



Why Making the Case for Higher Education's Value Still Matters *(And How to Do It Well)*

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Session Goals

- Overview of Public Opinion on Higher Education Value
- Discuss ROI Data Usage in Accountability and Incentive Structure
- Lessons in Understanding Perceptions of Higher Ed Value in MT

Is College Worth the Cost? The Public Remains Divided

Is college worth it? Generation Z, torn between investment and risk



18/06/2025 • English • Written by Laura Islas

LIFESTYLE

Is college actually worth it anymore? Gen Z isn't sure, study says

By [Adriana Diaz](#)

EPISODE 1402 | JUN 10, 2025

Is college still worth it?

Some Americans are rethinking the value of a four-year degree.

High-Stakes Gamble: Is College Still Worth It?

R RELEVANT Magazine

The Great College Rethink: Is Higher Ed Still Worth It?

The answer isn't a simple yes or no. It's a complex tapestry of choices, opportunities, and personal journeys.

MONEY

Is a College Degree Really Worth It?

BY ERIKA KOTITE

Loans / Student

Is College Worth It? Here's How Much Student Debt Boomer Homeowners Have

May 19, 2025 • 3 MIN READ



Written by [Crystal Mayer](#)

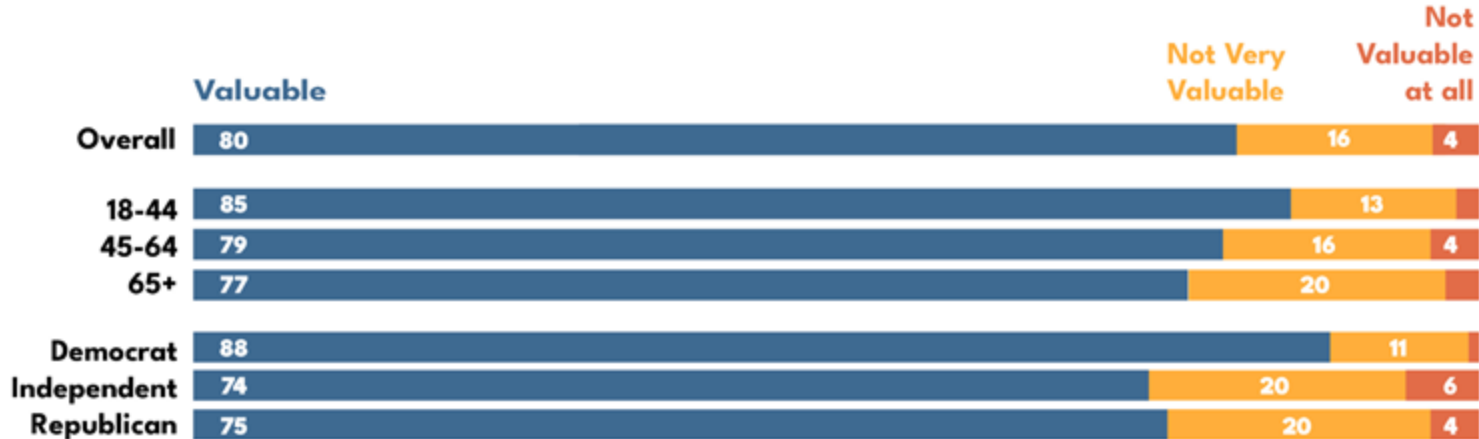


Edited by [Amber Barkley](#)

Americans Think Higher Ed is Valuable



Do You Think a Four-Year College Degree is Valuable?



