

Virginia Voter Attitudes on Higher Education and the Economy

Results of 2017 Public Opinion Surveys

FREDERICK *polls*

 McLaughlin & Associates

Prepared for:

GROWTH  **4 VA**

A Campaign of the Virginia Business Higher Education Council

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SUMMARY

Virginia voters know that higher education in the Commonwealth provides a strong value for the state's investment. Higher education enhances the state's workforce, provides access to good job opportunities and drives the state's economy.

In contrast to more mixed views about colleges in some other parts of the country, higher education receives broad, bipartisan support in Virginia. This support reflects voters' awareness of the stand-out performance and reputation of Virginia's higher education institutions, the schools' contributions to economic growth and job creation, the value of higher education credentials in the job market, and the consensus among Virginia's business and political leaders to support the higher education system as a vital asset for the state's future.

Repeatedly, Virginians tell us they are more likely to vote for elected officials who support higher education in Virginia and who will invest to ensure it remains affordable and accessible for all Virginia students.

METHODOLOGY

McLaughlin & Associates partnered with FrederickPolls to conduct two separate Virginia statewide surveys. The first survey was conducted between January 11-16, 2017 and the second survey was in the field between February 8-13, 2017. Each survey was conducted among 800 likely general election voters. Certain questions were split into equally proportionate samples of 400 likely voters.

Interviews were conducted by live professional phone interviewers (400) and an advanced online survey platform (400). Interview selection was at random within predetermined election units. These units were structured to statistically correlate with actual voter distributions in a gubernatorial general election.

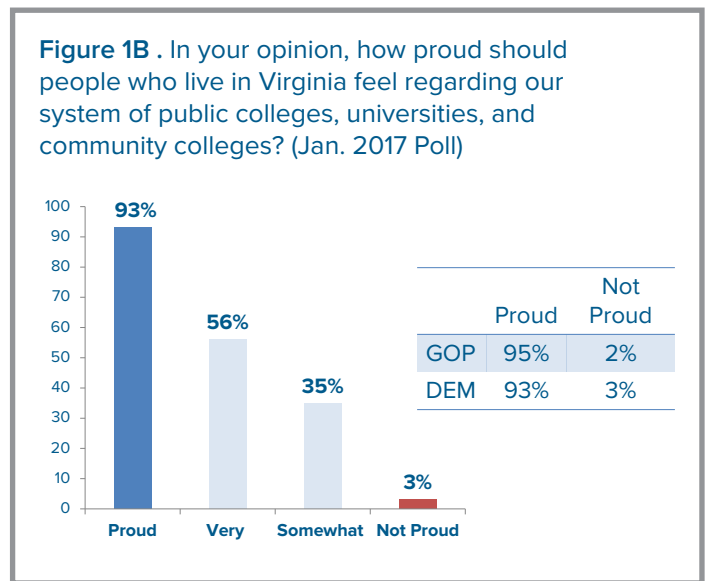
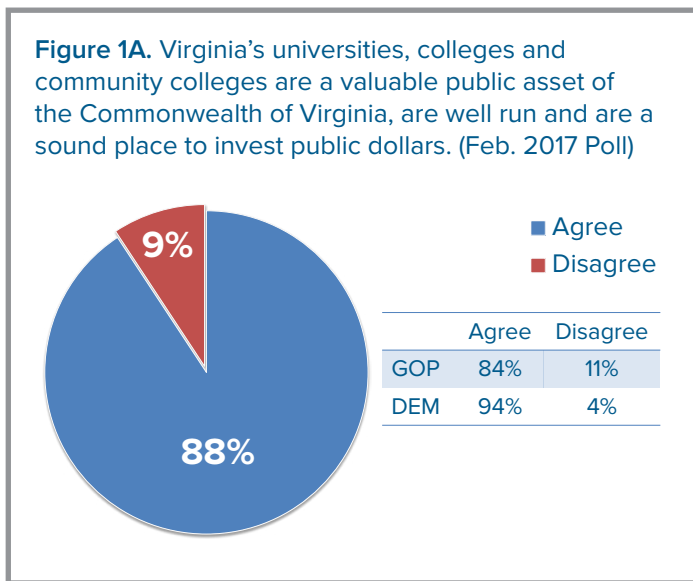
The accuracy of the sample of 800 likely general election voters is within +/- 3.4% at a 95% confidence interval. The accuracy of the 400 split samples of likely general election voters is within +/- 4.9% at a 95% confidence interval.



KEY FINDINGS

1. Virginians are aware and proud of the fact that their state has one of the top-performing systems of higher education in the country.

Large majorities of Virginians, regardless of political views, see Virginia’s higher education institutions as valuable public assets that are well run and a sound place to invest public dollars. (See Figures 1A-B)

