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## Regional

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# Higher ed opinions divided along party lines

Until recently, higher education commanded a good standing in public opinion polls. According to a 2013 Gallup-Lumina Foundation survey, 72 percent of people in the U.S. thought that to have a college degree was “very important,” and 25 percent thought it was “somewhat important.”

However, that good image has been eroding rapidly. According to the results of a 2016 survey funded by the Kresge Foundation, 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 said that college is necessary for workforce success – a 13 percent drop from a similar survey in 2009. Fifty-seven percent of Americans said that there are many ways to succeed in today’s world without a college degree, 14 percent lower than in 2009.

Now another poll is giving us even worse news, and shows just how split this country is along party lines. According to a Pew Research Center poll released just last week, Republicans and Democrats are deeply divided on the impact of several of the nation’s leading institutions, including the news media, colleges and universities and churches and religious organizations. And the gap in these views is significantly wider today than it was just a year ago.

According to the poll, while 55 percent of the American public think that colleges and universities have a positive effect on the nation, a

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majority of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents (58 percent) now say that colleges and universities have a negative effect on the country, up from 45 percent last year. Seventy-two percent of Democrats and those who lean Democratic, on the other hand, say that colleges and universities have a positive effect, which is little changed from recent years.

What is particularly stunning about this poll is how rapidly Republicans and those who lean Republican have changed their opinion about colleges and universities. Just two years ago, most Republicans and Republican leaners held a positive view of the role of higher education (54 percent of Republicans said colleges and universities had a positive impact on the way things were going in the country, while 37 percent rated their impact negatively). Just a year later Republicans’ ratings of colleges and universities were mixed (43 percent positive and 45 percent negative). Now, for the first time, 58 percent say colleges and universities are having a negative effect on the way things are going in the country, with only 36 percent saying that they have a positive effect.

Opinions also differed within party affiliation. Sixty-five percent of conservative Republicans said that colleges are having a negative impact,

compared with just 43 percent of moderate Republicans. On the other hand, liberal and moderate Democrats said college has a positive impact (79 and 67 percent respectively).

So why is public opinion about the value of higher education changing so fast, and why is it so separated along party lines? First of all, we need to remember that bad news about higher education has been front and center in all kinds of media outlets.

Whether it is their affordability, scandals, race relations, or issues of free speech, colleges and universities have been the recipients of very bad press. Some colleges and universities have seen their enrollments drop dramatically after being the focus of media attention.

Just a couple of weeks ago it was reported that the University of Missouri-Columbia showed a decrease in freshman enrollment of 35 percent over the past two years after the highly publicized racial incidents that took place there in 2015. Decreases in enrollment on other campus have also been tied to other incidents reported in the media.

Another factor that we must take into consideration is the fact that conservative media have become more assertive in reporting on these incidents and blaming them – correctly or not – on so-called “liberal” ideologies. Given that the American public is increasingly obtaining their news from media they feel most closely align with their ideology, it’s no wonder that this partisan rift in public opinion about colleges and

universities is becoming wider and wider.

This divide in opinion along party lines can have serious consequences. With private institutions totally, and public institutions increasingly dependent upon tuition to be able to survive, decreases in enrollment can be devastating. The other important factor is that the Trump Administration, which leans even further right than the Republican party as a whole, has shown less inclination to support colleges and universities.

But let’s face it. Many colleges and universities have brought this situation on themselves. As expressed in this column a few weeks ago, the leadership of these institutions has allowed incidents to occur that were totally unnecessary, such as banning speakers who do not conform with their ideology.

They have made themselves easy targets for the conservative media.

Another problem has been the way they have handled their marketing in general, emphasizing meaningless rankings or sports events over the benefits of a higher education for both individuals and society. It is time for the leadership of these institutions to realize that education cannot be sold using marketing techniques more appropriate for toothpaste or laundry detergent.

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