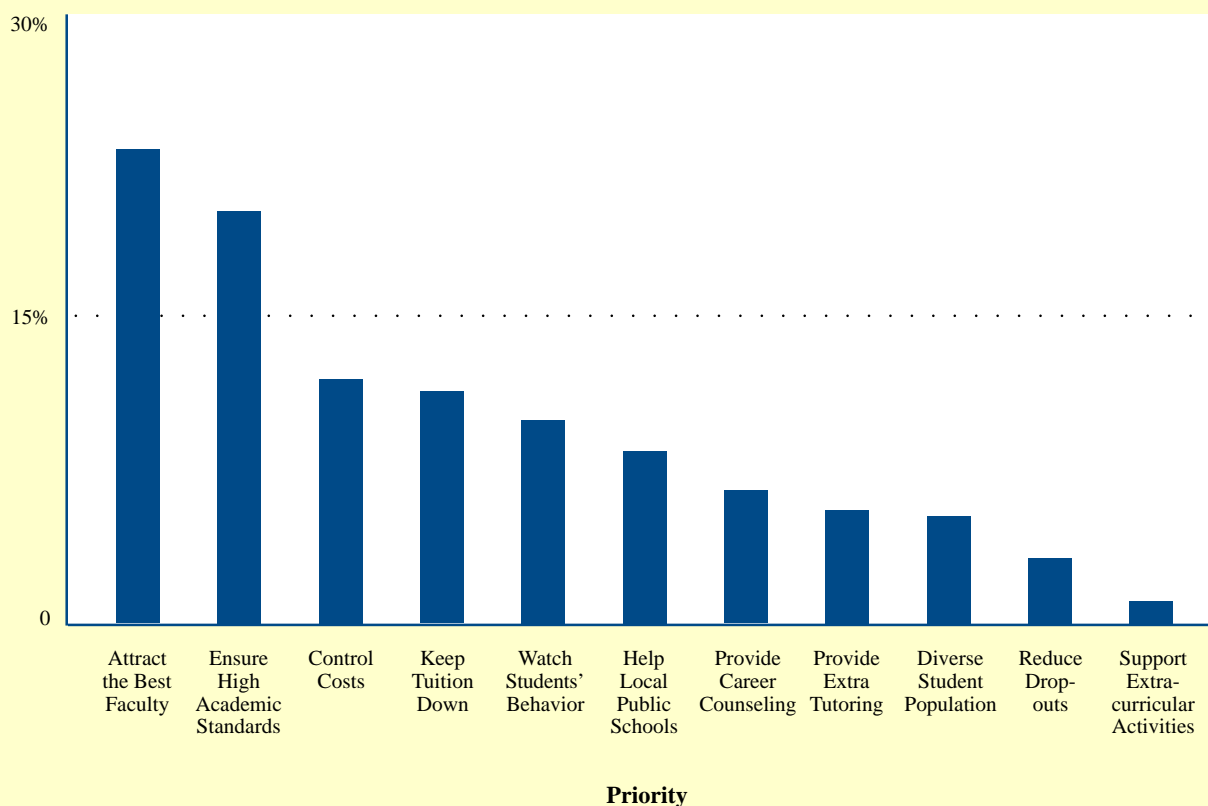
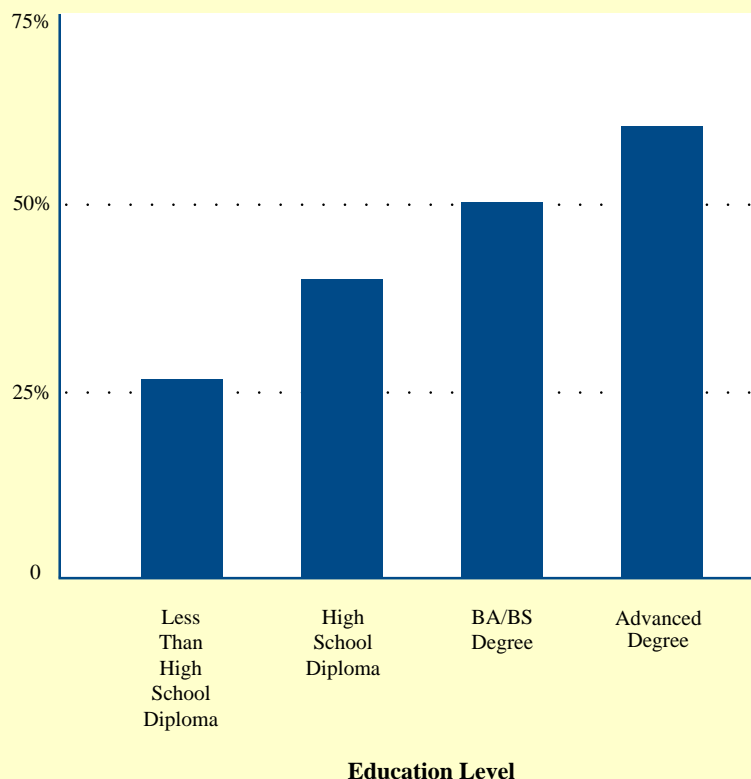


Chart 3.
By Education Level: Academic Goals as the Single Most Important Priority for Colleges and Universities to Pursue.



the single most important goal, and 19 percent say that ensuring student achievement of high academic standards should receive that emphasis.

Other priorities considered to be essential include controlling costs and tuition levels—though by fewer Americans than those who indicate academic goals as being the most important. By and large, the public regards institutional goals concerning services and support to students as being less important than academic standards and faculty quality. This finding provides the first hint of a conviction that runs throughout public opinion: namely, that students themselves bear a considerable share of responsibility for meeting the chal-

lenges of attaining a higher education.

Not surprisingly, education level affects the degree to which the public believes academic goals are the single most important function of colleges and universities. The more education respondents have attained, the greater the importance they attribute to the academic goals of attracting the best faculty and ensuring high academic standards (Chart 3). While 39 percent of respondents who had completed high school regard academics as being the most important objective, the proportion rises among those who have earned baccalaureate (50 percent) and advanced degrees (63 percent).