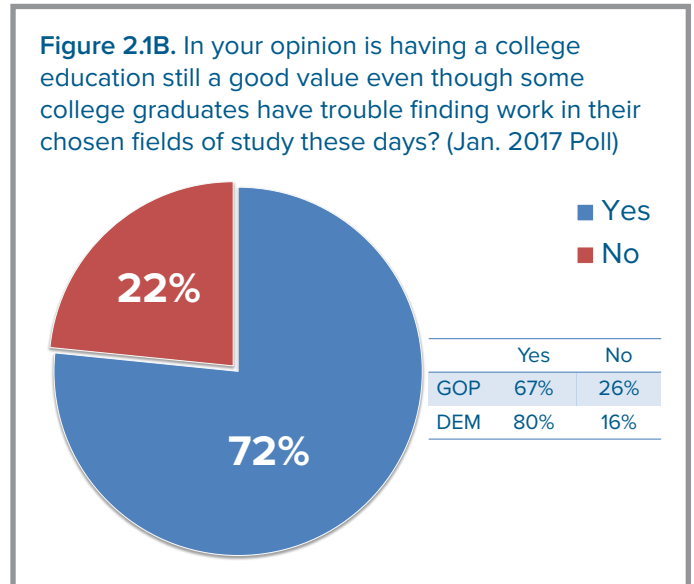
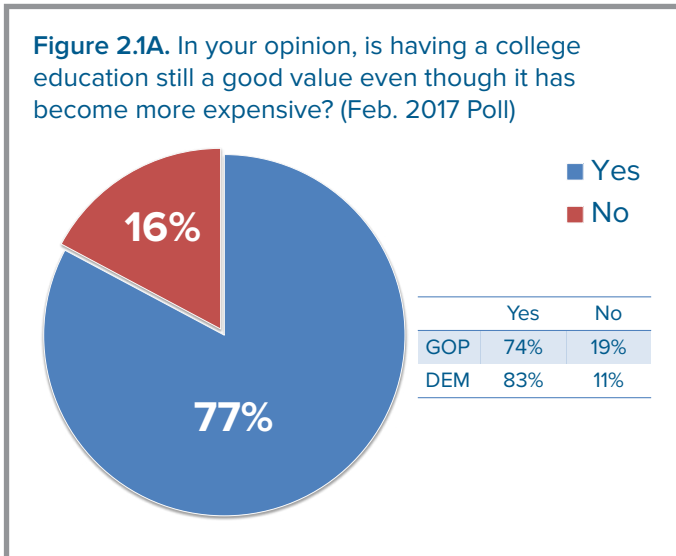


2. While some national polls have found increasing partisan polarization and resulting erosion in public support for higher education, our polling in Virginia consistently shows broad and strong bipartisan support.

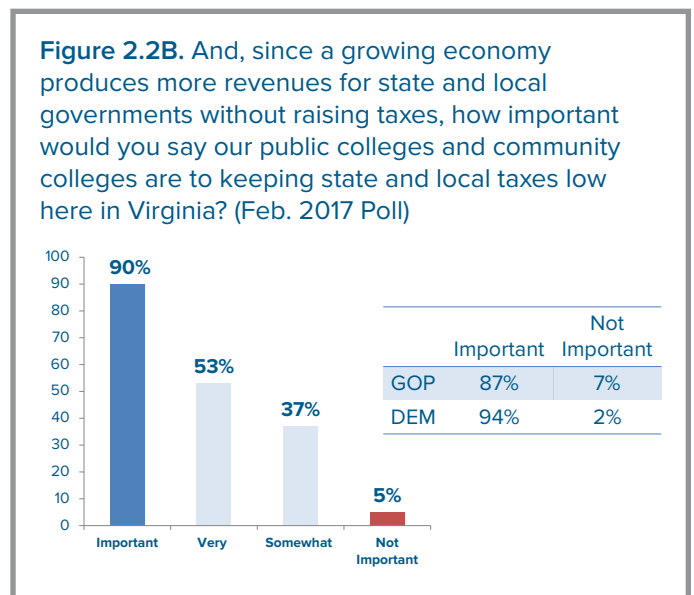
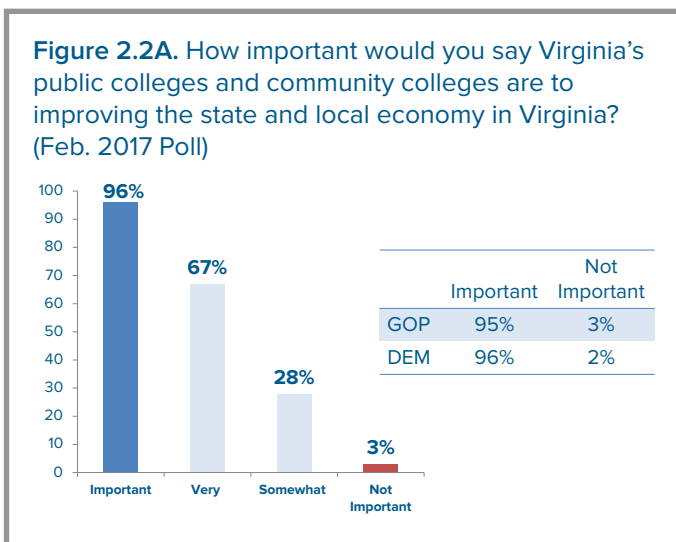
Virginia voters see great value in higher education, linking the system to a stronger economy, better jobs and better citizens.



Large majorities of Virginians see college degrees as highly valuable economically. Even when rising tuition and the tight job market are cited as reasons to question the value of a college degree, more than 3/4 of Democrats and more than 2/3 of Republicans in Virginia strongly endorse the college value proposition. (See Figures 2.1A-B)



Almost all voters say Virginia’s colleges are important to their state and local economies. They understand that without revenues from a growing economy pressures for higher taxes will increase. (See Figures 2.2A-B)





Large majorities of Virginians believe higher education is a good investment because it leads to higher incomes and a stronger economy. (See Figures 2.3A-B)

Figure 2.3A. Since college graduates on average earn more than twice what non-graduates earn, attending and graduating from a Virginia college or university is a good investment. (Feb. 2017 Poll)

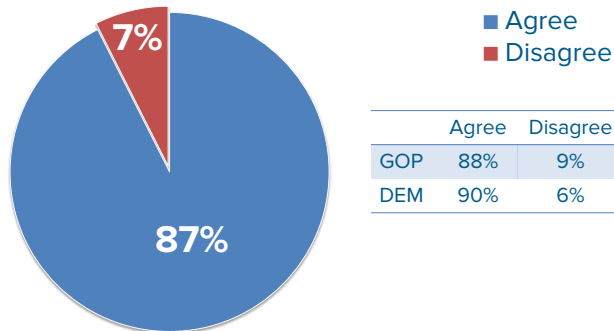
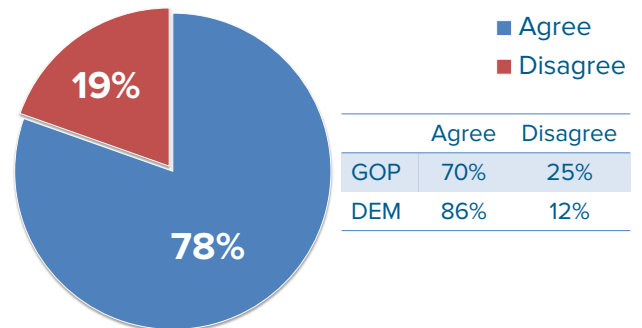


