

# **College Is Worth It**

A Report On Beliefs About The Importance Of College, Impressions Of  
The Financial Aid System, Priorities For Reform, And Reactions To  
Potential Reform Approaches

**By**

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## Key Research Findings Among Public Audiences

### Methodology

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*This research was designed to understand impressions of the postsecondary education system today, the appetite for changes to the system, and reactions to potential financial aid reform approaches aimed at helping address the college completion challenge.*

*The research was conducted in two phases. First, exploratory qualitative research was conducted among various audiences. This research then informed the design of quantitative research among engaged voters, African-American parents, and Hispanic parents.*

**Qualitative Research:** *In August 2012, Hart Research Associates and the Winston Group conducted focus groups among various audiences, including Pell-eligible students, parents of Pell-eligible students, voters, Capitol Hill staffers, and education policy leaders. We conducted 14 focus groups in total.*

**Quantitative Research:** *Hart research conducted two surveys after the qualitative research to quantify key findings among voters, as well as among African-American and Hispanic parents.*

*From November 12 to 19, 2012, Hart Research Associates conducted a nationwide online survey among 1,401 engaged voters who follow news about national issues and are involved in issues of the day. This includes an oversample of 18- to 29-year-old engaged voters.*

*A second survey was conducted by telephone from December 10 to 16, 2012, among 300 African-American parents and 300 Hispanic parents of 11- to 24-year-olds. All respondents have annual household incomes of \$50,000 or less. Interviews among Hispanic parents were conducted in Spanish when preferred by the respondent.*

### Overview Of Key Findings

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**Engaged voters and parents in communities of color agree: completion of a college degree or credential is important and worth the time and money involved.**

- 84% of engaged voters agree that **earning a college degree or credential is very important** today, including 40% who say that it is absolutely essential. Fully 95% of African-American parents feel that it is important (including 49% who think it is absolutely essential), as do 97% of Hispanic parents (including 35% who think it is absolutely essential).
- 80% of engaged voters, 92% of African-American parents, and 83% of Hispanic parents believe that **completing a degree or credential is important for a large majority of young people** today.

- Considering the time and money involved, 87% of engaged voters still say that earning a degree is definitely (49%) or probably (38%) **worth it**. Fully 96% of both African-American parents and Hispanic parents feel it is worth it, with more than three in four in each group saying it definitely is worth it.

### **There is a broad consensus that changes are needed in the higher education system today.**

- When asked to think about colleges in the United States and the way the higher education system is working today, just 13% of engaged voters say that the system is working pretty well now, while 38% say minor changes are needed, and nearly half say that major changes (41%) or a complete overhaul (8%) is needed.
- Similarly, 20% of African-American parents and 25% of Hispanic parents think that the system is working pretty well now. Forty-three percent (43%) of African-American parents and 50% of Hispanic parents think that major changes or a complete overhaul is needed.

### **Engaged voters view individuals' amassing large amounts of student loan debt as the most common problem with postsecondary education today, ahead of both affordability and completion. Parents in communities of color see all of these problems as similarly common.**

- When specifically asked in the survey about various problems related to postsecondary education and the degree to which they happen today, engaged voters identify a variety of problems, with individuals facing large amounts of student loan debt as the most common.
  - About four in five (79%) engaged voters say that **individuals' amassing large amounts of student loan debt to pay for their college degrees or credentials** happens a lot in the United States today. A lesser but still notable half of voters also say **amassing large amounts of student loan debt without completing a degree or credential** happens a lot.
  - Affordability is viewed as a prevalent and important issue. More than half (53%) say it happens a lot that **individuals from low-income families and communities of color** who are motivated to enroll in college are not able to do so because of financial challenges. A slightly lesser 48% think that it happens a lot that **middle-class individuals** who are motivated to enroll in college and are not able to do so because of financial challenges.
  - Forty-five percent (45%) of voters think it happens a lot that **individuals start a college education but do not finish and do not get a degree or credential**, however just 18% select this as a top concern that they have about higher education today.
- African-American and Hispanic parents were asked about a slightly different list of problems with higher education. They perceive large student loan debt as the most common problem with postsecondary education today, but they view affordability, debt with no degree, and incompleteness as occurring nearly as often. Notably, African-American parents see individuals' amassing large student debt

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as most common, whereas Hispanic parents see failure to complete as occurring the most.

