

PERCEPTIONS OF COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PRACTICES

Americans would like to see change in the college admissions process, particularly when it comes to the emphasis colleges place on factors other than academics. Overall, 38% consider the college admissions process to be fair, 36% say it is unfair, and 25% say it is neither fair nor unfair.

Previous surveys have captured the factors Americans think colleges should consider in making admission decisions. However, none have asked what they believe colleges do consider. This survey, from the Higher Education Analytics Center at NORC and The AP-NORC Center, asks both, allowing for unique insight into aspects of the college admissions process perceived as needing the greatest change—and those areas where most Americans think colleges are getting it right.

Questions on college admissions were included on two omnibus polls using the AmeriSpeak Panel®, the probability-based panel of NORC at the University of Chicago. First, online and telephone interviews using landlines and cell phones were conducted March 28-April 1, 2019, with 1,009 adults for the Higher Education Analytics Center at NORC. Then, The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research conducted a survey April 11-14, 2019, with online and telephone interviews using landlines and cell phones with 1,108 adults.

Key findings from surveys include:

- In general, 38% regard the college admissions process as fair, while 36% consider it unfair. Another 25% say it is neither fair nor unfair.
- Most Americans think high school grades and standardized admission test scores are and should be the most important factors in



© 2010 AP Photo/Nati Hamik

Three Things You Should Know

About the Surveys on College Admission Among Americans Age 18 and Older:

- 1) Thirty-eight percent think the college admissions process is fair, and 36% say it is unfair.
- 2) Most say high school grades and scores on standardized tests used for college admission are and should be given the highest importance in evaluating applicants to college.
- 3) Many would like to see a family's financial wealth and background be less of a factor in admission decisions—there is a strong call for reducing the importance placed on family donations made to schools and for giving preferential treatment to children of an alumnus.

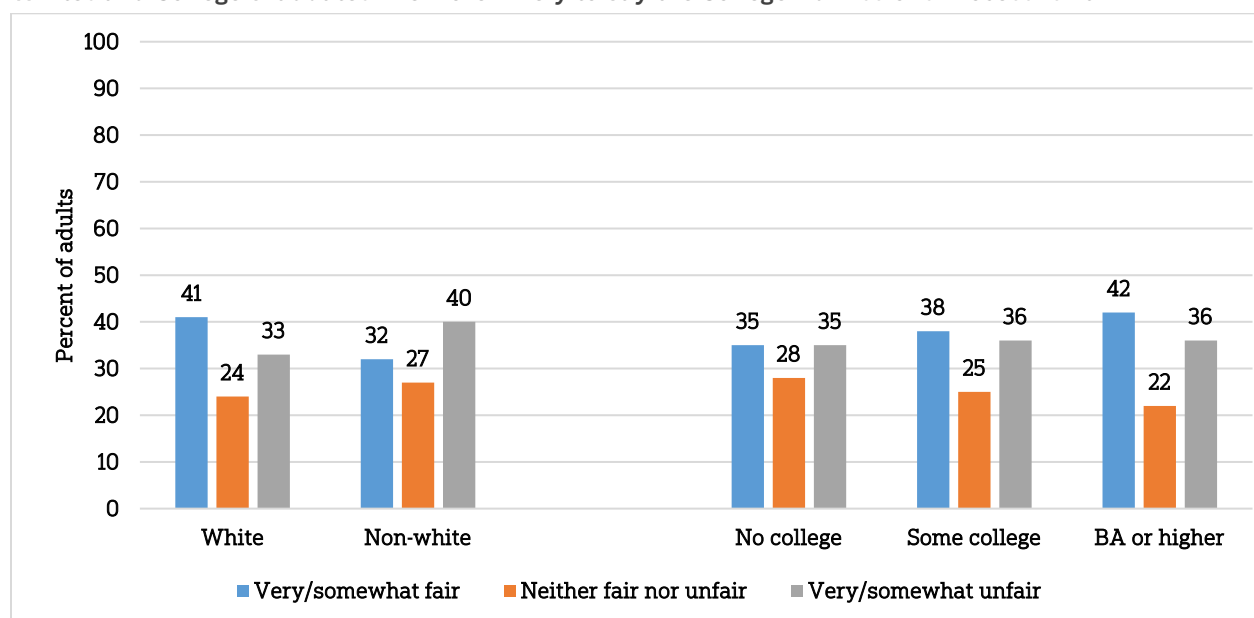
determining college admission. Eighty-one percent say a student’s performance in high school is important when colleges decide admission, and 76% agree that it should be critical to the admission decision. Similarly, 75% say scores on tests such as the ACT and SAT are important when colleges consider applications, and 68% say they should remain important.

