

Why Half of Americans Now Oppose Increasing Spending on Higher Education

We've all been there. You answer that unknown number on your phone and the caller asks, "Do you want to help save the sea turtles?" Yes! Or you're walking in the city square and smiley people with clipboards and colorful shirts ask if you want to save the whales. Yes!

But then they ask how much you're willing to pay to save the turtles or the whales. Your unbridled enthusiasm for the cause may wane when it hits your pocketbook.

Most Americans, it seems, have a similar response to public spending on higher education. When asked if they support this cause, the majority of adults give a resounding yes! When asked if they want their taxes raised to subsidize additional college enrollment, their response grows decidedly cooler—similar to the foot shuffling or excuse fumbling you might make when you tell the turtle and whale canvassers that you want to help, just not today.

According to nationwide poll results released this week by WGBH, Boston's public radio network, 78 percent of the over 1,000 U.S. adults surveyed are widely in favor of current public funding for higher education. (Yes, let's save the turtles and the whales!) But when these pollsters asked respondents if they would be okay with having their taxes raised to make public higher education more accessible to more individuals, there was much less gusto. (Um, my meatloaf is burning, but call back some other time!)

Forty-seven percent of those surveyed in the poll, which was administered in conjunction with Abt Associates, said they are in favor of higher taxes so that more students can afford their state college or university; 49 percent were opposed. Not surprisingly, the biggest support for higher taxes came from liberals and young people. Millennials and Gen Z'ers, ages 18 to 29, were large supporters of more taxes. Conservatives were much more reluctant to support tax increases for public higher education. The split was also geographical, with more people in the East supporting tax increases and more people in the Midwest opposing them.

Lack of support for increased tax dollars to public higher education might be attributable to widespread feelings, particularly among conservatives, that today's colleges and universities consistently shut down free speech and dissent. Indeed, 57 percent of the poll respondents indicated that colleges should welcome campus speakers that might offend some members of the student body, but 32 percent of those polled said that colleges should not invite these contentious speakers.

When first asked if we support a certain societal cause, we may reflexively say yes. But

when we're asked to open our wallets, that yes may shift—particularly if we are skeptical about a cause's actions and outcomes.

What about you? Do you support public higher education? More importantly, are you willing to pay more for it?