**When it comes to goals for reforming the financial aid system, engaged voters place the highest priority on increasing the number of individuals who earn a degree or credential. African-American and Hispanic parents also view this as a priority.**

- Engaged voters point to several goals as high priorities for reforming federal and state student financial aid programs, with **increasing the number of students who earn a degree/credential** (64%) at the top.
- Majorities also prioritize ensuring **affordability** (59%), as well as **holding colleges accountable** (57%) and **holding students accountable** (57%) for whether students complete a degree as top among goals tested.
- In addition, half (50%) of engaged voters say a goal of **providing colleges with incentives** to ensure that students complete their degree is a high priority, while 47% believe that **students should be given incentives** or rewards to complete degrees on time.
- Comparatively few (23%) say that **holding down government spending** on student grants and loans for college should be a high priority for reforming financial aid.
- When asked about a similar, though slightly different, list of goals for financial aid reform, high proportions of parents in communities of color rank most of them as priorities. Among these audiences, holding down government spending also is the lowest priority for reform.

**There is broad support for providing student aid dollars based on completion rather than enrollment.**

- Survey respondents were asked about a proposal to **spread out financial aid payments to colleges over the course of the semester with the full amount not paid until coursework is completed**, rather than providing financial aid dollars to colleges in the first few weeks based on enrollment, as is done today. Majorities of engaged voters (60% good approach, 9% bad approach), African-American parents (59% good approach, 11% bad approach), and Hispanic parents (65% good approach, 7% bad approach) feel this is a good approach.

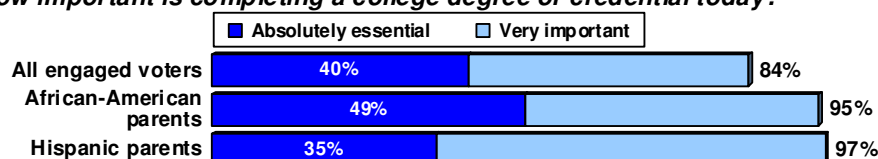
## Summary Of Findings

### 1. Engaged voters and parents in communities of color agree: completion of a college degree or credential is important and worth the time and money involved.

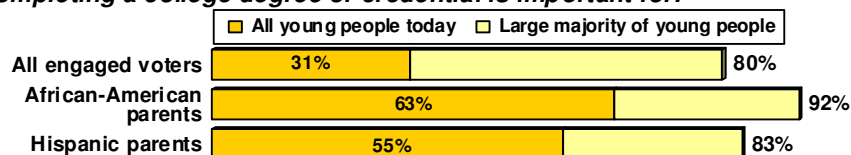
- While some in the United States may be debating the value of a college degree, large proportions of engaged voters feel that it is important for individuals to complete some sort of college degree today and that it is worth the money and time involved. Parents in communities of color feel even more intensely about the importance and value of a college degree or credential.

### A college degree or credential is seen as important and worth it.

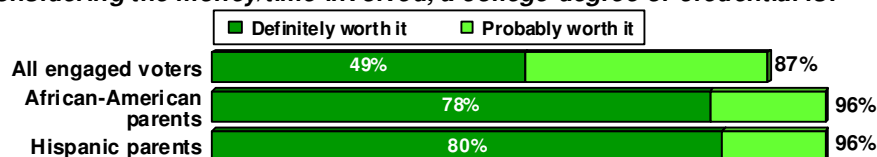
*How important is completing a college degree or credential today?*



*Completing a college degree or credential is important for:*



*Considering the money/time involved, a college degree or credential is:*



- Important:** More than four in five (84%) engaged voters agree that earning a college degree or credential is very important today, including 40% who say that it is absolutely essential. Just 16% say degree completion is somewhat important or less. Among engaged voters, women (44%), four-year college graduates (46%), African Americans (58%), and Hispanics (47%) are among the most likely to feel that a college degree or credential is absolutely essential. Fully 95% of African-American parents feel that it is important (including 49% who think it is absolutely essential), as do 97% of Hispanic parents (including 35% who think it is absolutely essential).
- Important for a large majority of young people:** Fully 80% of engaged voters believe that completing a degree or credential is important for a large majority of young people today, including 31% who say that it is important for ALL young people to earn a degree or

credential. Just one in five says it is important for only a small majority or fewer young people to complete a degree. Parents in communities of color are notably more likely to think that a college degree is important for all young people: 63% of African-American parents and 55% of Hispanic parents think that completing some sort of college degree/credential is important for all young people today.

