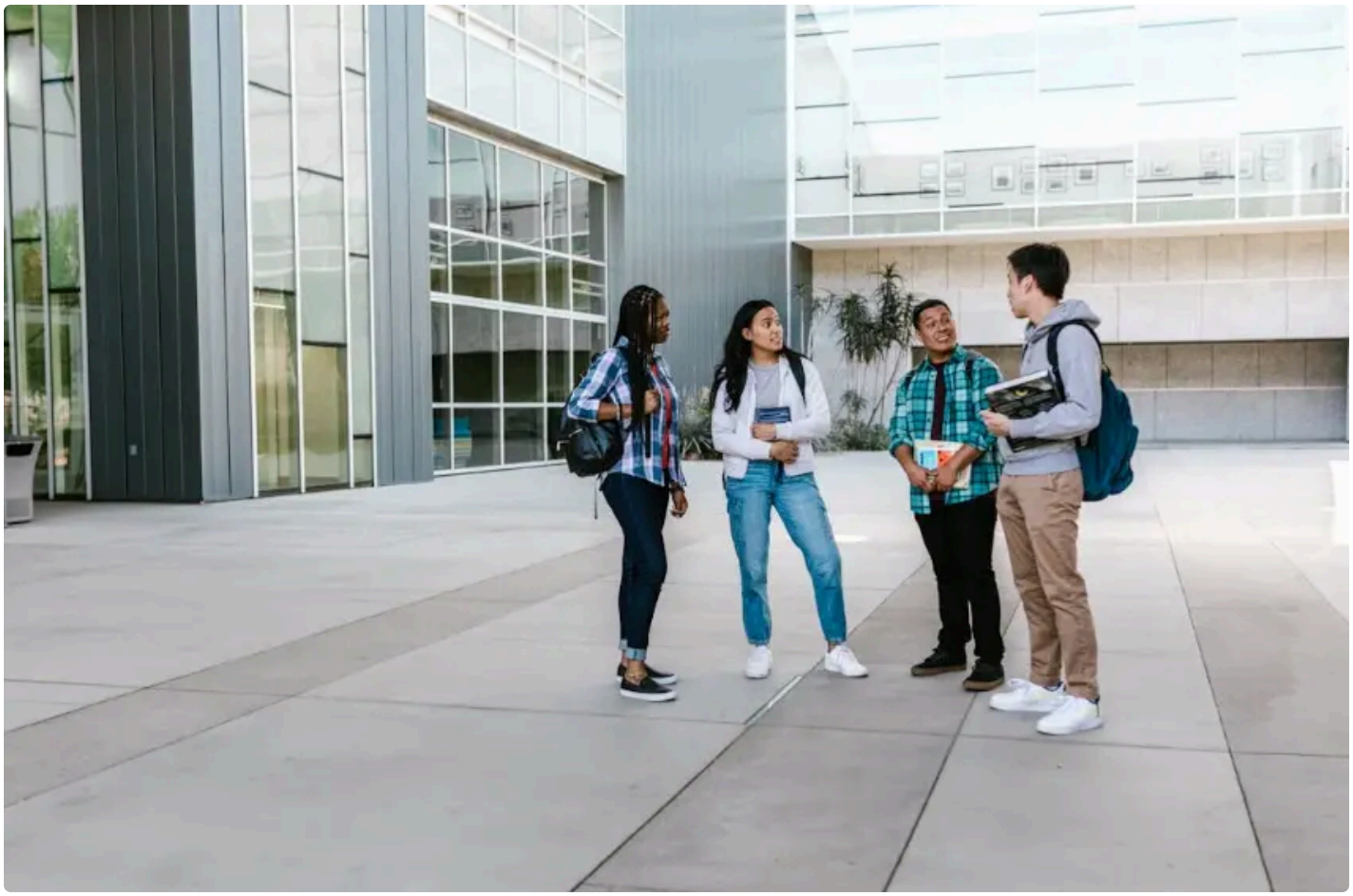
Opinion

Allen Mendenhall: Waning trust in higher ed

Allen Mendenhall | 09.22.24



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Higher education, which once enjoyed wide favor, is increasingly viewed skeptically. According to a summer poll from Gallup, conducted in partnership with the Lumina Foundation, public confidence in colleges and universities is dwindling.

The numbers tell the story: only 36% of Americans believe these institutions are worth the investment, a significant drop from 57% in 2015. This shift has been particularly noticeable among Republicans, who express concerns about perceived ideological bias on campus and the promotion of particular political viewpoints.

Progressives, too, doubt whether the traditional four-year experience adequately prepares students for today's job market. Of course, the ever-rising cost of education and the burden of student debt leave many wondering if the price tag matches the value of a degree.