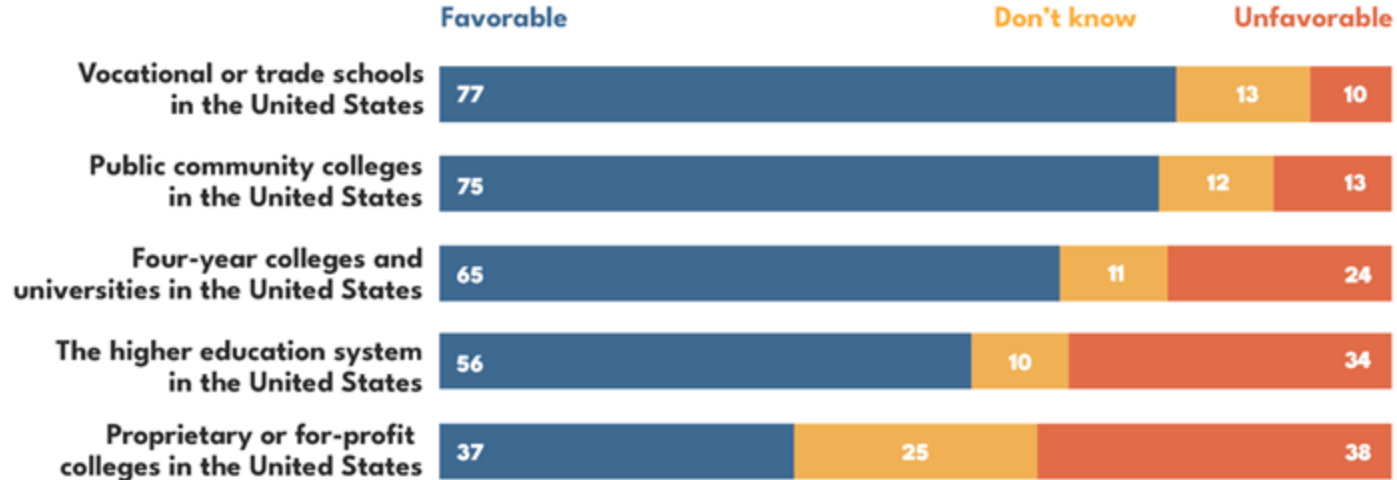
Note: Values may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Third Way/Global Strategy Group and GS Strategy Group poll of 1,500 eligible voters nationwide from March 21-26, 2024.

Americans Think Higher Ed is Valuable



Voters' Favorability of Higher Education Institutions



Source: Third Way/Global Strategy Group and GS Strategy Group poll of 1,500 eligible voters nationwide from March 21-26, 2024.

Americans Think Higher Ed is Valuable

- **89%** of American adults without a college degree or credential say having **at least one credential** is valuable.

(Gallup-Lumina Foundation State of Higher Education 2025)

- **88%** of Americans say education after high school is needed for **higher-paid jobs** and more **career opportunities**.

(New America, Varying Degrees 2025)

- **80%** of Americans say colleges and universities **help individuals get ahead and succeed in life**.

(New America, Varying Degrees 2025)

Americans Think Higher Ed is Valuable... *For Now*

- **27%** say it is **less important** for people today to have a two- or four-year degree in order to have a successful career than it was 20 years ago. *(Gallup-Lumina Foundation State of Higher Education 2025)*
- **65%** of American voters expect **fewer** high school graduates will pursue higher ed in the next decade because it **does not offer the same value** and advantages in the job market as it did in the past. *(Third Way 2024 nationwide voter poll)*

What's Changing?

7 in 10 U.S. adults believe higher ed is heading in the wrong direction.

- **COVID:** **69%** say the pandemic caused a drop in college quality. (Third Way)
- **Campus Culture:** **38%** of those with little confidence in higher education attributed that to issues of political and ideological climate. (Lumina-Gallup)
- **Cost:** **81%** of voters and **86%** of high school students believe college is getting more expensive. (Third Way)
- **Careers:** **37%** of those with low confidence in higher ed say it doesn't teach relevant skills. (Lumina-Gallup)

Insight #1: Communicate Cost Clearly

Among high school students surveyed by Third Way:

- Most felt anxiety about paying for college—stemming from *perceptions* of the cost and *uncertainty* about how to pay for it.
- Most view student debt as extremely risky and scary, and many see it as something to be avoided at all costs.
- Most assume they *won't* qualify for scholarships, Pell Grants, or other sources of aid to help reduce cost below the sticker price.

Insight #2: Focus on Career Alignment



**Which of the Following Comes Closest to Your Definition
of the Value of Higher Education?**



Source: Third Way/Global Strategy Group and GS Strategy Group poll of 1,500 eligible voters nationwide from March 21–26, 2024.

