



AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION BAROMETER
HIGHER EDUCATION PUBLIC OPINION ANALYSIS:
STRONG SUPPORT AMID
SPECIFIC VULNERABILITIES

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COVER MEMO

American Higher Education Barometer **(AHEB)**

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Note on methods:

Between July 3, 2025, and August 1, 2025, we collected a total of 31,891 responses from individuals age 18 and older across all 50 states plus the District of Columbia. The surveys were conducted by PureSpectrum via an online, nonprobability sample, with state-level representative quotas for race/ethnicity, age, and gender. In addition to balancing on these dimensions, we reweighted our data using demographic characteristics to match the U.S. population with respect to 2020 vote choice and turnout, race/ethnicity, age, gender, education, and living in urban, suburban, or rural areas.

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Higher Education Public Opinion Analysis: Strong Support Amid Specific Vulnerabilities

KEY INSIGHTS

A MAJORITY OF THE AMERICAN PUBLIC RECOGNIZE THE VALUE OF UNIVERSITIES AND OPPOSE FEDERAL FUNDING CUTS. HOWEVER, THEY ALSO EXPRESS CONCERN ABOUT CAMPUS ISSUES, INCLUDING COSTS AND FREE SPEECH. COMMUNICATIONS CAN EMPHASIZE HIGHER EDUCATION'S HIGHLY VALUED CONTRIBUTIONS WHILE DISTINCTLY ACKNOWLEDGING STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS CONCERNS.

Our first report examines public attitudes towards colleges and universities in the United States. We find that higher education enjoys broad public support, but this strength is tempered by serious vulnerabilities. Most Americans recognize universities as vital for science (90%), technology (91%), healthcare (83%), and economic growth (83%). Moreover, 72% see them as important for democracy, and majorities across parties value local contributions in health and the economy. This translates into strong opposition to federal funding cuts in science, health, and education, with disapproval ratios of roughly 4–5 to 1.

Alumni engagement emerges as a key opportunity: most would want to learn more about threats to research funding, and nearly a quarter would write to Congress if asked by their alma mater.

At the same time, the public expresses concern about issues shaping campus life. Cost is nearly a universal worry, with 87% concerned about tuition and debt, especially the young and highly educated. Other major areas of anxiety include discrimination (racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia all at 78–87%), campus free speech (84%), liberal bias (77%), and transgender athletes in women's sports (74%). These issues cut across partisan lines, though the intensity often differs. Even with those vulnerabilities, however, 59% of Americans overall approve of universities and 75% trust them at least somewhat.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UNIVERSAL VALUE RECOGNITION

Americans see higher education as crucial across key domains:

- **Science:** 90% think universities are 'somewhat' or 'very' important for science
- **Technology:** 91% recognize the importance of higher education for technology
- **Healthcare:** 83% see the value of universities for medical advancement
- **Economic Growth:** 83% recognize the importance of universities to the economy
- **Democracy:** 72% see universities as important for democratic society
- **Local impact:** 76-79% value the local community, economic, and healthcare contributions of universities

There are bipartisan majorities supporting higher education's importance across each of these domains.

STRONG OPPOSITION TO POLICIES HARMFUL TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Research Funding Protection

Overwhelming public opposition to federal funding cuts

- Federal cuts to science funding: 64% oppose vs. 17% support (4:1 ratio)
- Federal cuts to health research: 70% oppose vs. 15% support (5:1 ratio)
- Federal cuts to education: 66% oppose vs. 17% support (4:1 ratio)

Enormous latent possibility to mobilize support for more research investments

- 47% want **more** scientific research investment in 2025 compared to 2024
- 57% want **more** medical research investment in 2025 compared to 2024
- Across a range of issues, 57-62% express some willingness to contact Congress to oppose policies **if asked to do so by a university they have a connection to**. This includes majorities of most demographic groups in the US.

Alumni Mobilization Potential

When informed about threats to research funding:

- **58%** would want to learn more
- **23%** would write to Congress
- Only **11%** would be angry about being contacted with policy concerns

GENERALLY HIGH LEVELS OF APPROVAL AND TRUST OF HIGHER EDUCATION

- Across all Americans, **59%** approve of US universities. A majority approval is evident across a wide array of demographics. For example, 73% of Democrats, 52% of Republicans, and 54% of Independents approve of universities.
- While trust has [declined](#) and become more [polarized](#) over the last few decades, Universities remain more trusted than most other social institutions.
- Overall, **75%** of Americans have "some" or "a lot" of trust in universities and colleges.
- Universities rank as the 4th most trusted major institution (25% trust them "a lot"). The three most trusted institutions are hospitals/doctors, the military, and scientists/researchers. Federal, city, and state governments rank among the least trusted institutions.

FIVE CRITICAL VULNERABILITIES

Despite strong foundational support, higher education faces universal concerns that transcend partisan boundaries. Majorities of respondents report at least some concern about each of these issues. Beyond their inherent challenges, several are also areas of polarization: while there is broad agreement that concern is warranted, perceptions of the problems and the preferred solutions often differ across parties.

1. COST OF HIGHER EDUCATION

- **87%** of Americans have some concerns about tuition costs and student debt (42% report being extremely concerned).
- Demographics that are most concerned: the young (93% of the youngest cohort), the educated (94% of those with graduate degrees), the affluent (91% of those who earn \$100+k), and Democrats (91%).

