



# Applying to College in 2026: Perspectives from College Admission Officers on an Evolving Application Process

Justin J. Mohney - Director of Recruitment, Carnegie Mellon University

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# Introductions



# Agenda

- Evolving Landscape Around Testing Policies
- Scholarship Offers and Timing of Enrollment Commitments
- Shifting Student Perceptions of Value of Education
- Open Discussion / Q&A

# **Evolving Landscape Around Testing Policies**





OPINION

Views

## U of California's Test-Free Experiment Is Producing an Uncomfortable Truth

January 5, 2026

... eliminating standardized tests ignores ... Working Group on Ad the ... San Diego—written not by lobbyists or ...

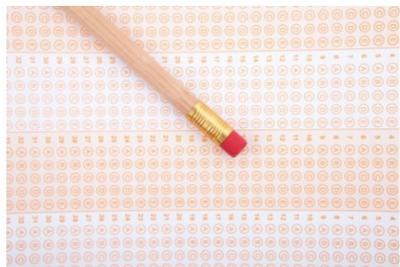


THE REVIEW | OPINION

## What Do Test-Optional Policies Actually Accomplish?

By *Greta Hsu, Amanda J. Sharkey* | August 20, 2025

For many colleges, the policy shift was merely symbolic.



Admissions Traditional-Age

## Princeton Will Require Standardized Test Scores Again

October 13, 2025

... to submit standardized 2027–28 admissions c university webpage about , the decision ...

U.S. News & World Report

## Elite Colleges Are Requiring the SAT and ACT Again – And That’s a Good Thing

Standardized tests are the best and most objective predictor of student success. Bringing them back helps high-achieving,...

Oct 22, 2025





## What's the Data Telling Us?

# FairTest

The National Center for Fair & Open Testing

<https://fairtest.org/test-optional-list/>



# 2,085 +

Accredited, Bachelor's Degree Granting Colleges & Universities with  
ACT/SAT Optional or Test-Free Admission Policies for Students  
Seeking to Enroll in Fall 2026 or Beyond

