

Virginia Voter Attitudes on Higher Education and the Economy

RESULTS OF 2023 PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY



PUBLIC OPINION
STRATEGIES

turning questions into answers

FREDERICK *polls*

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Virginia Business Higher Education Council

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SUMMARY

In a time of great political division, there is something on which Virginians in both parties strongly agree:
It's time to invest in Virginia's talent.

Virginia is different. Unlike some states, where support for colleges recently has shown signs of eroding, higher education is not a good punching bag in Virginia. Voters here are very proud of our top-ranked higher education system, and large majorities in both parties say our colleges are “well run” and a “sound place to invest public dollars.”

Regardless of political affiliation, Virginians believe our colleges are a good value for students, an economic engine for our state, and a key factor in winning top business rankings and attracting job-creating investments. They agree that broadening the talent pool through varied degrees and credentials is “the most important investment our state can make.”

Virginians say they are more likely to vote for candidates this fall who support strategic investments in higher education, including college internships, talent pathways that lead to post-graduation employment in Virginia, and making college more affordable and accessible for all Virginia students.

METHODOLOGY

The Virginia Business Higher Education Council engaged two national polling organizations with extensive experience in Virginia to survey voters in the Commonwealth. Public Opinion Strategies, a Republican firm, and FrederickPolls, a Democratic firm, partnered to conduct the survey of 800 registered Virginia voters during March 15-24, 2023. The credibility interval for the survey is +3.95%. Individual percentages may be rounded down and charts may not total 100%.

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.

Figure 1A. Virginia's universities, colleges, and community colleges are a valuable public asset of the Commonwealth of Virginia, are well run, and are a sound place to invest public dollars.

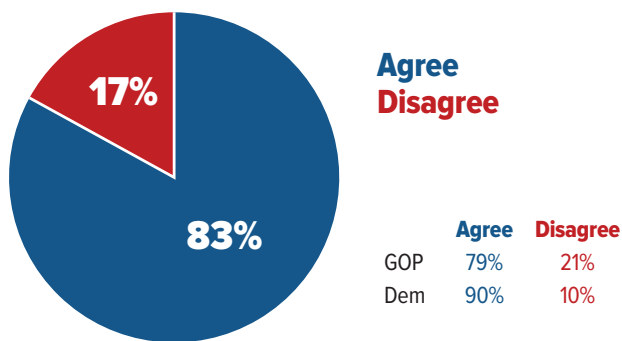


Figure 1B. In your opinion, how proud should people who live in Virginia feel regarding our system of public colleges, universities, and community colleges?

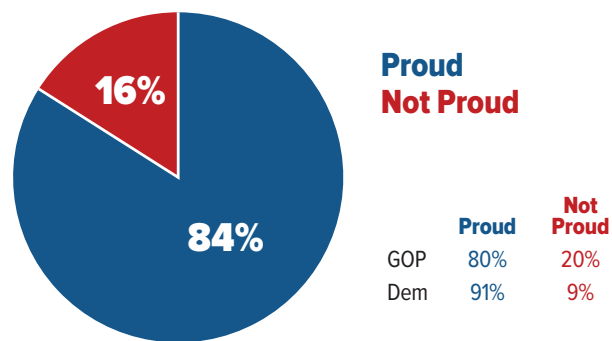
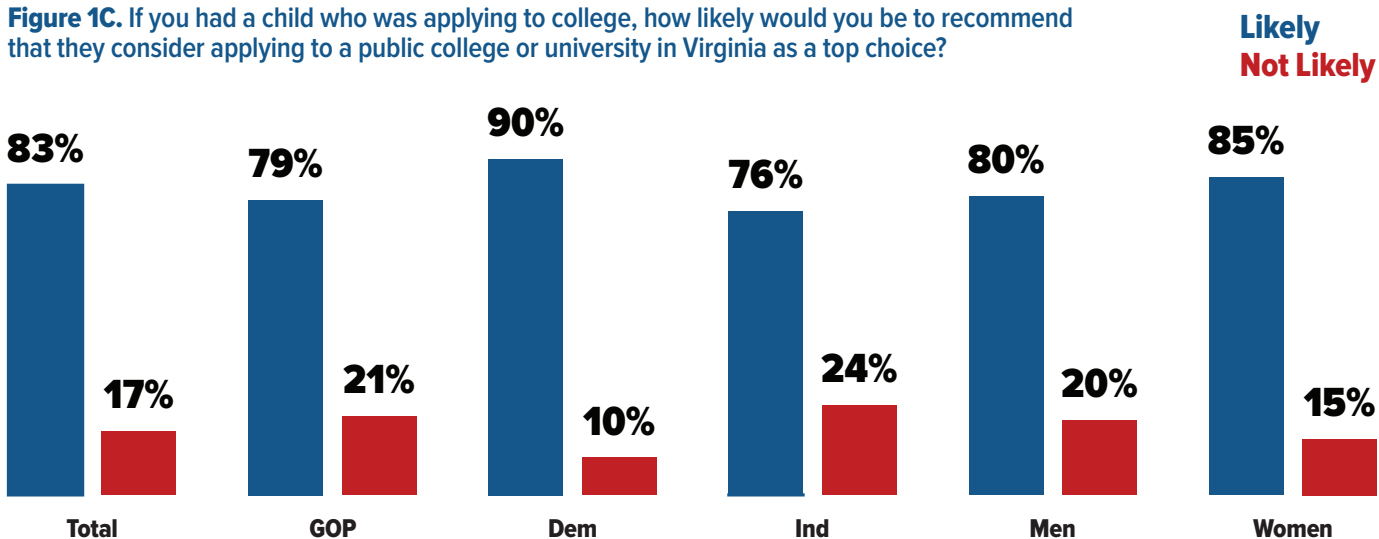


Figure 1C. If you had a child who was applying to college, how likely would you be to recommend that they consider applying to a public college or university in Virginia as a top choice?



2. In contrast to some states, Virginians express broad, bipartisan support for higher education. They credit our colleges with producing a strong ROI for students and taxpayers and playing a pivotal role in making Virginia the best state for business.

Large majorities of Virginians see college degrees as highly valuable economically. Even when the tight job market and tuition expense are offered as reasons to question the value of a college degree, more than 2/3 of Republicans and Democrats endorse the college value proposition.

