

Poor Grades From the Public

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By [Jacqueline Thomsen](#)

As far as parents are concerned, the days of college being a place to focus on learning are over.

A national poll released by the [Robert Morris University Polling Institute](#) [rmu.edu/PollingInstitute] Monday found that only a little more than half of respondents viewed the college selection process favorably and less than half thought colleges were doing enough to help graduates find jobs. Those involved with the poll said the results indicated a need for institutions to keep up with the changing view of higher education as a way to find employment rather than earn a degree.

Based on nine characteristics, including “being transparent on costs” and “emphasis on job placement after graduation,” only 54.6 percent of parents of children who had attended college, who were currently enrolled in a program or who already graduated gave the process of choosing a college to attend a favorable review, on average.

Only 49.2 percent believed the institutions were paying attention to current labor needs and trends, and 54.8 percent said there was enough of an emphasis on job placement after graduation.

And based on answers from all respondents to the poll, public perception of the value of a degree has turned sour over the past decade. Sixty-eight percent of surveyed parents said they viewed undergraduate degrees in a positive light 10 years ago but only 44.6 percent saw the degrees favorably now, and there was a similar drop from 73.2 percent to 57.9 percent for graduate degrees.

Jerry Lindsley, president of the Center for Research and Public Policy, the organization that helped to develop and conduct the poll, said other industries often score in the high 80s or even low 90s in terms of favorability, and the low overall rating of the college selection process showed that institutions have to determine how best to improve the system.

He said administrators who view the survey should strongly consider adapting their universities' priorities and services to keep up with the demands shown in the poll results, including expanding relationships with potential employers and tailoring institutions to fit the job market.

“I would sure as heck get more engaged in existing community needs assessments, or start doing my own in the world of employee training,” Lindsley said. “I would get a whole lot more in touch with local employers or statewide employers than I am now, just to really see what needs are going to be requested.”

Nationally, employment rates for recent college graduates seem to be recovering from the recent recession. A study by the National Association of Colleges and Employers released last week [www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/06/05/new-national-survey-aims-set-baseline-postgraduation-outcomes] found that roughly 54 percent of responding members of the Class of 2014 found employment within six months of graduation, and about 75 percent chose some sort of path within the same time frame.

Wendy Beckemeyer, vice president of enrollment management at Robert Morris University, said choosing a college is a "high-stakes decision" for parents and students alike, as they try to weigh different factors while choosing from thousands of different institutions. Job placement has emerged as a leading component in that decision-making process.

"Focusing on job placement is something that parents and students are thinking about -- are the outcomes for their investment going to be really worthwhile?" she said.

Beckemeyer disputed the thought of the value of college degrees declining, citing data from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce [cew.georgetown.edu/] that indicated that students with college degrees are likely to earn more than their peers without any higher education. "I'm not going to say that it doesn't hurt my feelings a bit to see that kind of shift in 10 years," she said. "It's the very best thing you can do, provided you're prepared after high school graduation, to pursue a bachelor's degree. And earning one has so many lasting positives."