Figure 2.3B. Since, in today's economy, the highest paying jobs generally go to the best educated workers, a greater state investment in Virginia's higher education system will result in higher average incomes for Virginia workers and a stronger economy. (Jan. 2017 Poll)



Large majorities say Virginia's colleges and universities help prepare good leaders and good citizens who are practical problem-solvers. Voters also believe higher education institutions play an important role in developing the innovative ideas that help solve today's pressing public problems. (See Figures 2.4A-B)

Figure 2.4A. Virginia's colleges and universities help produce good citizens and good leaders by emphasizing ethical behavior, openness to new ideas, collaboration, and practical problem-solving. (Jan. 2017 Poll)

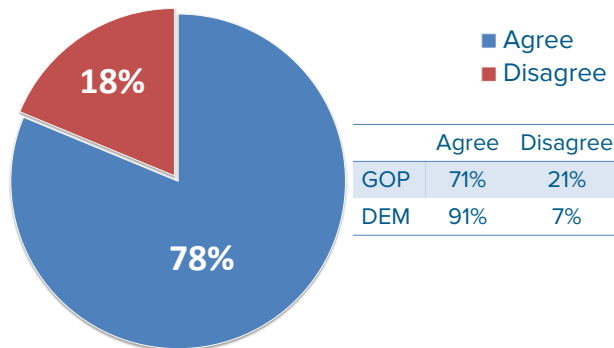
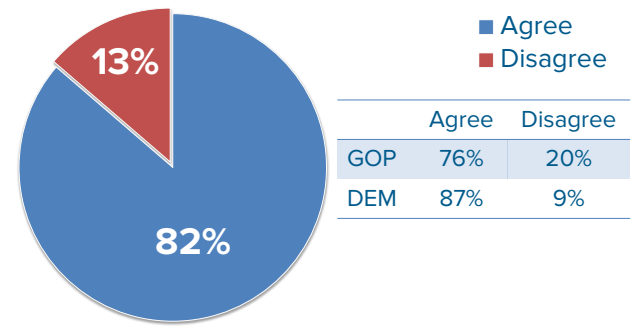


Figure 2.4B. Virginia's colleges play an important role in solving problems facing our state and country by developing innovative ideas in fields ranging from health care and energy to cyber security and data privacy. (Jan. 2017 Poll)





Virginians understand their state currently faces economic challenges, including the loss of high-paying jobs and talented workers to other states, and they believe their colleges and community colleges have a crucial role to play in meeting these challenges. They are more likely to support candidates for office who share that view. (See Figures 2.5A-C)

Figure 2.5A. These are challenging times, so Virginia’s colleges and community colleges should step up to help, including creating more degree programs for jobs that are in high demand, expanding research that generates new business opportunities, and supporting regional partnerships that create higher-paying jobs. (Jan. 2017 Poll)

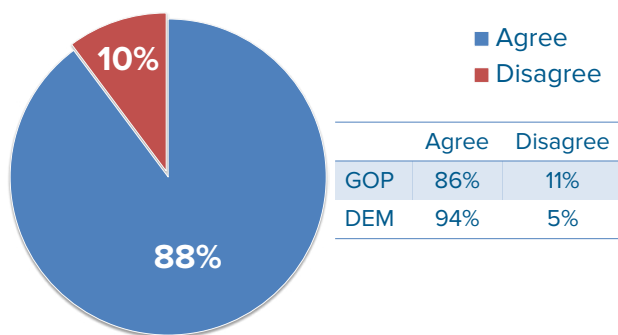


Figure 2.5B. Virginia has been losing higher-paying jobs to other states. To turn this around, Virginia needs to invest in higher education so that more students have the college degrees and job-training credentials needed to fill top jobs and attract major employers to our state. (Jan. 2017 Poll)

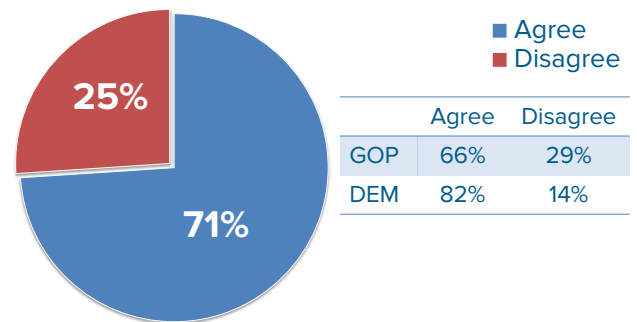
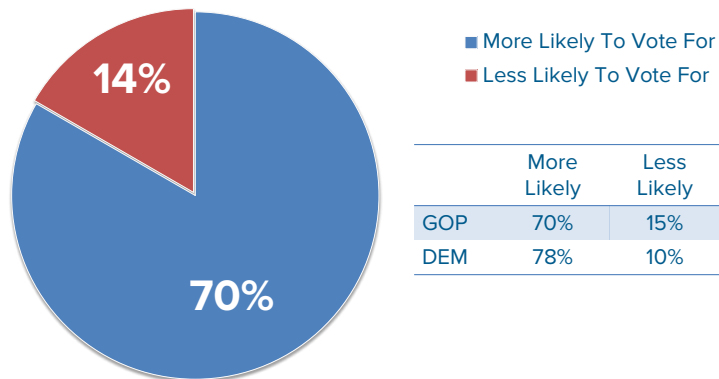


Figure 2.5C. A candidate who says that Virginia’s higher education system is an especially valuable asset in today’s economy because our colleges and community colleges cultivate the talent it takes to succeed, the ideas it takes to innovate and compete, and the character it takes to be good leaders and productive citizens. (Jan. 2017 Poll)