Figure 2.1A. In your opinion, is having a college education still a good value even though it has become more expensive?

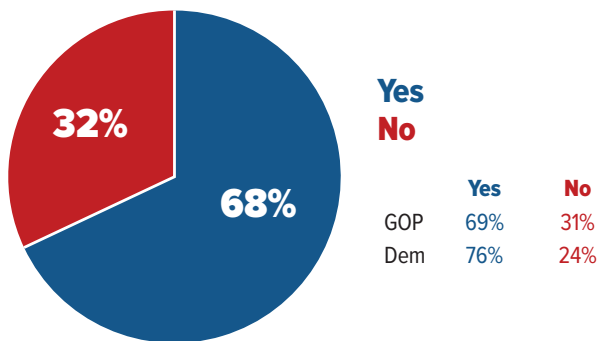
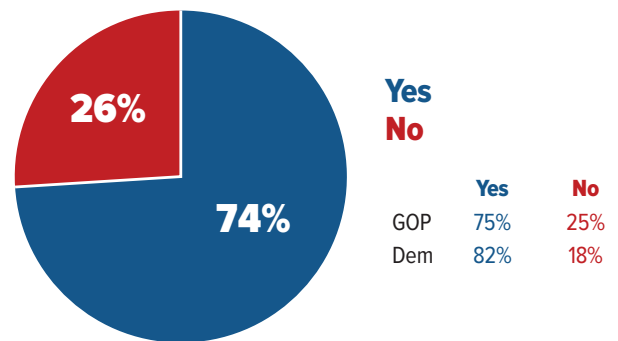


Figure 2.1B. In your opinion, is having a college education still a good value even though some college graduates have trouble finding work in their chosen fields of study these days?



Virginia voters understand the crucial role that higher education plays in expanding the economy and producing the growth revenues that meet public needs while keeping taxes low.

Figure 2.2A. How important would you say Virginia's public colleges and community colleges are to improving the state and local economy in Virginia?

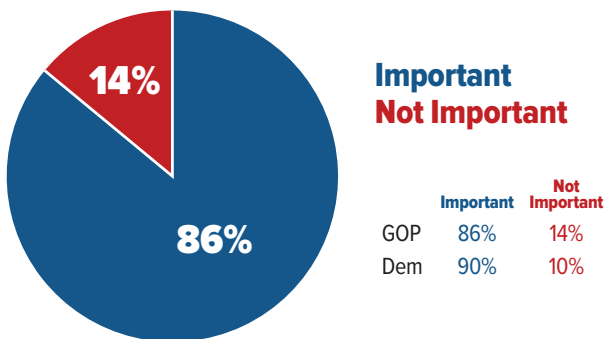
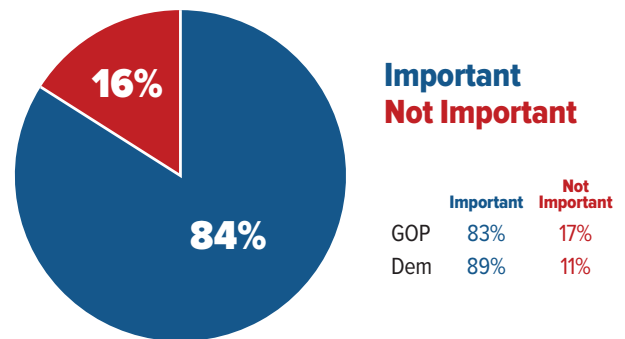
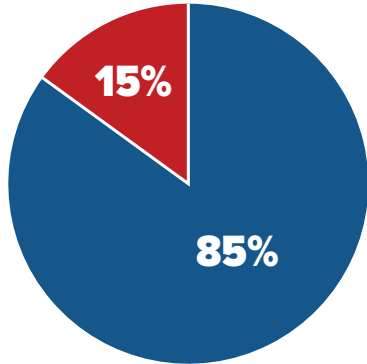


Figure 2.2B. And, since a growing economy produces more revenues for state and local governments without raising taxes, how important would you say our public colleges and community colleges are to keeping state and local taxes low here in Virginia?



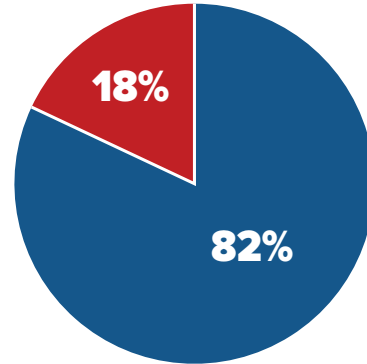
Large majorities of Virginians believe higher education is a good investment because it leads to higher-paying jobs and a stronger economy.

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.



Agree Disagree		Agree	Disagree					
	<table border="0"> <tr> <td>GOP</td> <td>81%</td> <td>19%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Dem</td> <td>89%</td> <td>11%</td> </tr> </table>	GOP	81%	19%	Dem	89%	11%	
GOP	81%	19%						
Dem	89%	11%						

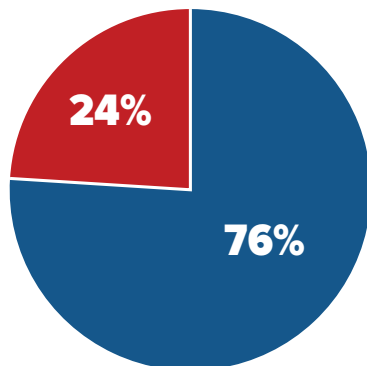
Figure 2.3B. Since, in today's economy, the highest paying jobs generally go to the best educated workers, a greater state investment in Virginia's higher education system will result in higher average incomes for Virginia workers and a stronger economy.



Agree Disagree		Agree	Disagree					
	<table border="0"> <tr> <td>GOP</td> <td>78%</td> <td>22%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Dem</td> <td>92%</td> <td>8%</td> </tr> </table>	GOP	78%	22%	Dem	92%	8%	
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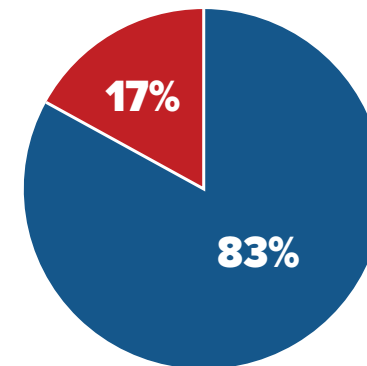
Voters give Virginia's colleges and universities high marks for preparing young people to succeed in the changing economy. They believe our higher education institutions also produce the innovative ideas that help make our state and nation more ready and resilient in the face of growing threats.