2. DISCRIMINATION ON CAMPUS

- Racism: **86%** of Americans report being concerned, with 42% extremely concerned. (97% among Democrats and 82% among Republicans).
- Antisemitism: 84% of Americans are concerned, with 34% extremely concerned. (88% among Democrats and 84% among Republicans).
- Islamophobia: 78% of Americans are concerned, with 28% extremely concerned (87% among Democrats and 73% among Republicans).

3. CAMPUS FREE SPEECH

- **84%** of Americans are concerned about free speech on campus (35% extremely concerned).
- Democrats are somewhat more concerned than Republicans (89% vs. 80%).¹

4. LIBERAL BIAS

- **77%** of Americans are concerned about liberal bias on campus (27% extremely concerned).
- Republican intensity: **84%** concerned (38% extremely concerned)²

5. TRANSGENDER ATHLETES

- Overall: **74%** concerned (36% extremely concerned), with a substantial partisan divide.
- Republicans: 84% concerned (52% extremely concerned).
- Democrats: 67% concerned (25% extremely concerned).
- Age: Concern increases with age, affecting potential donor demographics.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

Higher education simultaneously enjoys:

- High recognition of its value across key domains (80%+ recognize its importance for science, technology, and economic growth).
- Public support for research funding and opposition to funding cuts (60%-70% oppose).
- Higher public trust than most social institutions in the United States (75% trust).

Yet, universities also have genuine vulnerabilities: issues for which 70-90% of the American public express some level of concern.

These vulnerabilities are not purely partisan:

- Even strong supporters of higher education show a majority concern on many issues.

¹ We expect that there are considerable political differences in the public understanding of which speech requires protection and how that protection should be implemented.

² The motivations and expectations with regard to campus politics likely differ across parties, even though both sides report non-trivial levels of concern.

- Several of the concerns may divide the public when it comes to solutions (e.g., there may be disagreement on what speech to protect, how to address discrimination, whether to include or exclude transgender women athletes).

Mobilization Opportunities

- Funding cuts to science, health, and education generate strong defensive mobilization (57-62% say they might consider contacting Congress).
- Alumni engagement shows high potential with low backlash risk.
- Bipartisan messaging is possible around shared economic and scientific values.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO UNIVERSITY LEADERS

Leverage Strengths

1. Emphasize universal values: Science (90% support), technology (91% support), and economic development (83% support).
2. Mobilize research supporters: 58% of alumni want to engage on funding threats.
3. Mobilize alumni: 23% would definitely write to Congress if asked by their university.
4. Emphasize local community benefits (76-79% recognize local benefits of higher education).

Address Vulnerabilities

1. Acknowledge concerns proactively rather than dismissing them as partisan attacks.
2. Develop campus climate initiatives addressing the issues with 70-90% concern levels.
3. Create transparent cross-stakeholder dialogue processes on free speech and campus inclusion.
4. Differentiate the vulnerabilities from the strengths – that is, the vulnerabilities have not undermined the value propositions of universities.

BOTTOM LINE

Higher education operates from a position of relative strength in the American institutional landscape but faces genuine campus climate vulnerabilities that require strategic attention.

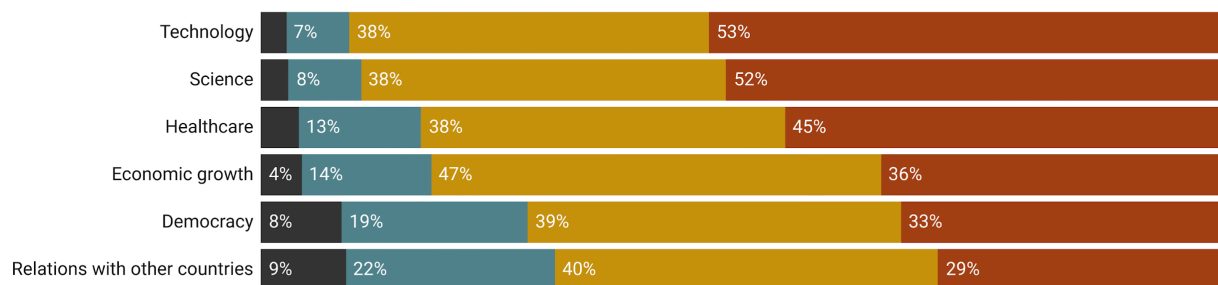
DETAILED FINDINGS

FINDING 1: Higher education is seen as crucial across key domains

Importance of universities across different domains in the United States

How important would you say universities are for each of the following?

■ Not important at all ■ Not very important ■ Somewhat important ■ Very important



National sample, N = 31,891, Time period: 07/03/2025-08/01/2025

1. Science and Technology: Overwhelming Support

- **90% recognize universities' role in science, and 91% see their importance for technology.**

These domains have the highest perceived level of importance among all areas we measured.

- This result shows a broad public consensus that universities are **essential for technological advancement and innovation.**
- We find strong support for university importance here, even among skeptical demographics.

2. Healthcare: Very Strong Support

- **83% value university importance for healthcare**, the second-highest perceived recognition rate.
- This demonstrates public recognition of universities' role in medical breakthroughs and research.
- **Bipartisan support for medical research funding** was recorded across multiple items in our survey.

