

TRUST IN HIGHER EDUCATION STARTS LOCAL



What Americans want for the future of college—and how we get there



C&S sparks young people to create bold, fresh civic solutions that move our country forward.

We partner with college presidents, faculty, and students to build a strong civic culture that prepares every student for civic life.

Visit cands.org to learn more about our campus programming, including College Presidents for Civic Preparedness, the Mellon Fellowships, and Carnegie Young Leaders.



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WHY THIS WORK MATTERS NOW

Higher education has long helped prepare people not only for careers, but for citizenship.

At its best, college is where students learn how to think critically, collaborate across differences, and practice the civic skills they need to solve the real-world problems affecting their generation.

Today, however, higher education faces growing scrutiny. Americans are asking questions about cost, value, and whether colleges are staying true to their core mission of preparing citizens.

This national survey and media analysis was commissioned to better understand how Americans think about higher education today—and what that means for the future of the college promise. The report pairs these findings with concrete actions and tools designed to help leaders across sectors respond.

The findings reveal both a challenge and an opportunity:

Americans still believe in the promise of college—but they need proof that it delivers.

This report is also an invitation. Preparing the next generation for the responsibilities of citizenship is not the work of colleges alone. **Business leaders, civic organizations, policymakers, parents, alumni, and communities all have a role to play.**

But this moment demands more than business as usual. Higher education can't just explain its value—it has to show it. **That means visible action, stronger partnerships outside of campus, and fresh ways of engaging and communicating that match how Americans experience the world today.** This isn't a call for better marketing—or even just more community engagement. It's an invitation for colleges to rethink their role: not as institutions that occasionally reach outward, but as an integral part of the broader communities they serve.

If this research shows anything, it is that the promise of higher education remains strong—and that realizing it will require leadership, partnership, and **a renewed commitment to action.**



Rajiv Vinnakota
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A NEW NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK

THE CHALLENGE

Americans still believe in the promise of higher education—but they are not always convinced that colleges are delivering on that promise.

Concerns about cost, access, and institutional priorities have created a gap between what people expect and what they believe they see.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Most Americans are neither strong defenders nor firm opponents of higher education.

Nearly half fall into a movable middle—people who believe in the promise of college but want to see it evolve.

THE NARRATIVE SHIFT

From defending why colleges matter to showing the (local) impact of colleges

THREE PRINCIPLES FOR NARRATIVE CHANGE



GO LOCAL

Make community impact a throughline—both in how the institution shows up locally and how it prepares students to improve the communities they will shape.



MAKE THE LOCAL VISIBLE

Tell human stories of students, faculty, and campuses solving real problems.



BE HONEST ABOUT THE WORK AHEAD

Americans know there's work to do and want to help. Make the effort to close that gap in visible and public ways.

SIX MINDSETS SHAPE HOW AMERICANS VIEW HIGHER EDUCATION

Public opinion about higher education is often described through demographics—politics, education levels, or geography.

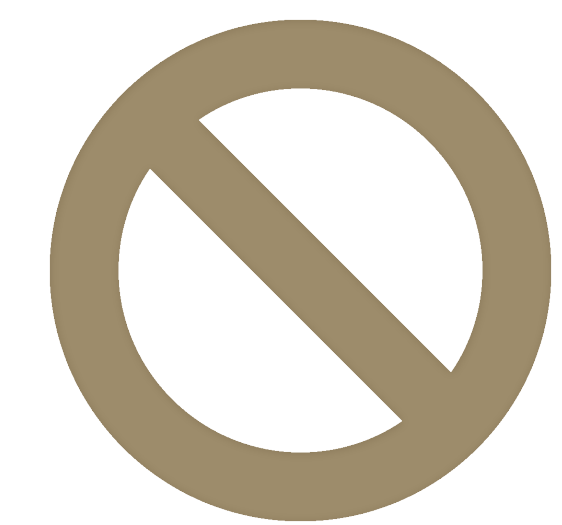
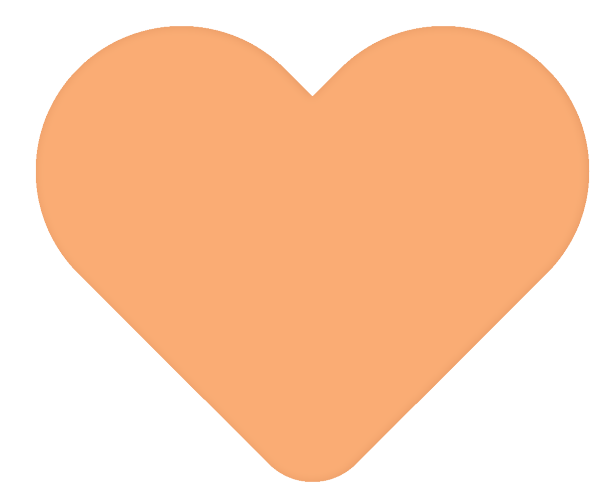
But our research reveals a more illustrative lens: mindset.

Americans approach higher education with different hopes, expectations, and concerns.

Together, these perspectives form six distinct audience groups.

AUDIENCE MINDSET SPECTRUM

Supporters |—————| moveable middle |—————| Opponents



ALL-IN ALLIES

**CONSTRUCTIVE
CRITICS**

**CIVIC-MINDED
REFORMERS**

ROI SKEPTICS

**DISCONNECTED
& DISILLUSIONED**

**HARDLINE
OPPONENTS**

All-In Allies (26%)

Highly supportive of higher education and confident in its societal role.