Insight #2: Focus on Career Alignment

In your own words, what is the value of higher education today? (Open End)



"Higher education gives students more opportunities for **higher payer jobs and security**. It is an **investment in their future**."

"It is **hard to get a high paying job without higher education**. In this context it is very valuable."

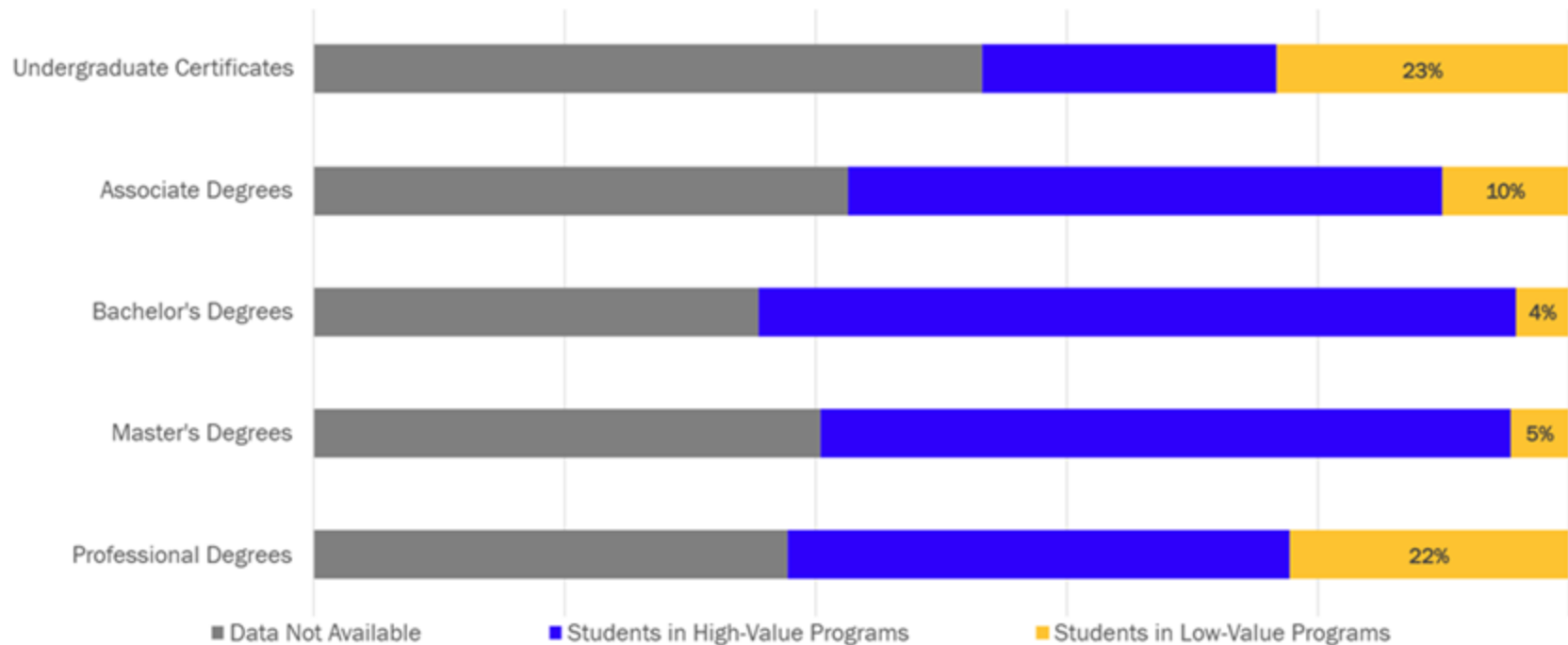
"A **better career and advancement for me and my family**. Better paying job."

"The value of higher education today lies in its ability to provide individuals with opportunities for **personal growth, intellectual development, and career advancement**."

Insight #3: Be Transparent About ROI

- Only **17%** of high school students “strongly agree” they can easily find information about which colleges offer the best ROI.
- Students express wanting more **quantitative** information about post-graduation employment rates and earnings, and more **qualitative** information like testimonials from former students.
- Changes in the federal policy landscape will necessitate more and clearer information about how college is paying off.