- Many say a family’s finances should be less of a factor when evaluating college applications. While 44% think donations made to the school are considered by colleges when determining a student’s admission, only 13% say it should have any significant bearing on admissions. And 46% think colleges give weight to the family’s ability to pay full tuition, while only 23% think that should be a consideration.
- A relative who is an alumnus of the college is an important factor in admission, according to 37%, but only 11% think legacy status should be given much consideration.
- Athletic ability is viewed as important to colleges by 54%. However, only 32% think colleges should make athletic talent an important factor in considering college applications.
- Among both whites and non-whites, 40% think colleges currently use race and ethnicity as a consideration for admission. Thirty-seven percent of non-whites believe this should continue, compared with 22% of whites.
- Thirty-five percent of both men and women say gender is an important factor in admission, and 27% of both gender should remain important.

IS THE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PROCESS FAIR?

In general, 38% of Americans think the college admissions process is very or somewhat fair for students who are applying, while 36% say it is very or somewhat unfair. Twenty-five percent describe the process for getting into college as neither fair nor unfair. Whites and college graduates are more likely to regard the status quo system as fair than are non-whites and those who did not attend college.

Whites and College Graduates Are More Likely to Say the College Admissions Process Is Fair



Questions: In general, how fair do you think the college admissions process is for students who are applying?
 Source: AP-NORC poll conducted April 11-14, 2019, with 1,108 adults

Grades and Test Score Do and Should Determine Admissions

The majority of Americans believe that high school grades and standardized test scores (e.g., ACT, SAT), are and should be the most prominent factors when evaluating an application for admission. Responses were similar regardless of income, race, or education level. Those who are 60 years of age or older are more likely to report the value of continued use of test scores when compared with younger Americans.

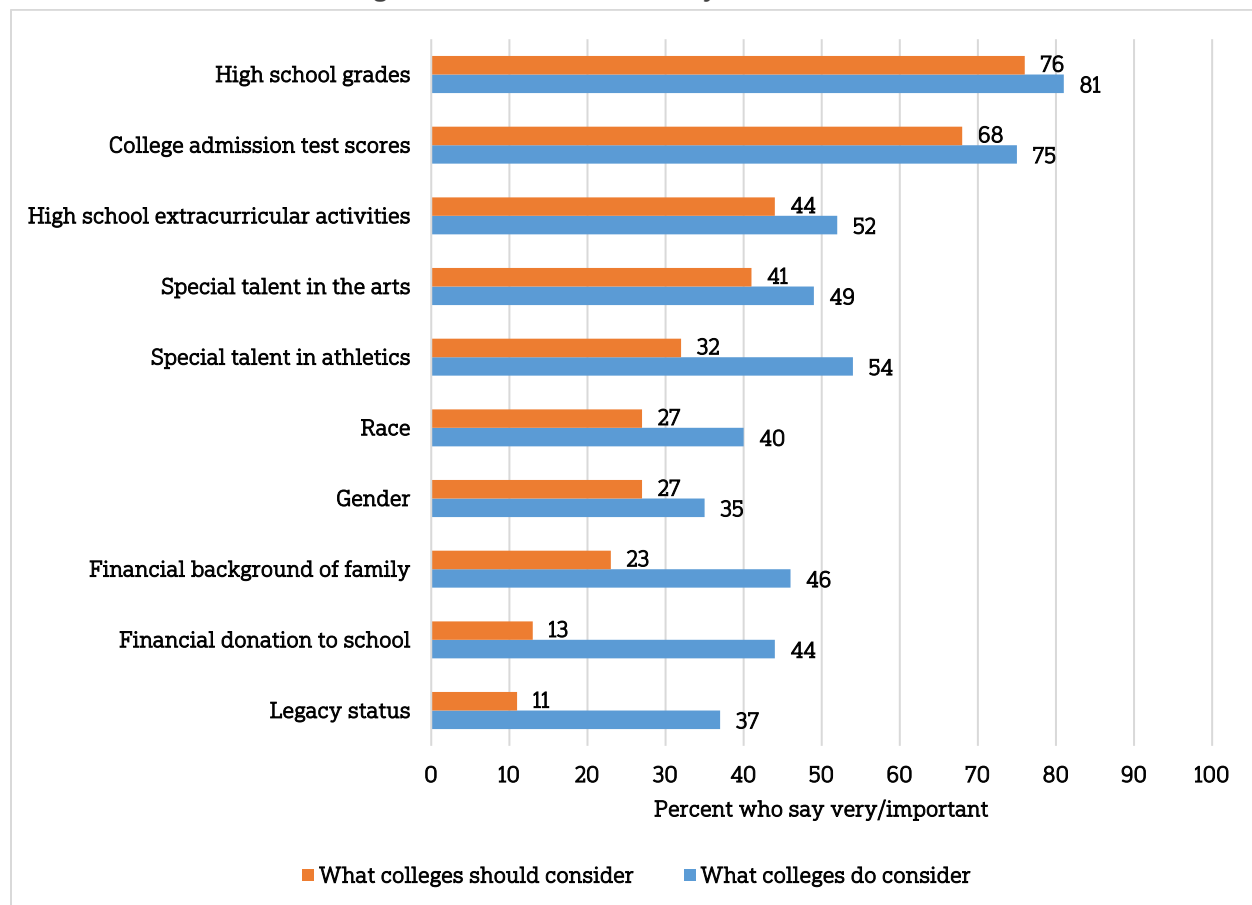
However, there is support for change in the college admissions process, particularly when it comes to the emphasis colleges place on factors other than academics.