Opportunity: activate them to amplify stories of impact.

Constructive Critics (14%)

Believe in higher education, but worry institutions have drifted from their core mission.

Opportunity: demonstrate focus and accountability.

Civic-Minded Reformers (14%)

See colleges as important civic institutions, but want stronger community impact.

Opportunity: highlight partnerships solving local challenges.

ROI Skeptics (17%)

Evaluate college primarily through economic value and career outcomes.

Opportunity: recognize people's concerns about cost and value, and show real-world payoffs.

Disconnected & Disillusioned (13%)

Feel distant from higher education and unsure it serves people like them.

Opportunity: make community contributions and outcomes visible.

Hardline Opponents (17%)

Hold deeply negative views and are unlikely to change perspectives in the near term.

While highly visible in public debate, they represent a minority of Americans.

INSIGHT Nearly half of Americans fall into a **movable middle** that believes in higher education. But they need to see it evolve—and evolve quickly.



THE RESEARCH



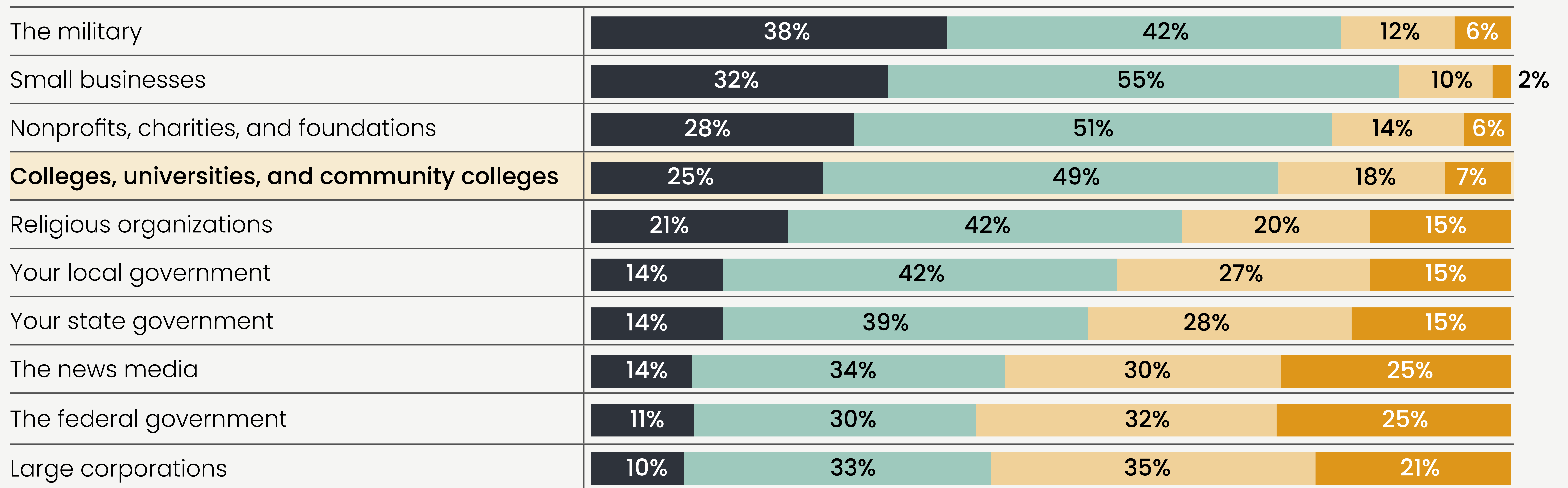
TRUST ISN'T THE ISSUE—AMBIVALENCE IS

Headlines about declining trust give some the impression that Americans have turned on higher education.

This data tells a more nuanced story. Nearly three in four Americans (74%) say they trust colleges, universities, and community colleges to do what is right. That trust holds across racial groups, education levels, and political parties. For example, 86% of Democrats, 70% of independents, and 67% of Republicans said they trust colleges to do what is right.

However, broad trust does not mean deep commitment. Only 25% say they trust colleges “a great deal.” Nearly half of Americans (49%) say they only trust colleges “somewhat”—inclined to be supportive, but not firmly committed, and potentially persuadable in either direction.

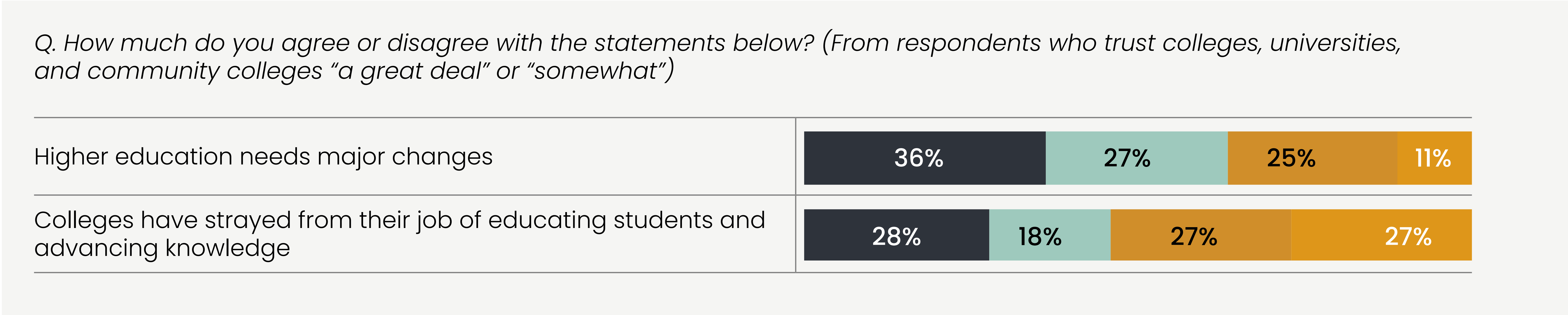
Q. How much do you trust each of the following institutions to do what is right?