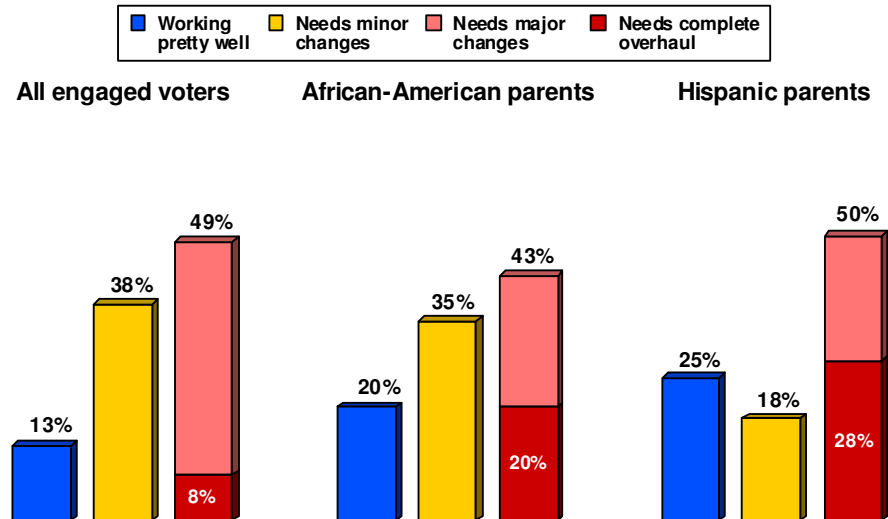
- **Worth the time and money involved:** Considering the time and money involved, 87% of engaged voters still say that earning a degree is definitely (49%) or probably (38%) worth it, compared with 13% who say it is definitely or probably not worth it. African-American (66%) and Hispanic (58%) engaged voters are most likely to believe that it is definitely worth it. Parents in communities of color are even more emphatic in their belief that a college degree is worth the commitment of time and financial resources: fully 96% of both African-American parents and Hispanic parents feel it is worth it, with more than three in four of each group saying it definitely is worth it.

## **2. There is a broad consensus that changes are needed in the higher education system today and the focus is primarily on addressing the challenges of affordability and debt.**

- When asked to think about colleges in the United States and the way the higher education system is working today, just 13% of engaged voters say that the system is working pretty well now, while 38% say minor changes are needed, and nearly half say that major changes (41%) or a complete overhaul (8%) is needed.
- Similarly, most African-American and Hispanic parents think that changes to the higher education system are needed. Just 20% of African-American parents and 25% of Hispanic parents think that it is working pretty well now. Forty-three percent (43%) of African-American parents and 50% of Hispanic parents think that major changes or a complete overhaul is needed.

## Most think changes are needed in the higher education system today.

### Assessment of Colleges and Higher Education System in the U.S. Today



- In any discussion about college or financial aid today, students, parents, voters, and policy elites across the focus groups are laser focused on the challenges of affordability and debt. There is a widespread sense that college is becoming increasingly unaffordable, and these audiences all feel anxiety about the debt with which borrowers are burdened.
- Reinforcing the focus group findings, among engaged voters and African-American parents who believe that change is needed, cost and debt top their volunteered responses regarding how the nation's higher education system should change. Nearly half (47%) of engaged voters and two in five (40%) African-American parents say the system must work to reduce costs for students, including their debt load, tuition, fees, and books. Another 7% of engaged voters and 17% of African-American parents say that financial aid programs and access to grants and scholarships must be improved. Hispanic parents most often cite affordability and financial aid as areas in need of change, though they are less likely than engaged voters and African Americans to mention cost.

## Those who think changes are needed in higher education focus most on cost and debt.

	Engaged voters*		African-American parents*	Hispanic parents*
Lower costs, fees, tuition, debt load; too expensive	47%	Lower costs, fees, tuition, debt load; too expensive	40%	18%
Better prepare students for workforce, focus on job skills	16%	Improve financial aid, more scholarships	17%	15%
Eliminate political, philosophical bias of professors/courses	8%	Streamline curriculum, eliminate electives, less time to degree	5%	3%
Improve financial aid, more scholarships	7%	Improve quality of teachers/professors	4%	5%
Should be accessible/available to all	7%	Better/more career counseling, job placement, help students find jobs	4%	3%
Streamline curriculum, eliminate electives, less time to degree	6%	Improve accessibility to higher ed, more opportunities	3%	8%

\* among respondents who do not say that the higher education system is working pretty well

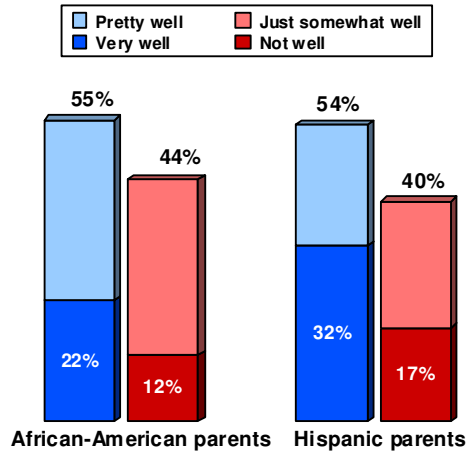
### 3. Many African-American and Hispanic parents feel that the higher education system could better meet the needs of African-American and Hispanic students, and just half of these parents think that students of their race/ethnicity get the same opportunities as white students to enroll in college and complete a degree or credential.