What is the one aspect that the public would change in order to improve the colleges and universities in their communities? Would it be to make these institutions more efficient, to lower prices, to eliminate tenure, or to raise entrance standards? In a sense, this question invites the public to consider whether the primary issue for improvement is one of quality, on the one hand, or of cost and efficiency, on the other.

The answers suggest once again that the public feels generally assured about the quality of higher education's academic performance (Chart 4). Only 14 percent would eliminate tenure, and another 12 percent would raise entrance standards. Tenure appears not to be as volatile an issue in the public mind as it is sometimes characterized in the arena of public policy, and the issue of entry standards turns out to be one that simmers rather than boils.

Many of those within the academy will be reassured that relatively few respondents cite the elimination of tenure as a first priority. What ought to trouble higher education, however, is that greater familiarity with colleges and universities seems to generate stronger feelings about the issue. Indeed, one in four respondents with an advanced degree choose the

elimination of tenure as the single item they believe would most improve colleges and universities.

Of greater concern to the public is higher education's efficiency and price (Chart 4). Thirty-six percent report they would make colleges and universities more efficient, and another 26 percent say they would lower prices. Perhaps neither of these responses in itself is cause for a major recasting of higher education's practices. Yet the two options together account for nearly two-thirds of all responses to this question, which again asks what the respondent would do to improve colleges and universities. If there is a submerged set of questions just waiting for a time of turmoil, it involves efficiency, cost, and price. Viewed from the perspective of increased efficiency, the elimination of tenure could equally become a hot-

button item during times of duress.

An aura of indifference surrounds the public's response to the question: "In terms of how they spend money and manage themselves, is it your sense that most colleges are inefficient and wasteful, or that most colleges are careful and efficient?" Despite more than a decade of media focus on higher education's economic shortfalls, half of the respondents reply that they do not know higher education's internal practices well enough to comment. Overall, 27 percent of all respondents think higher education institutions are inefficient and wasteful, while 23 percent consider them to be careful and efficient.

The responses to this question differ by the respondents' level of educational attainment (Chart 5). Even for those who have not completed high

Chart 4.
What Is the One Thing You Would Do to Improve Colleges and Universities?

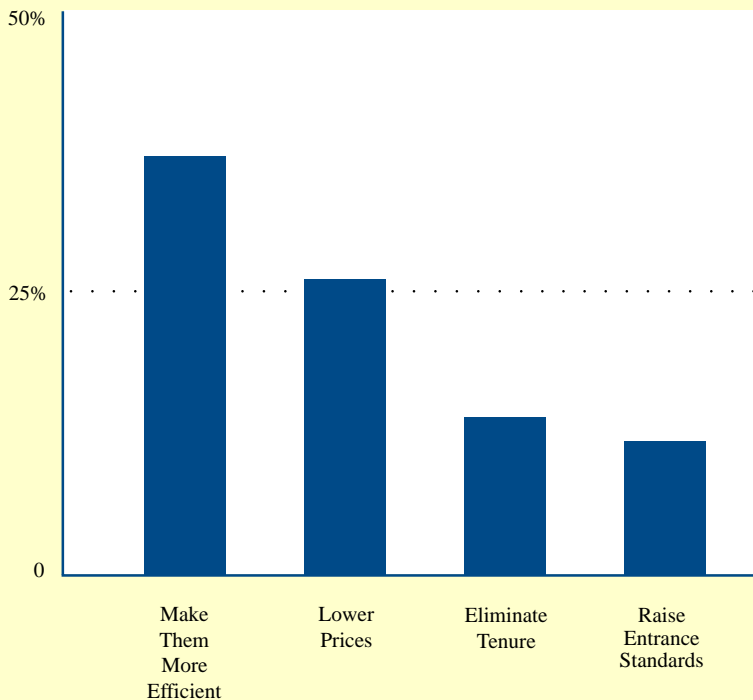
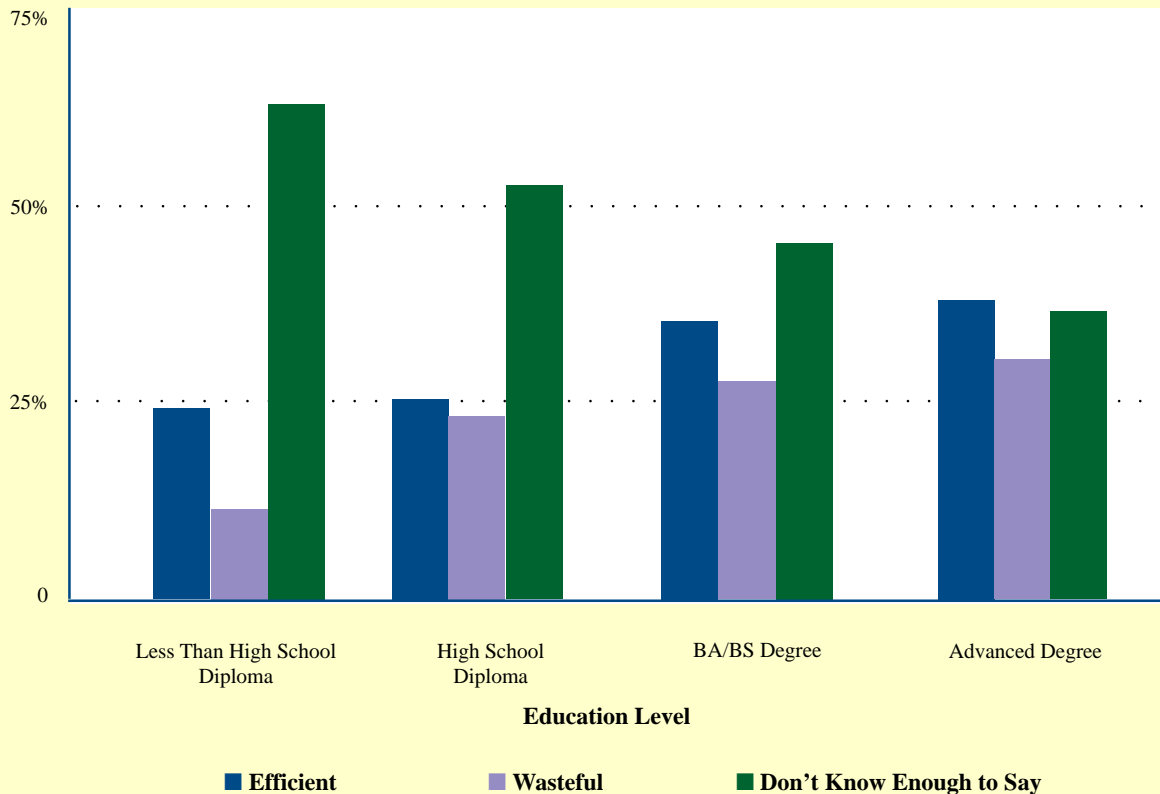