Figure 2.4A. Would you say Virginia's universities and colleges are doing a good job or a bad job at making sure students are graduating with the skills they need to succeed in the changing economy?



Good Job Bad Job		Good Job	Bad Job					
	<table border="0"> <tr> <td>GOP</td> <td>74%</td> <td>26%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Dem</td> <td>84%</td> <td>16%</td> </tr> </table>	GOP	74%	26%	Dem	84%	16%	
GOP	74%	26%						
Dem	84%	16%						

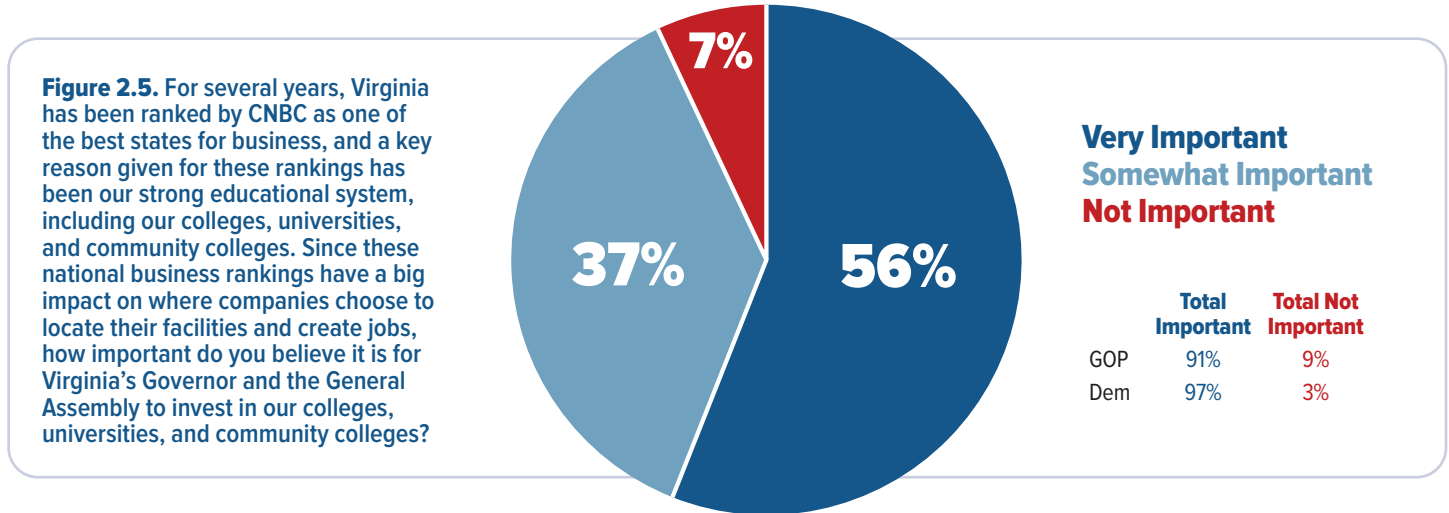
Figure 2.4B. As leaders in research and innovation, Virginia's colleges and universities are helping our state and nation become more resilient and better prepared to address future threats to our infrastructure and supply chains for everything from energy and the internet to food and medicine.



Agree Disagree		Agree	Disagree					
	<table border="0"> <tr> <td>GOP</td> <td>79%</td> <td>21%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Dem</td> <td>86%</td> <td>14%</td> </tr> </table>	GOP	79%	21%	Dem	86%	14%	
GOP	79%	21%						
Dem	86%	14%						

Virginians recognize that higher education is an economic engine for our state and our chief competitive advantage in attracting job-creating businesses and preserving our best-state-for-business ranking.

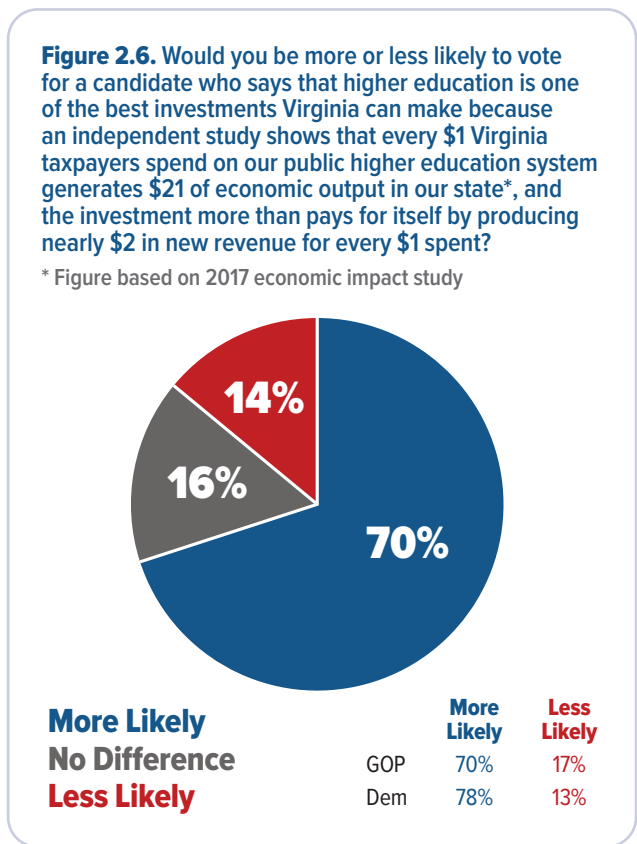
93% of voters say it is important to invest in higher education to maintain this competitive advantage. More than half say it is “very important,” indicating that voters’ views on this issue are especially intense.



Voters are more likely to vote for a candidate for the General Assembly who says that higher education is one of the best investments Virginia can make because of the high ROI.

