

RESEARCH

Republicans and Democrats Both Think Higher Ed's on the Wrong Track — for Very Different Reasons

By *Emma Pettit* | JULY 26, 2018



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Most Americans aren't fond of where higher education in the United States is headed, a new Pew Research Center survey has found. To learn why, the results say, find out a person's political party.

The findings, announced on Thursday, said about 61 percent of Americans think higher education is moving in the wrong direction. About three-fourths of Republicans and those who lean Republican believe so. The figure was lower, but still a slim majority at 52 percent, for Democrats and those who lean Democratic.

That partisan divide is consistent with 2017 Pew surveys, the center said on its website. Last year the organization reported that in general, Republicans feel "colder" toward college professors than Democrats do, and are more likely to think that colleges and universities affect the country negatively.

Of Republican respondents who disapprove of high education's path, 79 percent were strongly concerned by professors' introducing political and social views into the classroom. About three-fourths said there's too much hand-wringing about protecting students from potentially offensive viewpoints. Democrats who think the system is broken cared far less about those issues, at about 17 percent and 31 percent, respectively.

Instead, a whopping 92 percent of those Democrats cited high tuition as a major concern. A little more than half of them, 56 percent, cited students' not obtaining workplace skills. For wary Republicans, those figures were 77 percent and 73 percent, respectively.

On one issue, the two parties agreed resoundingly: free speech. Ninety-one percent of Republicans and 86 percent of Democrats said it's more important to allow people on college campuses to speak freely than to guard students from objectionable ideas.

Another recent poll suggests the students might feel differently. A Gallup poll this year found that, when asked to pick what was more important — protecting free-speech rights or encouraging a diverse and inclusive society — students picked diversity by a small margin: 53 percent to 46 percent.

The 'National Rhetoric'

Because of the "prevailing national rhetoric," the results of the Pew poll were frustrating but not shocking, said Lynn Pasquerella, president of the Association of American Colleges & Universities. Pasquerella referenced Attorney General Jeff Sessions' recent labeling of today's college students as "sanctimonious, sensitive, supercilious snowflakes."

That argument is a red herring, Pasquerella said. Most students aren't "protesting and asking for therapy animals and safe spaces. ... They're trying to do their work and pay their bills," she said.

Still, Pasquerella said, the association takes the misgivings about academe seriously. It just wrapped up a survey of chief executives and human-resource managers, asking them if college graduates come prepared to the workplace, she said. The results will be announced later this year.

Like Pasquerella, Michael S. Roth, president of Wesleyan University, said he was disheartened by the survey. Roth, who wrote *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*, said the results indicate that the Trump administration's campaign against higher education has taken root.

But some gripes, like rising tuition, are warranted, Roth said. "I don't know anyone who thinks that tuition costs are too low," he said. It's also difficult to imagine anyone saying colleges and universities are doing enough to prepare someone for the workplace, Roth added.

So what can be done? Lots of things, Roth said. Offer lower-cost alternatives for learning. Articulate the value colleges bring to students. And higher-education leaders must make the borders more porous between the college campus and the world at large, Roth said. To assume academe is in its own special secluded sector would be, he said, "a grave mistake."

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