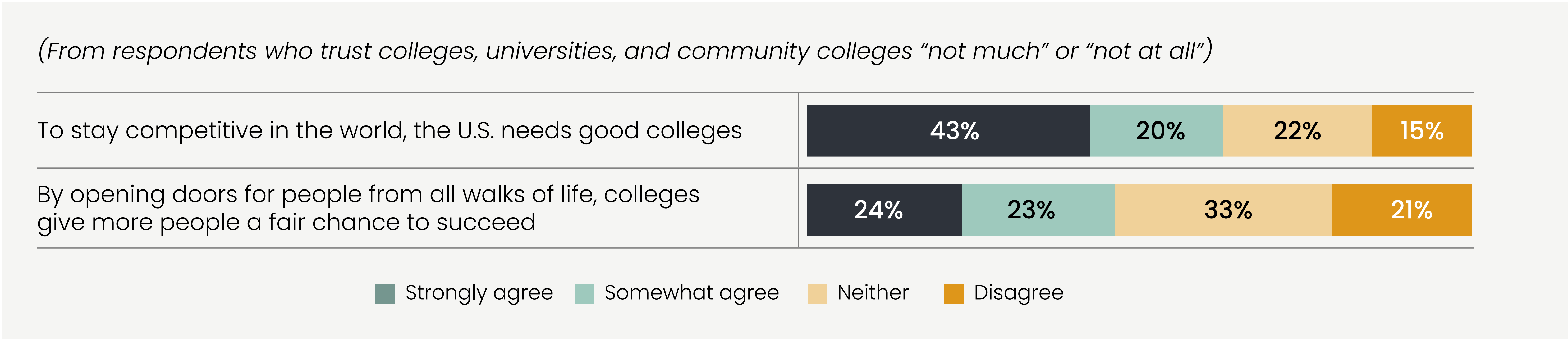
■ A great deal ■ Somewhat ■ Not much ■ Not at all

Despite this topline trust, the dominant public attitude toward higher education is not hostility: It is ambivalence.

Many people who say they trust colleges and universities hold critical views: they say that higher ed needs major changes (63%), that colleges mostly serve the rich and powerful (48%), and that colleges look down on people without degrees (43%).



The ambivalence runs in both directions. **Among people who say they don't trust higher ed, 63% still say the United States needs good colleges to stay competitive**, 47% believe colleges give people from all walks of life a fair chance to succeed, and 38% say their own education played a big role in shaping who they are.



INSIGHT Most Americans are both champions and critics of higher ed.

WHAT'S THE COST? AND WHAT DO I GET FOR IT?

Beneath specific concerns lies a deeper worry: that some colleges have stopped serving the public interest and started serving their own.

Our research found that **cost is the first thing that comes to mind when people think about higher education**—overshadowing even learning. People don't see rising costs as simply a financial concern. They experience them as a moral story: colleges prioritizing their bottom lines over their students' futures, charging more while delivering less. **Cost becomes a shorthand for a deeper concern about whether higher ed has lost its way.**

Across every level of trust, **Americans' number one wish is to make college more accessible and affordable.** Even the most skeptical Americans are asking for more college, for more people.

"Is it even worth it anymore? So many [people] have a degree yet still can't find a job that pays enough to survive."

– SOMEWHAT TRUSTING

"I think the majority of them are good places and have good intentions but a [few] are bad places, **only operating to make a profit.**"

– SOMEWHAT TRUSTING

"They went from places of learning and wisdom to being **focused on money.** And with that all bad things happen."

– NOT MUCH TRUST

"They sign you up for **classes you don't need** to get money."

– NOT MUCH TRUST

"Lower costs and **allow more people the opportunity to get degrees** without going into debt."

– NOT AT ALL TRUSTING

"Provid[e] affordable education to **everyone.**"

– SOMEWHAT TRUSTING



WHY ARE AMERICANS SKEPTICAL?

1. THE ACTION GAP

People believe in what colleges are supposed to do. But many are unsure whether colleges are actually doing it.

The challenge facing higher education is not belief in the mission. It is confidence in the action.

2. THE NARRATIVE GAP

In media coverage, supporters talk principles while opponents talk action:

Advocates

Principles like freedom of inquiry, teaching across difference, and academic integrity

Opponents

Concrete policy ideas like outlawing DEI, controlling hiring, and cutting funding

Higher education's values must be connected to visible examples of impact.

WHAT AMERICANS EXPECT COLLEGES TO DO

People don't need to be persuaded that higher education matters.

Americans see college as essential to the country's future—not just as a launchpad for careers but as a civic institution that builds critical thinkers as much as cures for cancer.