2,010+

ACT/SAT Optional institutions

75+

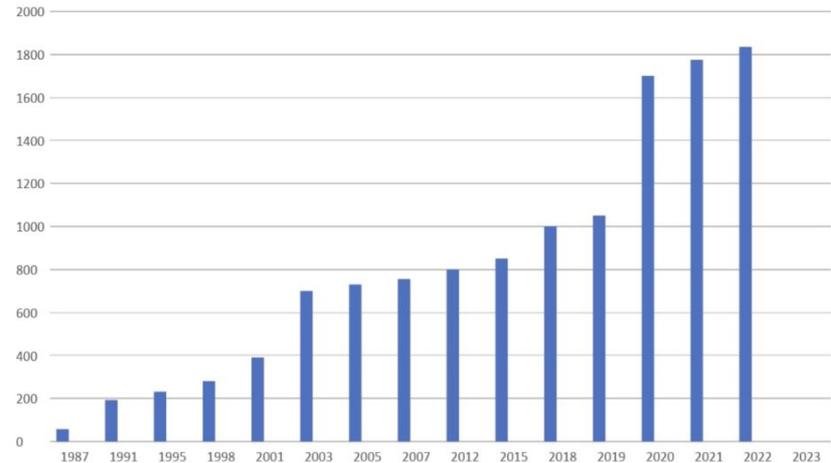
Test-Free Institutions

# What's the Data Telling Us?

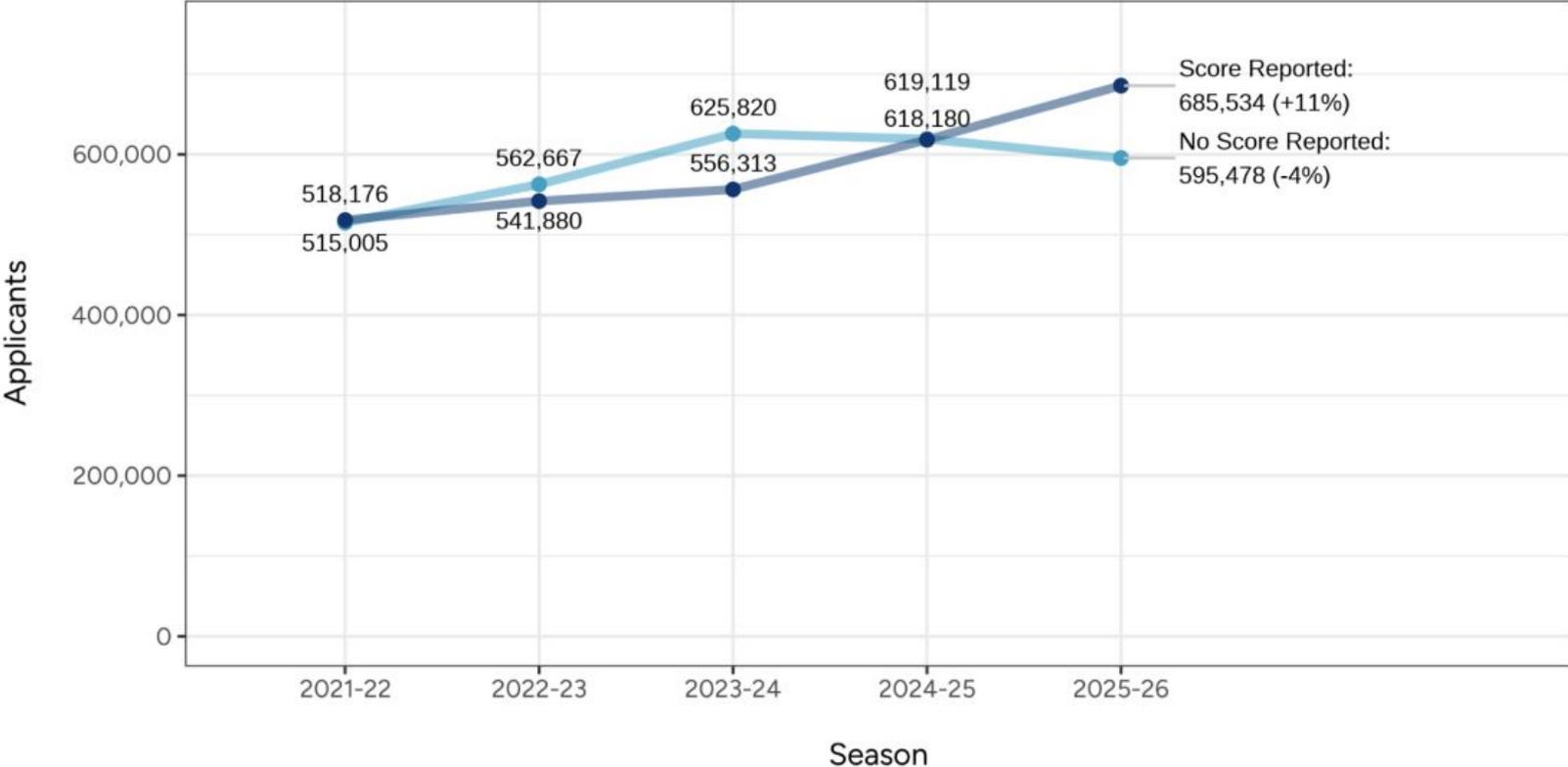


<https://fairtest.org/test-optional/>

**ACT/SAT-Optional and Test Blind/Score-Free Schools Growth Chronology**  
(out of ~2,330 accredited bachelor-degree institutions)



**Figure 20. Growth in first-year applicants by test score reporting behavior since 2021-22**



Source: Common App January 2026 Deadline Report



# Considerations for Colleges

- Testing's role - Selection? Placement/scaffolding?
- Research:
  - Access and equity
  - Application volume
  - Student performance and retention
- Influences from within the community - faculty, trustees, etc.
- Pressures outside the institution
- Varying approaches
  - SAT/ACT requirement
  - Test flexible (Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate)
  - Testing waivers



## Considerations for Students

- List building
  - Scholarship eligibility
  - Direct admit or honors programs
  
- Course placement considerations

# Scholarship Offers and Timing of Enrollment Commitments

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## Percentage of Applicants per Decision Type on Jan 15