3. Economic Growth: Strong Cross-Party Support

- **83% see universities as important for economic growth.**

- Importance for the economy is perceived across party lines and education levels.
- Messaging emphasizing **shared economic interests** might appeal to the public.

4. Democracy: Strong Support

- **72% see universities as important for democracy**, with 33% saying that they are "very important". This is a substantial recognition of the role higher education plays in this space.
- There is a **strong cross-party recognition**: even among Republicans, 63% find universities important for democracy (25% very important).
- **Democrats show the strongest support**: 88% overall (49% very important).

5. Local Community Impact - Strong Recognition

We also asked respondents about the local importance of universities.

- **79% value the local economic contributions of universities.**
- **76% value the local healthcare contributions of universities.**
- There are only modest partisan differences.
- University messaging should emphasize **local partnerships** and **community impact**.
- Universities should **strengthen local community relationships** as a political buffer.

Conclusion

The American public's belief in the importance of higher education is exceptionally broad. There is near-universal consensus that universities are crucial for innovation, with approximately nine in ten Americans recognizing their importance for technology (91%) and science (90%). This perception of importance extends to other key areas that impact daily life, including healthcare and economic growth (83%).

Beyond these contributions, a substantial majority also values the civic role of universities, with 72% viewing them as important for a democratic society. The broad support is also grounded in the tangible benefits universities provide to their local communities. Strong majorities recognize the value of universities for local economic (79%) and healthcare (76%) contributions, demonstrating that the public appreciates the direct and observable local impact of higher education institutions.

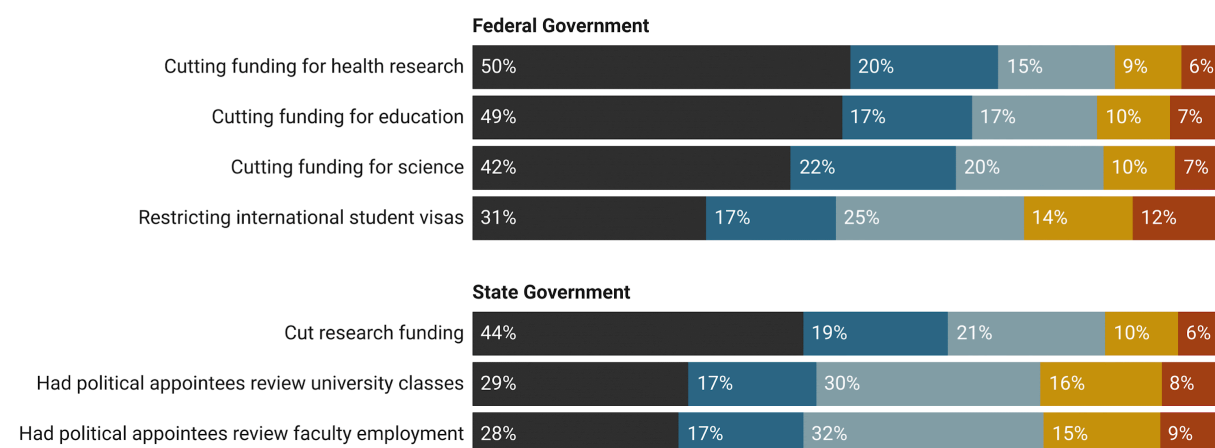
FINDING 2: There is strong support for funding scientific and medical research

Attitudes towards government interventions in higher education

Would you approve or disapprove if the federal government took the following actions?

Would you approve or disapprove if your state government took the following actions?

■ Strongly disapprove ■ Somewhat disapprove ■ Neither approve nor disapprove ■ Somewhat approve ■ Strongly approve



National sample, N = 31,891, Time period: 07/03/2025-08/01/2025

1. Opposition to Funding Cuts

- **Federal science funding cuts:** 64% of Americans oppose them, while only 17% support the cuts
- **Federal health research funding cuts:** 70% oppose them, and only 15% support those cuts
- **Federal education funding cuts:** 66% oppose them, and only 17% support those cuts
- **State-level research funding cuts:** 63% oppose those cuts, while only 16% support them
- Even though a Republican government is mandating the funding cuts, a large proportion of Republicans still oppose them. For instance, 49% of Republicans oppose science funding cuts and only 26% approve; 57% oppose health research funding cuts, while 23% approve.

2. Strong Support for Increased Investment

- **47% of Americans want more government investment in scientific research** in 2025 compared to 2024. About 40% want the same amount as in 2024, and only **13% want less investment.**

- **57% of Americans want more government investment in medical research in 2025.** Close to 34% want the same amount as in 2024, and only **9% want less investment.**

3. Willingness to Contact Congress

If prompted by a university that they have ties to, a considerable proportion of Americans report willingness to contact a member of Congress and speak out against funding cuts.

- **57% of Americans are likely to contact Congress** to speak out against **science funding cuts**
(25% are very likely to do so)
- **62% of Americans are likely to contact Congress** to speak out against **health research cuts**
(31% are very likely to do so).
- Overall, a **quarter to a third** of Americans say they would be very likely to contact a Congress member to complain if their university experienced science or health funding cuts.