Q. In your opinion, what is the most important contribution that colleges could make in America today?

75%

Help students become **critical thinkers and informed citizens**

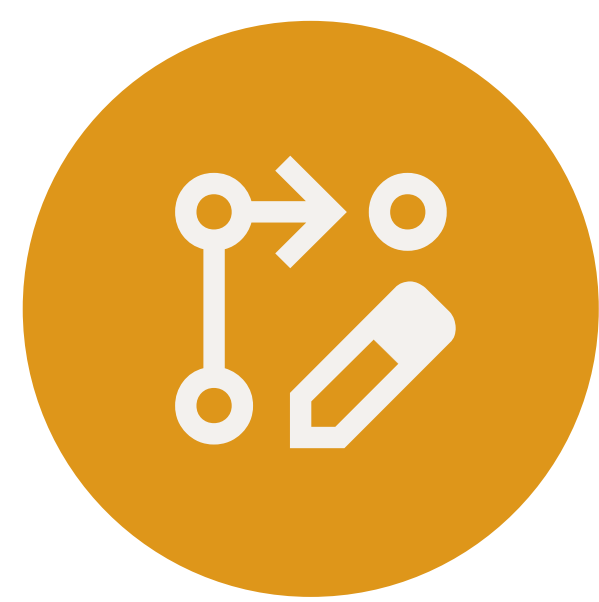
72%

Prepare students to succeed in their **careers**

70%

Find cures for cancer and other diseases

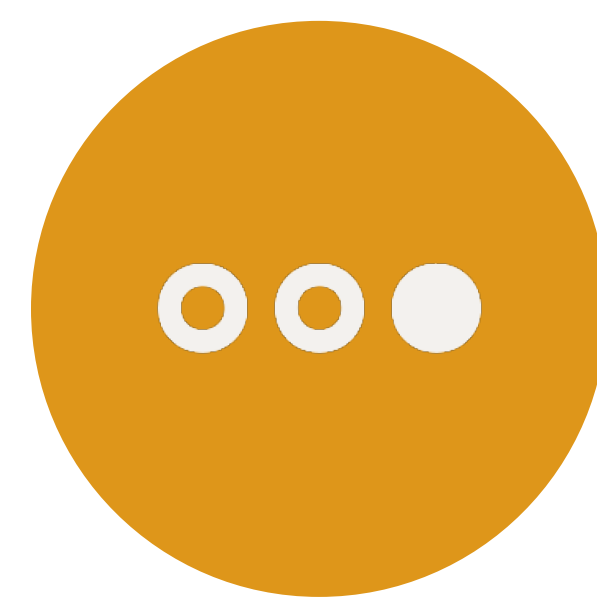
PATHWAYS TO JOBS AND A STRONGER COUNTRY



Develop critical thinking



Prepare for meaningful careers



Understand complex issues



Collaborate across differences



Contribute to their communities

Americans see colleges as places not just to earn degrees, but as institutions that play a critical role in building a stronger country.

When asked about the most meaningful contributions colleges make, Americans don't just say "jobs." While nearly 75% said providing a skilled workforce was important, just as many said that helping students become critical thinkers and informed citizens and protecting freedom of speech were also critical college contributions.

Q. Below is a list of ways that colleges could benefit the country. How important is each contribution to you?

Help students become critical thinkers and informed citizens	75%	15%	8%	2%
Provide a skilled and educated workforce for the economy	74%	16%	8%	2%
Protect freedom of speech, equal rights, and other American values	74%	15%	9%	2%
Prepare students to succeed in their careers	72%	17%	9%	2%
Produce science and technology that improve people's lives	71%	17%	10%	3%
Find cures for cancer and other diseases	70%	17%	9%	3%
Engage graduates to make a difference in the world	68%	19%	10%	2%
Increase healthy and respectful political debate	65%	18%	13%	4%
Level the playing field for people across different racial and ethnic backgrounds	65%	17%	13%	6%
Empower faculty members to use their expertise to benefit society	64%	20%	13%	4%
Create new businesses and industries	58%	22%	15%	5%
Foster creativity and the arts	58%	21%	15%	6%
Protect our environment and address climate change	57%	18%	15%	9%
Strengthen national security	55%	21%	16%	7%

Very important
 Somewhat important
 Neither important nor unimportant
 Unimportant

But Americans need to see college delivering, not just promising.

Americans believe in what college can be, but many don't see the payoff. They're just not seeing the results that colleges promise consistently and comprehensively.