Year	Early Action	Regular Decision
2026	63%	37%
2025	55%	45%
2024	52%	48%

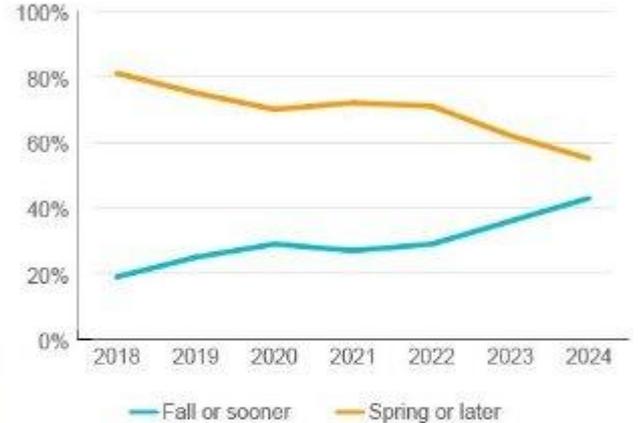
Duquesne data as of January 15 each year

## Earlier Applications, Earlier Commitments

Ross, E. (2025, March 4). *Timing is everything: shifting trends in student decision making*. Encoura.

<https://www.encoura.org/resources/wake-up-call/timing-is-everything-shifting-trends-in-student-decision-making/>

When Admitted First-Year Students Really Knew Where They Would Enroll 2018-2024



Source: Eduventures' 2018-2024 Admitted Student Research

# Duquesne Adjustments in 2026



Adjustment	Rationale	Early Result
Earlier Financial Aid Packaging	Increased demand in early applications; importance of financial planning; on-time FAFSA opening	160% increase in sent packages prior to February 4; substantial increase in earlier deposits
Earlier financial planning emphasis	Feedback from students; growing applicant pool	TBD - KPIs to measure include financial literacy among students and melt rate due to finances
Separation of scholarship letter from admission letter	Enhanced “single message” clarity for student; allowing two moments of achievement	Little change in deposit behavior
Expansion of Direct Admission offers	Enhanced reach and support for college access	Enhanced & diversified applicant pool; Reduction in established affinity and pre-knowledge of DU



## Takeaways

- High affinity students are committing to top choice schools even before
  - receiving merit scholarships and financial aid awards
  - 2025: 100% received merit prior to deposit
  - 2026: 70% received merit prior to deposit
- Financial Aid Awards remain king for many students
  - 2025: 48% of early FAFSA filers received financial aid award prior to deposit
  - 2026: 50% of FAFSA filers received financial aid award prior to deposit

Source: Duquesne internal data via Slate; *Claude AI* used to support data analysis



## Takeaways

- Early Decision and other forms of early commitments will continue to grow, particularly for competitive programs
- Financial Counseling tools should be utilized early and often. Examples include:
  - a. Net Price Calculator
  - b. Raise.me and other micro-scholarship platforms
  - c. Financial planning meetings with admissions and financial aid staff



## A Resource for Comparing Award Letters

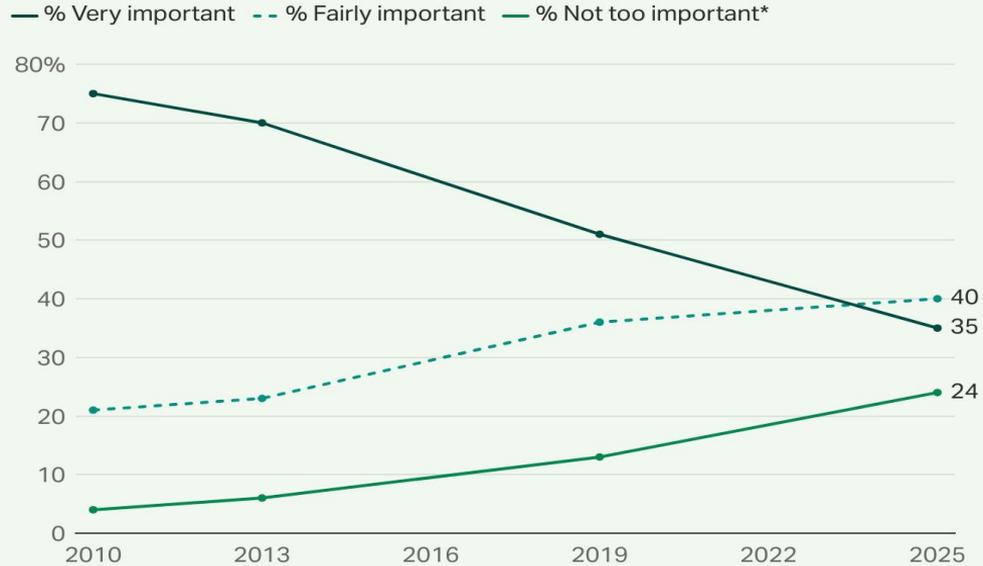
[College Board Big Future](#)

# Shifting Student Perceptions of Value of Education

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## Value Americans Place on College Education

How important is a college education today — very important, fairly important or not too important?

