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Poll: Texans recognize the value of a degree, but still consider college costs and student debt obstacles

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The cost of college is an obstacle to higher education, according to a 2019 survey of Texas residents.

Photo: Liz Hafalia, Staff / The Chronicle

Texans know the value of a college degree — many have said it can lead to higher income, a better quality of life and that an educated workforce can lead to a more competitive state economy — yet the cost of college and student debt are still considered an obstacle in obtaining a degree, according to a higher education poll released Wednesday.

The “101: Higher Ed Poll of Texas” surveyed 800 Texans over the phone earlier this month about their concerns and attitudes toward higher education in the state. The results of the poll, conducted by Austin-based Strategic Research Associates, were similar to those seen before — most residents believe a degree to be an asset and some are looking for more education and training, but the cost and thought of student debt are seen as deterrents.

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Poll results showed that 75 percent of participants considered the cost of a degree an obstacle, while 79 percent — a majority who had acquired no student debt themselves— considered student debt a “major problem.”

Using financial aid survey data, student loan business site LendEDU ranked the average student loan debt across more than 1,000 U.S. universities last year. Researchers discovered the average Texas student borrows \$27,001 from lenders and that 55 percent of Texas students graduate with debt.

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It’s no surprise, pollsters found, that a majority of the participants also said it’s crucial that Texas continue providing financial aid for college students in need. Fifty-one percent of the polled Texans said they believe the state government spends “too little” on college education (only 7 percent said the government spends too much), and nearly 50 percent believe the state doesn’t provide enough financial aid.

The poll was organized through a collaboration between Western Governors University’s nonprofit, online university WGU Texas, the Independent Colleges and Universities of Texas nonprofit, and the Texas Association of Community Colleges. It comes as the 86th Legislative Session is underway. State lawmakers could have a major effect on funding for higher education, and as the state pushes toward the 60x30TX, an initiative that aims to have 60 percent of adults under the age of 34 armed with a post-secondary degree by 2030.

Despite major concerns about cost, the poll confirmed that Texans recognize the personal and economic value of higher education, and some want more.

Most participants — 65 percent of those with associate's degrees, 77 percent with college degrees and 72 percent with graduate degrees — were confident that the money that they or family members have invested in their degrees “will pay off” someday and that the value graduates get back is equal or more than what they paid for while attending college. More than 80 percent of participants believed that post-secondary education would lead to a higher income or better quality life, and more than 90 percent said that degrees, if anything else, can be a source of pride for most people.

A majority of those polled — 60 percent who didn't view their job as a career — said they need more education and more training, and nearly 30 percent of the adults, ages 30 and up, said they plan to enroll in an educational or training program with the next five years.

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