

Released: March 1, 2012

Colleges Viewed Positively, But Conservatives Express Doubts

Americans generally think that colleges and universities have a positive impact on the country, and an overwhelming majority of college graduates say higher education is worth the investment. However, conservative Republicans are skeptical of colleges' effects on the country, even though most who have completed college view the experience as personally beneficial.

In the latest survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, conducted Feb. 8-12 among 1,501 adults, 60% said that colleges have a positive effect on the way things are

Conservative Republicans More Skeptical of Colleges' Effects on the Country

<i>Effect of colleges on the way things are going in the country</i>	Positive	Negative	Other/DK	N
...	%	%	%	
Total	60	26	13=100	730
Republican	51	36	13=100	222
Conservative Republican	46	39	15=100	150
Democrat	67	20	13=100	224
Independent	61	26	13=100	254
<i>Among Reps/Rep leaners</i>				325
Agree w/ Tea Party	38	47	16=100	130
Disagree/No opinion	62	28	10=100	189

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Feb. 8-12, 2012. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding

going in the country; just 26% said they have a negative effect. Of a list of 12 institutions and industries, only small businesses (75% positive effect) and technology companies (70%) were viewed more positively.

However, just 46% of conservative Republicans said colleges and universities have a positive impact, while nearly as many (39%) said they have a negative effect. By wide margins, Democrats (67% to 20%) and independents (61% to 26%) said colleges and universities have a positive impact.

There were substantial differences among Republicans and Republican-leaning independents in opinions about the effects of colleges and universities: Just 38% of those who agree with the Tea Party viewed their impact positively; that compared with 62% of Republicans and leaners who do not agree with the Tea Party.

Has College Been a Good Investment for You?

<i>Based on college graduates ...</i>	Good	Not good	Other/ DK	N
	%	%	%	
Total	84	7	9=100	641
Republican	87	8	5=100	164
Conserv Rep	85	9	6=100	111
Independent	85	4	11=100	202
Democrat	81	7	12=100	223

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Mar. 15-29, 2011. Based on 641 college graduates not currently enrolled. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding

Nonetheless, conservative Republicans who have graduated from college are as likely as those in other political groups to have a positive view of the personal impact of a college education. In a survey conducted in March 2011 by Pew Social & Demographic Trends, 85% of conservative Republicans said that college had been a good investment for them personally. That was little different from the percentages of independent (85%) and Democratic (81%) college graduates who viewed college as a good investment.

That survey found relatively modest partisan and ideological differences in opinions about whether a college education is important for young people to succeed, the affordability of college, and whether the higher education system provides a good value for students and their families. (For more from this survey, see [“Is College Worth It?”](#) May 15, 2011.)

Moreover, virtually all parents across the political and ideological spectrum said they expected their own children to go to college: 99% of Republicans said this, as did 96% of Democrats and 93% of independents.

Main Purpose of College ...

	Teach workplace skills	Help personal growth	Both/ DK
	%	%	%
Total	47	39	14=100
Conserv Rep	52	36	12=100
Mod/Lib Rep	48	42	10=100
Independent	44	44	13=100
Conserv/Mod Dem	54	33	12=100
Liberal Dem	37	47	16=100

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Mar. 15-29, 2011. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding

But conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats differed about the main purpose of college: 52% of conservative Republicans said the main purpose of college should be to teach specific skills and knowledge that can be used in the workplace, while 36% said its purpose should be to help an individual grow personally and intellectually.

Liberal Democrats were more likely than conservative Republicans to say college should mainly help people grow personally and intellectually (47%). About four-in-ten liberals (37%) said college’s main purpose should be workplace training. On this issue, the views of conservative and moderate Democrats were closer to those of conservative Republicans than to liberal Democrats (54% training vs. 33% personal growth).

Partisan Differences in Views of Institutions

The survey released last month found substantial partisan differences in views of the effects of several institutions, aside from colleges and universities.

Republicans More Positive about Churches than Colleges; Democrats Vice Versa

<i>% saying each has positive effect on the way things are going in the country ...</i>	Total	Rep	Dem	Ind	R-D diff
	%	%	%	%	
Labor unions	37	19	47	42	-28
Entertainment industry	32	19	44	33	-25
Federal government	22	10	35	19	-25
Auto industry	55	46	65	57	-19
Colleges and universities	60	51	67	61	-16
National news media	26	18	34	27	-16
Technology companies	70	65	71	73	-6
Congress	15	13	19	14	-6
Banks, financial institutions	22	22	24	21	-2
Small businesses	75	74	73	77	+1
Large corporations	28	29	24	33	+5
Churches & religious organizations	57	68	55	56	+13

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Feb. 8-12, 2012.

Just 19% of Republicans said labor unions have a positive effect on the way things are going in the country; more than twice as many Democrats (47%) and independents (42%) viewed unions’ impact positively.

The differences were about as large in positive opinions about the impact of the entertainment industry and the federal government (25 points each).

Among the 12 institutions and industries included in the survey, there was only one – churches and religious organizations – that Republicans rated more positively than did Democrats. About two-thirds of Republicans (68%)

said churches have a positive effect on the way things are going in the country, compared with 55% of Democrats. Republicans expressed more positive views about the impact of churches than colleges (68% vs. 51%), while Democrats were more positive about the effects of colleges (67% vs. 55%).

Among Republicans and Republican leaners who agree with the Tea Party, fully 78% said churches have a positive effect on the way things are going in the country, about double the percentage saying that colleges and universities have a positive impact (38%). Among liberal Democrats and Democratic leaners, the gap was about as wide in the other direction: 74% said colleges have a positive impact compared with 38% who viewed the effect of churches and religious institutions positively.