

NEWS RELEASE

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PPIC STATEWIDE SURVEY: CALIFORNIANS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Californians Give Public Colleges High Grades But See Budget Cuts, Fee Hikes as Big Problems

GOVERNOR, LEGISLATURE GET RECORD-LOW RATINGS FOR HANDLING HIGHER EDUCATION

SAN FRANCISCO, California, November 11, 2009—Californians give high grades to their public higher education systems, but they are worried about college costs and the impact of state budget cuts. These are the findings of a statewide survey released today by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) with funding from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

While strong majorities believe state budget cuts (70%) and overall affordability (57%) are big problems, far fewer (21%) characterize the quality of California public colleges and universities the same way. Despite significant budget cuts in higher education, at least six in 10 Californians give good to excellent marks to the California Community College (13% excellent, 52% good), California State University (9% excellent, 52% good) and University of California (13% excellent, 49% good) systems. These grades are nearly as high as they were in 2007 and 2008, when about two in three Californians gave positive ratings to the three branches. Today, parents of California college students, current students, and alumni give the state's higher education institutions similarly high grades.

But residents have little confidence in the state elected officials who have authority over California colleges and universities. Californians give Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger a 28 percent overall approval rating that matches his record low in July 2009. They give the legislature an overall approval rating of 18 percent, near its record low (17%) from July. State leaders get even lower ratings for their handling of higher education: 21 percent for Schwarzenegger and 16 percent for the legislature. Both are new lows. And most Californians have very little (37%) or no (20%) confidence in state government's ability to plan for the future of the higher education system (8% have a great deal of confidence, 33% only some).

"Californians hold their colleges and universities in high esteem," said Mark Baldassare, PPIC president and CEO. "But they're worried about what's going to happen next. They're struggling with a crisis in the economy and a crisis of confidence in their leaders."

A COLLEGE DEGREE VIEWED AS ESSENTIAL BUT HARDER TO GET

Californians place more importance on a college education than do adults nationwide. In a national survey conducted last December by Public Agenda and the National Center for Policy and Higher Education, 55 percent say college is necessary for a person's success, while 43 percent say there are many ways to succeed without a college education. By comparison, 66 percent of Californians in the PPIC survey view college as necessary. Just 31 percent say there are many other ways to succeed.

But many Californians see a college degree as increasingly difficult to attain: 65 percent say that getting a college education is more difficult than it was 10 years ago, a 9-point increase from 2007 (56%). More than two-thirds of residents (68%) say that many qualified people lack the opportunity to go to college.

OPPOSED TO RAISING TAXES OR STUDENT FEES

In the context of the state budget situation, most Californians place a very high (26%) or high (33%) priority on spending for public higher education, which at \$12.2 billion is the third-largest area of spending in the budget. But residents split along partisan lines, with 67 percent of Democrats and 61 percent of independents putting a very high or high priority on spending in this area, compared to 42 percent of Republicans. The same percentage of Republicans (42%) puts a medium priority on higher education spending.

Given the high value that most Californians place on spending for higher education, what would they be willing to do to offset state spending cuts?

- **68 percent are unwilling to increase student fees.** Solid majorities across parties, regions, and demographic groups concur.
- **56 percent are unwilling to pay higher taxes.** Although 56 percent of Democrats are willing to pay higher taxes for this purpose, 58 percent of independents and 74 percent of Republicans are not.
- **53 percent would support a higher education construction bond measure on the 2010 ballot.** But support is lower among likely voters (46% yes, 47% no) for this hypothetical bond measure and would fall short of the simple majority threshold needed to pass such a measure. Here, too, a partisan split emerges, with 61 percent of Democrats and 51 percent of independents saying they would vote yes on a bond and 55 percent of Republicans saying they would vote no.

Half (50%) of Californians believe that major changes are needed in the higher education system—a 10-point increase from last year—and 39 percent say minor changes are needed. When asked the best method for significantly improving California's higher education system, about half (52%) say a combination of better use of existing state funds and increased funding is the answer. Just 7 percent say increased funding alone is the key and 38 percent say just using existing funds more wisely is best.

MOST BACK SLIDING SCALE FOR TUITION, MORE FUNDS FOR GRANTS, WORK-STUDY

Should the state spend more money to keep fees and tuition costs down even if this means less funding for other programs? Despite Californians' concerns about higher tuition and student fees, they are divided (49% favor, 43% oppose) on this question. A majority of Democrats (56%) are in favor, a majority of Republicans (55%) are opposed, and independents are split (48% favor, 46% oppose).