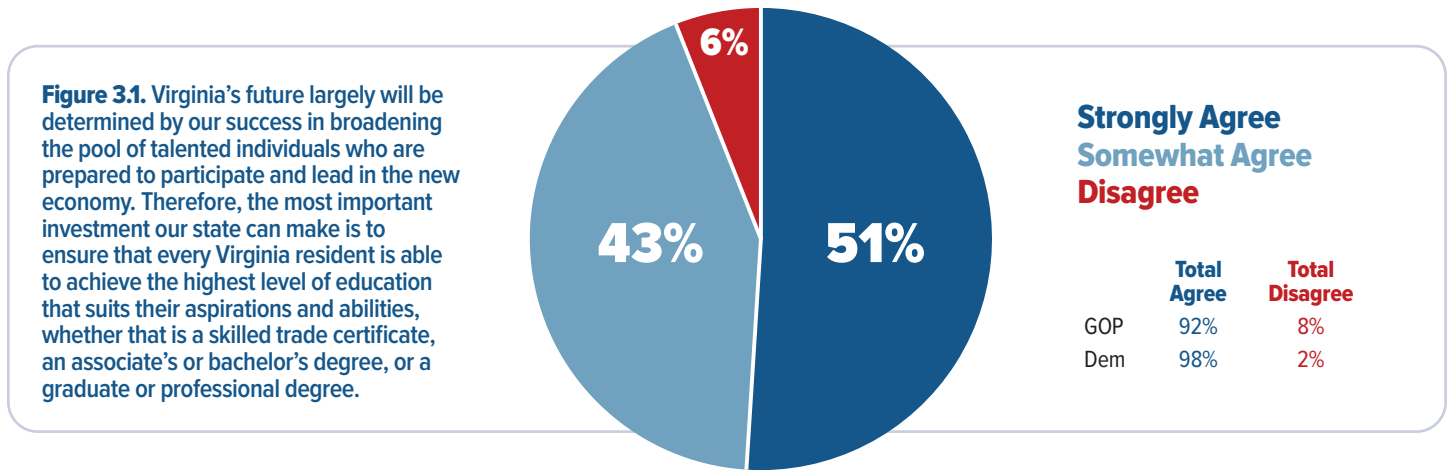
The Virginia Business Higher Education Council has documented the major impact of higher education on the Virginia economy. Among other findings, a comprehensive 2023 study showed that the public higher education system:

- Adds more than \$52 billion annually to Gross State Product, contributing more than \$25 in economic activity for every \$1 invested
- Is associated with more than 188,000 Virginia jobs
- Produces nearly \$2 in new state revenue for every \$1 of state expenditure

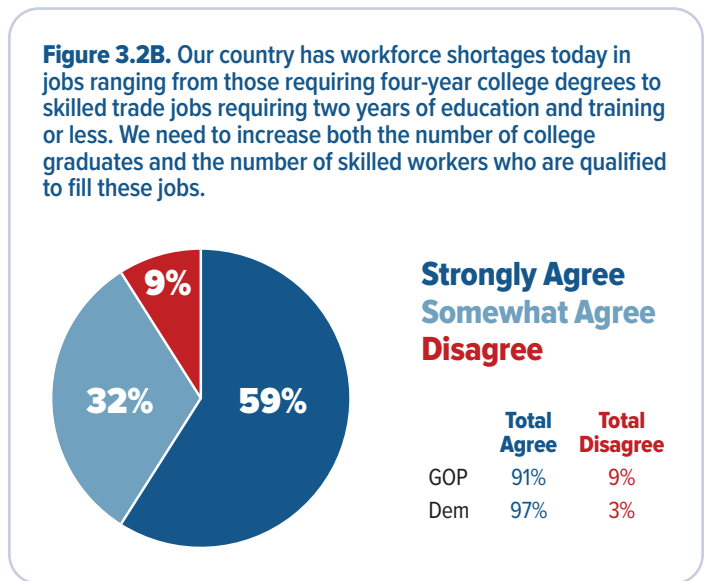
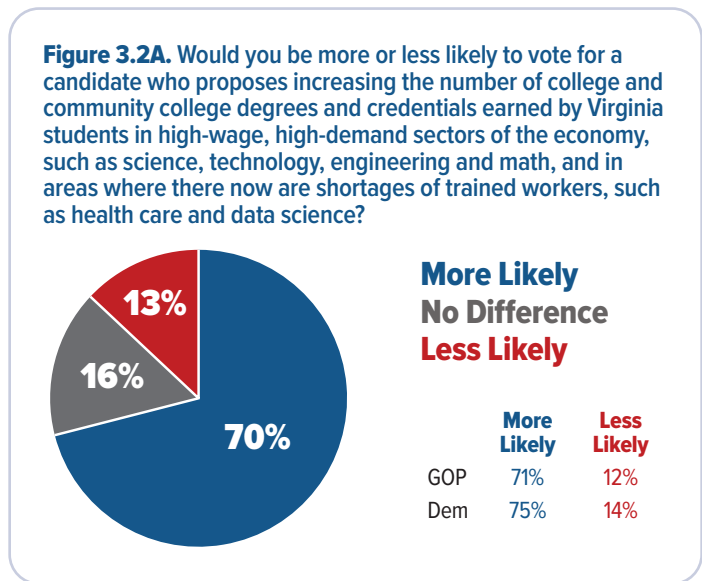


3. Voters believe talent is what sets Virginia apart. They support investments that will broaden the talent pool and increase access to good job opportunities through expansion of internships and talent pathways.

Voters respond with intensity when asked about the state’s role in developing talent. More than 90% agree — more than 50% agree “strongly” — that providing all Virginians with degrees and credentials that fit their individual aspirations and abilities is “the most important investment our state can make.”



Virginians are more likely to vote for a candidate with a plan to address workforce shortages by increasing degrees and credentials in STEM and other high-demand fields. They believe solving our workforce shortages will require more college degrees AND more skilled trade certificates.



Virginians strongly support giving all college students access to paid internship opportunities. The value of internships in helping to pay for college and preparing students for successful careers resonates more strongly with voters than almost any other issue.

Figure 3.3A. Virginia should increase the paid internship opportunities available to students because it will help students pay for college as well as prepare them for their career.

