

# Most Republicans Still Aren't Crazy About Higher Education. And That's OK.

*By Brian Rosenberg* OCTOBER 12, 2018

Another round of hand-wringing and soul-searching has been inspired by another set of surveys showing a decline in public confidence in American higher education. All of these surveys reveal a partisan distinction, with the sharpest decline and the most negative attitudes among respondents who identify themselves as Republican.

A new [Gallup poll](#) shows 62 percent of Democrats and only 39 percent of Republicans expressing "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in higher education. The proportion of Republicans is a decline of 17 percentage points from a similar survey administered in 2015, before the most recent presidential election. Another [recent poll](#), by the Pew Research Center, found that 73 percent of Republican and Republican-leaning respondents judged higher education to be "going in the wrong direction," as compared with 52 percent of Democratic and Democratic-leaning respondents. The most commonly cited concern among Democratic respondents was the cost of tuition; the most commonly cited concern among Republican respondents was the "political and social views" of professors.

I am as much a fan of soul-searching as the next person, but I think that most of the diagnoses of this phenomenon and prescriptions for "fixing" it misstate what is going on. Confidence in higher education among those with a particular party affiliation is declining not because we are doing something wrong but because we are doing something right.

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This loss of confidence is being driven less by changes in higher education than by changes in the attitudes of a large segment of the American public. We are inspiring

distrust not because we are abandoning our mission but because we are doing our best to carry it out. That mission has not significantly altered in the past two years, but the world around us has.

Let me be clear. Colleges and universities are highly imperfect and regularly make bad decisions. That is true now and was true in the past. Our collective history is filled with examples of racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism, including during those times when public confidence in our work was very high. I readily acknowledge that it is difficult today to be a thoughtful conservative on most American college campuses, and for this we should be ashamed. Higher education, unfortunately, mirrors the broader culture in its increasing inability to speak constructively across reasonable differences of opinion.

But bringing more conservative speakers to campus or listening with more civility to conservative viewpoints, while desirable, will not make us significantly more popular. The mission of higher education and the central tenets of a major political party have become so disconnected that it is hard to imagine, in our current moment, how they can be reconciled.

The mission statement of my institution, Macalester College, is distinctive but also representative of what you find when perusing many college catalogs: It specifically cites the importance of "internationalism" and "multiculturalism." To the extent that we attempt to carry out that mission, we are running counter to a political agenda that has become increasingly nationalistic and resistant to the notion that diversity is an American strength.

Much of the science providing our understanding of climate change is being generated at colleges, and it is hard to see how such work would be embraced by those who reject the conclusions of climate science. Another recent [Pew survey](#) revealed that only 16 percent of conservative Republicans believed that "almost all climate scientists agree that human behavior is mostly responsible for climate change," compared with 55 percent of liberal Democrats.

A [Time/SurveyMonkey](#) poll taken before the recent Senate confirmation hearings for then-Supreme Court nominee Brett M. Kavanaugh indicated that 77 percent of Democrats believe that the #MeToo movement will "lead to meaningful change," while 55 percent of Republicans consider it a "distraction." My guess is that a poll taken today would reveal an even sharper divide.

Perhaps most important, higher education is organized around the belief that rigorous, ethical research is central to a better understanding of the world. This belief has become increasingly rare — and therefore increasingly important — in a world

buffeted by the currents of social media, but it is unhelpful that the current president of the United States has carried one party further and further away from the notion that facts matter. A [YouGov poll](#) conducted less than a year ago indicated that 51 percent of Republican respondents still believed that Barack Obama was born in Kenya. That poll is not an anomaly.

I have heard many times the argument that self-interest alone should dictate that colleges attempt to become more popular among those who currently wield most of the political power. But I am skeptical, after signing countless petitions, amicus briefs, and letters of concern, that there is much that we can do at the moment to shape the priorities of the federal government.

Will Betsy DeVos stop trying to repeal the borrower-defense rule and stop [advancing the interests](#) of predatory lenders because [we invite Charles Murray](#) to campus? Will Stephen Miller stop trying to keep certain people out of the country if we hold campus debates on immigration? Will the Supreme Court be less likely to strike down affirmative action if we do targeted hiring of conservative faculty? Consider me unconvinced.

We live in a democracy — or at least a republic that approximates a democracy — and elections have consequences. It is entirely possible that a plurality or even a majority of the American public disapproves of those things that we have adopted as our mission, and they have every right to do so. But that does not mean that we should abandon our fidelity to that mission.

We should always strive to improve, based not on calculations of what will make us more popular but what will make us better. It is nice when those two things are aligned, but often that is not the case: Keeping Jews out of Ivy League universities was [once pretty darn popular](#). If we become convinced that our commitment to internationalism or multiculturalism or gender equity or facts is impeding our ability to educate, then we should alter those commitments. We should not do so merely because they have become less widely embraced.

In fact, our work is more, not less, important when it is unpopular, if we believe in the rightness of that work: If everyone accepted the value of what we do, we would probably need to do less of it. So long as there are students who want what we offer, we should remain true to our calling. Perhaps, if we do, it will one day become more popular.

Oh, and in that same Gallup poll, confidence in Congress stood at 11 percent. So there's that.

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