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◆ WSJ NEWS EXCLUSIVE | U.S.

Americans Are Losing Faith in College Education, WSJ-NORC Poll Finds

Confidence in value of a degree plummeted among women and senior citizens during pandemic



People ages 18-34 are among those who have the strongest doubts about the value of a college degree, a new poll finds.

PHOTO: BRIAN SNYDER/REUTERS

By Douglas Belkin

March 31, 2023 5:30 am ET

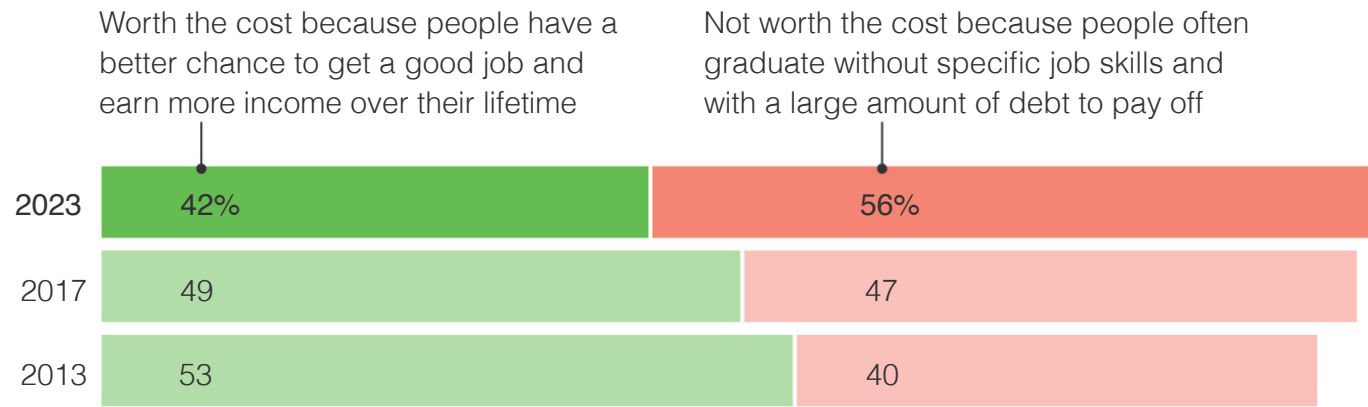
A majority of Americans don't think a college degree is worth the cost, according to a new Wall Street Journal-NORC poll, a new low in confidence in what has long been a hallmark of the American dream.

The survey, conducted with NORC at the University of Chicago, a nonpartisan research organization, found that 56% of Americans think earning a four-year degree is a bad bet compared with 42% who retain faith in the credential.

Skepticism is strongest among people ages 18-34, and people with college degrees are among those whose opinions have soured the most, portending a profound shift for higher education in the years ahead.

In 2013, 53% of Americans were bullish on college, and 40% weren't. In 2017, 49% of Americans thought a four-year degree would lead to good jobs and higher earnings, compared with 47% who didn't.

When it comes to getting a four-year college degree, which of the following statements comes closer to your point of view? A four-year college education is...



Note: 'Don't know'/skipped/refused responses not shown. Numbers that don't add up to 100 are due to rounding.
 Source: WSJ/NORC poll of 1,019 adults, conducted March 1-13, 2023; margin of error +/- 4.1 pct. pts. 2017 data from WSJ/NBC survey of telephone poll of 1,200 adults conducted Aug. 5-7; margin of error +/- 2.8 pct. pts. 2013 data from CNBC AAES survey of June 2013.

“These findings are indeed sobering for all of us in higher education, and in some ways, a wake-up call,” said Ted Mitchell, the president of the American Council on Education, which counts more than 1,700 institutions of higher education as members. “We need to do a better job at storytelling, but we need to improve our practice, that seems to me to be the only recipe I know of regaining public confidence.”