Chart 5.
By Education Level: Are Colleges and Universities Efficient or Wasteful?



school, the percentage who think higher education is efficient consistently exceeds the percentage who believe it to be wasteful. Probably the most intriguing finding is that, on this issue, the perception of higher education's wastefulness increases with familiarity.

Individual Responsibility: Motivation and Achievement

Whom does the public consider to be most responsible for students' academic success and failure? Public opinion assigns responsibility primarily to the student and not the institution. In fact, the theme of "Self-Reliance" is no less compelling today than in 1840, when Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay

gave the term heightened significance as an ethic of American life. While survey respondents believe that universities and colleges have an important role to play in fostering the skills and attitudes necessary to succeed, they attribute primary responsibility to individual students for the outcomes of their studies.

Regarding the quality of postsecondary students, respondents are asked: "Compared to 10 years ago, would you say today's college students are more prepared and motivated, less prepared and motivated, or about the same?" The largest number of those answering the question think that motivation is generally the same today

as in the past, although the opinion that motivation and preparation have declined is nearly as strong (Chart 6).

A key insight emerges when this finding is considered in light of answers to a related question: “Some students start college, but can’t keep up with the work and end up dropping out. In general, who would you say is most responsible: the high schools, because they didn’t prepare the students; the colleges, because they should do more to help the students; or the students themselves?” Half of all respondents think students themselves are to blame (Chart 7). Another 40 percent think it is the failure of high schools to prepare students for college-level study that causes them to drop out. On the issue of preparing and motivating students for success, colleges and universities scarcely appear. Only 11 percent of those responding to the question hold these institutions responsible for students’ failure to persist.

Interestingly, the differences between the responses of women and men to these questions reflect old stereotypes: men’s answers tend to have a more competitive and individualistic cast, while women’s responses tend to emphasize greater acceptance of differences and the importance of helping those in greater need. Men in general are more likely than women to stress the element of self-reliance: 54 percent of men report that responsibility for dropping out of college rests with the student, while 45 percent of women believe this reason to be the case (Chart 8). Conversely, women are more likely than men to blame high schools or higher education institutions for students’ failure to persist; 43 percent of women report that high schools are responsible for under-prepared students, compared to 36 percent of men.

This finding resonates with the general conclusion that the American

Chart 6.
Are Today’s College Students More or Less Prepared and Motivated Than a Decade Ago?

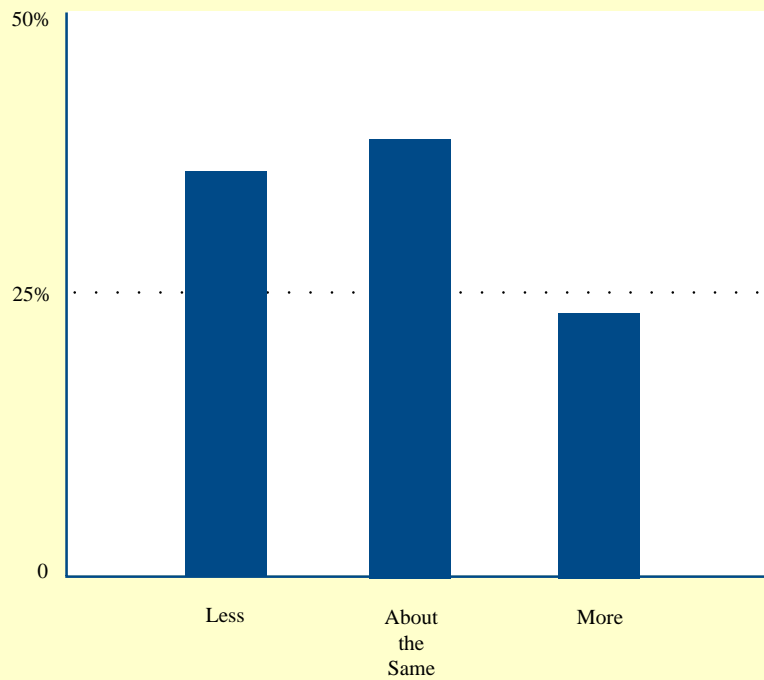
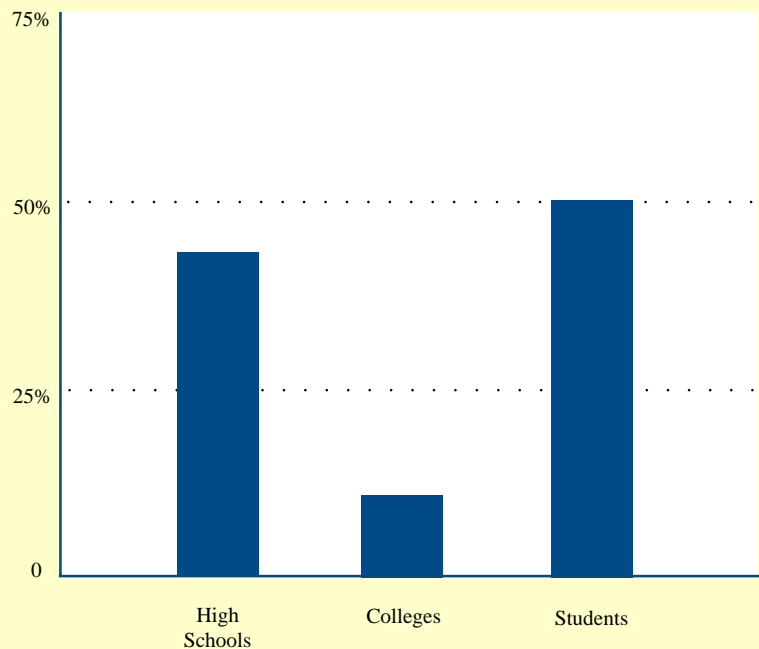