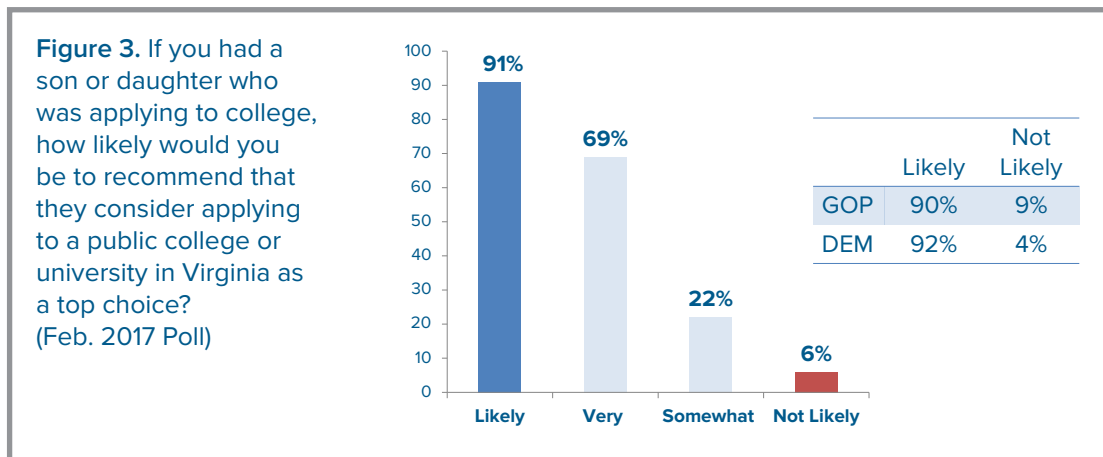




3. A reason why voter attitudes on higher education in Virginia diverge from attitudes elsewhere is that Virginians' positive opinions routinely are validated by high rankings and independent assessments that document the system's strong performance.

Virginians' support for their higher education system is reinforced routinely by news reports about Virginia colleges and universities' stand-out performance, including top rankings for quality, value, and return on investment. For example, Virginia's higher education system was ranked #1 in the nation in 2017 according to the "Smart Asset" website, which focused on graduation rates and return on investment. Notably, the system generates the 2nd highest graduation rates in the country despite being ranked near the bottom (41st in 2016) in state support per student.

Virginians are aware of their colleges' strong performance and national reputation, and, as noted above, they express pride in their higher education system (93%) and confidence that the institutions are well run, sound places to invest public dollars (88%). Virginia voters, however, also exhibit a strong personal connection to the schools, as seen in their eagerness for their own sons and daughters to attend. (See Figure 3)





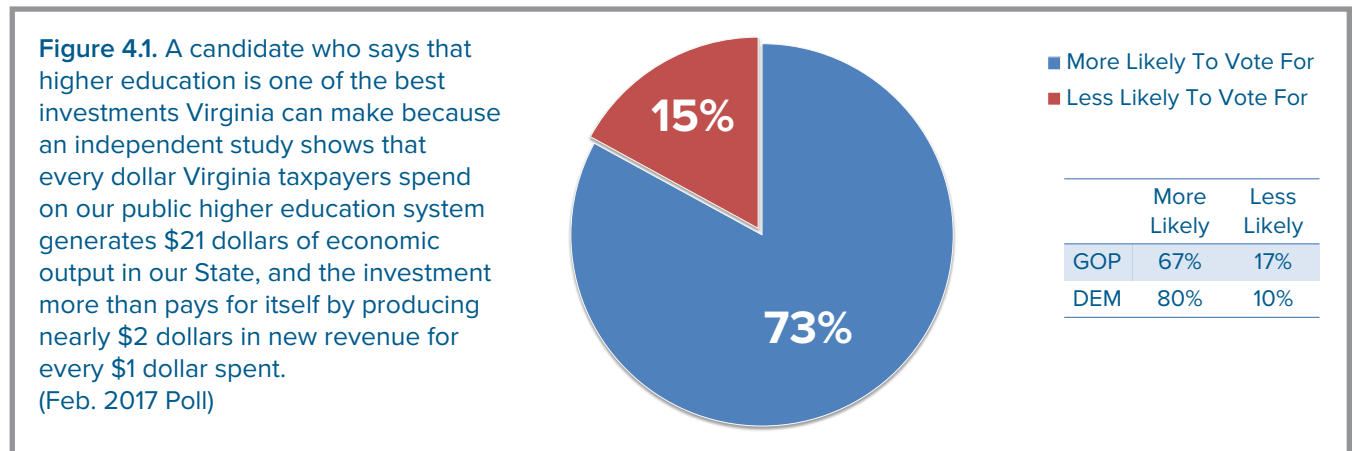
4. Another possible explanation for Virginians' strong support of higher education is the active partnership between the state's colleges and the business community.

Leading businesses and business organizations have worked closely with the state's colleges, universities and community colleges, fostering widespread recognition that higher education is a key economic driver for the state.

A business-led group, the Virginia Business Higher Education Council, has documented the major impact of higher education on the Virginia economy. Among other findings, the group's 2017 study showed that the public higher education system:

- adds \$36 billion annually to Gross State Product, contributing more than \$21 in economic activity for every \$1 invested;
- is associated with more than 167,000 Virginia jobs; and
- produces nearly \$2 in new state revenue for every \$1 of state expenditure.