4. Alumni Response to Research Threats

When asked what actions they would take if contacted by their alma mater about cuts in research funding:

- **58% of alumni would want to learn more**
- **23% of alumni would write to Congress**
- Only **17% might be less likely to donate** to the university
- Only **11% might be angry** about being contacted

Conclusion

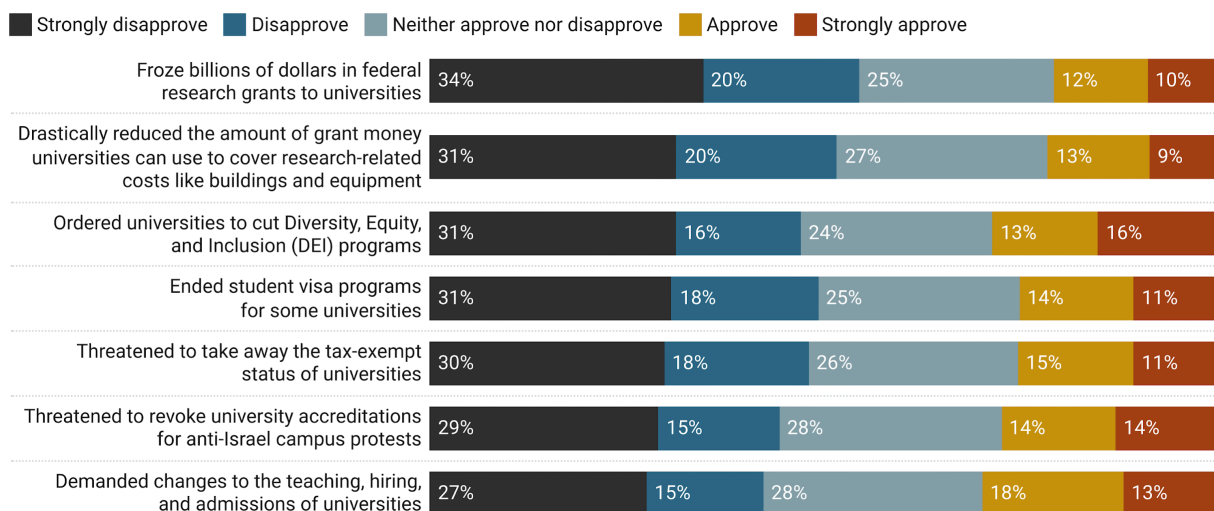
The data shows public opposition to funding cuts at both the federal and state levels, with disapproval rates ranging from 63% to 70%. In addition, nearly half of Americans want more investment in scientific research (47%) and a clear majority want more for medical research (57%) in the coming year.

Crucially, this support represents a mobilizable constituency. A majority of Americans (between 57% and 62%) report a likely willingness to contact Congress to oppose funding cuts if prompted by a university they are connected to. This potential for engagement is particularly strong among alumni, who show a high readiness to learn more about threats to research (58%) and a low risk of backlash for being contacted. This combination of broad-based support and a high willingness to engage presents a significant opportunity for universities to mobilize stakeholders in defense of research funding.

FINDING 3: There is strong opposition to Administration policies

Approval of government actions affecting science and higher education

The following are actions the Trump administration has taken. How much do you approve or disapprove of them?



National sample, N = 31,891, Time period: 07/03/2025-08/01/2025

Public Reactions to Recent Government Actions

When asked about recent federal actions related to science and education, respondents were likely to express disapproval.

- **Freezing research grants to universities:** 54% disapprove vs. 22% approve
- **Reducing the allowed overhead costs:** 51% disapprove vs. 22% approve
- **Threatening the tax-exempt status of universities:** 49% disapprove vs. 26% approve
- **Restricting international student visas:** 48% disapprove vs. 27% approve
- **Ordering universities to cut diversity, equity, and inclusion programs:** 47% disapprove vs. 29% approve
- **Demanding changes to teaching, hiring, and admissions:** 43% disapprove vs. 31% approve

Opposition to Political Interference in Education

Respondents were also likely to oppose political interference in higher education by state governments. When asked of their approval for such policies, close to half said they "somewhat" or "strongly" disapproved.

- **Political review of faculty employment:** 44% disapprove, while 24% approve
- **Political review of university classes:** 46% disapprove, while 24% approve

Conclusion

There is a clear public mandate against direct political interference in the core academic and research functions of universities. Policies such as freezing research grants, having political appointees review faculty employment, and threatening the tax-exempt status of universities are met with disapproval ratings that are roughly double the approval ratings.

The opposition to government overreach remains fairly robust, even on issues that are more culturally and politically charged. For instance, the directive to cut Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs is met with more public disapproval than approval, with 47% opposed to the intervention vs. 29% in favor. This demonstrates that the public broadly wishes to protect both the financial and operational autonomy of universities from government interference.