Chart 7.
Who Is to Blame for Poorly Prepared College Students?



public believes academic success is the individual student's responsibility. It is clear from Chart 2 that the public does expect colleges and universities to provide a range of support services to aid students in their progress toward a degree, but none of these services is considered as important as the attention institutions devote to ensuring their continued academic strength.

Taken together, these findings suggest that colleges and universities have roles to play in helping students achieve their full potential, including working with public schools, providing counseling and tutoring, and ensuring that students behave appropriately. Yet very few respondents express the conviction that the presence or absence of these services is a primary cause of student success or

failure. To the degree that students have anyone to blame besides themselves, it is high schools, not higher education, that the public considers at fault.

Supporting Difference: Diversity and Opportunity

The most striking as well as disturbing differences in how the American public views higher education center on the importance that it attaches to questions of diversity and the need for higher education to accord equal opportunity to members of different racial and ethnic groups. Again, what these findings suggest is the degree to which recent challenges to affirmative action policies are related to the growing notion that the onus of success or failure rests on the individual.

Chart 8.
By Gender: Who Is to Blame for Poorly Prepared College Students?

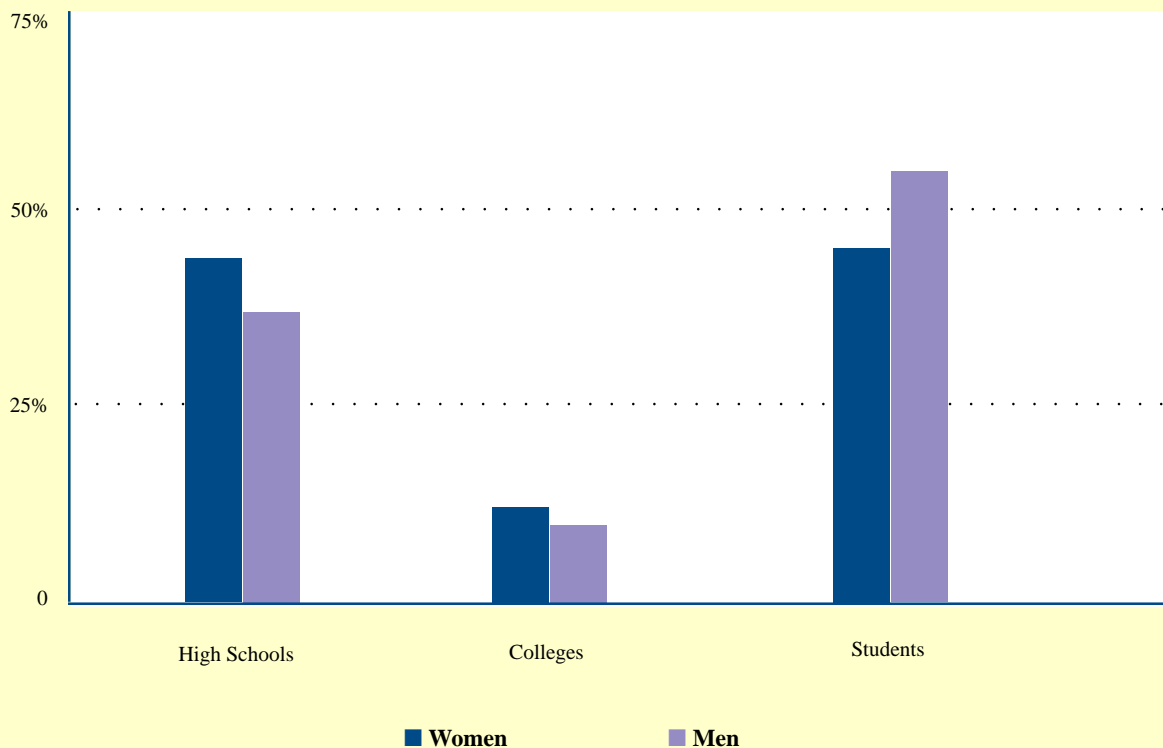
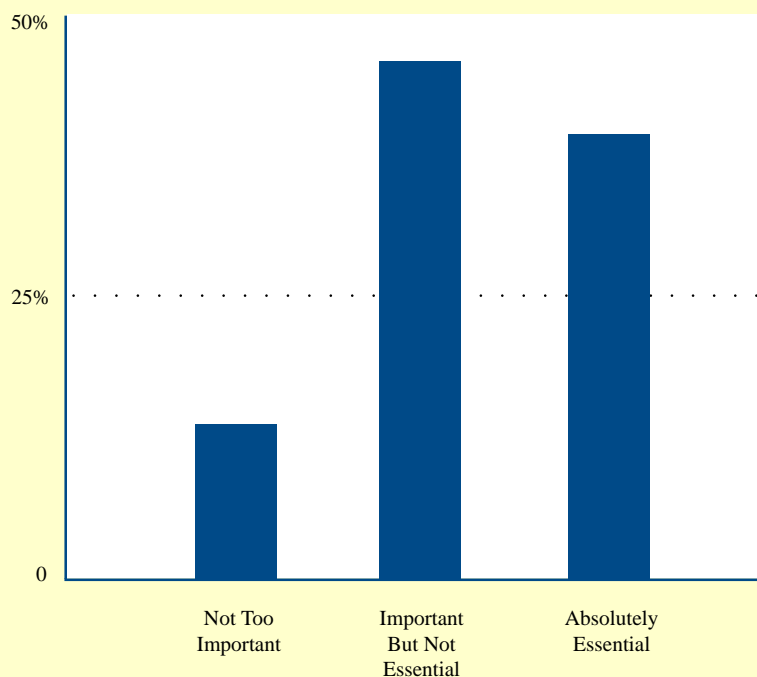


Chart 9.
How Important Is It for Colleges and Universities to Have Diverse Student Populations?