Communicating ROI with Limited Data



Source: [Gainful Employment and Financial Value Transparency Regulations](#)

Helping Students Access ROI Information

- SLDSs can help measure and publicly report the employment outcomes of students
- College Scorecard and other tools can provide insights as well

Helping Policymakers Use ROI

- Supporting data transparency
- Improving completions
- Incentivizing credentials of value

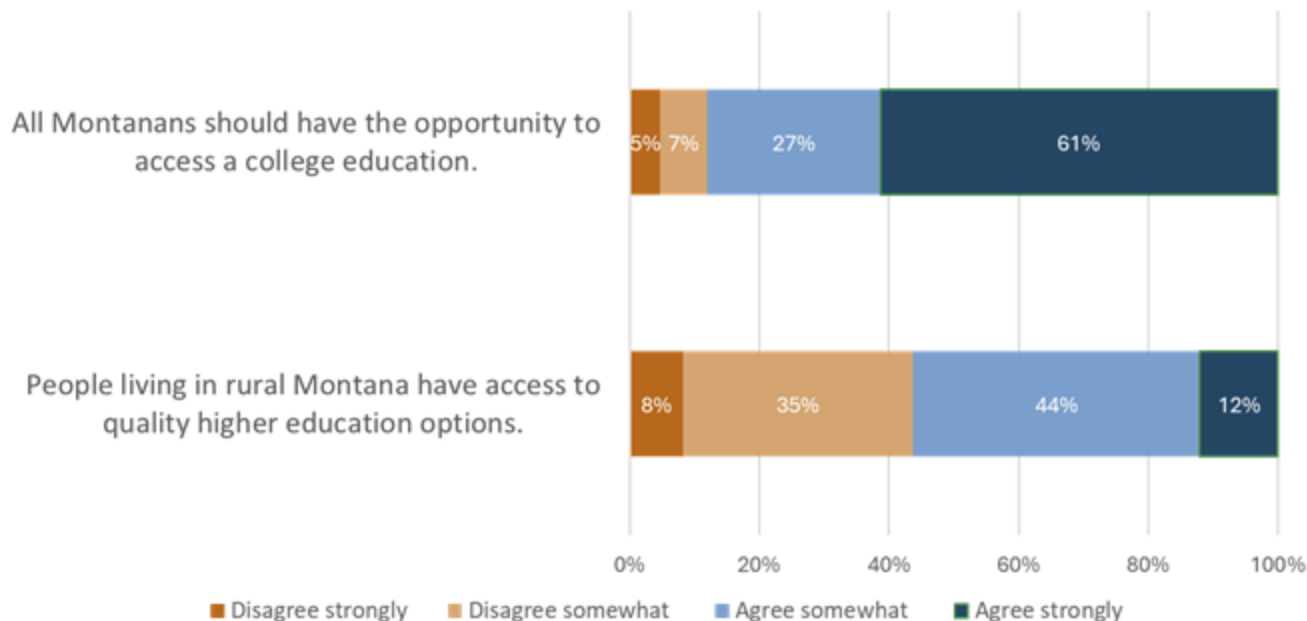
Helping Policymakers Use ROI

- Improving ROI will help restore Americans' faith in the value of higher education.
- States are increasingly using ROI data for:
 - Transparency (public-facing dashboards)
 - Financial incentives (outcomes-based funding)
 - Program offerings (considering workforce demand when approving new programs)

Demonstrating Value in Montana...

Montanans have a shared commitment to college access.