- When asked whether they think students of their race/ethnicity are given the same opportunities as white students to enroll and complete a college degree/credential, just 46% of African-American parents and half of Hispanic parents believe that they are given the same opportunities.
- Furthermore, only a bare majority (55%) of African-American parents say the higher education system is meeting the needs of African-American students very or pretty well, while 44% think it is doing so just somewhat or less well. Hispanic parents have a similar view of how well the system is meeting the needs of Hispanic students (54% very/pretty well, 40% just somewhat well/not that well/not well at all).

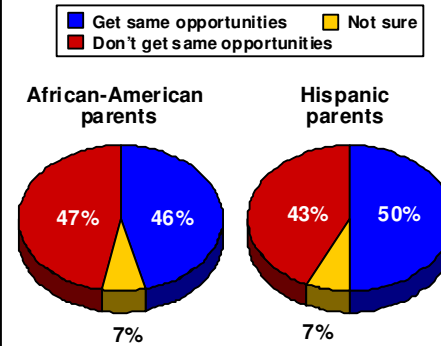


**Significant proportions of African American and Hispanic parents feel the higher education system is not meeting the needs of their students well.**

*How well are colleges and the higher education system meeting [African-American/Hispanic] students' needs?*



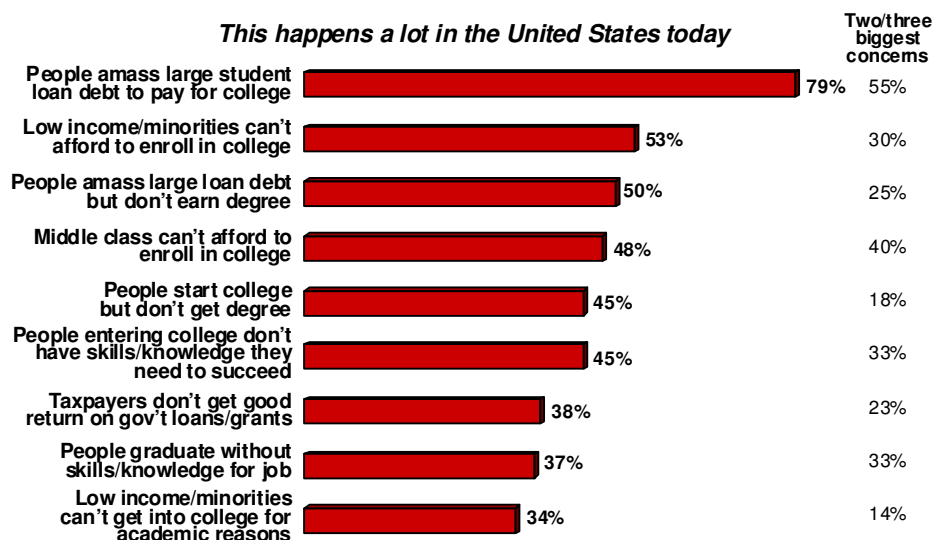
*Do [African Americans/Hispanics] get the same opportunities as whites to enroll in college/get a degree?*



**4. Engaged voters view individuals' amassing large amounts of student loan debt as the most common problem with postsecondary education today, ahead of both affordability and completion. Parents in communities of color see these all as similarly common problems.**

- The focus group discussions reveal that the issue of low completion rates is not on the public's radar screen, and there is no awareness of how low completion rates are. When focus group participants—whether students, parents, voters, or policy elites—talk about college and problems with the system, their discussion centers around affordability and debt.
- When specifically asked in the survey about various problems related to postsecondary education and the degree to which they happen today, engaged voters identify individuals' facing large amounts of student loan debt as the most common.

