



SURVEY SAYS:

Do Blow
Your **OWN** Horn

Authors of a wide-ranging public-opinion survey explain why colleges and universities can ensure a healthy future by stressing the essentiality of a college degree.

MUCH GOOD NEWS and a healthy ration of not-so-good is contained in the survey “What Americans Think About Higher Education,” released in May by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

As primary architects of the study—developed in partnership with the *Chronicle* and with assistance from most of the country’s major higher education associations (including AGB)—we had long wanted to field a survey

that would provide regional and national contexts for student recruitment, fund-raising, and legislative relations. Knowledge of the public’s opinions regarding the strategic issues facing colleges and universities—the central concern for boards of trustees—defines the terrain on which communication campaigns for admissions, development, and state and federal support are waged.

• BY JOHN ROSS AND GEORGE DEHNE •



TABLE 1

<i>How much confidence do you have in these institutions?</i>	
	A GREAT DEAL
The U.S. military	65%
Four-year private colleges and universities	51%
Your local police force	48%
Four-year public state-supported colleges and universities	46%
Community colleges	43%
Churches and religious organizations	43%
Doctors	40%
Hospitals	36%
Presidential branch of the U.S. government	33%
Public elementary and high schools	32%
Your local government	18%
Television news	17%
Newspapers	16%
Your state government	15%
The U.S. Congress	14%
Lawyers	9%
Large corporations	6%

TABLE 2

	ALL	CAUCASIAN-WHITE	AFRICAN-AMERICAN	HISPANIC-LATINO	ASIAN-AMERICAN
Do you think a four-year college degree is essential for success in our society?					
Yes	51%	48%	60%	59%	82%
Uncertain	7%	7%	6%	7%	5%
No	42%	45%	34%	33%	14%

Among the best of the good news is this: Private and public universities enjoy levels of public confidence second only to the U.S. military. Fifth in the top five comes community colleges (see Table 1). Clearly, American adults ages 25–65 believe in the quality of our system of higher education.

Yet within the data are indicators of disturbing weaknesses. Only half of the 1,000 adults surveyed said they believed that a four-year college degree was essential for success in our society. Asian-Americans, Hispanic/Latinos, and African-Americans were far more likely than Caucasians to express the imperative of a baccalaureate degree (see Table 2). Males are less likely than females (46 percent versus 55 percent) to believe that a four-year degree is a necessity.

A sliver of light can be found in this bleak picture. Younger adults are more likely than their elders to believe that a college education is essential. Still, only 62 percent of those born in the 1970s and 52 percent of those from the 1960s believe that a college degree is a necessity.

Despite well-publicized reports that holders of baccalaureate degrees earn at least \$600,000 more on average during their working lives than those without college degrees (and that their health and career success also tend to be better), we are failing with too many to make the case for a four-year college degree—particularly with those whose parents have limited educations and who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The problem is that trustees and college administrators as a matter of faith believe in the essentiality of a college degree. We all assume that other adults, particularly parents of prospective students in all socioeconomic strata, share this view. The survey shows they do not.

Whether private or public, large or small, colleges and universities must do a better job presenting the benefit equation.

Alumni Satisfaction Counts. Typically, institutions focus most communications on process—small classes, personal advising, and opportunities for undergraduate research—as well as on their wonderful facilities. But something we believe is far more important is given short shrift: the changes that occur in students by virtue of their experiences at the institution.

Typically, colleges describe alumni outcomes in terms of the percentage of the prior year’s graduates who proceeded to graduate schools or found employment. Such data say virtually nothing about how an institution facilitated the personal and professional maturation of its students. Just as universities have established regular reviews of academic programs, so too should they systematically review alumni outcomes five, ten, and twenty years after graduation. Doing so will reveal perceptions of how they value their degrees and the extent to which they sense that their collegiate experiences contributed to their current success in life.