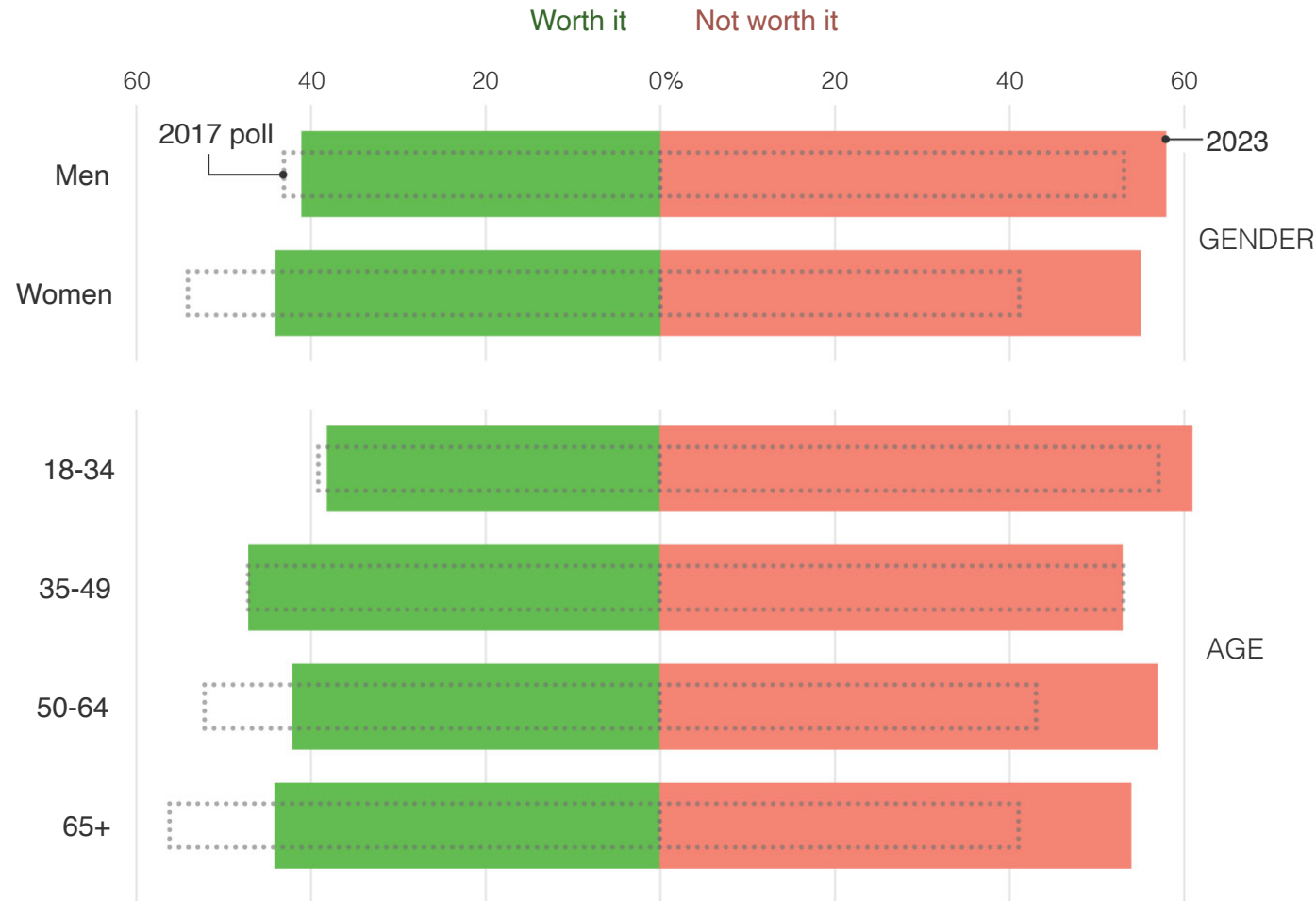
Dr. Mitchell cited student debt, which has reached \$1.7 trillion, and the 60% graduation rate at four-year colleges as two of the biggest problems undermining confidence in the sector.

Public skepticism toward higher education began to rise after the 2008 recession and compounded during the pandemic. Enrollment in U.S. colleges declined by

about 15% over the last decade while the growth in alternative credentials, including apprenticeships, increased sharply.

In 2017, doubt over the value of a college degree was greatest among men, Republicans and people living in rural areas. That disaffection preceded a widening gender gap in higher education as hundreds of thousands of men left college during the pandemic.

Is a four-year college education worth the cost?



Sources: WSJ/NORC poll of 1,019 adults, conducted March 1-13, 2023; margin of error +/- 4.1 pct. pts. 2017 data from WSJ/NBC survey of telephone poll of 1,200 adults conducted Aug. 5-7; margin of error +/- 2.8 pct. pts.