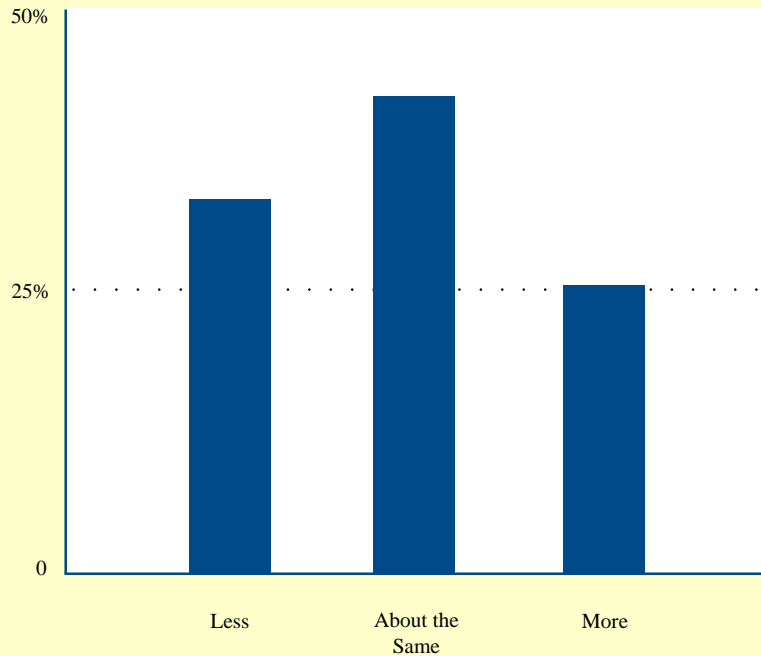
When asked how important it is for higher education to “try to have a diverse student population, with people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds,” 46 percent of respondents say they consider diversity to be important but not essential, and only 40 percent think it is an essential goal (Chart 9). A much smaller proportion of respondents believe the goal is not particularly important. In terms of the gender of the respondent, women are less likely than men to dismiss diversity as an important goal for higher education: one in five men report that having a diverse student body is not too important; fewer than one in 10 women hold the same view.

Respondents were also asked about the educational opportunities available to students who are members of an

ethnic or racial minority, in particular African Americans and Latinos: “Do qualified students who are ethnic or racial minorities have more opportunity, less opportunity, or about the same opportunity as others?” The pattern of answers is similar to the findings on the importance of diversity—a majority of the public thinks that racial and ethnic minorities have about the same opportunities as other students (Chart 10).

In fact, the proportion is similar to those who believe that diversity is an important but not essential goal of higher education. Taken together, these responses sketch an image of a public that feels more or less satisfied with higher education’s current level of commitment to diversity and equal opportunity for ethnic and racial

Chart 10.
Do African Americans and Latinos Have the Same Opportunities as Others for Obtaining a College Education?



minorities. The sentiment appears to be that colleges and universities have struck a practical and well-accepted balance in providing opportunities to all Americans.

There is, however, a caveat to these findings: one-third of those polled believe that minorities have less opportunity than others, while one-quarter feel they enjoy more educational opportunity. The fault lines underlying these diverging perspectives come into sharper relief when the same question is examined in terms of the racial and ethnic backgrounds or political affiliations of respondents.

Not surprisingly, the proportion of whites reporting that minorities have less opportunity is far smaller than the percentage of African Americans and Latinos who share this view (Chart 11).

Nearly half of African Americans (45 percent) and more than one-third of Latinos (36 percent) believe that the educational opportunity available to minorities is constrained, compared to slightly more than one-quarter (28 percent) of whites.

Mitigating this impression is the fact that the percentage of African Americans and Latinos who believe minorities have about the same opportunity as others is roughly similar to that of whites. Most telling, however, is the percentage of the public that considers minorities to have *more* educational opportunity than other students. Twenty-eight percent of whites and 23 percent of Latinos believe that Latinos and African Americans enjoy more opportunity than others, while only 13 percent of African Americans express that sentiment.

Given the frequent correlation between ethnicity and political affiliation, no one should be surprised that there is a political dimension to these findings. Chart 12 represents the American public's responses to the question of educational opportunity in terms of party affiliation. Even in this configuration, the notable clustering of responses in the middle suggests that diversity and equal access are not deeply divisive issues across the political spectrum. However, a substantially greater proportion of Democrats (42 percent) than Republicans (25 percent) think that minorities have less opportunity, while Republicans are nearly twice as likely as Democrats (35 percent versus 18 percent) to say that minorities have more educational opportunities than others.

Public opinion regarding diversity and access in higher education underscores the theme that runs throughout this analysis: when it comes to academic opportunity and success, it is the notion of individual responsibility and motivation that dominates, not the expectation that colleges and universities have a duty to equalize educational opportunity.

Indeed, a fair percentage of the general public believes higher education has gone too far in providing additional opportunities to members of traditionally under-represented minority groups. It is impossible to determine the extent to which this finding captures the disposition underlying challenges to affirmative action in higher education, but the implicit relationship is difficult to ignore.

Chart 11.
By Ethnicity: Do African Americans and Latinos Have the Same Opportunities as Others for Obtaining a College Education?