The information gained through surveys of alumni outcomes is data that institutions can take to the bank. It is the validation of a college or university’s reputation. When presented in recruitment publications, appeals to donors, and materials for legislators, these data form the evidence that an institution does what it says it does. A bank of data about alumni outcomes is, in fact, an enduring endowment as important as an institution’s investment portfolio.

Not only is such information vital to the operational tasks of admissions and development, but knowledge of outcomes data enables trustees to articulate the special benefits of the institutions they serve. The ability to describe

well and accurately how their college or university fulfills its mission is a tremendous asset for trustees who are seeking support from other highly positioned peers. As strategic leaders of their institutions, trustees have a responsibility to ensure that the organization is headed for a successful future.

Success and Satisfaction. Among the reasons why American adults have such a high degree of confidence in America’s colleges and universities is their general belief that the college experience is a key component in their current success. About 50 percent of those in our survey reported earning at least a bachelor’s degree, roughly twice the national norm. Six of ten college graduates said their degree is very important to their current success, and another one in five termed it “important.”

Not surprisingly, the greater their income, the more likely respondents were to call their degree important for success. However, women were far more likely than men (66 percent versus 54 percent) to rate their degrees as very important to their current success. Caucasians were dramatically more likely than minorities (64 versus about 44 percent) to describe their degrees as very important to their success.

Graduates of private colleges and universities expressed much higher levels of satisfaction than did graduates of public colleges and universities. Seventy percent of the graduates of large private research universities, two-thirds

TABLE 3

	LARGE PUBLIC STATE COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY	SMALL STATE COLLEGE	LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE	LARGE PRIVATE RESEARCH UNIVERSITY	MODEST-SIZE PRIVATE UNIVERSITY	SPECIALTY COLLEGE	COMMUNITY COLLEGE
How satisfied are you with the college education you received? Are you ...							
Very satisfied	54%	45%	66%	70%	62%	56%	55%
Satisfied	33%	42%	29%	24%	30%	11%	27%
Somewhat satisfied	11%	11%	5%	3%	8%	33%	18%
Not satisfied	1%	2%		3%			

TABLE 4

	PREFERRED	ENROLLED
Large public state college or university	23%	40%
A small state college	15%	14%
Liberal arts college	4%	3%
Large private research university	9%	4%
Modest-size private university	20%	18%
Specialty college for art, engineering, business	8%	5%
Community college	6%	14%
Don't know	16%	1%

of the graduates of liberal arts colleges, and six of ten graduates of modest-size private universities said they were very satisfied with the education they received. In comparison, only 54 percent of the graduates of public doctoral institutions and 45 percent of small state colleges and universities reported similar levels of satisfaction (see Table 3).

Data relative to satisfaction with degree holds opportunities, albeit different ones, for private and public institutions. First, the data provide benchmarks against which institutional studies of student satisfaction can be viewed. Direct comparisons, because of sample and question construction, might not be wholly appropriate. However, we hazard the guess that an individual school's data on alumni satisfaction almost always will exceed those reported in our survey for the same type of institution.

We hesitate to suggest that the lower satisfaction rates with public than private institutions are indications of lesser quality. Rather, they may represent an unavoidable side effect of the economies of scale and the extremely broad service and access missions under which most public institutions operate.

The antidote is to communicate success and quality to students *while they are enrolled*, so that they become more deeply engaged

with their departments and schools or colleges and thus with their university as a whole before they graduate. Effective internal communications may be of greater importance on large public campuses, where individuals can more easily become lost in the crowd, than at small private colleges, where first names are the norm. Trustees and other advisory boards also benefit from how the universities they serve contribute to student success.

What Parents Want. If money were not an issue, 45 percent of American adults would rather have their children attend a private college or university, compared with 25 percent who favored public institutions and 28 percent for whom the distinction made no difference. But when it actually came to enrolling, the publics were the institutions of matriculation (see Table 4).