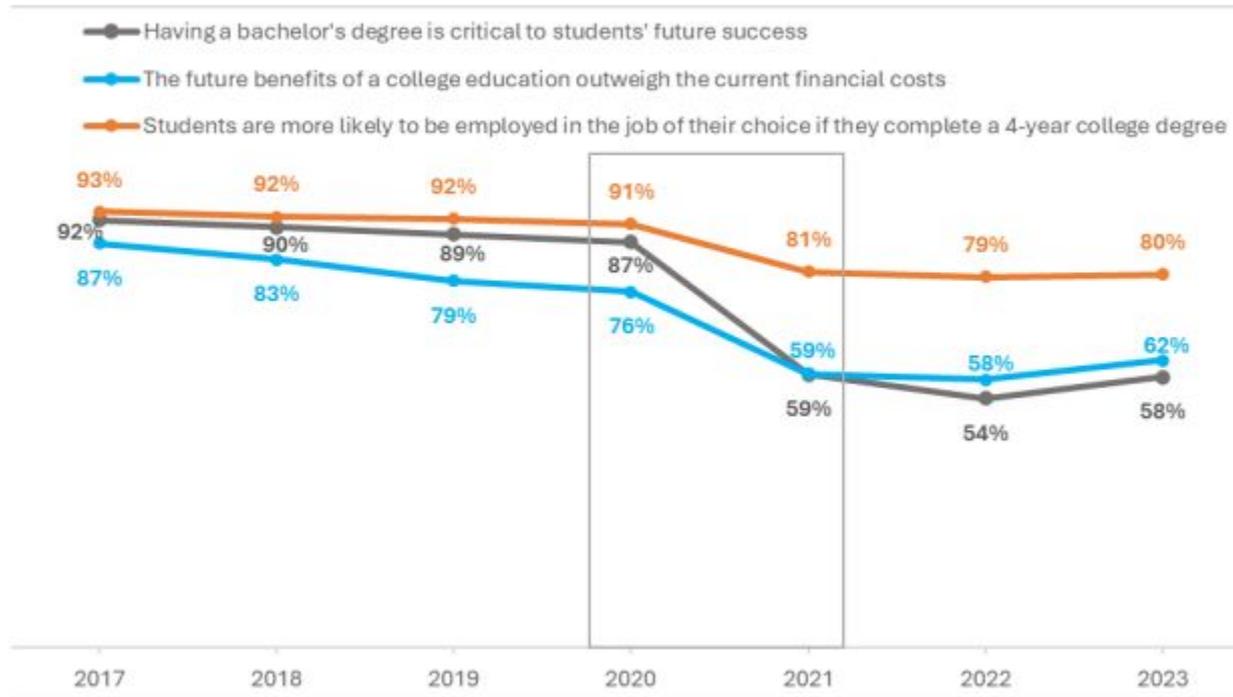


\* 2010 result includes 1% who volunteered "not at all important"