Americans believe extracurricular activities in high school (such as the debate team, 4-H, or student government) are the next most important factors to consider in college admissions after high school grades and standardized test scores. However, extracurriculars are a distant third. Only 44% believe extracurricular activities should be very important or important.

Twenty-seven percent say race and ethnicity should be considered when reviewing an applicant for admission. Among both whites and non-whites, 40% think colleges currently use race and ethnicity as a consideration. Thirty-seven percent of non-whites believe this should continue, compared with 22% of whites.

Having children under the age of 18 was not a significant factor in the results.

What Americans Believe Colleges Consider and What They Should Consider in the Admissions Process



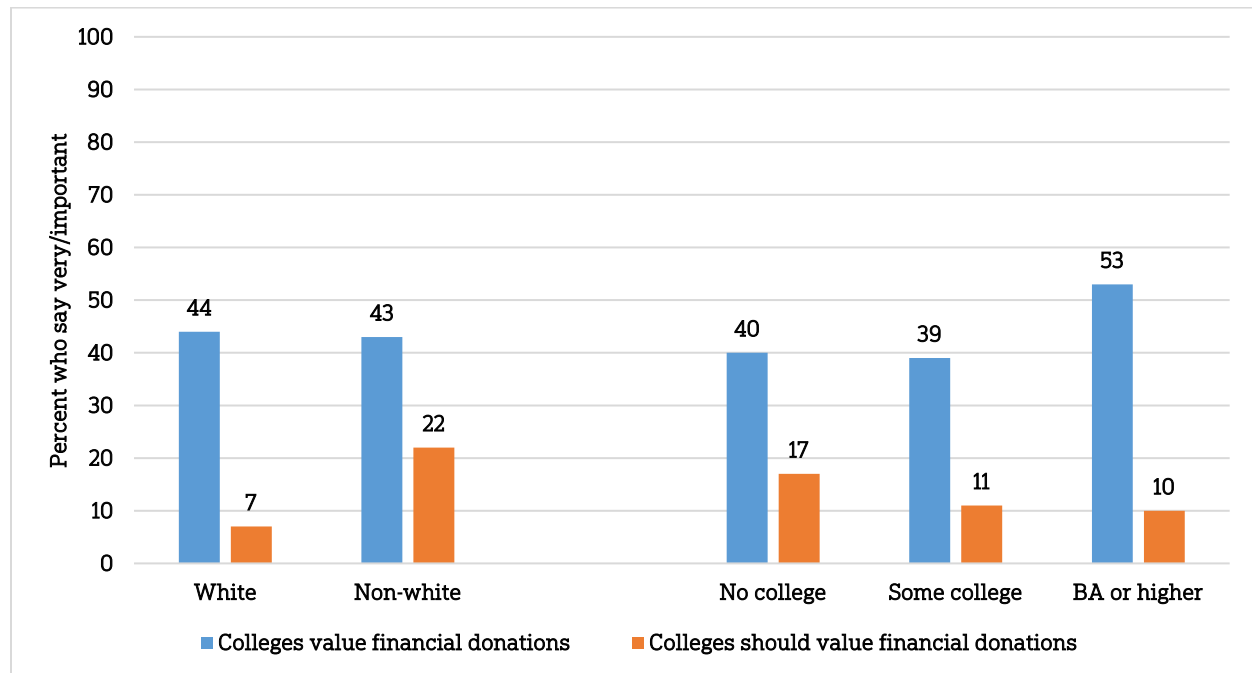
Questions: How important do you think these applicant factors are to 4-year colleges when they review and consider college applications? Now, how important do you think these applicant factors should be to 4-year colleges when they review and consider college applications?