Adults were much more likely to rate the quality of private four-year colleges and universities very high (26 percent) than they were to give the same ranking to public four-year colleges and universities (19 percent) or two-year community colleges (14 percent). However, other adults were twice as likely to report that they did not know the quality of private institutions as they were for public four-year colleges and universities (see Table 5).

So, if private institutions are perceived to be of higher quality than public institutions, why do most students enroll in large publics? In a post-survey study of how institutions communicate with prospective college students, we probed the reasons underlying choice of an institution. In short, students base their picks on availability of academic program or major, comfort with the social and physical environment of the campus and surrounding community, and then on affordability.

It's too easy to lay the preference for publics on

TABLE 5

	VERY HIGH	HIGH QUALITY	GOOD	AVERAGE	LOW QUALITY	DON'T KNOW
Two-year community colleges	14%	28%	32%	15%	2%	9%
Public four-year colleges and universities	19%	35%	27%	12%	2%	5%
Private four-year colleges and universities	26%	35%	18%	9%	1%	11%

cost. While relatively open access may diminish perceptions of quality at public institutions, the aggregation of a wide array truly first-class academic programs those campuses constitutes a tremendous marketing strength.

On the other hand, independent institutions, particularly the popular modest-size privates, can market the unbeatable combination of professional preparation with the personal nurturing of skills in research, leadership, and communication that last a lifetime. In private universities, process is an extremely important complement to performance.

Misplaced Focus. Adults were asked to rank 20 possible roles of colleges and universities (see Table 6). Preparing undergraduate students for careers topped the list. Playing athletics for the entertainment of the community was dead last. (Two-thirds of those surveyed also strongly agreed or agreed that four-year colleges and universities place too much emphasis on athletics). Providing cultural events to the community was second from the bottom on the list.

Yet where do colleges and universities focus a huge share of their public-relations efforts? Unusual is the college, even in Division III, that does not employ at least a half-time sports-information director. What's more, news releases about tuba recitals and guest speakers consume media-relations offices at the expense of more substantive stories about the core business of nearly every college and university in the country: teaching undergraduates.

In communications, institutions tend to focus on what is snazzy enough to sell to legislators, donors, and news media. But the fact remains that our core business is teaching undergraduates and adults; all else is peripheral in the

eyes of the public. Communicating the strengths of an institution, of course, is far more complex than an either/or scenario. Trustees can help their institutions develop a communications mind-set that always links its salient initiatives to the most important plank of its mission: preparing undergraduates for success. ♦

George Dehne is president of GDA-Integrated Services, a marketing consulting, research, strategic-planning, and services firm that specializes in higher education and is based in Old Saybrook, Conn. John Ross is senior consultant with the firm. Data within all tables are derived from "What Americans Think About Higher Education," a survey conducted by the Chronicle of Higher Education released in May 2003. The accompanying tabulations and analysis do not reflect the work or opinions of the Chronicle staff and are not represented as such.

