



## Partisanship and Higher Education: Where Republicans and Democrats agree

**NOT LONG AGO**, nearly everyone viewed universities as beacons of knowledge, wisdom, and scientific progress guiding us toward a brighter future. After World War II, college enrollments climbed steadily with every passing year. Even when Democrats and Republicans could agree on nothing else, they both subscribed to the old adage, “the more education, the better.”

Not so today.

In our most recent public-opinion survey (see “The 2017 *EdNext* Poll on School Reform,” *features*, Winter 2018), we find sharp differences between Democrats and Republicans about the value of a bachelor’s degree (as distinct from a two-year associate’s degree). Three-fourths of Democrats would choose the bachelor’s for their children, but only 57 percent of Republicans would. Conversely, nearly a third of Republicans would have their children go for an associate’s degree, while only a sixth of Democrats would make that choice.

What’s driving these differences of opinion? Is politics clouding our judgment of what’s best for our children? Or do people, when they have the appropriate information about the costs and benefits of college alternatives, put politics aside in making these choices?

Judging by the headlines, it would seem that choosing between an associate’s and a bachelor’s degree has, like so much else, been drawn into the ever-widening political divide of our time. Speaking at Gateway Technical College in Kenosha, Wisconsin, last April, President Donald Trump said, “Vocational education is the way of the future.” A month later, his secretary of transportation, Elaine Chao, elaborated: “The good news is that workers don’t need an expensive four-year degree to access [many] good-paying jobs.”

By contrast, Democrats are pitching for a vast increase in tuition subsidies to students at both two-year and four-year colleges. “It is imperative that the next president put forward a bold plan to make debt-free college available to all,” Hillary Clinton declared during the presidential campaign. After the election, Senator Bernie Sanders introduced a bill that would enact free tuition at two-year and four-year institutions alike.

The value of a bachelor’s degree has never been greater. According to the College Board, students who get a bachelor’s earn, on average, 33 percent more annually than do students who receive only an associate’s degree. As Princeton economist Cecilia Rouse puts it, “for most students, the benefits [of a

bachelor’s diploma] will outweigh the costs.”

Yet community colleges have their place in American higher education. Associate’s degrees provide certificates that open up job opportunities for many.

Still, it would be a matter of concern if partisan politics were interfering with people’s choices about their children’s future. Do these leanings persist even after people receive accurate information about the costs and benefits of both a bachelor’s and an associate’s degree?

To explore this question, we did an experiment in our poll. Before asking people their preferences for their children’s higher education, we gave a subset of the respondents information about both the earnings information mentioned above and the average cost of tuition, board, and fees at two-year colleges (\$7,620 per year) and four-year public institutions (\$14,210 annually). When Democrats receive this information, just 66 percent prefer the four-year degree, the same percentage as that for Republicans. Economic realities triumph over politics.

Even when this information is not supplied, the difference between Democrats and Republicans is much smaller among parents of children 18 and under. Seventy-six percent of Republican parents want their children to pursue a four-year degree, almost as high a proportion as the 82 percent of Democratic parents. That difference, too, is erased when information on college costs and potential earnings is provided.

I find these results comforting. An associate’s degree is the right choice for some, while a bachelor’s program is the better option for others—but choices with respect to children’s education should be based on something other than political viewpoints. It is probably utopian to think that needless partisanship could be eliminated on other issues if we could provide people with better information about them. But it is good to know that, at least in this one area of personal decisionmaking, common sense still prevails.

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**MISSION STATEMENT** In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.

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