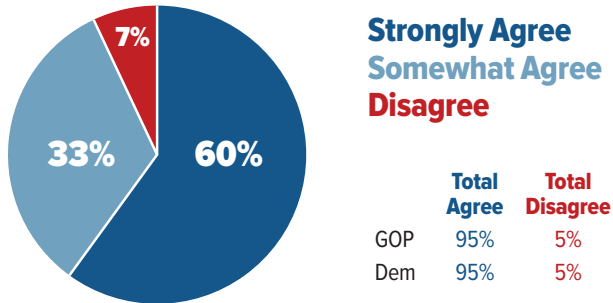
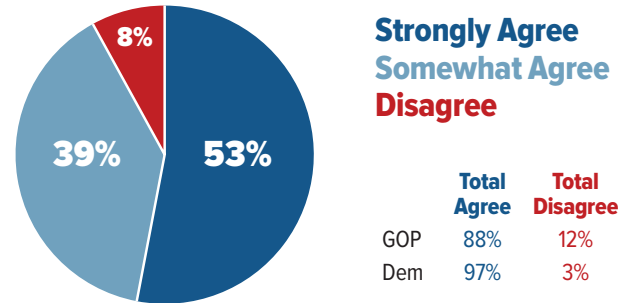


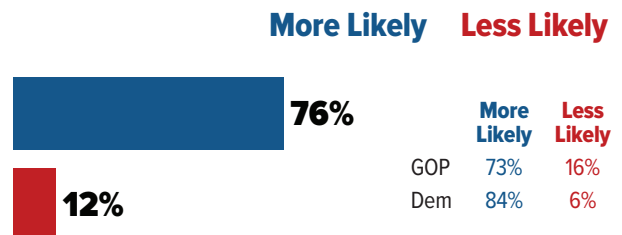
Figure 3.3B. It is important the state of Virginia invests in the Innovative Internship Program which increases the number of paid internships, co-op programs, and other work-based learning opportunities available to students attending Virginia's colleges and universities.



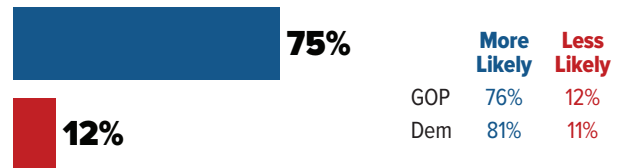
Virginians are more likely to vote for legislative candidates who support strategic investments to make internships available to all students.

Figure 3.4

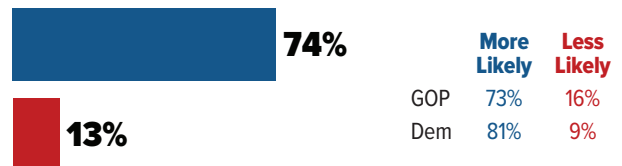
A - CAMPUS INTERNSHIP CENTERS. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says that colleges in Virginia need to work directly with businesses to help place students in paid internships with those businesses, so the state should invest in campus internship centers that focus on matching students with businesses for specific internship opportunities?



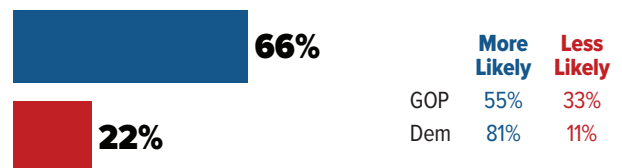
B - INTERNSHIP LISTINGS ON ONLINE PORTAL. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says that because many businesses want to hire student interns but do not know how to go about it, the state should create a user-friendly online portal with internship information and market it to employers and students throughout the state?



C - SMALL BUSINESS MATCHING GRANTS. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says that because most jobs in our economy are created by small businesses and internship experiences with small businesses are especially valuable to students, the state should provide matching grants to small businesses in Virginia so more small businesses can afford to hire interns?



D - FINANCIAL AID TO HELP WITH EXPENSES. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says that because many students cannot afford off-campus internships because they have additional expenses for things like transportation and housing, the state should provide financial aid to help cover those expenses so internships are accessible to all students regardless of their family's income?



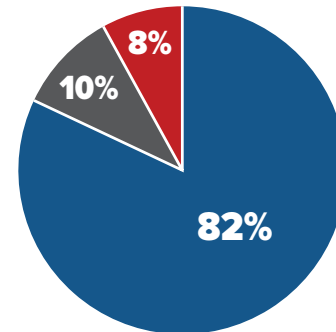
Voters want colleges and businesses in Virginia to partner in the creation of **AFFORDABLE TALENT PATHWAYS** that help students move efficiently from learning to earning and connect them to Virginia employers for full-time jobs after graduation. Large majorities in both parties are more likely to vote for candidates who support investing in talent pathways.

Talent Pathways:

A strategy for higher education innovation that enhances opportunity, affordability, efficiency, and keeps young talent in Virginia

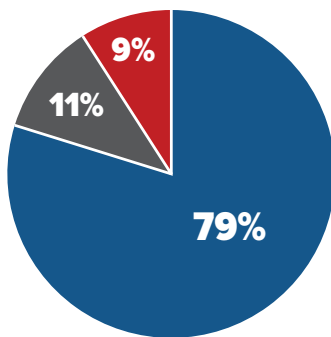
- Colleges collaborate with businesses and other employers.
- Curriculum is aligned to better address employer needs.
- Students have paid internship experiences or other valuable work-based learning.
- Leads to full-time job opportunities with a Virginia-based employer.

Figure 3.5A - REDUCING THE TIME AND COST OF GETTING A DEGREE AND JOB. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says Virginia should invest in creating more talent pathways where colleges, community colleges, and high schools work together with businesses to streamline coursework, provide work experience while learning, and reduce the time and cost of getting a degree followed by a full-time job?



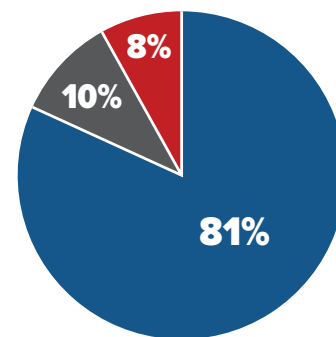
	More Likely	No Difference	Less Likely
GOP	84%	4%	4%
Dem	87%	8%	8%

Figure 3.5B - BENEFITS FOR FIRST-GENERATION AND LOW-INCOME STUDENTS. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says we need to invest in creating more talent pathways in Virginia because they are especially helpful for first-generation and low-income college students who otherwise have trouble getting needed work experience and being considered for well-paying jobs?