Based on this documented impact, a large majority of Virginians in both parties express a preference for candidates who consider higher education to be one of the best investments Virginia can make. (See Figure 4.1)



Support for an even closer partnership between colleges and businesses is a major theme that emerged from our surveys. Virginians see more internships, apprenticeships, work-study opportunities, and other on-the-job experience as a key to helping students find good jobs, helping businesses find good workers, and keeping talented young people from leaving Virginia in search of better opportunities elsewhere. They also support increased collaboration between business and higher education on new business startups using university-based research. (See Figures 4.2A-B)



Figure 4.2A. Making it more likely that Virginia college graduates stay and take a full time job here by establishing partnerships between Virginia businesses and higher education so more students have internship, work study and real world work experiences during their college years. (Feb. 2017 Poll)

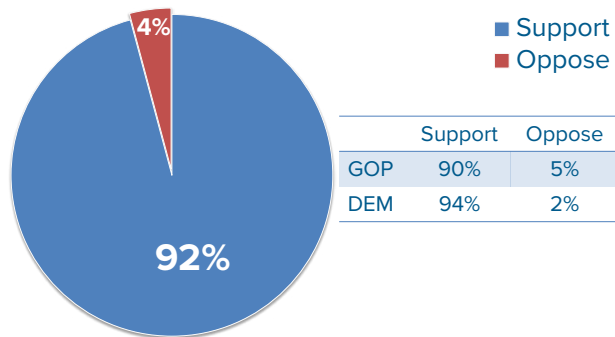
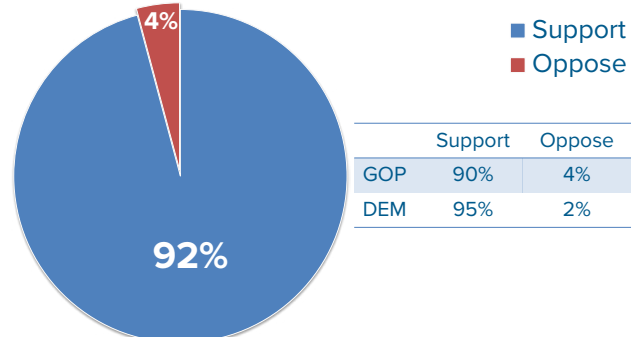


Figure 4.2B. Having colleges and universities in each region partner with businesses and local governments to establish innovation districts where new business start-ups and entrepreneurs can access resources and expertise that will help them grow their businesses and create jobs. (Feb. 2017 Poll)



Virginians agree with business leaders who look to the higher education system for varied strategies that will meet workforce needs in the knowledge-based new economy.

(See Figures 4.3A-E)

Figure 4.3A. A candidate who proposes increasing the number of college and community college degrees and credentials earned by Virginia students in high-wage, high-demand sectors of the economy, such as science, technology, engineering and math, and in areas where there now are shortages of trained workers, such as health care and computer science. (Feb. 2017 Poll)

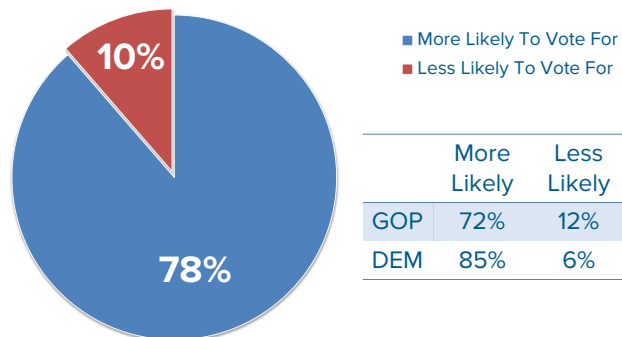


Figure 4.3B. A candidate who says to improve the health and quality of life for Virginians, we should use our colleges and community colleges to train more healthcare professionals, such as doctors and nurses which are in short supply, and we should promote university-based research into advanced forms of medical care and treatment. (Jan. 2017 Poll)

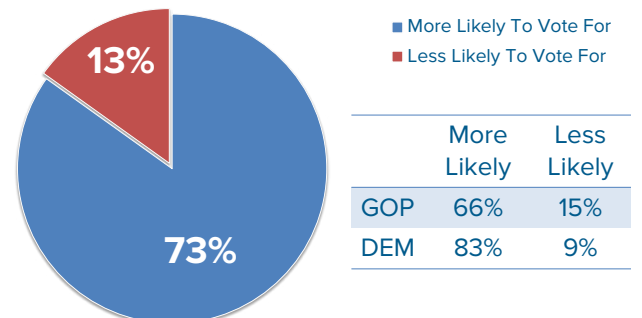




Figure 4.3C. A candidate who says that cyber security and internet data privacy are among the nation’s most pressing economic and national security challenges, and that Virginia’s colleges should become leading researchers and trainers of well-prepared workers for these critical fields. (Jan. 2017 Poll)

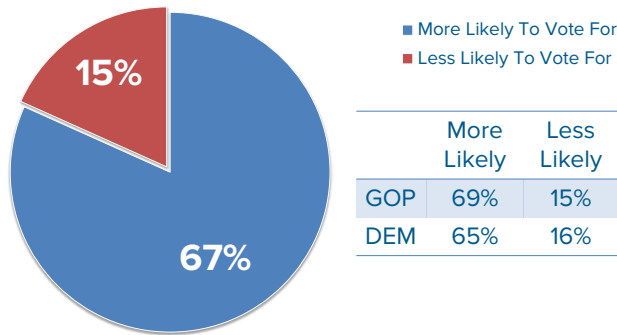


Figure 4.3D. Providing military veterans with affordable access to education and training programs, and giving them credit for advanced skills developed during their military service. (Feb. 2017 Poll)

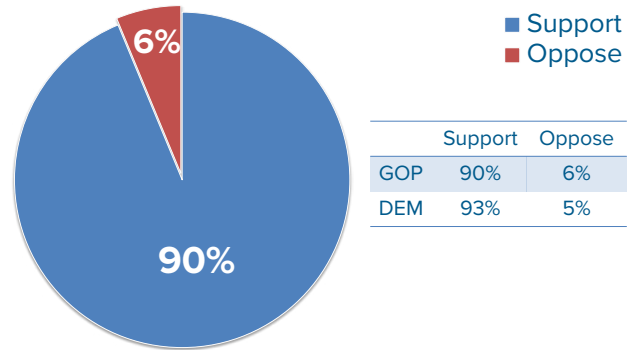
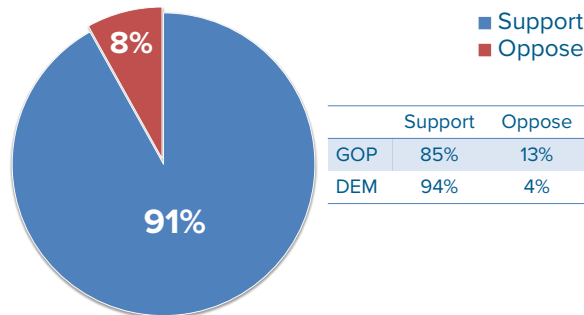