## Engaged voters view large student loan debt as the most common problem with postsecondary education today.



- About four in five (79%) engaged voters say that **individuals' amassing large amounts of student loan debt to pay for their college degrees or credentials** happens a lot in the United States today, and it ranks at the top two or three biggest concerns (55%) among engaged voters. A lesser but still notable 50% of voters also say **amassing large amounts of student loan debt without completing a degree or credential** happens a lot, but they are half as likely to cite it as a top concern (25%).
- Affordability is viewed as a prevalent and important issue. More than half (53%) say it happens a lot that **individuals from low-income families and communities of color** who are motivated to enroll in college are not able to do so because of financial challenges. A slightly lesser 48% think that it happens a lot that **middle-class individuals** who are motivated to enroll in college are not able to do so because of financial challenges. More voters view middle-class individuals' not being able to enroll for financial reasons as a top concern (40% compared with 30% for low-income families/communities of color).
- Forty-five percent (45%) of voters think it happens a lot that **individuals start a college education but do not finish and do not get a degree or credential**, however just 18% select this as a top concern that they have about higher education today.
- African-American and Hispanic parents were asked about a slightly different list of problems with higher education. They perceive large student loan debt as the most common problem with postsecondary education today, but they view affordability, debt with no degree, and incompleteness as occurring nearly as often. Notably, African-American parents see individuals' amassing large

student debt as most common, whereas Hispanic parents see failure to complete as occurring the most.

### Proportions Of African-American And Hispanic Parents Who Say That Selected Problems Happen A Lot

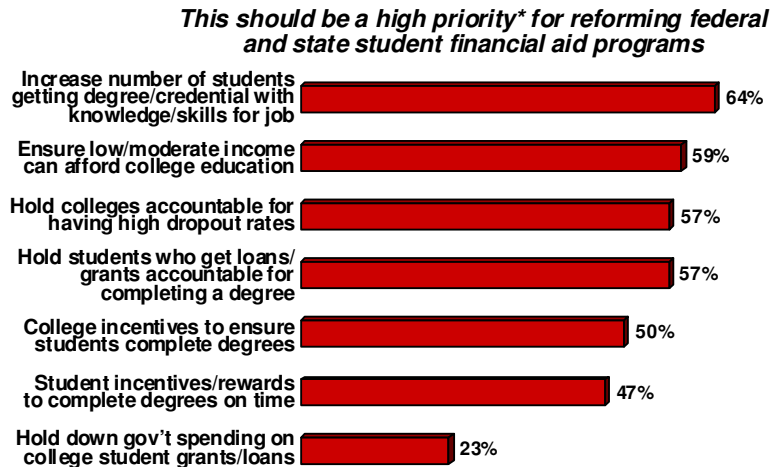
	African-American Parents %	Hispanic Parents %
Individuals' amassing large amounts of student loan debt to pay for their college degrees/credentials	78	60
Individuals from communities of color who are motivated to enroll in college are not able to do so because of financial challenges	74	53
Individuals' amassing large amounts of student loan debt without completing a college degree/credential	70	54
Individuals' starting a college education but not finishing and do not get a degree/credential	65	67
Individuals from communities of color who are motivated to enroll in college are not able to do so because of academic challenges	51	38
Individuals' graduating with a college degree/credential but not having the skills and knowledge needed to get a good job	44	43

**5. When it comes to goals for reforming the financial aid system, engaged voters place the highest priority on increasing the number of individuals who earn a degree or credential. They also put a high priority on making sure that college is affordable, holding students and colleges accountable, and providing both students and colleges with incentives to increase completion. African-American and Hispanic parents rank all of these as priorities to some degree. Holding down government spending is not selected as a high priority for reforming financial aid among any audience.**

- Engaged voters point to several goals as high priorities for reforming federal and state student financial aid programs, with increasing the number of students who earn a degree/credential (64%) at the top. Majorities also prioritize ensuring affordability (59%), and holding colleges (57%) and students (57%) accountable for whether students complete a degree as top among goals tested.
- In addition, half (50%) of engaged voters say a goal of providing colleges with incentives to ensure that students complete their degree is a high priority, while 47% believe that students should be given incentives or rewards to complete degrees on time.

- Comparatively few (23%) say that holding down government spending on student grants and loans for college should be a high priority for reforming financial aid.

### Top goals for financial aid reform: increase number earning degree/credential, ensure affordability, hold colleges and students accountable.



\* 8-10 ratings on zero-to-10 scale, 10 = should be a top priority

- When asked about a slightly different list of goals for financial aid reform, high proportions of parents in communities of color rank most of them as priorities. Among these audiences, holding down government spending also is the lowest priority for reform. African-American parents rate affordability as an even higher priority than increasing the number of Americans who receive college degrees/credentials, while Hispanic parents rate the latter as most pressing. Interestingly, Hispanic parents place a slightly higher priority on affordability for students of low and moderate means than on affordability for individuals from communities of color, whereas African-American parents rank them as equally important.