GALLUP

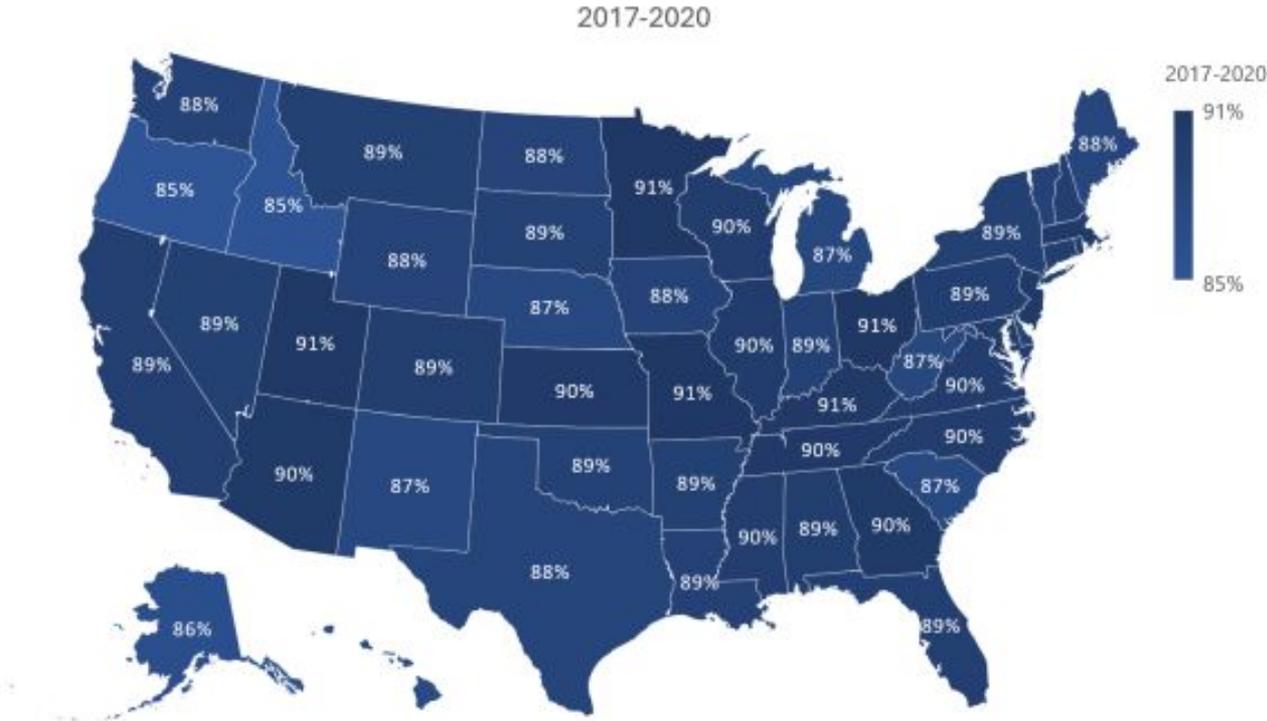
Source: Gallup, "Perceived Importance of College Hits New Low," September 2025

**Figure 1.** Shares of Respondents Who Completely or Generally Agree with Each Statement About the Value of College



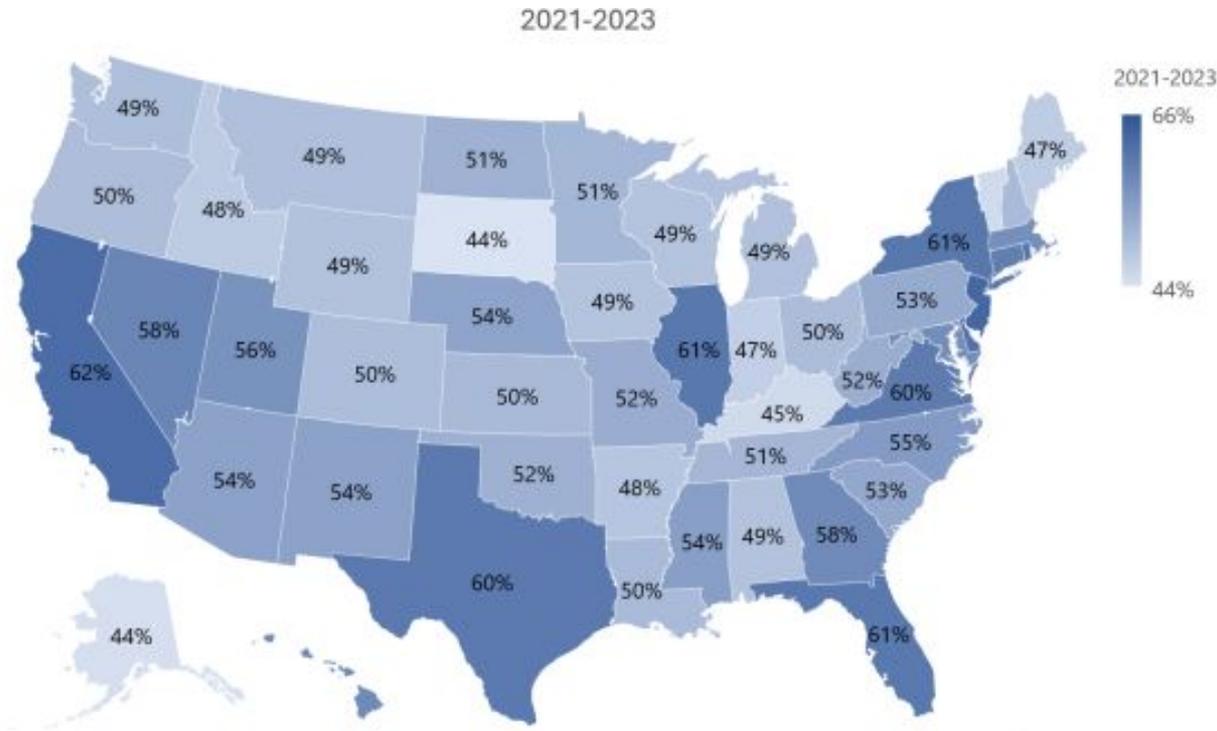
Source: College Board, "College Benefits and Costs: Student Perception and Data Realities," February 2025