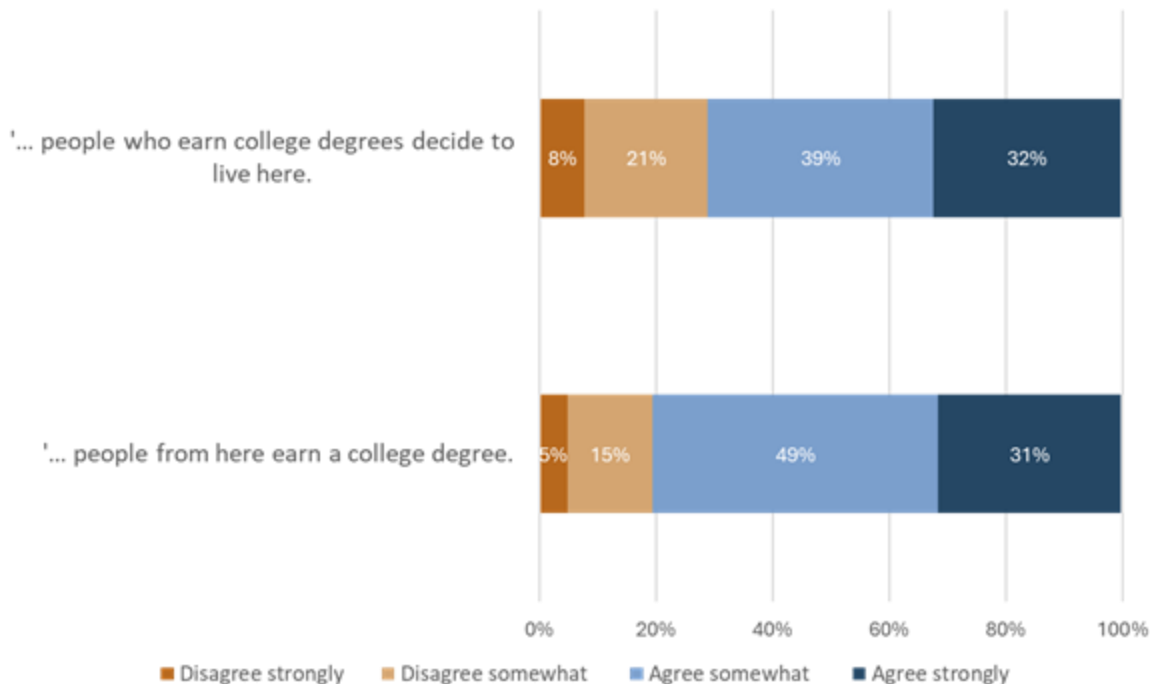
Resident Agreement That...



Nearly nine out of ten residents (88%) agreed that ***all Montanans should have the opportunity to access a college education.***

College degrees contribute positively to communities.

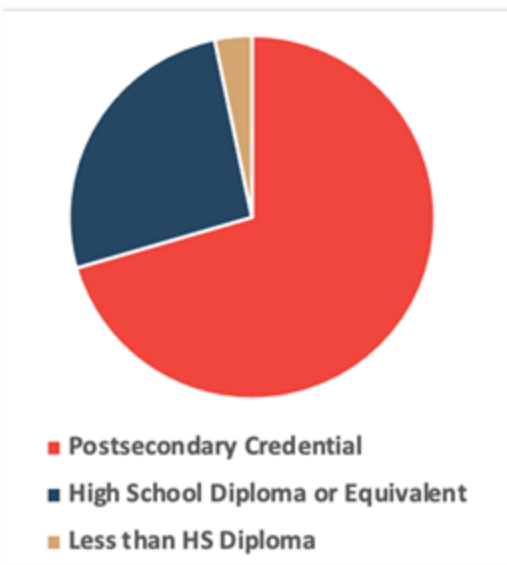
"My Community Benefits from..."



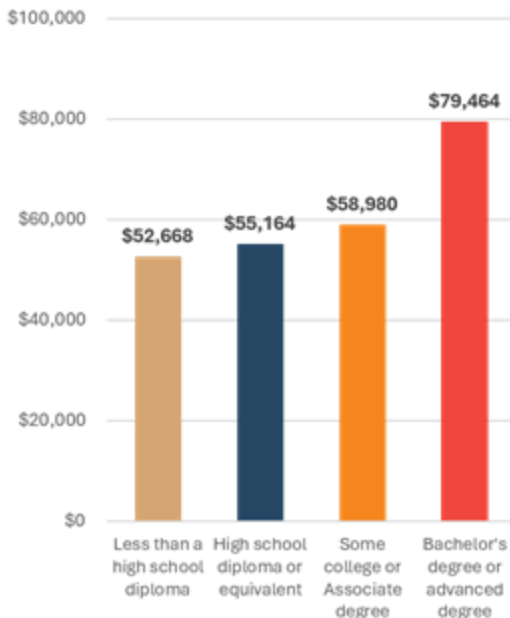
Most of the state's residents said that **communities benefit** when locals earn college degrees and when degree holders move to their community.