Q. How much do you agree or disagree with these statements?

At the same time

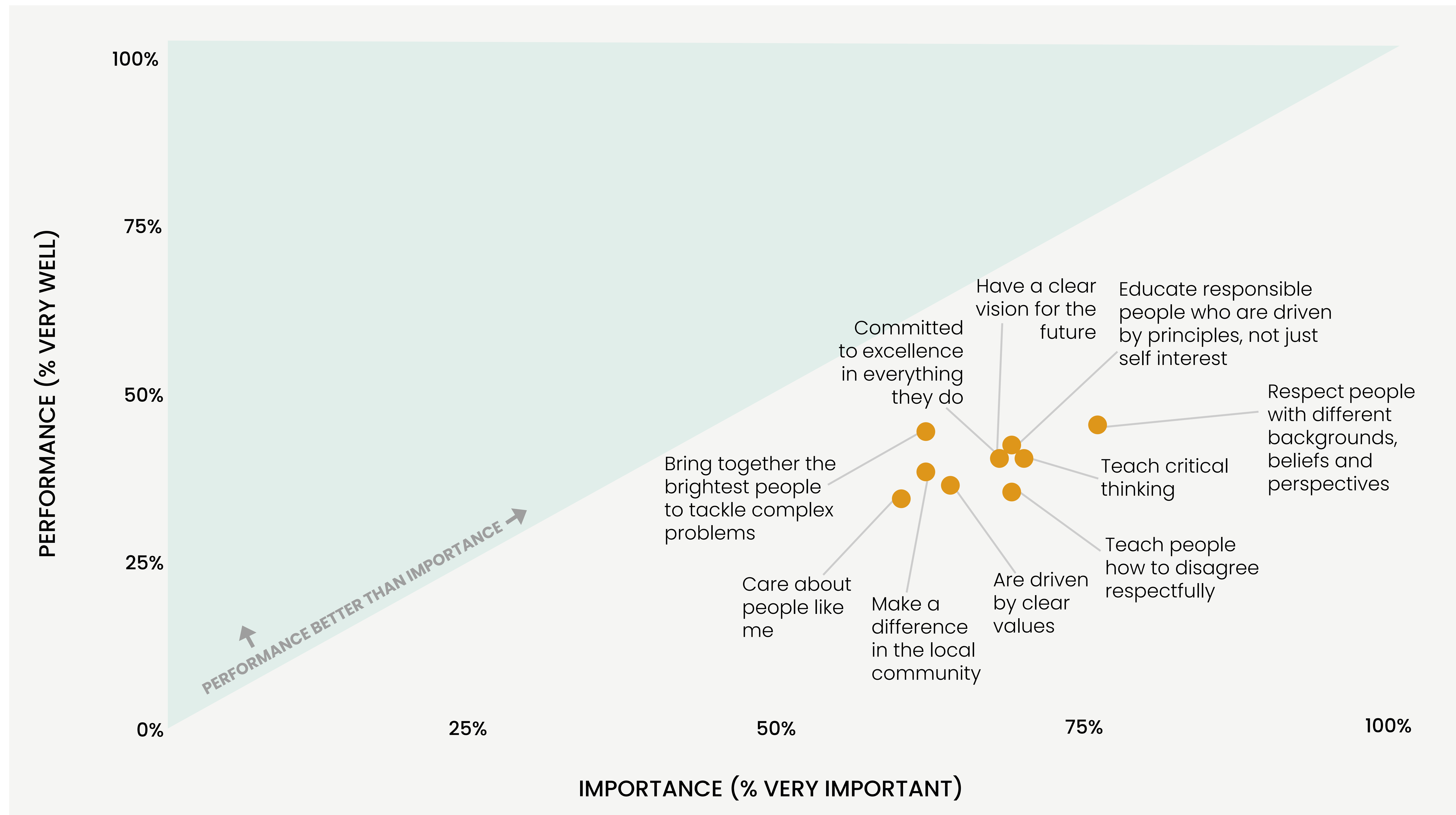
77%

To stay competitive in the world, the U.S. needs good colleges.