Figure 4.3E. Setting up a new system that makes it easier for working adults in Virginia with partial college credit to take online classes to complete their degrees or gain new job skill certification so they have better opportunities for job advancement. (Jan. 2017 Poll)



5. While it is hard to say which is the cause and which is the effect, another major reason for Virginians’ stand-out support for higher education may be the strong bipartisan backing for higher education among Virginia’s state government leaders.

Voters strongly approve of the General Assembly’s bipartisan legislation in 2011 (known as the “Top Jobs Act”) that committed the state to becoming a top state for talent by conferring 100,000 more degrees concentrated in the STEM and healthcare areas. They want to see Virginia continue to invest in achieving those goals. (See Figures 5.1A-B)



Figure 5.1A. To make Virginia a top state for talent, Virginia’s governor and legislature adopted a bipartisan plan six years ago to add 100,000 more college graduates by 2025 focused in high-demand sectors of the economy like science, technology, engineering, and math. This plan is important for the state’s economic future, and our elected leaders should continue to invest in achieving it. (Jan. 2017 Poll)

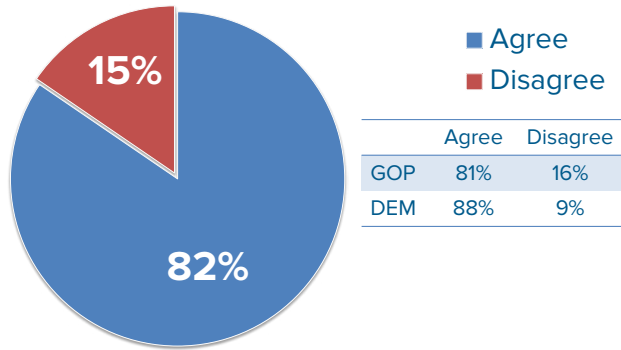
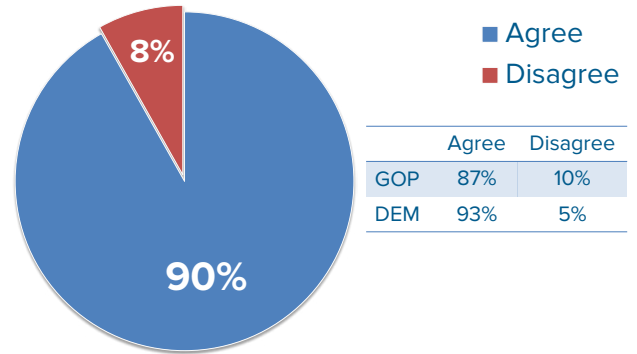


Figure 5.1B. Increasing the number of college graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics must be a top priority for Virginia’s next governor and other state leaders because it is essential for our national competitiveness and for Virginia’s economic growth. (Feb. 2017 Poll)



The role of higher education institutions in regional economic development, such as the General Assembly’s bipartisan “GO Virginia” initiative, resonates strongly with voters.
(See Figures 5.2A-B)

Figure 5.2A. Having colleges and community colleges in each region work with businesses and local governments to promote economic development and attract new business investment and higher-paying jobs to the region. (Feb. 2017 Poll)

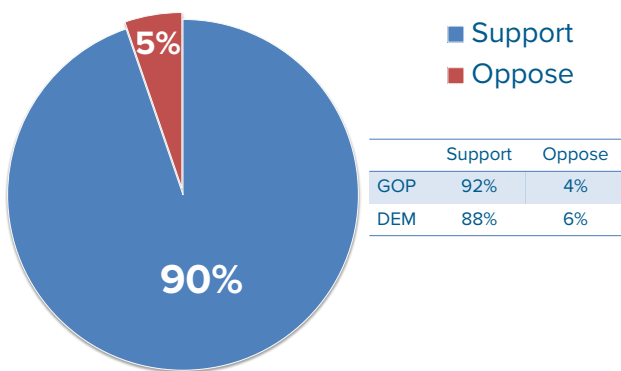
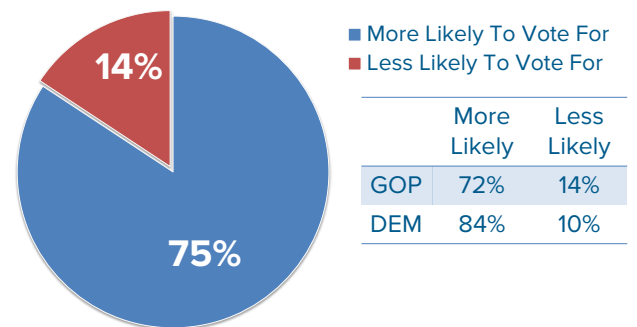


Figure 5.2B. A candidate who says we need to have strong colleges and community colleges in each region of our state, because they improve the quality of life, supply a skilled workforce, and encourage public-private partnerships on research and economic development that attract new businesses and high-paying jobs to the region. (Jan. 2017 Poll)





Voters also support current state efforts to increase workforce credentials conferred by community colleges and to promote collaborative university research leading to commercial applications and business startups. (See Figures 5.3A-B)

Figure 5.3A. A candidate who says we should increase state funding for job-specific education and training programs that result in a workplace credential or degree and teach job skills needed in all parts of our high-tech economy. (Feb. 2017 Poll)