**Figure 4.** Shares of Respondents Who Completely or Generally Agree That Having a Bachelor's Degree is Critical to Students' Future Success



Source: College Board, "College Benefits and Costs: Student Perception and Data Realities," February 2025

**Figure 4.** Shares of Respondents Who Completely or Generally Agree That Having a Bachelor's Degree is Critical to Students' Future Success

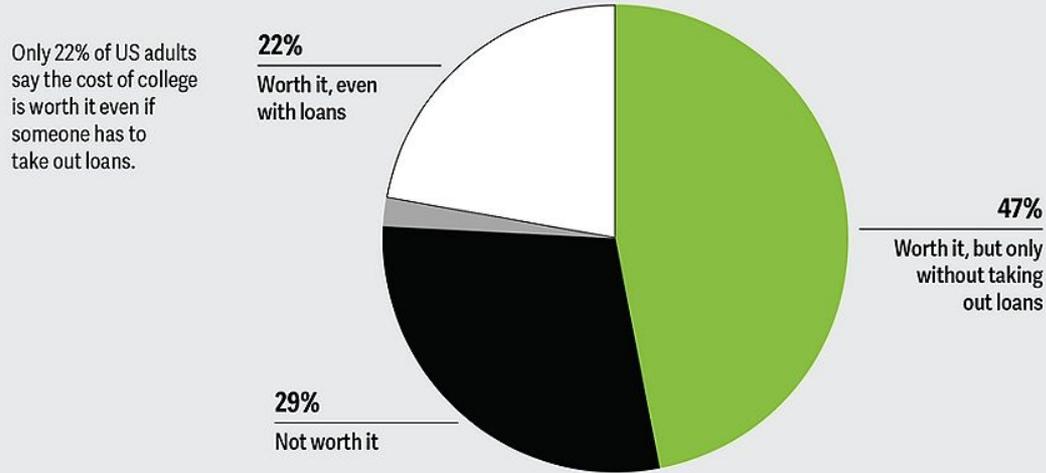


Source: College Board, "College Benefits and Costs: Student Perception and Data Realities," February 2025

Figure 5

## Fewer than half of US adults say the cost of college is worth it if students don't have to take out loans

Percentage saying the cost of getting a four-year college degree today is ...



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer is shown but not labeled.

Source: Survey of US adults conducted between between Nov. 27 and Dec. 3, 2023; Pew Research Center, "Is college worth it?" May 15, 2011.



## Perceived Value vs. Outcomes

If a bachelor's degree still has documented, objective benefits, why do Americans, and more specifically high school students, perceive it as less valuable than a decade ago?

Short Answer: It's too soon for a consensus



## Considerations for Colleges

- Confidence has changed much more sharply than enrollment data
  - Does it matter?
- What is valuable for students?
  - How do you demonstrate that value?
- How to address student and family concerns?



## Considerations for Students

- *Is a bachelor's degree the right fit for me?*
- *Why am I pursuing a college education?*
  - *Do I believe it's valuable? What provides that value?*
  - *Is it just what my parents expect from me?*
- *Cost vs. tangible benefits*

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**Open Discussion / Q&A**



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