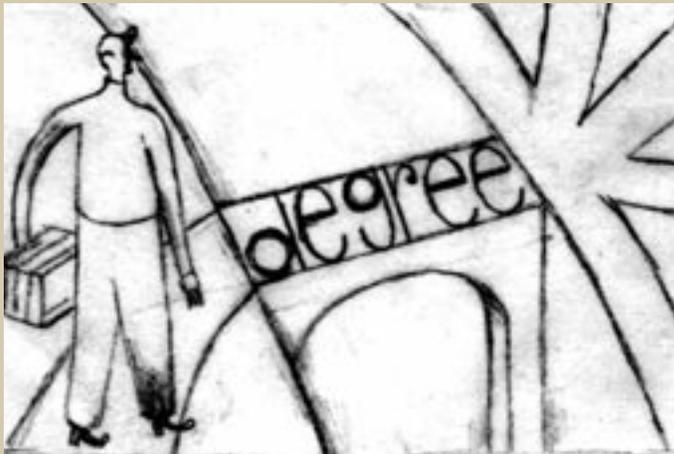
TABLE 6

	VERY IMPORTANT ROLES FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES
Prepare its undergraduate students for a career	71%
Prepare students to be responsible citizens	65%
Provide education to adults so they qualify for better jobs	65%
Prepare future leaders of our society	65%
Help elementary and high schools do a better job teaching children	63%
Offer a broad-based general education to undergraduate students	59%
Teach students how to cope with a rapidly changing world	59%
Teach students to get along with people from different backgrounds	59%
Help students develop good values and ethical positions	58%
Prepare undergraduate students for graduate or professional school	57%
Discover more about the world through research	56%
Prepare students from minority groups to become successful	51%
Conduct research that will make American businesses more competitive	42%
Enroll students from all parts of the country	41%
Help attract new business to your region	39%
Help local businesses and industries in the area be successful	36%
Provide useful information to the public on issues affecting their daily lives	35%
Improve the image of the state in which it is located	33%
Promote international understanding by encouraging students to study in other countries	31%
Provide cultural events to the community	30%
Play athletics for the entertainment of the community	13%

VISIBILITY ENSURES THE FUTURE

A new study by GDA-Integrated Services, conducted following the *Chronicle* survey, confirms the conventional wisdom: Prospective students are much more apt to pursue admission to a college or university about which they know something. In that aspect they are like donors. Trustees know that donors give to causes they believe in.

But unlike donors—particularly alumni and parents of current and former students who have an existing relationship with an institution—prospective students generally have little awareness of the range of colleges or universities that would be suitable for them. Hence, it is critically important to establish visibility in markets from which an institution is most likely to draw students.



The *Chronicle* survey shows that the greater the level of parental educational attainment and family income, the higher the propensity of a teenager to pursue a college degree. But at which college? Here are the determining factors for high school students:

- *Academic program:* Does the university offer a major that meets my career aspirations? From as early as their freshmen year in high school, prospective college students are focused on what they will **DO** when they go to work full-time. Most first-year college students enroll with a specific major in mind.
- *Appropriate environment:* Is this university a place where I am socially comfortable and intellectually challenged? Few prospective students are willing to risk the loneliness that comes with an utterly foreign setting. They seek security. Some

find it in the nurturing climate of small colleges; others do so in the anonymity of a mega-university. Communicated accurately, the on-campus climate is the key to enrollment and retention.

- *Outcomes:* Do graduates pursue careers and lifestyles that appeal to me? How did the institution prepare alumni for their post-college lives? While studies such as the National Survey of Student Engagement claim to describe outcomes, they in fact only tabulate the types of educational tactics used by institutions. Reports of activities of college graduates one year after graduation—a self-justifying staple of career planning and placement centers—are the shallowest of outcome measures. Colleges should invest in systematic perception surveys of alumni and feed results into admissions, development, and legislative communications.

- *Affordability:* Can my family and I make the payments? The *Chronicle* survey shows that adults have a good idea of what it costs to attend public and private colleges. While worried about debt and their ability to afford college, few adults opt for the lowest cost university. But nor do they buy the old adage that high price equals high quality. When addressing prospective parents and students, smart colleges shift the discussion from one of price and cost to affordability and benefits.

- *Name recognition:* Prospective students are most likely to enroll in colleges whose names they recognize. The name of an institution is an icon for a series of characteristics (reputation) associated with it. Thus, an institution's visibility in geographic and demographic markets where it seeks to recruit students is the greatest factor in determining whether a prospective student will be receptive to its offerings. Being known in your market opens the door for recruitment and fund-raising.

- *Most reliable sources of information:* Prospective students demand and rely much more heavily on printed viewbooks and related materials than electronic communications. Though important, the Web is a secondary source of information for prospective students and their parents. Smart colleges will coordinate print and Web materials and use print to encourage students to visit the institution's Web site, where information of greater depth is available. —J.R. and G.D.