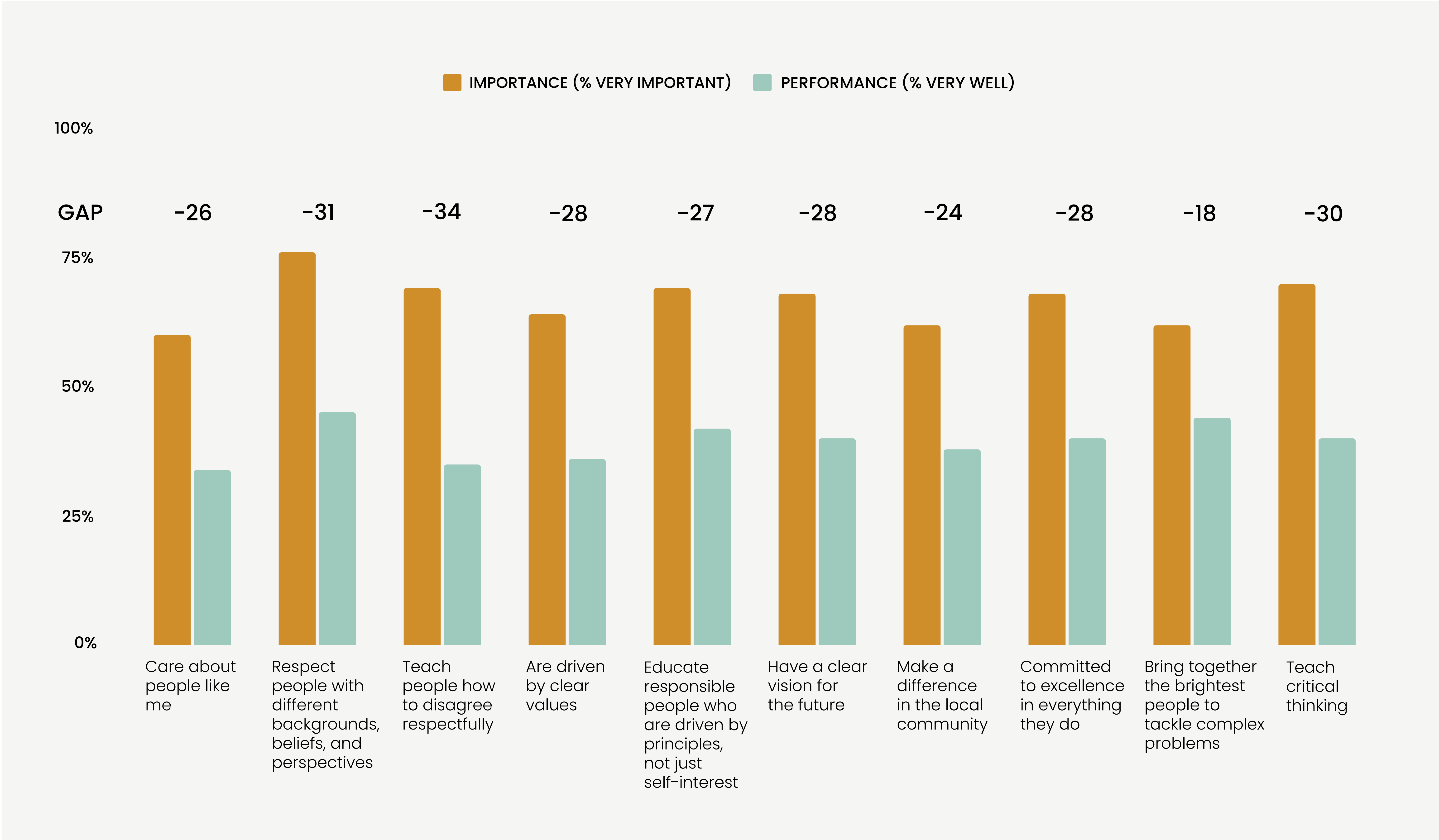
69%

Higher education needs major changes.

Given a list of qualities that could describe colleges—from “committed to excellence in everything they do” to “cares about people like me”—people rate every quality as highly important. But they also rate colleges’ actual performance well below their expectations on every dimension.



Across every priority, performance lags behind expectations.

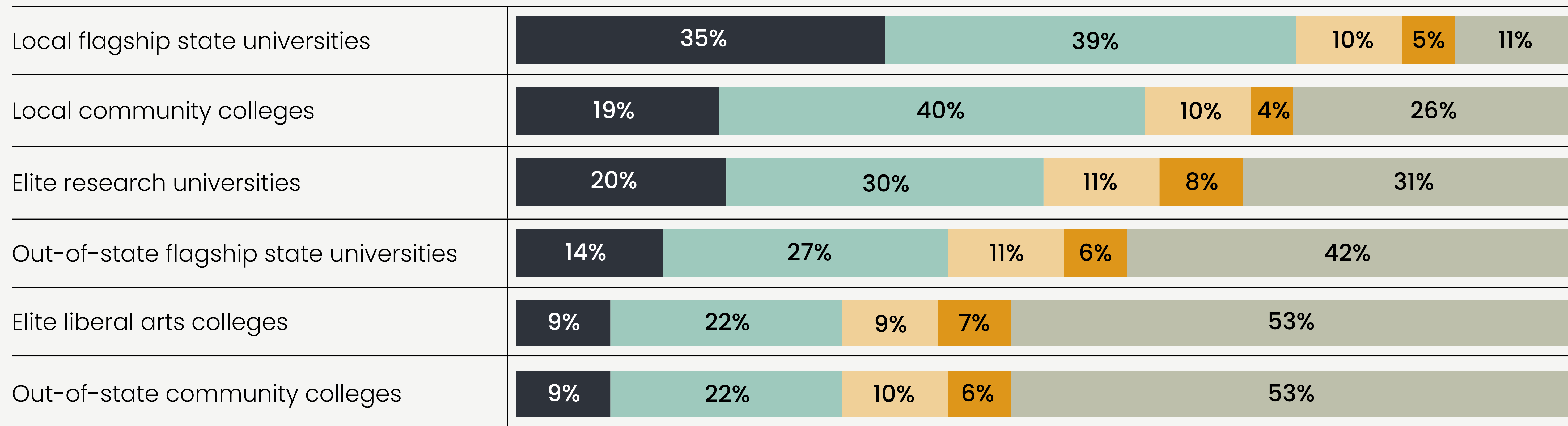


THE MOST TRUSTED COLLEGE IN AMERICA? (Your Local College)

People trust specific schools, not “higher ed.”

The closer someone is to a specific college—geographically, socially, experientially—the more likely they are to trust it. The more unfamiliar the college feels, the more they say they “don’t know.” This dynamic is even more pronounced among skeptics. Among those who say they don’t trust higher ed overall, 49% still trust their home state university.

Q. How much do you trust each of the schools below?



■ A great deal ■ Somewhat ■ Not much ■ Not at all ■ Don't know

57% of Americans have engaged with a local college in the last year—attending sporting events, visiting friends and family, voting, and other ways. And 81% are interested in participating in activities organized by a college near them—from volunteering and service projects (41%) to workshops to discuss community priorities (31%) and public events featuring speakers with diverse viewpoints (29%).

Q. Below is a list of activities that could be organized by a college near you. Which of these below would you be interested in participating in?

Volunteering and service projects to help the local community	41%
Workshops or forums to discuss community priorities and find solutions to local problems	31%
Public events to explore important issues with speakers from a wide range of viewpoints	29%
Community dialogues or town halls to talk about tough issues	24%
An advisory group of community members to provide colleges local perspectives on important issues	21%
None of these / Prefer not to say	19%

INSIGHT Trust grows not from national messaging, but from local relationships.