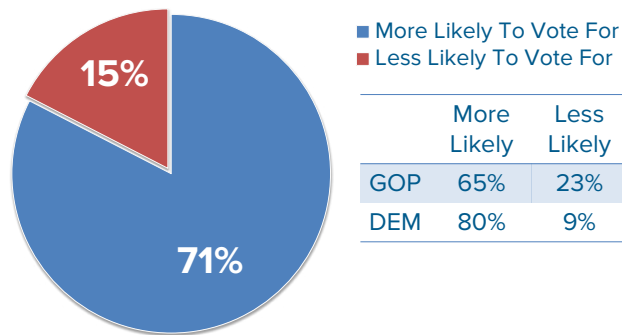
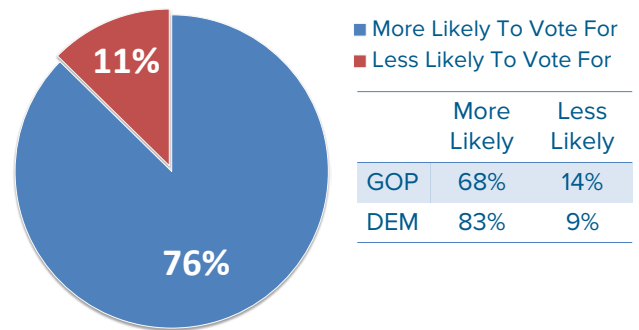


Figure 5.3B. A candidate who says that university based research produces discoveries every day that lead to new business startups and create thousands of higher-paying jobs; therefore, our State should invest in attracting more top researchers to Virginia universities and should promote business-higher education partnerships that will bring these new ideas to market. (Jan. 2017 Poll)



6. Cost remains a widespread concern of voters and drives support for innovative programs to make higher education more affordable.

Virginians see affordable access to college as a personal opportunity and social mobility issue, and they want to make sure every qualified Virginian has that chance. They believe bending the cost curve is a shared responsibility of the state and its colleges and requires multiple strategies, including more financial aid, alternative pathways to degrees, and a state reserve fund to protect against tuition spikes during future recessions. (See Figures 6A-E)

Figure 6A. Virginia rank[ed] 44th out of the 50 states in higher education funding [in 2015]. This low level of state support means Virginia colleges and universities tend to charge higher tuition and fees to students and provide less financial aid, making it hard for many low- and middle-income Virginia families to afford college. The next governor and state leaders should work to correct this problem by increasing the state's higher education investment. (Feb. 2017 Poll)

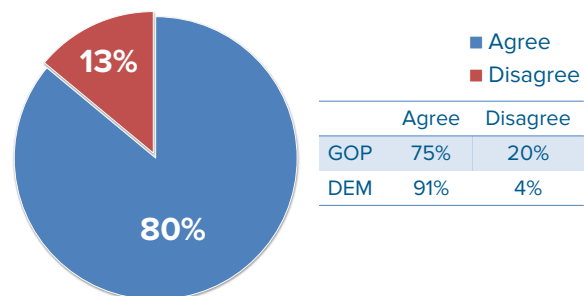




Figure 6B. Providing more financial aid so that low- and middle-income students can afford college is an important social investment, because independent studies show that college graduates tend to contribute far more to charity than non-graduates, pay more in taxes, and require less public expenditures on everything from healthcare and unemployment insurance to welfare and incarceration. (Feb. 2017 Poll)

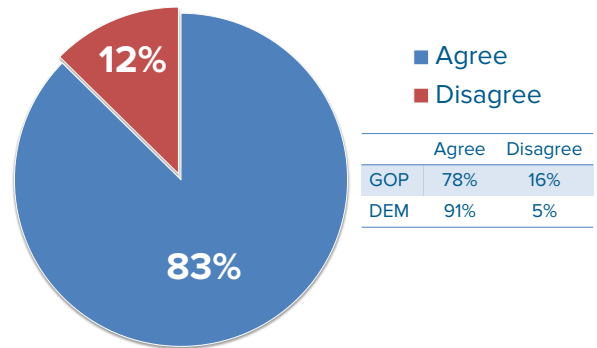


Figure 6C. Providing lower-cost pathways to bachelor's degrees by increasing dual enrollment and advanced placement courses, allowing more students to transfer from community colleges, giving students more work-study options, and making it more practical for students to complete their degrees in less than four years. (Feb. 2017 Poll)

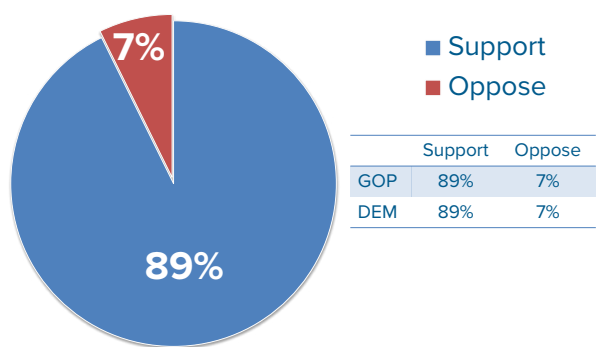


Figure 6D. Creating opportunities for Virginia college students to take courses offered at other colleges in the state by having the schools work together to create a new network of virtual classrooms and online courses. (Jan. 2017 Poll)

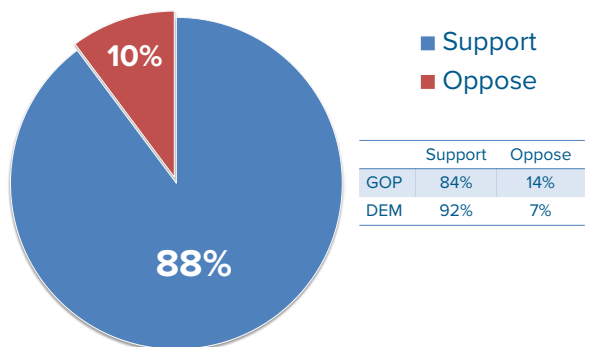
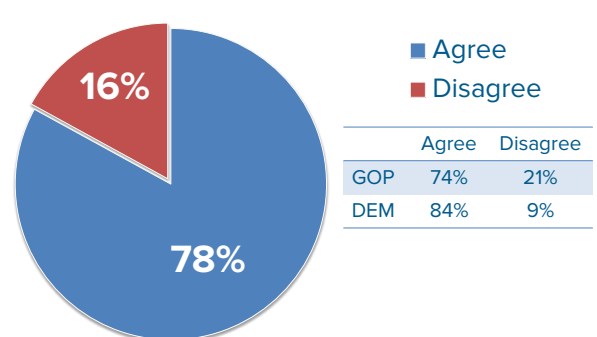