	More Likely	No Difference	Less Likely
GOP	71%	13%	13%
Dem	90%	4%	4%

Figure 3.5C - INCREASING THE CAREER-LONG RETURN ON INVESTMENT. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says creating more talent pathways here in Virginia will increase the students' return on their tuition investment in two ways: by connecting them directly to a well-paying first job, and by preparing them for lifelong success as resilient workers, critical thinkers, strong communicators, and outstanding citizens?



	More Likely	No Difference	Less Likely
GOP	81%	7%	7%
Dem	85%	10%	10%

Voters are concerned that talented young Virginians are leaving their families and communities for better job opportunities in other states. They see talent pathways, especially internships that lead to full-time jobs with Virginia employers, as a key strategy for reversing the outmigration trend and keeping young people in Virginia after graduation.

Figure 3.6A - CONNECTING WITH VIRGINIA EMPLOYERS WHILE IN COLLEGE. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says we need to invest in creating more talent pathways in Virginia because the best way to keep talented young people from moving away from our state after graduation is to connect them to Virginia businesses while they are still in college, such as through internships and co-op programs that can lead to full-time employment in Virginia?

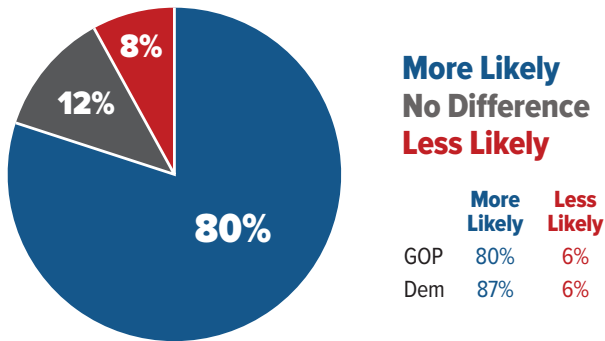
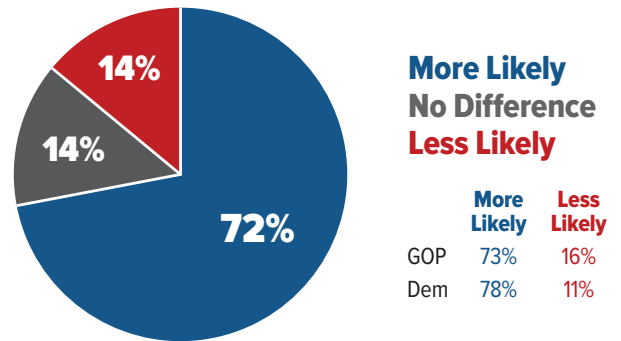


Figure 3.6B - PRESERVING OUR COMPETITIVE EDGE ON TALENT. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says Virginia's main advantage in competing for business investment is our talented workforce, but that advantage is declining because more young people are moving away from our state than are moving into it. Therefore, the General Assembly should make it a top priority to create talent pathways that provide incentives for students to come to Virginia for college and stay here for work after graduation?



Voters see talent pathways as a way to improve efficiency, reduce cost, and give more students access to internship and job opportunities while completing degrees on time.

Figure 3.7A - PARTNERING WITH BUSINESS TO IMPROVE EFFICIENCY AND RESULTS. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says colleges and businesses should work together to create more talent pathways in Virginia because partnerships between colleges and businesses help the colleges operate more efficiently, phase out programs that don't lead to good jobs, and produce better results for students at a lower cost?

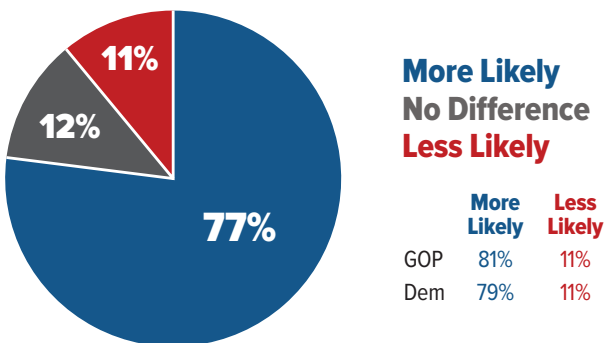
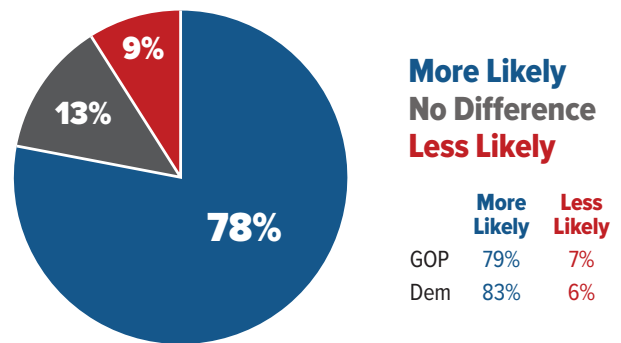


Figure 3.7B - REPEATABLE, EMPLOYER-APPROVED PROGRAMS. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says Virginia should invest in creating more talent pathways because, when colleges and businesses work together to develop educational programs, they produce repeatable, employer-approved programs that can be used by other colleges without going to the expense of designing new programs?



Voters support talent pathways as an effective strategy for expanding access to education and employment opportunities for all Virginians.

Figure 3.8

More Likely **Less Likely**

A - OPPORTUNITIES IN ECONOMICALLY DISTRESSED AREAS. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says we need to invest in creating more talent pathways in Virginia because they help young people in economically distressed urban and rural areas get access to good education and job opportunities that otherwise they would miss out on?



	More Likely	Less Likely
GOP	70%	14%
Dem	85%	4%

B - OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says Virginia should invest in creating more talent pathways that are available to students with disabilities, since, quite often, those students do not have good access to internships that can lead to full-time employment?



	More Likely	Less Likely
GOP	69%	19%
Dem	86%	6%

C - USING TECHNOLOGY TO EXPAND INTERNSHIP OPPORTUNITIES. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says colleges and businesses should work together to create talent pathways using online technology because having the option to work or study online lets more students have internships through which they get work experience and connections to future employers while still completing their degrees on time?