Source: Poll conducted by the Higher Education Analytics Center at NORC, March 28-April 1, 2019, with 1,009 adults

Remove Family Finances from the Equation

Americans would like to see a family's financial wealth be less of a factor in admission decisions—both in terms of donations made to the institution as well as a family's ability to pay full tuition. There is a particularly strong call for reducing the importance placed on a family donation made to the school when considering an applicant for admission. Whites and those with a bachelor's degree are more likely to report a need for change regarding this admission factor and less likely to report that financial donations should be a valued criterion than non-whites and those without a college degree.

Should Donations to College Be Important in Admissions Evaluation?



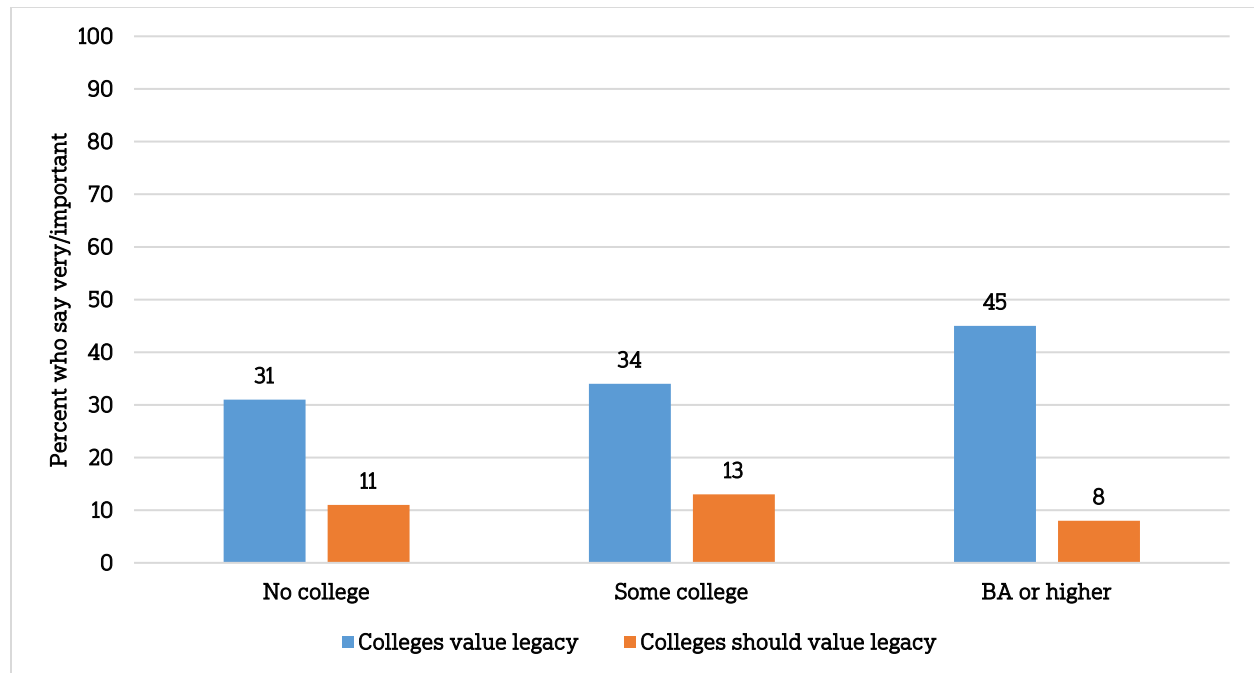
Questions: How important do you think these applicant factors are to 4-year colleges when they review and consider college applications: Financial donation made to the college by the applicant's family? Now, how important do you think these applicant factors should be to 4-year colleges when they review and consider college applications: Financial donation made to the college by the applicant's family?