79% percent of Americans agree that “the best place to make a real impact is in your local community.” When asked how their local college could make a difference in their community, respondents offered specific ideas that many colleges already do, but the public never hears about.

Q. Below is a list of actions that colleges could take outside their own campuses. Which of these would you like to see colleges doing?

Engage local business leaders to provide internships, teach classes, and develop projects that benefit the community	43%
Bring together business leaders, elected officials, and other community members to work together on local issues	38%
Show students how to vote and make their voices heard in government	36%
Provide useful information and support to help local leaders address local issues	35%
Provide research and learning opportunities that help government workers serve people better	34%
Implement clear policies for protests, demonstrations, and political activity that protect free speech and physical safety	34%
Work with legislators to develop policies and programs that prepare local students to be informed and active citizens	30%
None of these / Prefer not to say	8%

Many of the most trusted messengers on civic issues aren't necessarily the people who typically speak for higher education. Instead, they are:

Nonprofit leaders (63%)
 Local business owners (66%)
 Local faith leaders (51%)

Q. For each of the people below, please indicate how strongly you trust them on these issues.

Professor who studies the topic	43%	24%	23%	10%
Local community or nonprofit leader	36%	27%	26%	11%
Local business owner	35%	31%	27%	8%
Local faith leader	31%	20%	29%	20%
College president	27%	24%	32%	18%
Current college student	26%	24%	37%	13%
Well-known local alumnus	25%	25%	36%	13%
Governor, mayor or county official	25%	24%	26%	25%
U.S. Congressperson or Senator, or state legislator	24%	19%	27%	31%
Athletic director or head coach	23%	21%	37%	18%
National business leader	23%	23%	34%	21%
Local college athlete	21%	21%	37%	21%

Strongly trust
 Somewhat trust
 Neutral
 Do not trust

When colleges collaborate with these partners to address real challenges, their contributions become visible.



THE NARRATIVE OPPORTUNITY



TURNING INSIGHT INTO ACTION

The findings point to a clear opportunity. Higher education does not need to persuade Americans that colleges matter. Many already believe that.

What people want is to see how colleges translate their values into action.

THREE SHIFTS CAN HELP BRING THAT STORY TO LIFE:



GO LOCAL

Make community impact a throughline—both in how the institution shows up locally and how it prepares students to improve the communities they will shape.



MAKE THE LOCAL VISIBLE

Tell human stories of students, faculty, and campuses solving real problems.



BE HONEST ABOUT THE WORK AHEAD

Americans know there's work to do and want to help. Make the effort to close that gap in visible and public ways.

REACHING THE MOVEABLE MIDDLE

Trust and confidence in higher education will not be decided by its strongest supporters or its harshest critics.

Instead, it will be shaped by a large group of Americans who believe in higher education—but want to see it evolve.

THREE AUDIENCE MINDSETS MAKE UP THIS MOVEABLE MIDDLE:



**CONSTRUCTIVE
CRITICS**



**CIVIC-MINDED
REFORMERS**



ROI SKEPTICS

Together they represent nearly half of the public.

Reaching these audiences requires connecting higher education’s work to the priorities that matter most to them—whether that is community impact, civic leadership, or economic opportunity.

The opportunity ahead is not simply to defend higher education’s value, but to demonstrate it in ways people can see in their everyday lives.

WHAT THESE AUDIENCES ARE LOOKING FOR



CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICS

What they want to see

Colleges focused on educating students and developing citizens who can solve problems and work together.

What resonates

- teaching students how to think, not what to think
- responsible leadership and student-first priorities
- evidence that institutions are listening and evolving



CIVIC-MINDED REFORMERS

What they want to see

Colleges playing a stronger role in strengthening communities and civic life.

What resonates

- partnerships with local organizations
- students contributing to community problem-solving
- dialogue across differences



ROI SKEPTICS

What they want to see

Colleges recognizing their concerns about cost and value, and clear connections between a degree and real-world opportunity.

What resonates

- practical engagement around cost and tradeoffs
- workforce partnerships
- skill development tied to real jobs

AN INVITATION FOR ALL OF US

Rebuilding trust in higher education is not the responsibility of colleges alone.

Employers, civic leaders, community organizations, and citizens all play a role in demonstrating how colleges contribute to opportunity and problem-solving.

HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERS

Colleges and universities can strengthen public trust by making their work more visible and more connected to the communities they serve.

This includes:

- highlighting student projects that address community challenges
- elevating partnerships with employers and civic organizations
- demonstrating how learning connects to life beyond campus
- communicating outcomes clearly in plain language

When people see how colleges contribute to their communities, the value of higher education becomes tangible.