Postsecondary education provides individuals with pathways to good jobs.

Share of Jobs by Education Level



Average Annual Earnings (2022)



The majority of jobs (69%) in Montana will be available to those with postsecondary credentials by 2031.

Nearly **75%** of graduates from Montana postsecondary institutions work in Montana at some point in the ten years following graduation (MT DLI).

To remain competitive, especially given that Montana is a net-importer of college graduates, and to meet the state's workforce needs, Montana's public institutions must continue to increase resident student access to postsecondary opportunities (NCHEMS).

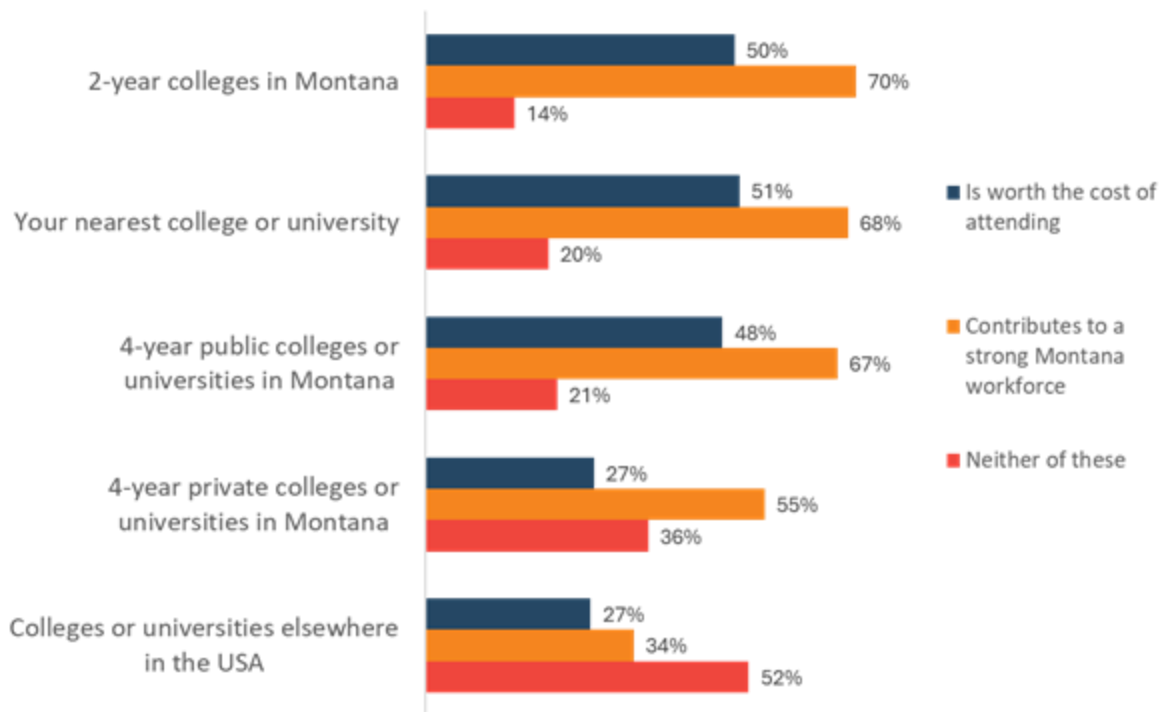
Chart Data Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce forecast using data from the US Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS); US Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS); US Bureau of Labor Statistics; HS Market; and Lightcast.

Earnings Data Source: US Census Bureau, Quarterly Workforce Indicators.

MT DLI: Watson, A., Wagner, B., & Trautman, E., Montana Post-Secondary Workforce Report (2022). Retrieved March 6, 2024, from https://imi.mt.gov/_docs/Publications/MI-Pubs/Special-Reports-and-Studies/MTCollegeReport2022.pdf.