This month’s Journal poll found disaffection has spread to all age groups as well as residents of cities and suburbs. The last categories in which a slim majority held fast to their faith in the value of a college degree were Democrats, those with a college degree and those earning more than \$100,000 a year.

But 42% of people with college degrees said in the most recent survey that it wasn't worth it, up more than 10 percentage points from the two polls last decade.

Women and older Americans are driving the decline in confidence. People over the age of 65 with faith in college declined to 44% from 56% in 2017. Confidence among women fell to 44% from 54%, according to the poll.

One of the women who has lost faith in the power of college despite herself obtaining an undergraduate degree, is Danielle Tobias, a 50-year-old dialysis technician in Lorain, Ohio.



Danielle Tobias, a college graduate, advises her stepson to be cautious about education beyond high school.

PHOTO: DANIELLE TOBIAS

Ms. Tobias said neither of her parents graduated from college. Her father worked in a steel mill in Cleveland. Her mother worked in a bakery. Both strongly encouraged her to enroll in college. She graduated in 2003 from Lake Erie College, a private liberal arts school, with a degree in equine studies and \$85,000 in student loan debt.

She worked at a horse stable giving riding lessons for several years before realizing she wasn't earning enough money to live on or make her student debt payments. She now works as a dialysis technician and earns \$36,000 a year at a medical

facility, which provided training at no cost to her.

Ms. Tobias pays \$125 a month on her student loans—the minimum due. Her balance has ballooned to \$145,000. She has made peace with the reality that she will likely die without having paid off her debt, she said.

“Our goal is that students graduate with as little debt as possible and also gain employment,” said Jen Schuller, a spokeswoman for Lake Erie College.

Ms. Tobias’s 20-year-old stepson graduated from high school and now works in a grocery store. She has advised him to be cautious about where and how to continue his education.

“I think college is good for certain things but I have told him he would definitely benefit from some sort of tech or skilled job,” she said. “I have suggested he join a vocation, a school where they teach a skilled trade.”

Bryan Caplan, an economist at George Mason University who has written extensively about higher education, said he thought college was still worth pursuing for “A” students in high school. He suggested “B” students enroll only if they are willing to pursue fields such as economics or engineering because those majors have, on average, strong return on investment.

That many colleges charged full tuition during the pandemic when classes were delivered online was a mistake that hurt the sector’s reputation, he said. Personal connections with professors tended to smooth over any problems that might arise from the left-wing bias among faculty, he said.

“Colleges have squandered a lot of good will by pushing a dogmatic left-wing religion,” said Dr. Caplan. “Normal people don’t have sympathy for that sort of thing, they find it very off- putting.”

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

How valuable do you believe a college degree is today? Join the conversation below.

Patsy Williams, 70, who works as a maid in Anderson, S.C., said she was less concerned with the politics taught in college than the opportunity for her seven grandchildren to learn enough to enter a profession.

Ms. Williams attended school through the 11th grade, then went to work in a factory folding pillow cases. One of her three children graduated college.

“I want every child to learn all they can because if they don’t we’re all in trouble,” she said. “We don’t have mills down here any more, we have restaurants and a restaurant job won’t buy you a house and a car. I tell [my grandchildren] all the time, ‘I’m looking for doctors and lawyers.’”

Paulo Eskitch, a 47-year-old violinist who lives in Tulsa, Okla., is less emphatic about whether his daughter, now 7 years old, should enroll in college when the time comes.

Mr. Eskitch has a master’s degree in music and earns about \$30,000 a year playing in several different orchestras. He said a degree has become necessary in his field but he sometimes wishes he had pursued welding as a career because he thinks he could have made more money.



Paulo Eskitch, a college-educated violinist, says he could have made more money working as a welder.

PHOTO: PAULO ESKITCH

percentage points.

Write to Douglas Belkin at Doug.Belkin@wsj.com

Appeared in the April 1, 2023, print edition as 'More Say Colleges Aren't Worth the Cost.'

That said, he anticipates supporting his daughter if she decides to pursue higher education because there aren't enough good alternatives.

“There are some fields you just can't enter unless you have a college degree,” he said. “I'm not saying that's right but it's the way it is.”

The Journal-NORC survey polled 1,019 people from March 1-13, mostly online. The margin of error was plus or minus 4.1

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