However, a strong majority of Californians (67%) support the idea of a sliding scale for tuition and fees so that students pay according to income, with majorities across all parties in favor (74% Democrats, 66% independents, 53% Republicans). Californians also favor increasing government funding for work-study opportunities so that students can earn money while in college (85% favor, 13% oppose) and for scholarships or grants for students (80% favor, 18% oppose).

TUITION, FEE HIKES ARE BIGGEST CONCERN

Colleges and universities have taken a range of actions to offset cuts in higher education. How concerned are Californians about the specifics?

- **Tuition and fee increases:** Echoing their unwillingness to increase student fees, most Californians (62%) are very concerned and 27 percent are somewhat concerned about increasing tuition or fees, which all three branches of higher education have done. Majorities across political parties, regions, and demographic groups are very concerned.

- **Enrollment cuts:** A majority (57%) are very concerned and 29 percent somewhat concerned about the idea of reducing the number of students admitted to offset budget cuts—actions taken by both the CSU and UC systems. Democrats (68%) and independents (59%) are more likely than Republicans (49%) to be very concerned about fewer students being admitted.
- **Fewer classes:** A majority (57%) are very concerned and 29 percent somewhat concerned about cuts in course offerings. All three branches have cut classes. Again, Democrats (67%) and independents (58%) are more likely than Republicans (49%) to be very concerned.
- **Reduced pay and hours for faculty, staff:** Nearly half of Californians (48%) are very concerned and 32 percent are somewhat concerned about cuts in this area. Most Democrats (57%) are very concerned compared to fewer independents (48%) and Republicans (38%).

PARENTS HAVE HIGH HOPES—BUT FEARS FOR THE FUTURE

Parents express high expectations for their children’s educational futures and their concern about being able to afford a college education for their youngest child is increasing. An overwhelming majority (89%) of parents with children 18 years old or younger say they hope their youngest child will get a bachelor’s or graduate degree. At the same time, half (50%) of parents are very worried about being able to afford a college education. Latino parents (67%) are far more likely than white parents (38%) to be very worried, although concern among white parents has increased 9 points since last year. Even at the highest income level of \$80,000 or more, 30 percent are very worried and 35 percent are somewhat worried about being able to afford college.

When asked about the progress they have made in saving for college, 62 percent of parents say they are behind, 28 percent saying they are just where they should be, and just 6 percent saying they are ahead. Among Latino parents, 73 percent say they are behind, a 10-point increase from last year. A majority of white parents (56%) say they are behind, 6 points higher than last year.

MORE KEY FINDINGS

- **Do students from ethnic or racial minorities lack opportunity? Californians are split**—page 18
While 60 percent of Californians believe that qualified low-income students have less opportunity to get a college education than others, they are divided in their views about the opportunities of qualified students who are ethnic or racial minorities: 40 percent say these students have about the same opportunity as others, 37 percent less opportunity, 20 percent more opportunity.
- **Economic, racial diversity on campus seen as important**—page 19
The vast majority of Californians say it is very (54%) or somewhat (26%) important for public colleges and universities to have an economically diverse student body. Their views of the value of racial diversity are similar: 54 percent say it is very important and 23 percent say it is somewhat important.
- **Many parents lack financial aid information**—page 20
A plurality (46%) of parents say they do not have enough financial aid information, 38 percent say they have just enough, and 13 percent say they have more than enough.
- **Higher education and the 2010 governor’s race**—page 33
How important are the candidates’ positions on higher education? A strong majority of registered voters say very important (53%) or somewhat important (37%).

ABOUT THE SURVEY

The PPIC Statewide Survey has provided policymakers, the media, and the general public with objective information on the perceptions, opinions, and public policy preferences of California residents since 1998. This survey is part of a series on K–12 and higher education, environment, and population issues funded by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Findings are based on a telephone survey of 2,502 California adult residents interviewed from October 20 to November 3, 2009, on landlines and cell phones, in English, Spanish, Chinese (Mandarin or Cantonese), Vietnamese, or Korean. The sampling error is ± 2 percent for all adults and larger for subgroups. For more information on methodology, see page 25.

Mark Baldassare is president and CEO of PPIC, where he holds the Arjay and Frances Fearing Miller Chair in Public Policy. He is founder and director of the PPIC Statewide Survey.

PPIC is dedicated to informing and improving public policy in California through independent, objective, nonpartisan research on major economic, social, and political issues. The institute was established in 1994 with an endowment from William R. Hewlett. As a private operating foundation, PPIC does not take or support positions on any ballot measure or on any local, state, or federal legislation, nor does it endorse, support, or oppose any political parties or candidates for public office.

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