## Proportions Saying Goals Should Be A High Priority For Reforming Aid Programs

	African-American Parents %	Hispanic Parents %
Make sure that individuals from communities of color can better afford a college education	85	63
Make sure that students of low and moderate means can better afford a college education	83	72
Provide more incentives for colleges to ensure that students complete their degrees	78	77
Increase the number of students in America who get a college degree/credential and have the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the job market	77	87
Provide incentives or rewards to students to complete their degrees on time	69	76
Hold students who receive loans or grants more accountable for completing a degree	66	77
Hold colleges and universities more accountable when they have high dropout rates	60	57
Hold down the amount the government spends on student grants and loans for college	32	46

- When asked in an open-ended question who or what they blame for the low college completion rates among students of their race or ethnicity, African-American and Hispanic parents place responsibility on students, parents, and the inability to afford it.
  - African-American parents are most likely to blame students themselves for a lack of self-motivation (36%), followed by about one in five who mentions parents and home life (22%) and inability to pay for it/lack of financial aid (19%).
  - Hispanic parents are nearly equally as likely to blame students (27%), inability to pay for it/lack of financial aid (25%), and parents and home life (24%).

### 6. There is broad support among engaged voters for providing student aid dollars based on completion rather than enrollment.

- Focus group discussions among members of the public, as well as among Capitol Hill staffers, reveal that neither audience makes the connection between public funds invested in the system (federal/state grants and loans) and outcomes. There also is little to no awareness of how and when public financial aid funds flow to institutions under the current system.

- When given the facts about low completion rates, audiences in the focus groups are receptive in principle to reforming publicly funded financial aid programs to incentivize degree completion and hold both students and institutions more accountable.
- Survey respondents were asked about a proposal to spread out financial aid payments to colleges over the course of the semester with the full amount not paid until coursework is completed, rather than providing financial aid dollars to colleges in the first few weeks based on enrollment, as is done today. Majorities of engaged voters (60% good approach, 9% bad approach), African-American parents (59% good approach, 11% bad approach), and Hispanic parents (65% good approach, 7% bad approach) feel this is a good approach.

### **7. Testing of other specific financial aid reform proposals reveals both potential obstacles and potential opportunities for proponents of reform.**

- When it comes to engaging in policy conversations about linking financial aid to degree completion, audiences in the focus groups and the surveys react very differently to some of the proposals tested in the research. They express the most support for increased transparency of key metrics, while there is the greatest resistance to proposals that focus on time to degree.

## Reactions To Specific Approaches To Reforming Federal And State Student Financial Aid Programs

	Engaged Voters			African-American Parents			Hispanic Parents		
	Good %	Bad %	Mixed %	Good %	Bad %	Mixed %	Good %	Bad %	Mixed %
Require colleges to make information on graduation rates, loan repayment, and job placement rates easily accessible to students and parents	84	4	12	80	3	16	81	2	15
Streamline/simplify tax credits and deductions for college education expenses and use savings to expand funding for government grants and loans for college	65	12	23	64	9	23	72	2	23
Rather than providing student financial aid dollars to colleges in the first few weeks of the semester, as is done today, payment to colleges would instead be spread out over the course of the semester, with the full amount not being paid to the college until the coursework is completed	60	9	31	59	11	27	65	7	24
In order to be eligible to receive financial aid dollars, a college would need to graduate at least 20% of its students	56	22	22	54	17	26	65	13	21
Financial aid would only go to students prepared for college courses. Those not prepared would first have to complete remedial courses paid for with government-funded aid	53	20	27	60	12	25	55	15	28
The amount a borrower would be required to repay on loan would vary on sliding scale based on income and family size	51	25	24	71	11	17	65	8	24
Require students to complete an associate degree in two years and a Bachelor's degree in four years in order to be fully eligible for publicly funded grants and loans	39	30	31	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Shorten the amount of time needed to get a degree, so an associate degree can be completed in one year and a Bachelor's degree can be completed in three years	28	43	29	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Require students to take 15 credits rather than 12 credits per semester, so students will complete degrees faster	26	42	32	36	34	26	62	14	22
End tax credits and deductions for college education expenses and use savings to expand funding for government grants and loans for college	16	57	27	46	21	29	49	10	36

### Potential Policy Opportunities

- **Transparency:** Fully 84% of engaged voters think that requiring colleges to make information on graduation rates, loan repayment, and job placement rates easily accessible is a good approach to reform (4% say it is a bad approach; 12% feel in between). Similarly high proportions of parents in communities of color endorse this approach, putting it at the top of all proposals tested.
- **Streamlining tax credits and deductions:** There is broad support for streamlining and simplifying tax credits and deductions that individuals and families can claim for college education and using the savings to expand funding for government grants and loans for college education, while there is notably less support for ending these tax credits and deductions altogether. (It is important to note that the proposal to “streamline and simplify” tax credits does not mention whether anyone would be eligible for less grant or loan funding.) More than three in five (65%) engaged voters think streamlining is a good approach, as do 64% of African-American parents and 72% of Hispanic parents.
- **Holding colleges accountable for low completion rates:** There is support for holding institutions accountable by requiring that a college graduate at least 20% of its students to be eligible to receive financial aid dollars. Majorities of engaged voters (56% good approach, 22% bad approach), African-American parents (54% good approach, 17% bad approach), and Hispanic parents (65% good approach, 13% bad approach) support it.