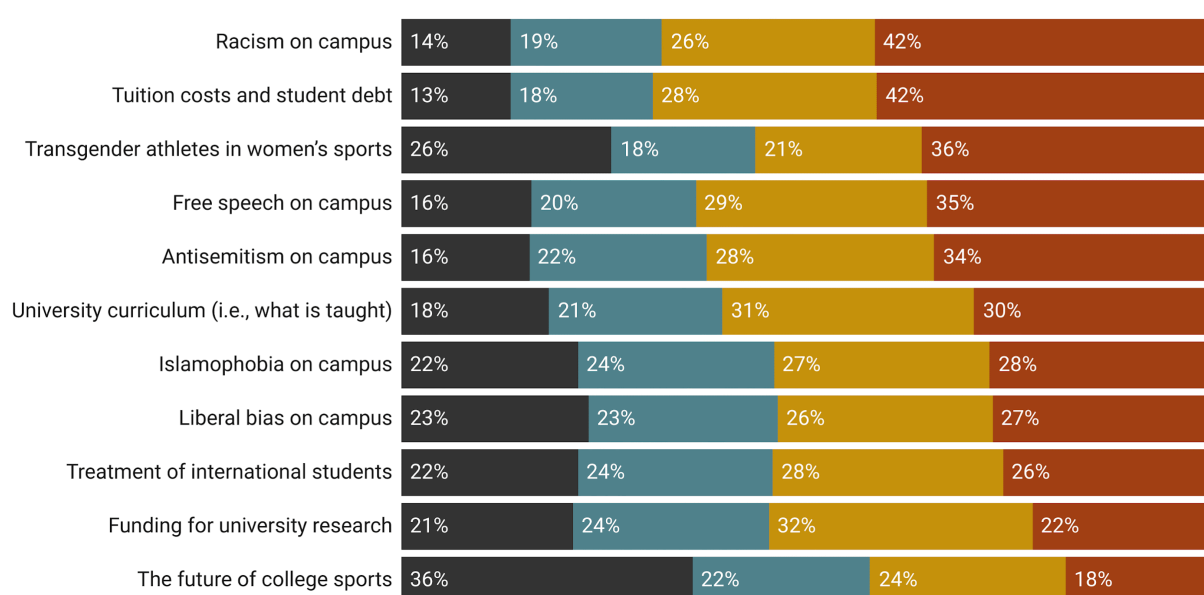
FINDING 4: Higher education faces significant vulnerabilities with respect to campus climate

We asked respondents about their level of concern with regard to eleven issues affecting universities across the United States. Responses to that question allowed us to identify areas of vulnerability for higher education.

Areas of concern about universities among Americans

How much do you trust the following people and organizations to do what is right?

■ Not at all concerned ■ Somewhat concerned ■ Moderately concerned ■ Extremely concerned



National sample, N = 31,891, Time period: 07/03/2025-08/01/2025

The Cost of Education

- **Tuition costs:** 87% expressed some level of concern about tuition costs and student debt.
Only 13% are "not at all concerned," making this a near-universal issue.
- **Education:** Graduate degree holders (94%) and college graduates (91%) are most likely to be concerned about costs, with lower levels of concern reported by those who have not completed college (81%-88%).
- **Partisanship:** Democrats (91%) are more likely to be concerned compared to Republicans (83%) and Independents (85%)
- **Age:** Concern levels are highest among younger people, especially those 18 to 24 (93%) and 25 to 44 (90%).

Racism, Antisemitism, and Islamophobia on Campus

- **Racism:** 86% overall concern (97% among Democrats and 82% among Republicans)
- **Antisemitism:** 84% overall concern (88% among Democrats and 84% among Republicans)
- **Islamophobia:** 78% overall concern (87% among Democrats and 73% among Republicans)

Free Speech on Campus

- **Overall:** 84% express some level of concern, with 35% extremely concerned.
- **Republicans:** 80% concerned, with 31% extremely concerned.
- **Democrats:** 89% concerned, with 42% extremely concerned.
- Free speech is another issue that cuts across political affiliation, though the specific challenges and preferred policies likely differ among Democrats and Republicans.

Liberal Bias

- **Overall:** 77% of Americans express some level of concern, 27% are extremely concerned.
- **Republicans:** 84% concerned, with 38% extremely concerned.
- **Democrats:** 72% concerned, with 22% extremely concerned.
- A potential vulnerability, this issue is of concern to both Democrats and Republicans, though their intentions and motivations with regard to it are likely very different.

Transgender Athletes in Women's sports

- **Overall:** 74% are concerned about this issue, with 36% saying they are "extremely concerned".
- **Republicans:** 84% expressing concern, with 52% extremely concerned.
- **Democrats:** 67% expressing concern, with 25% extremely concerned.
- While there is a large **27 percentage point gap** in "extremely concerned" responses among Democrats and Republicans, considerable majorities of both parties are at least somewhat concerned about this issue.

Conclusion

Despite strong overall support for their core mission, US universities face significant challenges regarding public perception of their campus climate. The data reveals several key vulnerabilities, with 74% to 87% of Americans expressing some level of concern on issues ranging from tuition costs to campus discrimination and free speech.

Critically, these are not fringe issues limited to one political ideology. The concerns transcend partisan lines, with substantial majorities of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents sharing anxiety over topics like the cost of education, racism, and free speech. While the intensity and specific focus may differ between political groups, the broad consensus indicates that these vulnerabilities are perceived as genuine problems by the American public at large. This suggests that a failure to strategically acknowledge and address these areas of concern could undermine the foundational support that higher education currently enjoys.

FINDING 5: There is relatively strong overall approval of higher education

We measured approval by asking respondents, *"Overall, how much do you approve or disapprove of the following?"*, focusing on their responses with regard to *"Universities in the United States"*. The possible answer options ranged from *"Strongly disapprove"* to *"Strongly approve"*. Respondents also had the opportunity to express a neutral opinion by selecting *"Neither approve nor disapprove"*.