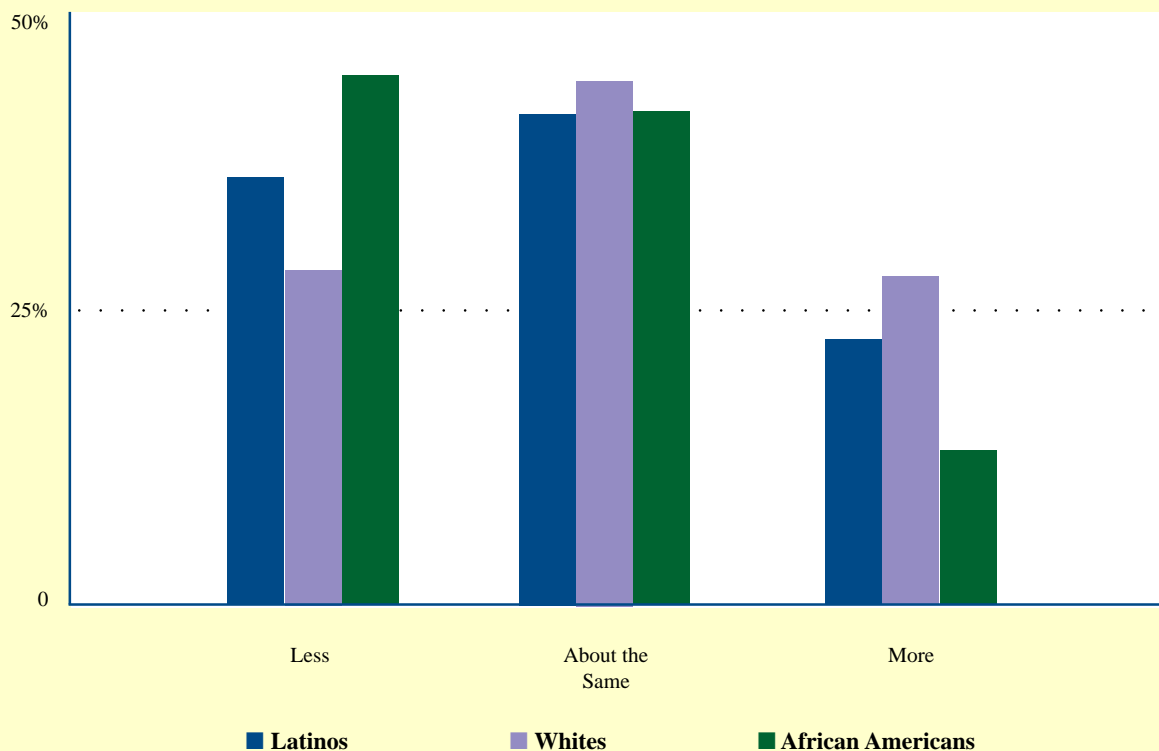
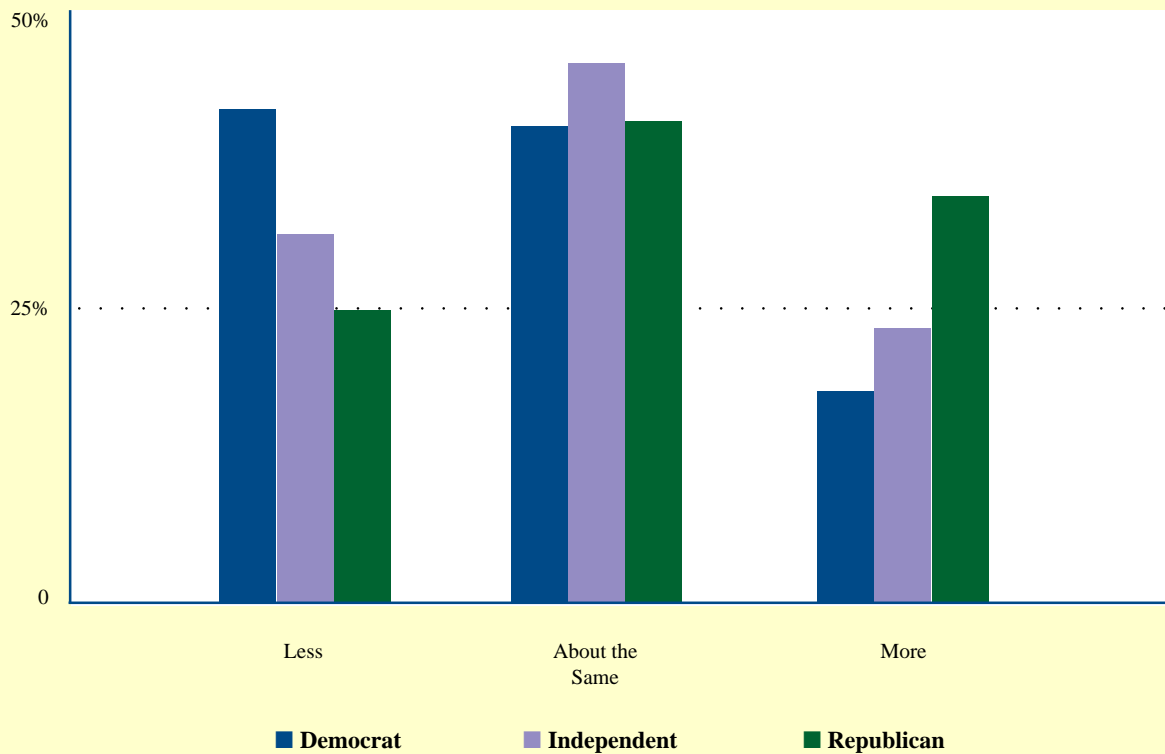


Chart 12.

By Political Affiliation: Do African Americans and Latinos Have the Same Opportunities as Others for Obtaining a College Education?



**Differences and Biases:
Education and Income**

What educational goals are important in the attainment of a college degree? Public opinion, according to level of education, produces a mixture of expected and unexpected results.