The qualitative research reveals, however, that the public is not aware of how low completion rates are today. When participants realize that a threshold completion rate requirement could mean that their local community college might lose its funding and be forced to cut back or close its doors, they express concern about current and future students losing access to higher education.

- **Linking student eligibility for aid to academic preparedness, with remediation funded by the government:** A proposal to require students to complete remediation and be college ready in order to receive financial aid is supported, as long as it is explicitly stated that the remediation will be provided through government aid and at no cost to the student. Majorities of engaged voters (53% good approach, 20% bad approach), African-American parents (60% good approach, 12% bad approach), and Hispanic voters (55% good approach, 15% bad approach) think it is a good approach, and few think it is a bad approach.
- **Loan repayment requirements based on income and family size:** Engaged voters support a sliding scale for loan repayment based on the borrower’s income and family size by 51% to 25%, with 24% who feel in between. African-American parents (71% good approach, 11% bad approach) and Hispanic parents (65% good approach, 8% bad approach) are more supportive.



## Potential Policy Obstacles

- **Time to degree:** In the qualitative research, a focus on reducing time to degree raises red flags among audiences who worry that the approach may cause institutions to (a) shed difficult students to increase their numbers, compromising access for the most “high-risk” students, (b) fail to take into account how life happens and unexpected circumstances (health issues, pregnancy, family issues, etc.) may delay one’s path to a degree, (c) penalize students whose path to degree is delayed by the limited availability of courses needed for completion, or (d) negatively affect quality and learning outcomes by placing pressure on professors to pass students prematurely.
  - A proposal to require students to take 15 credits per semester rather than 12 so students complete a degree faster is viewed with skepticism by engaged voters (26% good approach, 42% bad approach, 32% in between) and African-American parents (36% good approach, 34% bad approach, 26% in between). Hispanic parents are much more supportive (62% good approach, 14% bad approach, 22% in between).
  - Two additional proposals asked only of engaged voters generate mixed-to-negative reactions: a) requiring students to complete an associate degree in two years and a Bachelor’s degree in four years (39% a good approach, 30% bad approach, 31% feel in between), and b) shortening the time needed to get a degree (28% good approach, 43% a bad approach, 29% in between).
  - Additionally, when presented with two points of view about a proposal to require students to complete a college degree within a defined time period in order to be fully eligible for publicly funded financial aid, majorities of engaged voters, African-American parents, and Hispanic parents agree that it is not fair to require students to complete degrees in a defined time period.

### Which Statement Is More Convincing?

	<b>Engaged Voters</b> %	<b>African- American Parents</b> %	<b>Hispanic Parents</b> %
It is important to ensure that students complete degrees on time because studies show that those students who take longer are less likely to graduate, and they often waste time and money on credits they do not need	41	22	41
It is not fair to require students to complete degrees within a defined period of time because it simply takes some students longer because of life circumstances, such as juggling school, family, and work, or because they have a change in their goals and plans for college	59	68	50

- **Ending tax credits and deductions:** A proposal to end tax credits and deductions for college education elicits the most negative reaction among engaged voters. Just 16% of engaged voters say ending tax credits and deductions for college is a good approach, while a majority (57%) say it is a bad approach, and 27% feel in between. While ending tax credits and deductions is less popular than streamlining them among all audiences, African-American parents (46% good idea, 21% bad idea) and Hispanic parents (49% good idea, 10% bad idea) are notably more open to this proposal than are engaged voters. In focus groups, there is opposition to the concept among many who view the plan as a means of punishing students and families financing their own college education, particularly those in the middle class. Capitol Hill staffers suggest that this proposal would be a non-starter in Congress.
- 8. While expressing support for financial aid reform in principle, audiences in the focus groups also convey concern about potential unintended consequences that could hurt students. Ultimately, however, engaged voters and parents in communities of color agree that giving colleges incentives to not only enroll students but ensure that they complete is a good idea, even when presented with concerns that it will limit access for less prepared students.**
- Accountability for students and institutions is seen as reasonable and necessary, but even members of the public and policy elites in the focus groups who support financial aid reform in principle express concerns about **unintended consequences** that may result from linking aid eligibility to outcomes:
    - It could **limit access** for students, particularly those who are traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education.
    - **Quality could be diminished** as institutions find a way to meet requirements and achieve incentives.
    - **Students could be punished unfairly**, such as those who are motivated to get a degree but are not prepared adequately by their K-12 education, or those who must juggle work and family while working toward a degree.
  - Nonetheless, despite these concerns about access and unfairly punishing students, when presented with arguments on both sides, engaged voters and parents in communities of color feel that providing student financial aid dollars based on completion is a good idea rather than a bad idea.