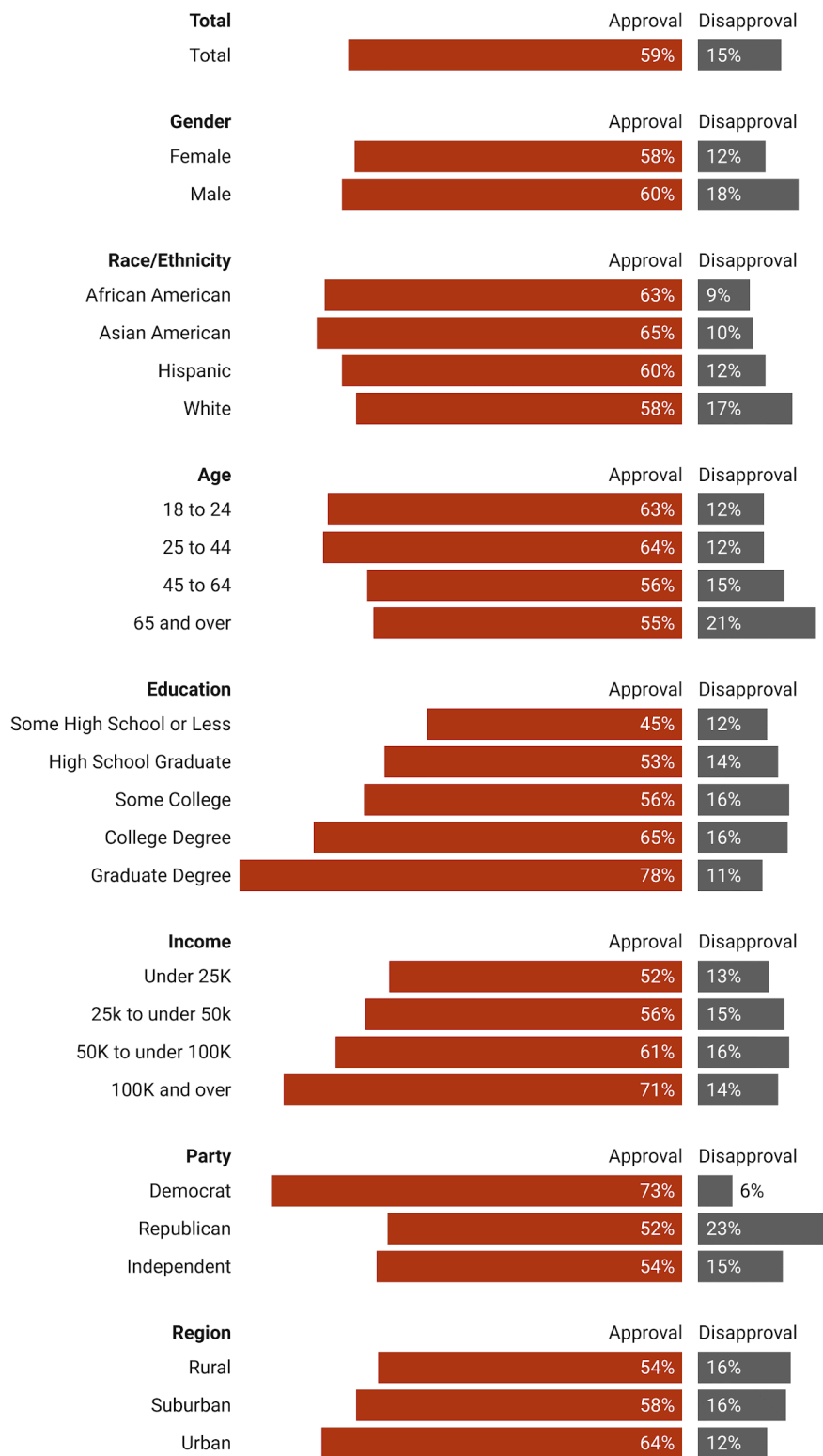
Primary Approval Metric

- A clear majority of Americans say they approve of US universities:
59% of Americans said they *somewhat* or *strongly* approve.

Approval of universities in the United States

Overall, how much do you approve or disapprove of the following? - Universities in the United States

[Percent respondents who "Somewhat approve"/"Strongly approve" or "Somewhat disapprove"/"Strongly disapprove"]



National sample, N = 31,891, Time period: 07/03/2025-08/01/2025

Approval Across Political Groups

- Democrats: 73% approval vs. 6% disapproval
- Republicans: 52% approval vs. 23% disapproval
- Independents: 54% approval vs. 15% disapproval

Approval by Education Level

- Graduate degree holders: 78% approval vs. 11% disapproval
- Bachelor's degree holders: 65% approval vs. 16% disapproval
- Some college: 56% approval vs. 16% disapproval
- High school graduates: 53% approval vs. 14% disapproval
- High school or less: 45% approval vs. 12% disapproval

Conclusion

The data demonstrate robust public approval for US universities, with a clear majority of 59% expressing support. This approval is widespread, persisting across political divides and demographic lines. While Democrats show very high approval at 73%, a majority of Republicans (52%) and Independents (54%) also approve of universities, demonstrating that support is not confined to one side of the political spectrum.