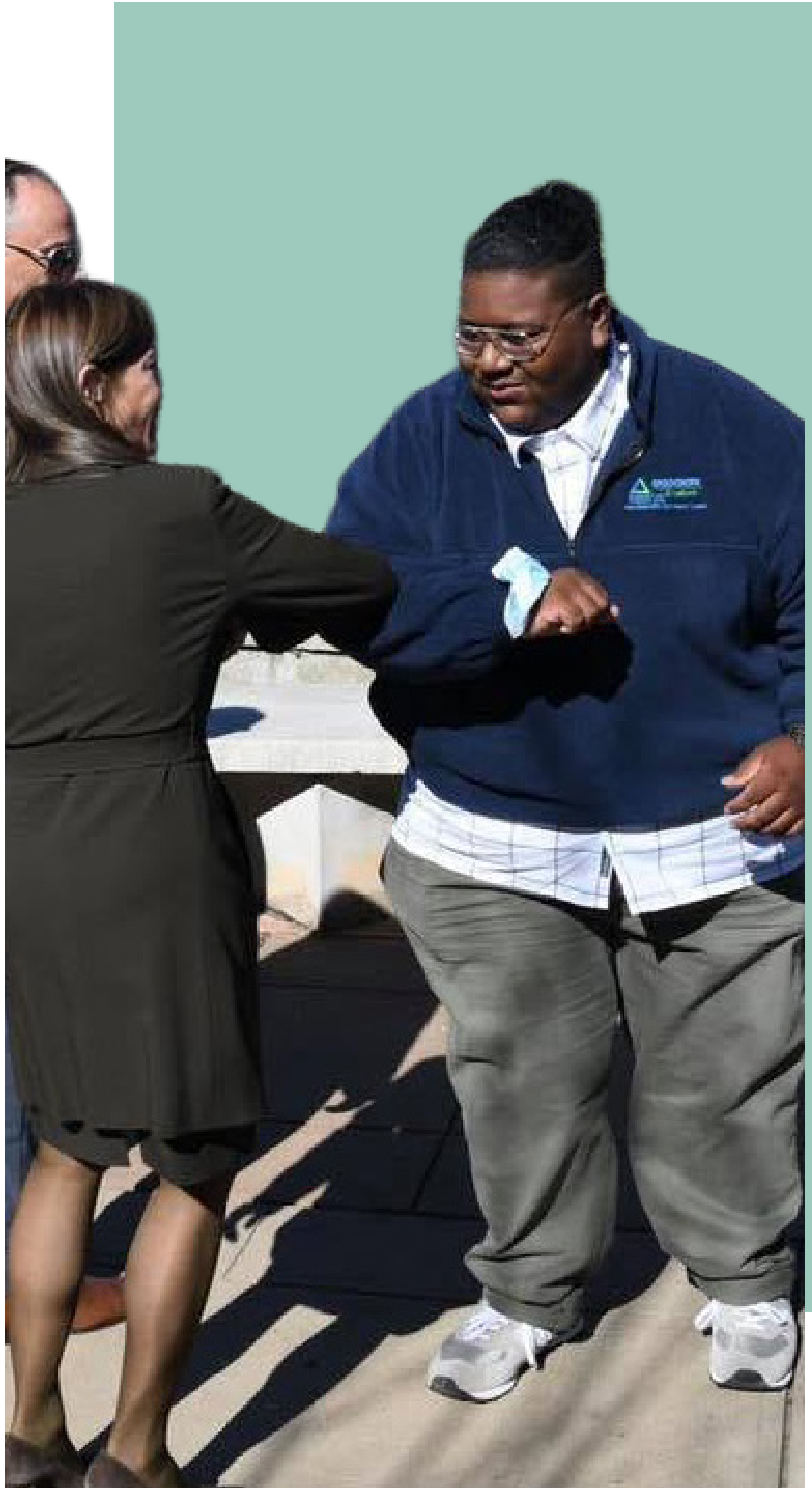
LOCAL BUSINESS LEADERS

Employers are among the most trusted voices in conversations about education and opportunity.

Businesses can help strengthen public understanding of higher education by:

- partnering with colleges on workforce development
- offering internships and real-world learning opportunities
- collaborating on local problem-solving initiatives
- speaking publicly about the role education plays in economic growth

These partnerships demonstrate how higher education and economic opportunity are connected.



CIVIC AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

Local leaders—mayors, nonprofit organizations, community groups, faith leaders, and civic institutions—shape the stories we tell about why higher education matters and have ideas for what role local schools can play.

Community leaders can:

- speak publicly about the role local schools play in making communities stronger
- partner with campuses to address local challenges
- create opportunities for students to contribute to community initiatives
- highlight successful campus-community collaborations
- connect higher education to local priorities

These relationships make the impact of higher education visible.

CITIZENS WHO CARE ABOUT THE FUTURE

Higher education has always been more than a pathway to a job.

It is also one of the ways communities develop new ideas, solve problems, and prepare the next generation to lead.

Across the country, students, educators, employers, and community leaders are already working together to address real challenges.

When people see and support this work, they help strengthen the role higher education plays in building a stronger society.

The future of higher education will not be shaped only by national debates.

It will be shaped by what people see in their own communities.



WHAT'S NEXT

The findings in this report are clear: people still believe colleges can strengthen communities and prepare the next generation for leadership. But belief alone isn't enough.

In the months ahead, C&S will begin designing and curating a next phase of action with partners across higher education, media, culture, technology, business, and civic life.

This will not be a traditional campaign.

Instead, it will be a collective effort to transform how people see what colleges can do for civic life.

It will require bold actions from colleges, breakthrough civic stories of local impact, and sustained work to change the narrative about the role of college.

What might that look like?

- New tools based on what people want to see from colleges
- Best-in-class creative storytelling
- Moments of collective visibility

The research shows that people are ready to believe. Now it's time to show them. Join us.

cands.org

APPENDIX

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

National survey of 2,404 U.S. adults, fielded between November 24 and December 5, 2025. Margin of error: $\pm 2\%$

Media analysis and research review



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