	More Likely	Less Likely
GOP	77%	9%
Dem	82%	11%

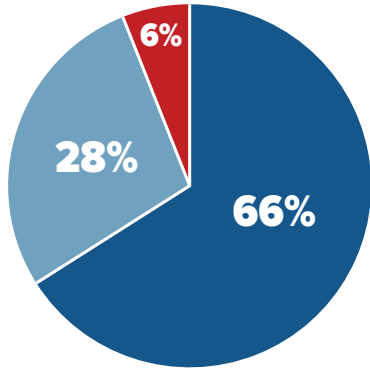
D - PROVIDING TEACHERS FOR VIRGINIA'S STUDENTS. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says we should invest in creating more talent pathways for students who are preparing to be teachers, since training more teachers and giving them incentives to stay and teach in Virginia will help address the severe teacher shortage we now have in Virginia's schools?



	More Likely	Less Likely
GOP	75%	13%
Dem	83%	9%

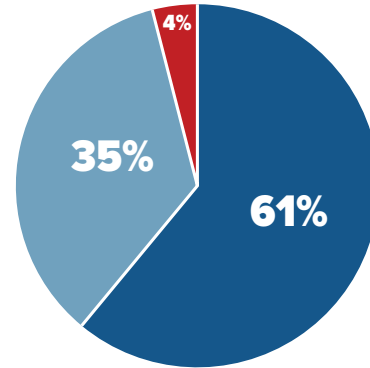
Providing educational opportunities for veterans and members of military families is extremely popular with Virginia voters. They also support making it easier for working adults to upgrade their skills.

Figure 3.9A. Providing military veterans with affordable access to education and training programs, and giving them credit for advanced skills developed during their military service.



	Total Support	Total Oppose
Strongly Support	96%	4%
Somewhat Support	97%	3%
Oppose		

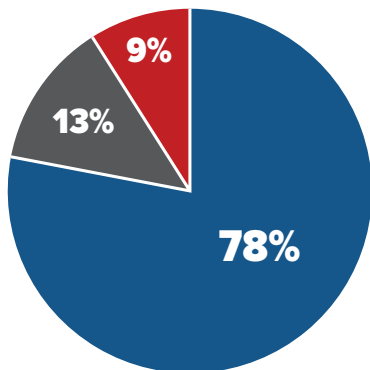
Figure 3.9B. Setting up a new system that makes it easier for working adults in Virginia with partial college credit to take online classes to complete their degrees or gain new job skill certification so they have better opportunities for job advancement.



	Total Support	Total Oppose
Strongly Support	97%	3%
Somewhat Support	97%	3%
Oppose		

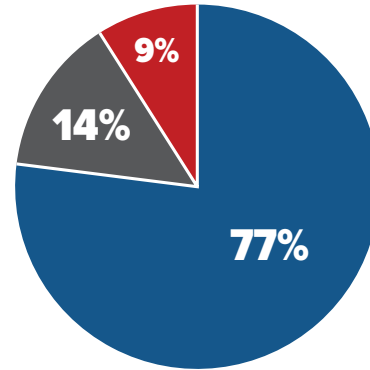
Virginians are more likely to vote for candidates who support university-based research, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

Figure 3.10A. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says colleges and universities in each region should 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?



	More Likely	Less Likely
More Likely	76%	9%
No Difference	86%	5%
Less Likely		

Figure 3.10B. Would you be more or less likely to vote for 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 doctors and nurses and also promote university-based research into advanced forms of medical care and treatment?



	More Likely	Less Likely
More Likely	77%	13%
No Difference	80%	8%
Less Likely		

4. College affordability remains a top concern for Virginia voters. They support greater state investment combined with strategies to improve access and performance.

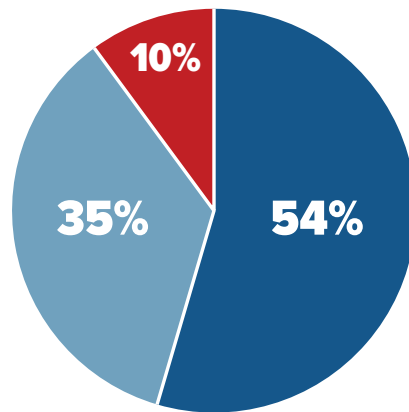
Voters recognize that the chronic underfunding of higher education in Virginia is the primary driver of tuition cost. They react strongly to data showing how much more neighboring states are investing in their colleges so the tuition burden for students and families in those states can be reduced.

Figure 4.1. Currently, tuition at our public universities in Virginia is higher than in neighboring states like Tennessee, North Carolina, and Maryland. This is mainly because those states provide thousands of dollars more funding per student than Virginia provides, leaving less to be paid by students and families in those states.

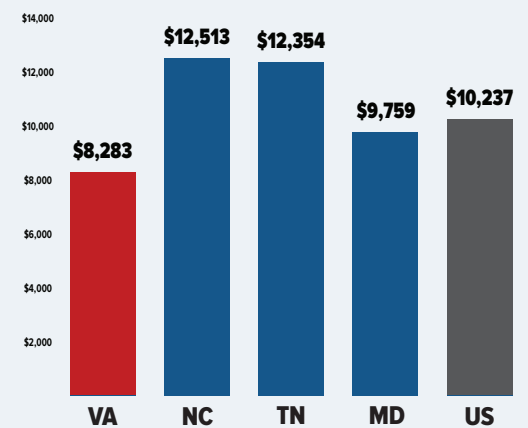
Knowing this, how important would you say it is for Virginia's Governor and the General Assembly to reduce reliance on tuition by increasing the state's funding of our higher education system?

Very Important
Somewhat Important
Not Important

	Total Important	Total Not Important
GOP	83%	17%
Dem	96%	4%



State Support per FTE Student, FY22



Source: SHEEO State Higher Education Project

Voters want the state to invest more in student financial aid so that every qualified Virginia high school graduate can afford to attend.

Figure 4.2A. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says every qualified Virginia high school graduate should have affordable access to college; therefore, we should increase state funding for student financial aid because currently the number of low-income and middle-income students needing this aid far exceeds the available grants?