Among the answers one might expect to find a greater likelihood for more educated respondents to stress “hard” over “soft” academic skills. For the purpose of this analysis, *hard skills* include such things as gaining expertise and knowledge in a field, writing and speaking skills, the ability to solve problems, exposure to great writers, and high-tech skills. *Soft skills* include a sense of maturity, an ability to get along with other people, and the

responsibilities of citizenship. Respondents with advanced degrees indeed favor the hard skills over the soft ones by a ratio of three to two; those with less than a college degree actually favor soft skills over hard skills, but only by a slight margin (Chart 13).

A somewhat less expected set of findings suggests that those with more education are more likely to believe that education in itself is *not* the single key to advancement—that the attitudes, motivation, and skills that one brings to particular challenges make the greatest contribution to personal success. While education may help foster those fundamental qualities, no amount of education can compensate for their deficiency. Ironically, the more

educated a respondent is, the more likely he or she is to report that having a strong work ethic, rather than learning to get along or having a college degree, is the key to personal success (Chart 14).

The most highly educated respondents are also far less likely to say that college graduates earn higher salaries because of the degree itself rather than their skills and accomplishments (Chart 15). While 36 percent of respondents with advanced degrees consider this statement to be true, half of those with a high school degree and 60 percent with no diploma think that the college degree itself is more important than skills.

The patterns related to respondents' income level reflect many of the same

tendencies as comparisons by level of education (Chart 16). As income increases, so does the emphasis on hard versus soft academic skills. Forty-four percent of respondents with the lowest incomes emphasize hard skills as being most important; of respondents with incomes over \$50,000 per year, 57 percent consider the hard skills to be more important.

As income increases, the blame for underprepared students shifts from high schools to students themselves. Fifty-seven percent of those earning over \$50,000 per year report that the fault lies with the student. Among those with the lowest incomes, just 44 percent say students themselves are to blame.

Chart 13.
By Education Level: Hard Skills Are More Important Than Soft Skills.

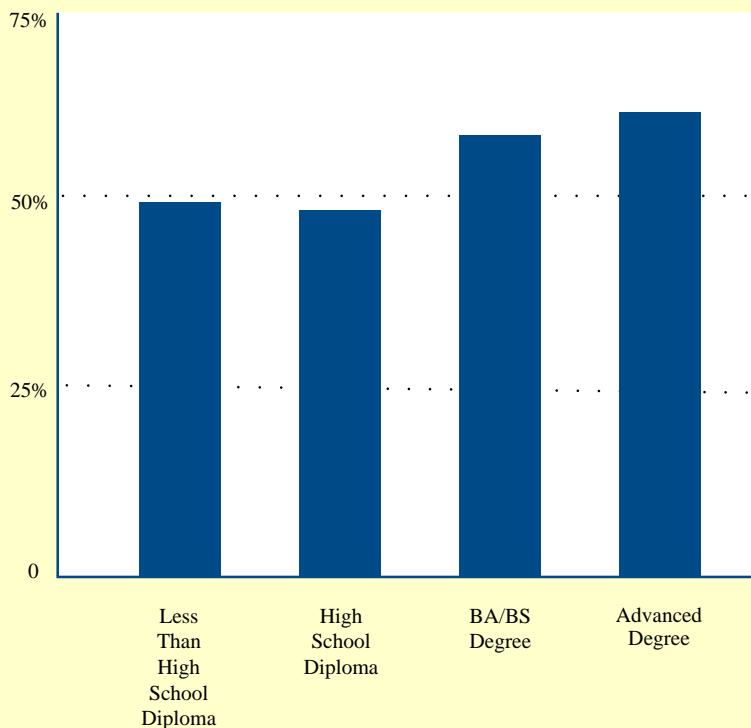
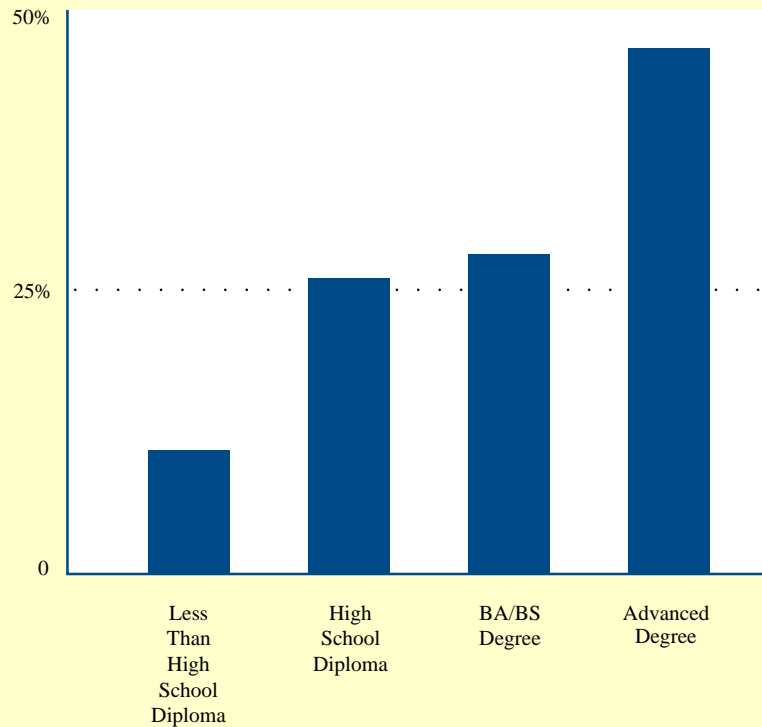


Chart 14.
By Education Level: A Good Work Ethic is the Best Route to Personal Success.



Stakeholder Perspectives

Higher education has much to celebrate in the more recent public accounting of its progress: a solid “B”—not a bad grade, considering the criticism that at times has been scathing over the last two decades. There is general agreement with higher education’s focus on academic quality. Public opinion says that colleges and universities do not bear primary responsibility for students who do not succeed.