Yet.....barriers persist.

Percentage of Residents Saying That ...



The majority of Montanans believe that public higher education contributes to a strong Montana workforce.

However, residents are split on whether college is worth the cost.

Is it material reality that college cost is too high?

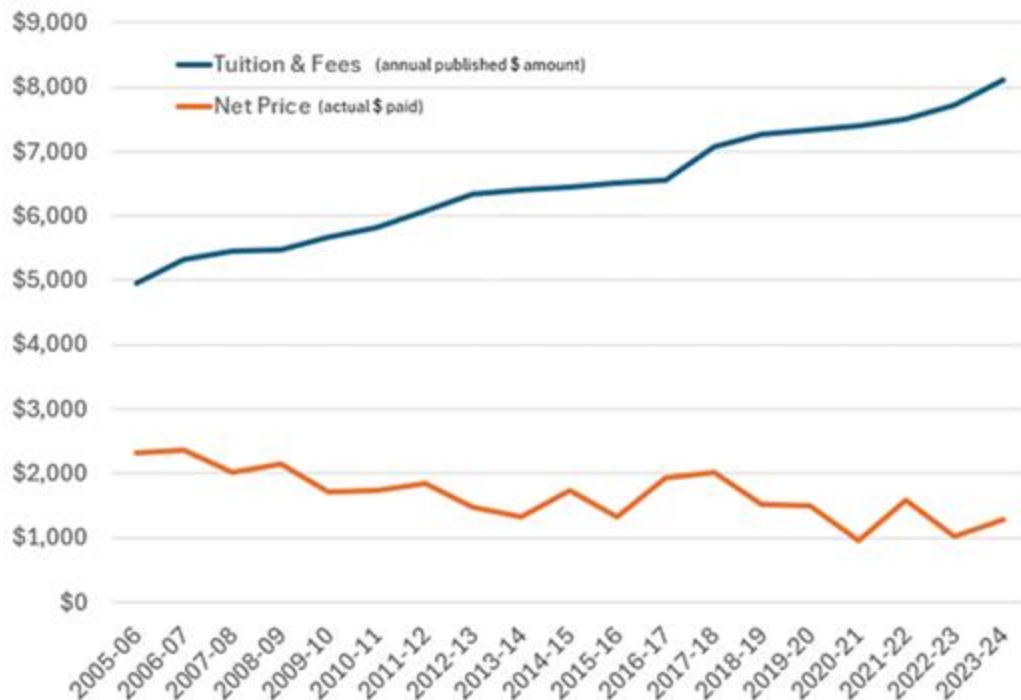
		Public Two-Year		Public Four-Year Nondocotoral		Public Research	
		24% of enrollment		16% of enrollment		60% of enrollment	
		Net Price*	% of avg. family income	Net Price*	% of avg. family income	Net Price*	% of avg. family income
\$56k MT Median Family Income	\$0-30k (18% of households)	8,448	49	11,000	63	13,576	78
	\$30k-48k (16%)	8,874	23	12,161	31	14,100	36
	\$48k-75k (21%)	11,674	19	14,180	23	17,321	28
	\$75k-110k (19%)	12,696	14	16,869	18	19,549	21
	\$110k + (25%)	13,838	7	17,138	9	20,866	11

Or is the *perception* of cost and potential for ROI skewed?

