
Regional

Higher education losing ground in public opinion

Until recently higher education held a high standing in public opinion polls despite many public image challenges. According to a 2013 Gallup poll, 72 percent of people in this country thought that to have a higher education degree was “very important” and 25 percent thought it was “somewhat important.” That near unanimity on the importance of a university education is quite unusual in the divided society in which we live today.

That good image, however, has been eroded.

According to the results of a recent survey by the Kresge Foundation, a private institution that provides funding for several social areas including education, Americans are increasingly uncertain about the necessity of college for success in the workforce. When asked the question, “Do you think that a college education is necessary for a person to be successful in today’s work world?” only 42 percent of Americans say college is necessary for workforce success, a 13 percent drop from a similar survey from 2009. Even worse, 57 percent of Americans say there are many ways to succeed in today’s world without a college degree, a 14 percent increase from 2009.

According to the same survey, 69 percent of Americans say there are many people who are qualified to go to college but don’t have the opportunity to do so. And only 29 percent of Americans say the vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college have the opportunity to do so.

How has the public image of higher education

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

deteriorated so much and so fast, despite the fact that numerous studies have shown that people with a college degree greatly increase their chances of getting a good job as compared with those without such a degree?

The reasons for this are many. To begin with institutions of higher education are, for the most part, very anemic when it comes to publicizing the value of higher education, particularly in the area of the liberal arts. While some have been publicizing the success of their alumni in those disciplines, such stories are disseminated more in an anecdotal fashion than in a statistical one, making them somewhat unconvincing.

Another factor has been the cost of college, which has risen exponentially in the last few years, particularly at public colleges and universities. The reasons for such cost increases are directly related to the anti-tax rhetoric that surrounds the current political discourse, making less money available to fund public higher education and leaving institutions with no other recourse than to increase tuition and fees. And because of the political dependency of these institutions on state government, they rarely if ever point out to the general public where the responsibility lies for that lack of funding. On

top of that, those very political entities love to blame the very institutions they fail to support as responsible for the problem of increasing college costs.

Another area in which many politicians have succeeded in influencing public opinion is by attacking colleges and universities for being “too liberal” and being the cadre of “political correctness.” Thus, many parents think that instead of educating their kids with useful skills, colleges and universities indoctrinate them into leftist ideologies.

Another line of attack against colleges and universities has been what some people have called “administrative bloat.” The allegation has been that colleges and universities keep increasing their administrative staff to the detriment of their academic mission. Although that is true in a few cases, the fact of the matter is that because of an increase in federal and state regulations, institutions of higher education have had to hire more administrators to comply with those regulations. In a report published last year, dozens of presidents of colleges and universities complained to the federal government about the cost of complying with their regulations, which could account for as much as 15 percent of their budget.

When it comes to state regulations, the presidents of public institutions have been much more circumspect in order to avoid rattling the political structures in their own states.

What must institutions of higher education do

in order to change public perceptions? To begin with we need to radically change our approach in the ways we communicate with the general public, as well as with specific constituencies. For many years we have copied each other in the way we present ourselves. If you take a look at both websites and the printed materials generated by colleges and universities, they are virtually indistinguishable from one another in terms of design.

The same thing can be said about content. Almost without exception all of these institutions use the word “excellence” in their materials. So what does that mean? Practically nothing. What is that word communicating to the public? That we are not mediocre? Nothing distinctive there. Are students going to a particular college or university for the quality of the instruction or because of athletics? Certainly students and their parents think they are paying for the former, not the latter.

The emphasis has to be on academics – its quality, offerings, and, more importantly, how well are the institution’s graduates doing. Given that the vast majority of a university budget goes toward personnel, the emphasis has to be on the quality of instruction and how it changes the lives of students.

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