There is no mandate for change—or even a suggestion of what kind of change would prove necessary. The overall tone is not one of anger, but of considerable dispassion. It is as though the message public stakeholders are

sending to higher education is: “Manage to stay on course, and we will continue to let you manage the enterprise.”

But, as always, the devil is in the details. While the differences reported in this issue of *A Report to Stakeholders* are a matter of limited magnitude, there are fault lines that once more could shift as economic and social pressure increases. These fractures raise a number of critical questions about the ability of higher education to address enduring issues that continue to loom on the horizon and in the back of the public’s mind:

- ***Tensions between the notions of self-reliance and equal opportunity.*** The relative difference in

perceptions among different groups of Americans regarding educational equity mark a sustaining divide in public opinion. Will the public's current satisfaction with the state of educational equity in the end yield restricted access? Will higher education's traditional emphasis on equal opportunity stem the tide of legal and political challenges to programs of affirmative action?

- **Criticisms around efficiency, cost, and price as matters of public concern.** The fact that most respondents are not prepared to charge colleges and universities

with being wasteful or inefficient probably has more to do with the economy than with the public's confidence in the enterprise's ability to manage itself—to maintain efficiencies of scale and keep the price objectively reasonable. Will a pronounced economic downturn rekindle the anger over prices and costs that was rampant in the early 1990s? Will colleges and universities then be in a better position to explain how and why they spend their monies as they do?

- **Responsibility for college preparedness and the skills that**

Chart 15.
By Education Level: Higher Salaries Are Paid to College Graduates Just Because Employers Are Impressed by a College Degree.

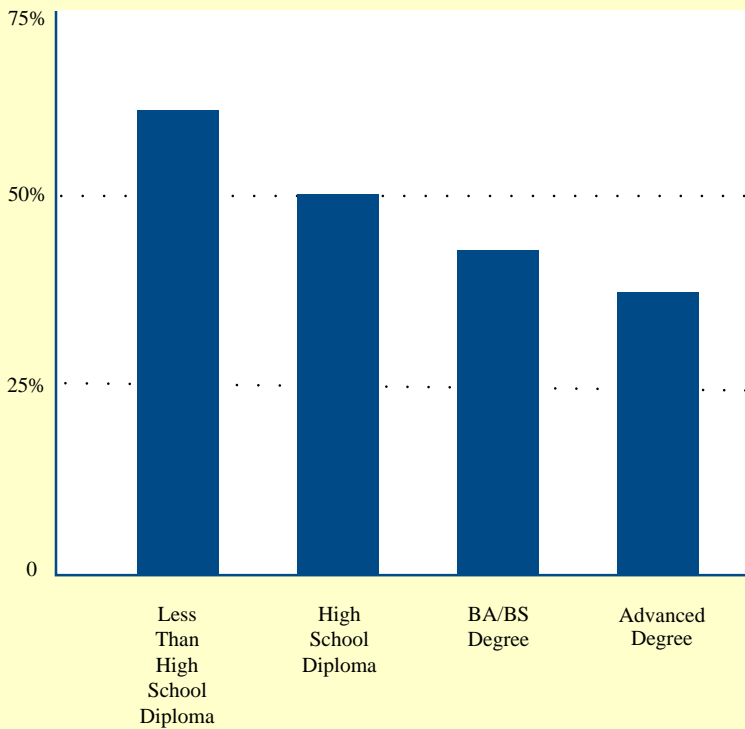
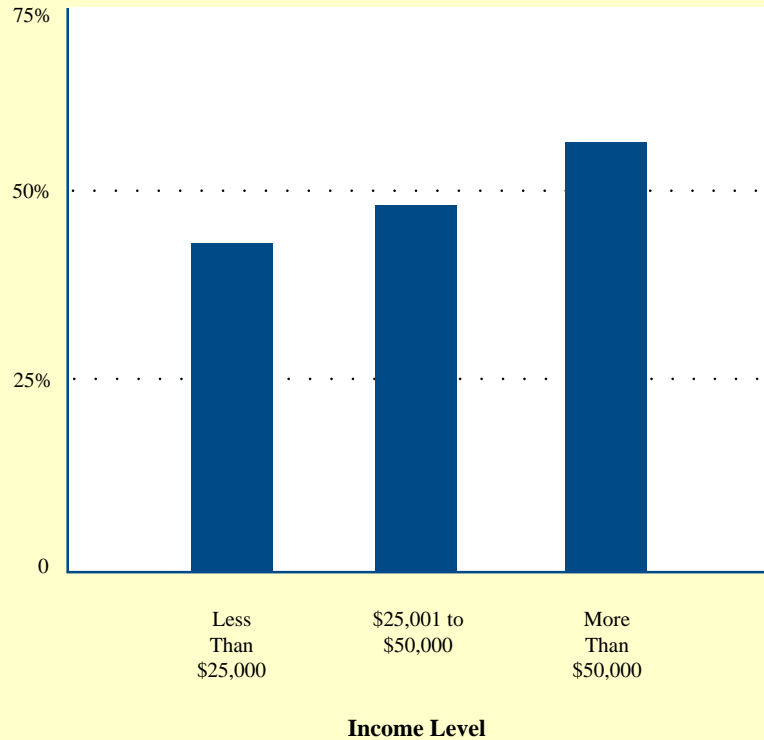


Chart 16.

By Income Level: Hard Skills Are More Important Than Soft Skills.



individuals obtain through a college education. To the degree that institutions of learning are held accountable for students' failure to persist in college, it is high schools, more than post-secondary institutions, that are blamed. But if substantial shortfalls in skill are identified in the workforce—as they were in the 1980s when *A Nation at Risk* dominated public discourse—to what extent will all educational institutions once again be held at fault, and at what cost given decades of education reform?

For the moment, however, the overall message is one of general satisfaction. Assuredly, the public views higher education with considerable dispassion—no strong divisions, no real cleavages. Where there are differences, they are a matter of small degree. American colleges and universities are seen as being solid and dependable institutions that are right to focus on academic pursuits and correct in making students principally responsible for their own success. □