This pattern of majority or near-majority support holds even among the lowest-support demographic groups. For instance, while it is strongly linked with educational attainment, reaching 78% among those with graduate degrees, it remains at 53% among high school graduates and a near-majority of 45% for those with less than a high school education.

Overall, every major political and demographic category maintains high levels of approval for higher education, demonstrating broad-based public support despite political tensions and trust concerns.

FINDING 6 Trust in higher education is high, especially relative to other institutions.

Public Trust in Higher Education

Overall, **75%** of Americans trust universities and colleges "some" or "a lot". This places higher education in the **4th place** out of the 20 institutions we evaluated in terms of institutional trust. Additionally, 2 of the 3 institutions ranked higher are closely connected to higher education ("hospitals and doctors" and "scientists and researchers").

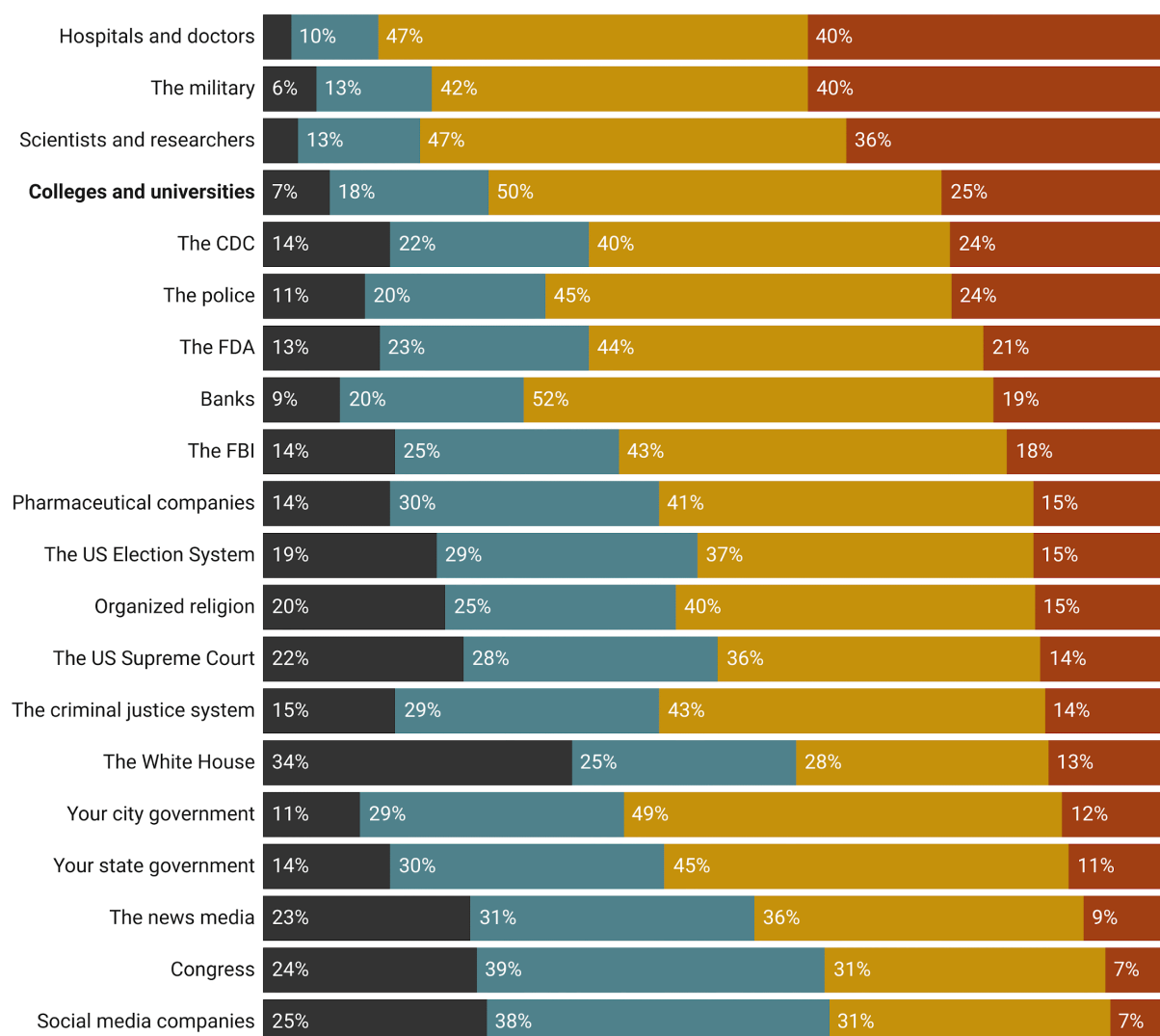
Key Findings

- **Higher education ranks 4th out of 20 institutions** in public trust
- **Only healthcare, military, and scientists** have higher trust levels than universities
- **Universities significantly outperform** most government institutions, media, and other major sectors. Universities are trusted 3.5 times more than Congress and 2.7 times more than the news media

Levels of trust in key social institutions among American adults

How much do you trust the following people and organizations to do what is right?