## Which Statement Is More Convincing?

	<b><u>Engaged Voters</u></b> %	<b><u>African- American Parents</u></b> %	<b><u>Hispanic Parents</u></b> %
This change is a good idea because it will give colleges incentives not just to enroll students but to ensure they complete a degree and gain the knowledge and skills needed for success in the job market.	73	63	63
This change is a bad idea because colleges will focus on admitting the most prepared students who are best positioned to progress and complete a degree, which will limit access and leave few options for students who are not as well prepared.	27	25	24

## Key Findings Among Postsecondary Education Leaders

### Methodology

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*In September and October 2012, Hart Research Associates conducted three phone focus groups and nine in-depth interviews among leaders of postsecondary institutions and systems.*

### Key Findings

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**1. Postsecondary education leaders recognize completion as a goal for them today and they indicate that they are focusing more on the importance of meeting non-traditional learners' needs. While many postsecondary leaders recognize completion as a logical metric for evaluating the effectiveness of financial aid, they view access as the primary goal of financial aid.**

- These leaders are very uneasy about taking an approach that they fear could have the unintended consequences of limiting access, leading to creaming or tracking, or diminishing quality.
  - Most institutional leaders think that the goal of student financial aid is to provide **access** for motivated students who otherwise would not be able to go to college, and they believe it should remain so. There is concern that linking financial aid to completion could limit access for students, particularly those who are traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education.
  - Institutional leaders express concern that student financial aid cannot be attached to performance without the consequences of **creaming or tracking**.
  - Some postsecondary leaders also are concerned that **quality could be diminished**, as institutions will find a way to meet the incentive requirements.
- Nonetheless, a small but vocal number of leaders push back forcefully against the argument that designing financial aid around completion will decrease access, noting that access without completion is not success.

**2. The research reveals that postsecondary leaders are open to some financial aid reform proposals and resistant to others.**

#### Key Openings For Reform

- **Transparency:** This reform is difficult to argue against, and postsecondary leaders do not. However, they stress the importance that the metrics take into account the student population served by an institution. Some postsecondary leaders also encourage transparency and analytics to

understand why students do not complete and to make data-driven decisions about how to improve completion rates.

- **Incentives:** While all audiences endorse the concept of greater accountability by both institutions and students, there is more support for using carrots rather than sticks with both students and institutions. Nonetheless, while there is support for providing incentives for adopting best practices, there is concern that incentives could morph into punishments.
  - Incentivize institutions to innovate and bring new practices and policies to scale.
  - Incentivize institutions to attract older and returning students.
- **A flexible, nuanced approach:** With institutions serving varied populations of learners, postsecondary leaders want to ensure that institutions that serve at-risk students will continue to be able to serve those populations. (This is important not only to access institutions that are most likely to serve them, but also selective four-year institutions.) An approach that balances attention to student success with some reward for institutions willing to take a bet on students at a higher risk for non-completion will be received much more favorably.
  - Rather than simply measuring degree completion, create a layered, more nuanced system that measures progress and achievement.
  - Any completion metric should be reformed to fit with the reality of today's learners. First time, full time is no longer a relevant metric.
  - A focus on completion should have a broad definition for credentials of value—inclusive of a degree, certificate, or other credential.

### Key Obstacles To Reform

- A focus on **time to degree** raises significant concerns. Postsecondary leaders note that yesterday's "non-traditional" students (who have work and family responsibilities and often do not attend college full time) have become the traditional students of today. They express concern that time to degree proposals would hurt non-traditional students and create challenges for access institutions, in particular.
- Postsecondary leaders are concerned that reforms will be implemented through **a blunt instrument that is overly prescriptive and rigid**. Because one size will not fit all, they recommend a nuanced approach that encourages transparency and offers flexibility. They do not want to punish institutions that take a risk on students who are motivated to get a degree but are not adequately prepared by their K-12 education, or punish them for things that are out of their control such as when "life happens" and gets in the way of a student completing.
- Many postsecondary leaders are concerned that **a vocational focus for outcomes and performance will eclipse a focus on citizenship**—an outcome that they believe is a key element of their mission.