Source: Poll conducted by the Higher Education Analytics Center at NORC, March 28-April 1, 2019, with 1,009 adults

Legacy Status Shouldn't Matter

There is also a call for change in the use of legacy status when evaluating an applicant for admission. Americans believe students should not inherit a spot in an entering class because a relative is an alumnus. Those who have a bachelor's degree are significantly more likely to indicate that the use of legacy to gain college admission needs to change and least likely to indicate it should matter in admission decisions. Whites are more likely to indicate that legacy should not be a strong factor when compared with non-whites (78% vs. 58%).

How Important Is Legacy in the College Admissions Process?



Questions: How important do you think these applicant factors are to 4-year colleges when they review and consider college applications: Legacy status—an older family member of the applicant graduated from the college? Now, how important do you think these applicant factors should be to 4-year colleges when they review and consider college applications: Legacy status—an older family member of the applicant graduated from the college?

Source: Poll conducted by the Higher Education Analytics Center at NORC, March 28-April 1, 2019, with 1,009 adults

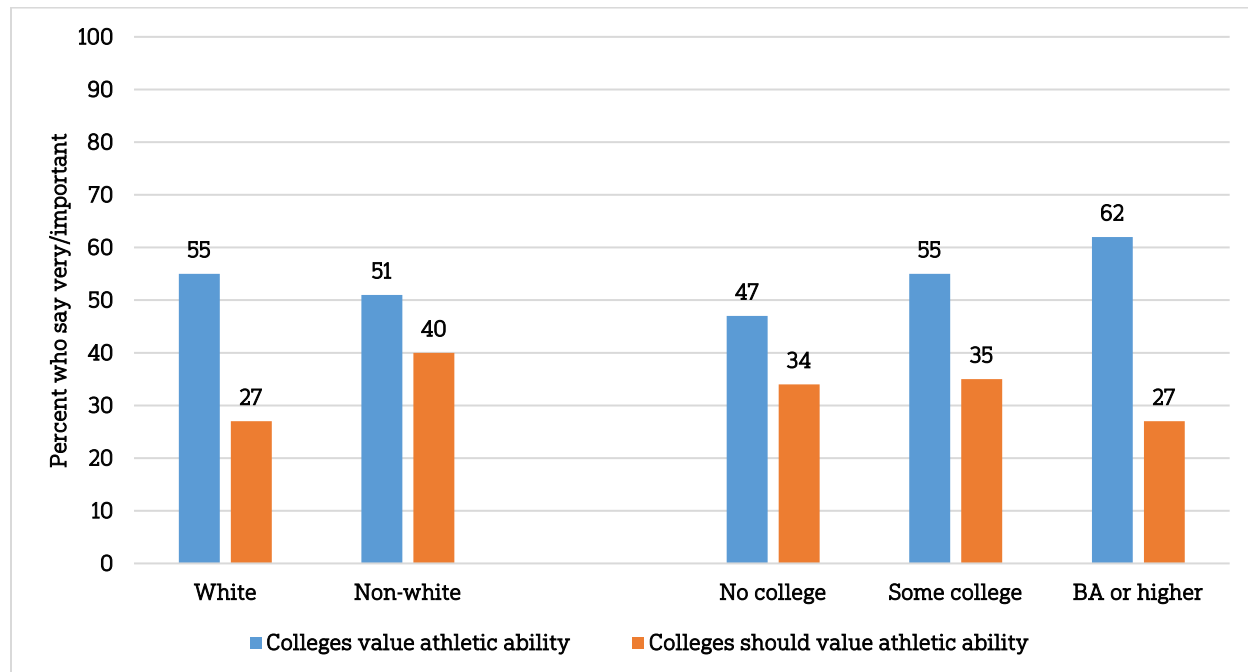
Athletics Are Given Too Much Prominence

Perhaps in response to the most recent admissions scandal,¹ Americans express a desire for change in how athletic ability is considered. Still, however, about one-third report it should remain an important component of admissions. Non-whites and those without a bachelor's degree are less likely to report a need for change and more likely to say athletics should be a valued criterion than whites and college graduates.

The public is significantly more likely to endorse using other special talent in the arts—such as musical, acting or fine arts ability, compared to athletic talent—as an important admission factor.