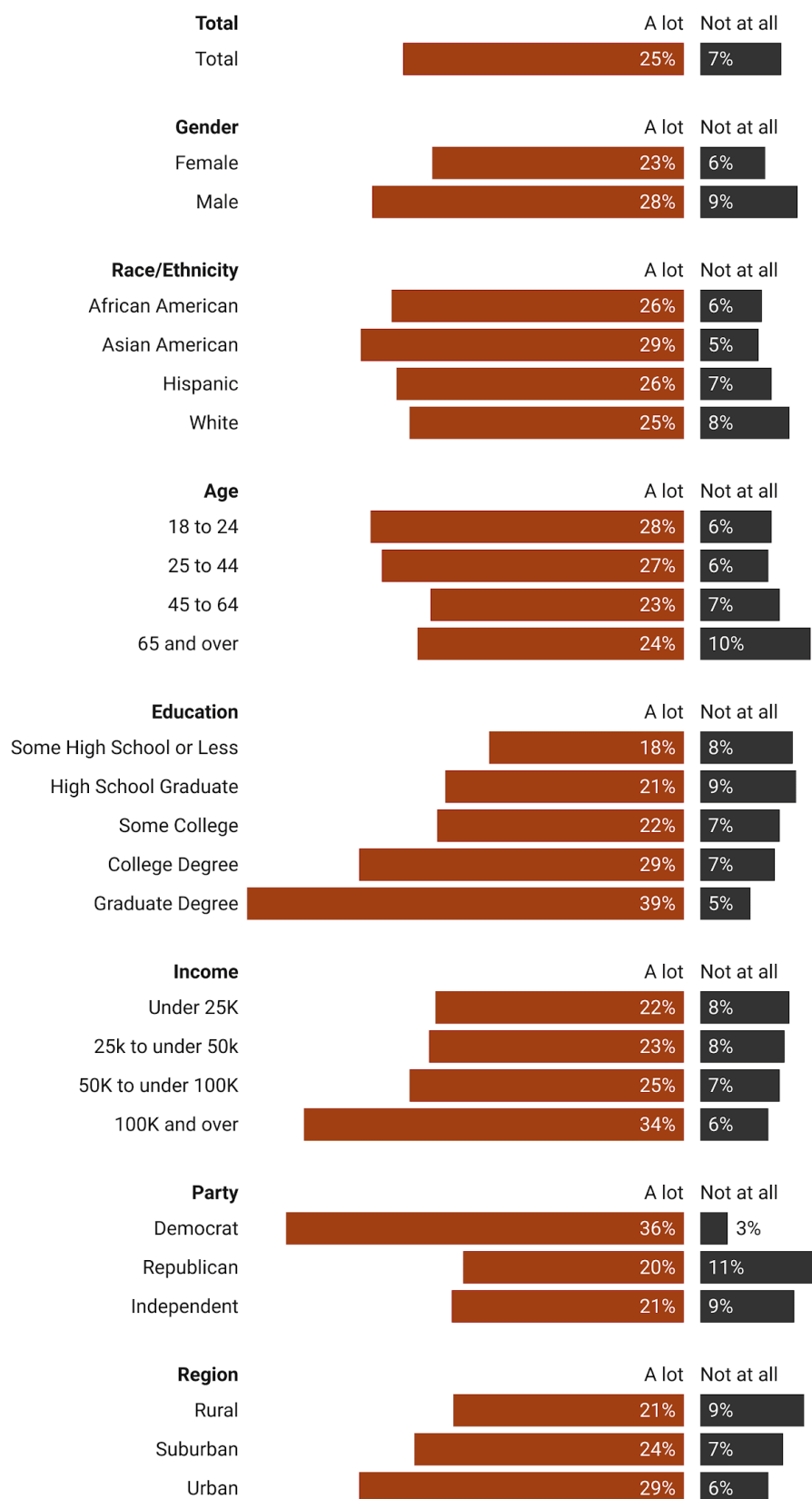
■ Not at all ■ Not too much ■ Some ■ A lot



National sample, N = 31,891, Time period: 07/03/2025-08/01/2025

Trust in colleges and universities in the United States

How much do you trust the following people and organizations to do what is right?
Colleges and universities [Answer options: Not at all / Not too much / Some / A lot]



National sample, N = 31,891, Time period: 07/03/2025-08/01/2025

Demographics of Trust

- **Educational attainment** shows the steepest gradient, with 39% of graduate degree holders trusting universities “a lot”, compared to 18% of those with no high-school diploma.
- **Political party** is also important, with a 16-point gap between Democrats and Republicans.
- **Income level** is another key predictor, with a 12-point gap between the highest and lowest earners.

Conclusion

Trust in colleges and universities is high, especially when viewed in comparison with other institutions. Higher education occupies a privileged position, ranking 4th most trusted among 20 US institutions. While university leaders may worry about trust challenges, we find that higher education has maintained robust public confidence.

Levels of trust vary across demographic groups. Educational attainment is associated with the largest differences, suggesting that personal experience with universities may be an important factor. For instance, 39% of graduate degree holders report trusting universities “a lot,” more than double the rate for those with a high school diploma or less (18%). We also see a partisan trust gap of 16 percentage points, though the political differences are not as extreme as those reported on many other issues. Thus, while not immune to the political polarization affecting other institutions, higher education enjoys relatively high levels of trust across ideological lines.