Figure 6E. During the previous decade, Virginia experienced budget shortfalls caused by 2 recessions. The Governor and General Assembly balanced the budget by making deep cuts in higher education funding, resulting in sharp spikes in tuition charged to students. To prevent this from happening in the future, the state should set up a reserve, or rainy-day fund, for higher education and put money in it when the economy is growing. That way, students and parents will be protected from sharp tuition increases the next time there is another economic downturn. (Feb. 2017 Poll)

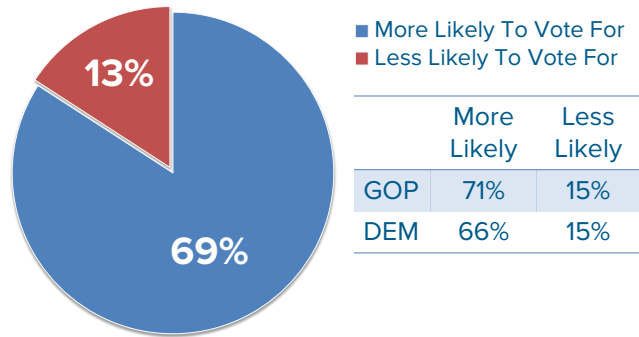




7. Perhaps the best indication of the confidence Virginians have in their colleges is provided by the responses to our questions about accountability for outcomes.

Virginians want the state to articulate clearly the major outcomes it expects from each institution based on what matters most to the Commonwealth and students, to measure and fund the schools based on those major outcomes, and otherwise to give the schools freedom to do what they do best, which is manage their institutions efficiently and produce stand-out rankings and results. (See Figure 7.1)

Figure 7.1. A candidate who says the best way to control college costs and improve results is to continue to restructure the system so that the colleges have more freedom to manage their operations efficiently and are held more accountable for student outcomes, such as degrees conferred, graduation rates, and student success in securing good jobs. (Jan. 2017 Poll)

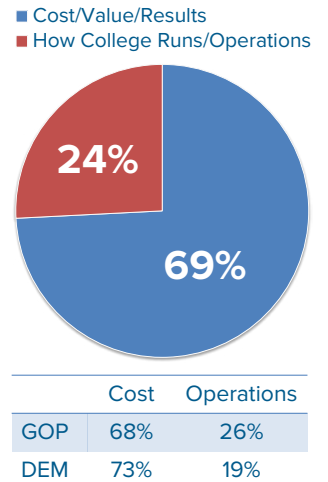


When it comes to greater transparency for higher education consumers, a large majority of Virginians want practical, usable information about the cost, value, and results from their college investment. Voters see less value in providing consumers with extensive details about the schools' internal operations and finances. (See Figure 7.2)

Figure 7.2. One idea for improving higher education in Virginia is to increase transparency and the information available to students and parents as consumers. Which of the following statements comes closer to your view regarding greater transparency in higher education? (Feb. 2017 Poll)

“Students and parents need more information about the cost, value, and results from their college investment. Colleges should publicize the full, four-year cost of getting a degree, the expected financial aid support and student loan debt levels, and job-related information like internship opportunities, job placement services, the success rate of the school’s graduates in finding good jobs, and the average earnings of the college’s graduates.”

“Students and parents need more information on the details of how each college runs, including how tuition and fee revenues are applied to internal operations, how the school budgets and invests its resources, what roles faculty and staff perform, and how much various components of the college cost.”





CONCLUSION

The bottom line in Virginia is that higher education is seen by voters as working extraordinarily well, producing top national results and helping to drive a strong economy with better job opportunities. This in turn produces broad bipartisan voter support for continued investment and initiatives that promise to increase the economic impact and ensure educational and job opportunities for all Virginians.

Perhaps college, business and political leaders around the country should take a page from the Virginia textbook. The best way to avoid becoming a target during this era of grievance-fueled populism and skepticism about institutions is likely to be the Virginia way: focus like a laser on the intersection of education and the economy, collaborate with businesses, produce measurable and marketable results for students, and then continuously, relentlessly get that success story out.

About Growth4VA

Growth4VA is a broad-based bipartisan coalition of business, education, and political leaders and Virginians from all walks of life who believe that higher education is a crucial economic engine for our Commonwealth. Our coalition is founded by the Virginia Business Higher Education Council and supported by all 16 public colleges and universities in Virginia, the Virginia Community College System, and Virginia's non-profit private institutions. We are promoting reform and reinvestment throughout the Virginia higher education system.

Sign up now and help our colleges, universities, and community colleges grow Virginia's economy, expand educational and job opportunities for all Virginians, and regain Virginia's #1 ranking for business.

About the Virginia Business Higher Education Council

The Virginia Business Higher Education Council (VBHEC) was founded in 1994 by Virginia business leaders on the principle that the prosperity of Virginia and the well-being of its citizens is fundamentally tied to access to a strong system of public colleges and universities. A nonprofit, nonpartisan partnership between Virginia's business community and higher education leadership, VBHEC's mission is to enhance the performance of Virginia's public colleges, universities, and community colleges and their funding by state government so they can produce the greatest possible positive impact on Virginia's economy. VBHEC is committed to educating the public about higher education's crucial role in Virginia's economy, and it strives to secure the support needed for the Commonwealth's colleges, universities, and community colleges to rank among the nation's best.

GENERAL INQUIRIES

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