FLAGSHIPS

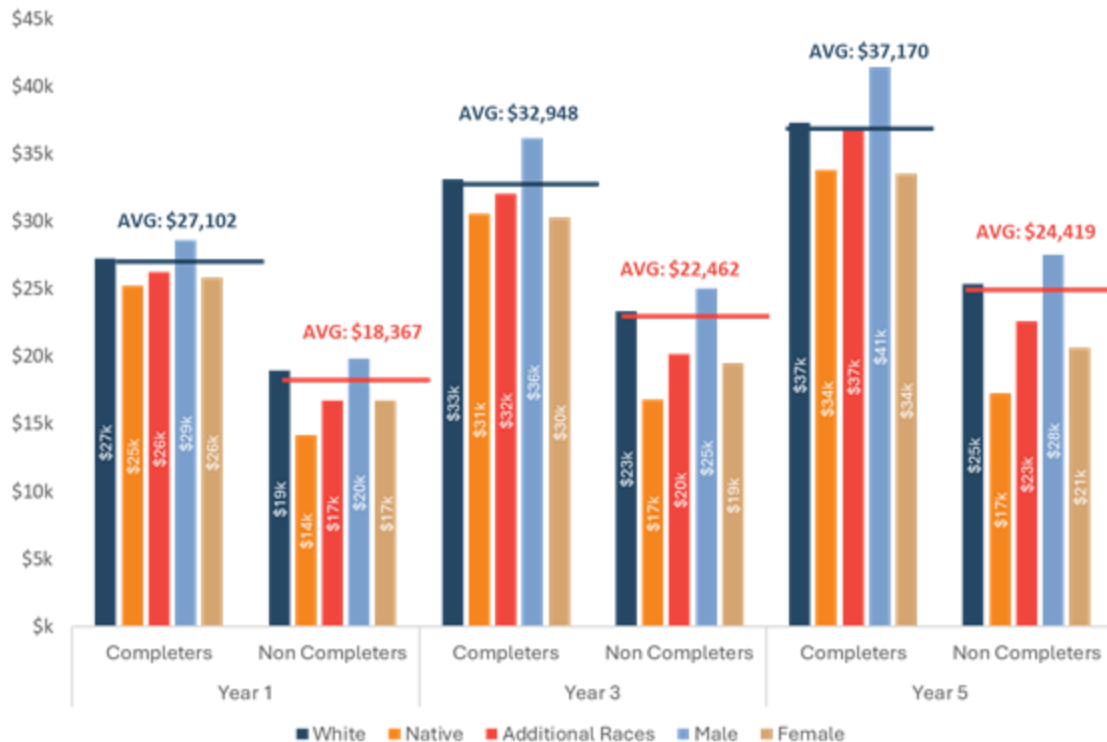
Published Rate vs. Paid Amount

1st-time, Full-time, Resident Students



Montanans paid less in tuition and fees cost in the 2023-2024 academic year than they did 20 years ago.

In MT, completion is the lynchpin.



Increased wage outcomes for college graduates suggest that earning a degree has a positive ROI for individuals.

Yet, that positive return on investment is dramatically curtailed for those who do not complete degrees.

Furthermore, respondents who don't have college experience are significantly more likely to **disagree** that a college degree leads to better career (37%) compared to those with an AA or BA (31% and 18%).

Data source: Wage outcomes 1-, 3- and 5-years after departure from MUS enrollment for completers and non-completers. Wage data sourced from MT DLI unemployment insurance programs. Figures report outcomes for Montana residents who are employed in-state for at least one quarter during the reported year. All wages expressed in constant 2019 dollars. Year 1 reports students departing 2010-2016. Year 3 students departing 2010-2014. Year 5 students departing 2010-2012.

Making sense of college value in MT

Just over ½ of respondents who were considering college in the next five years have household incomes under \$50k. Those respondents are more likely to face affordability challenges.

69% of those considering college in the next five years disagree that people living in rural Montana have access to quality higher education,” a significantly greater proportion when compared to other college-going household types (41%-44%).

Yet, they are also less likely to have peer groups who have positive experiences in higher education. MT residents with annual household incomes below \$50k (51%) were less likely than those with higher incomes (71%) to say most people they knew had positive experiences in college and finished their degrees.

Considerations for Driving Value in Higher Ed

Barriers to access are real (and perceived). Affordability impacts access for many Montanans, especially those from rural areas and those in Montana's middle-income bracket and below.

Completion matters (even more than we think). In Montana, MUS institutions graduate students at or just below national averages for on-time 2- and 4-year programs. Some credit, no degree, and debt mean low ROI for students and stranded investment for the state.

Transactional value isn't enough. The facts about higher education's positive impact on increased wage outcomes and positive ROI (for those who complete) are only part of the **transformational** story about the value of college.