According to the poll, just 17% of Americans say they have "a great deal" of confidence in higher education, with 19% expressing "quite a lot." The rest are split between lukewarm and low levels of trust, reflecting growing uncertainty about the role and future of colleges and universities in the U.S.

Meanwhile, efforts to boost degree attainment have faltered. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reveals that over 40 million Americans have poured time and money into college without earning a degree.

These figures prompt grave uncertainties about the role of higher education. Is it primarily about acquiring and sharing knowledge, shaping well-rounded individuals capable of studying timeless issues about the human experience? Or is it more civic in nature, preparing informed citizens who can make sound decisions that impact society writ large?

Alternatively, one might argue that higher education's chief goal is to develop practical skills and technical expertise. This view, however, invites scrutiny from employers who frequently assert that universities fail to impart knowledge more effectively than on-the-job training—

and that direct engagement with actual tasks in the workplace provides more valuable learning than the academic consideration of abstract theories.

Ideally, higher education can pursue each of these ends, but what if it no longer does? As we grapple with this crisis of confidence in higher education, we would do well to remember that the academic landscape is as varied as the nation it serves. From community colleges nestled in rural towns to ivy-draped bastions of the elite, from faith-based institutions to sprawling state universities with titanic football teams, each plays a distinct role in the grand tapestry of American education.

Some colleges, animated by religious conviction, seek to meld spiritual growth with intellectual curiosity. Others, with a keen eye on the job market, tailor their curricula to the ever-shifting demands of industry. Still others position themselves as launch pads for budding entrepreneurs or crucibles for future public servants. This diversity is not a bug but a feature of our system, mirroring the multifaceted features of our society and the myriad paths to personal and professional fulfillment.

Yet, amid this cornucopia of educational options and the clamor of critics, we must maintain sight of higher education's loftiest aspiration: knowledge for its own sake. The purest form of college education transcends mere vocational training or ideological indoctrination. It wrestles with the perennial questions that have both vexed and inspired humanity since time immemorial. What is justice? What is the nature of reality? What does it mean to live a good life?

These are not queries that lend themselves to easy quantification. They yield no immediate return on investment, at least not in any sense that would satisfy a cost-benefit analysis or please the compilers of college rankings. But to reduce education to a mere financial calculation or a political battleground is to miss its profound value entirely.

This is not to dismiss valid concerns about affordability, accessibility, or practical application of knowledge. These problems demand our attention and innovative solutions. But in addressing them, we must not lose sight of education's most noble aim – the pursuit of wisdom itself.

In an age obsessed with metrics and measurable outcomes, where confidence in institutions wanes and cynicism flourishes, we must champion the intrinsic value of learning. For in that pursuit lies a worth that no poll can capture, no standardized test can measure, and no salary

survey can adequately capture. It is, in the end, the cultivation of the human mind – a goal as vital today as it was when Plato founded his Academy.

As Albert Jay Nock said: "The university's business is the conservation of useless knowledge; and what the university itself apparently fails to see is that this enterprise is not only noble but indispensable as well, that society can not exist unless it goes on." The so-called useless knowledge might be the most useful in the long run.

Note: This piece is adapted from Allen Mendenhall's regular segment "Word to the Wise" on Troy Public Radio.

Allen Mendenhall is Associate Dean and Grady Rosier Professor in the Sorrell College of Business at Troy University and Executive Director of the Manuel H. Johnson Center for Political Economy. Visit his website at AllenMendenhall.com.

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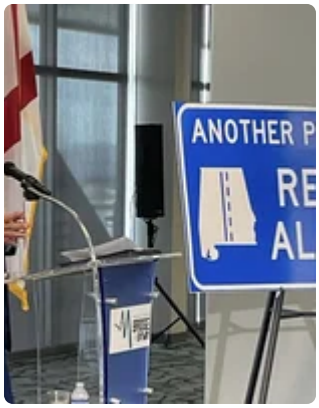

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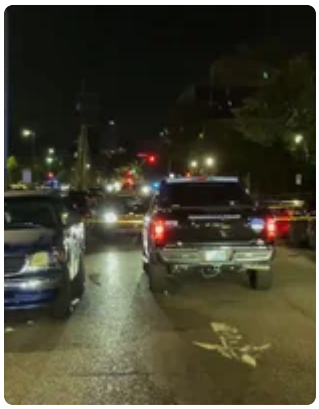

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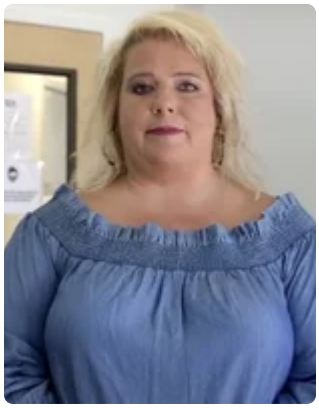

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