

Opinion: Read polls about college cost and value carefully

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College affordability is a key issue now on the front burner at both the federal and state levels. In August, President Barack Obama announced plans to rein in college costs using federal student aid availability as a lever. Meanwhile, legislators in Trenton have introduced bills to implement, or at least study, novel approaches to funding higher education.

education:

It is highly valued as a vehicle for individual success and as crucial to economic competitiveness.

It is viewed as less affordable than in the past and moving in the wrong direction.

With these dual concerns on a collision course of sorts, it is imperative that the public come to thoughtful public judgment about the role of government, institutions, and families in ensuring college affordability. The backdrop of debt weighs heavily on many students and graduates looking for work in a slowly recovering economy.

As never before, perhaps, the public is open to the discovery and application of new to obtain a degree. For example, a March 2013 poll by the Hughes Center at Richard Stockton College found that a majority of the public supports colleges offering more online courses (63 percent favor) and making it easier to transfer credits from one college to another (94 percent favor).

Scientific polls have been one important way for policy makers to discern where the public stands on the challenge of college access and affordability. But to contribute meaningfully to a dialogue about how to solve the perplexing challenges, polls have to be balanced and carefully crafted.

Polls that only scratch the surface of higher education matters may do a disservice to the development of informed public opinion that considers, over time, policy options including the costs and benefits of specific approaches.

When asking about the cost of college and the reasons for recent increases, it is only fair to separate the public college sector, where costs are very closely tied to state funding (and county funding for county colleges) from the independent and for-profit