¹ <https://apnews.com/bfabbb6afeb40408481bbb771b6577e2a>

Percent Reporting Athletics Ability Is and Should Be Very Important or Important by Race and Education



Questions: How important do you think these applicant factors are to 4-year colleges when they review and consider college applications: Special talent in sports / varsity athlete? Now, how important do you think these applicant factors should be to 4-year colleges when they review and consider college applications: Special talent in sports / varsity athlete?
 Source: Poll conducted by the Higher Education Analytics Center at NORC, March 28-April 1, 2019, with 1,009 adults

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The surveys were conducted by the Higher Education Analytics Center at NORC and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, with funding from The Associated Press and NORC at the University of Chicago. Data were collected using AmeriSpeak Omnibus®, a bi-monthly multi-client survey using NORC's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. The surveys were part of a larger study that included questions about other topics not included in this report.

During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected U.S. households were sampled with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame and then contacted by U.S. mail, email, telephone, and field interviewers (face-to-face). The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97% of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with P.O. Box only addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings.

Interviews for these surveys were conducted between March 28 and April 1, 2019, and April 11 and 14, 2019, with adults age 18 and over representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak. In the first survey, 1,009 completed the survey—899 via the web and 110 via telephone. Interviews were offered in English. The final stage completion rate is 25.3%, the weighted household panel response rate is 34.2%, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 85.1%, for a cumulative response rate of 7.4%. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 4.3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups.

For the second survey, 1,108 completed the survey—1,010 via the web and 98 via telephone. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish, depending on respondent preference. The final stage completion rate is 18.6%, the weighted household panel response rate is 34.2%, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 85.1%, for a cumulative response rate of 5.4%. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 4.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups.

Once the sample has been selected and fielded, and all the study data have been collected and made final, a poststratification process is used to adjust for any survey nonresponse as well as any non-coverage or under- and oversampling resulting from the study-specific sample design. Poststratification variables included age, gender, Census division, race/ethnicity, and education. Weighting variables were obtained from the 2018 Current Population Survey. The weighted data reflect the U.S. population of adults age 18 and over.

All differences reported between subgroups of the U.S. population are at the 95% level of statistical significance, meaning that there is only a 5% (or lower) probability that the observed differences could be attributed to chance variation in sampling.

A comprehensive listing of the questions, complete with tabulations of top-level results for each question, is available on The AP-NORC Center website: www.apnorc.org. For more information, email info@apnorc.org.

CONTRIBUTING RESEARCHERS

From NORC at the University of Chicago

Ann Kearns Davoren
Karen Grigorian
Lance Selfa
Marjorie Connelly
Will Bonnell
Mariana Meza Hernandez
Tom Okal
Jennifer Benz
Trevor Tompson

From The Associated Press

Emily Swanson
Hannah Fingerhut

ABOUT THE HIGHER EDUCATION ANALYTICS CENTER AT NORC

The Higher Education Analytics Center at NORC leverages its extensive experience conducting research on higher education to bring effective and affordable research and data collection offerings to institutions of higher education and other organizations related to higher education.

The Higher Education Analytics Center's focus is informed by its institutional mission and nonprofit status. The aim is to provide post-secondary institutions and related organizations with the data and insights necessary to improve their function and inform their policy decisions to the benefit of students, alumni, educators, academic leaders, and the institutions themselves. All work is approached with deep technical and methodological expertise, a spirit of collaboration, and a commitment to scientific integrity.

Learn more at <http://www.norc.org/About/Departments/Pages/higher-education-analytics-center.aspx>

ABOUT THE ASSOCIATED PRESS-NORC CENTER FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS RESEARCH

The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research taps into the power of social science research and the highest-quality journalism to bring key information to people across the nation and throughout the world.

The Associated Press (AP) is the world's essential news organization, bringing fast, unbiased news to all media platforms and formats.

NORC at the University of Chicago is one of the oldest objective and non-partisan research institutions in the world.

The two organizations have established The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research to conduct, analyze, and distribute social science research in the public interest on newsworthy topics, and to use the power of journalism to tell the stories that research reveals.

The founding principles of The AP-NORC Center include a mandate to carefully preserve and protect the scientific integrity and objectivity of NORC and the journalistic independence of AP. All work conducted by the Center conforms to the highest levels of scientific integrity to prevent any real or perceived bias in the research. All of the work of the Center is subject to review by its advisory committee to help ensure it meets these standards. The Center will publicize the results of all studies and make all datasets and study documentation available to scholars and the public.

Learn more at www.apnorc.org