More Likely
Less Likely

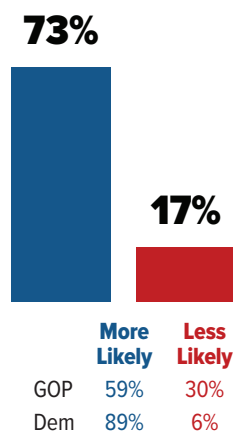
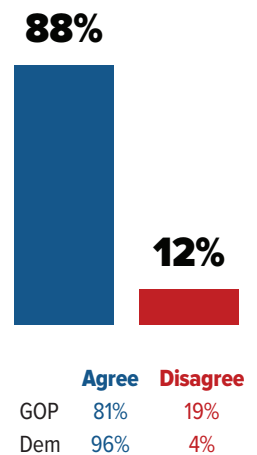


Figure 4.2B. While higher-income Virginians can afford college, and lower-income families tend to qualify for significant federal financial aid, many middle-income families in Virginia qualify only for loans, resulting in high levels of student loan debt. This problem is known as the 'middle class squeeze.' The Governor and General Assembly should seek a significant increase in state-funded financial aid for middle-income families so fewer Virginia students leave college with large debt burdens.

Agree
Disagree



Greater social mobility and relief from inflation are additional reasons why voters strongly support increased student financial aid.

Figure 4.3A. Since social mobility is especially important in our diverse state, Virginia’s Governor and General Assembly should work to increase student financial aid so that college is more affordable for low-income and first-generation college students.

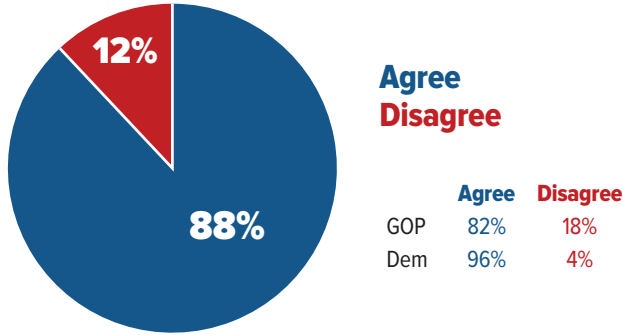
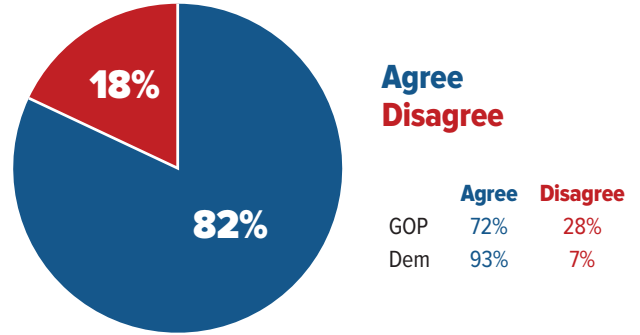


Figure 4.3B. With inflation at the highest level it has been in many decades, our colleges and universities are also paying higher prices. These higher costs should be paid by the state of Virginia through more state funding for our colleges rather than being passed along to students and their families through higher tuition.



Voters support funding for HBCU’s, tuition assistance grants (TAG) for private colleges, and increased dual enrollment options in community colleges.

Figure 4.4A. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says we should invest in Virginia’s historically black colleges and universities, also known as HBCU’s, because they provide affordable access to a high-quality education for diverse students, including many low-income and first-generation students who otherwise would not have access to higher education’s lifelong benefits?

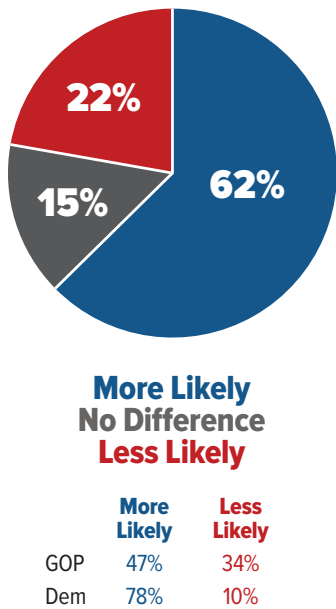


Figure 4.4B. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who says that Virginia’s private nonprofit colleges and universities are an essential part of our state’s top-ranked higher education system; therefore, Virginia should increase the amount of tuition assistance, also called “TAG” grants, that the state provides to Virginia resident students who attend those private colleges?

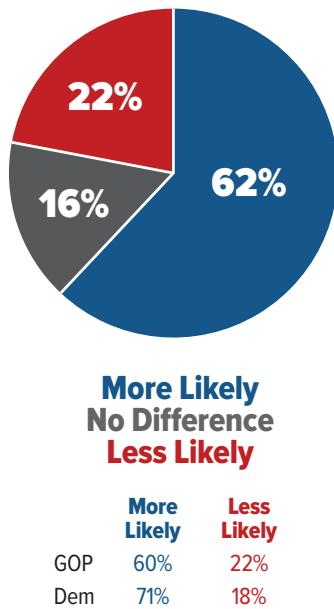
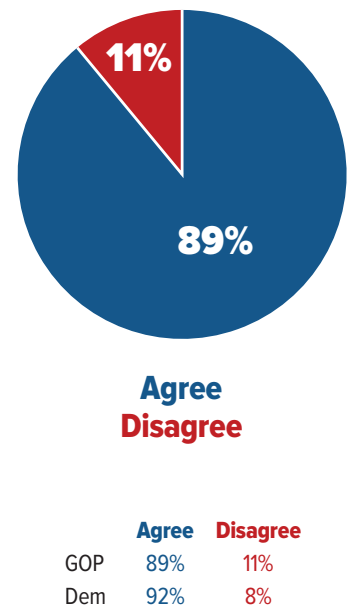


Figure 4.4C. The Governor and General Assembly should expand the number of dual enrollment courses, which are usually community college courses that students can take while they are still in high school, because the sooner a student can get a two-year degree or industry credential, the quicker and cheaper it will be for them to complete their education and get a good job.



Voters overwhelmingly favor state investments in mental health services and support services for students, which are now funded mainly by student fees.

Figure 4.5A. Each Virginia public college and community college should provide high-quality mental health services, funded by the state of Virginia, so that students who face mental health challenges and need help can readily receive it.

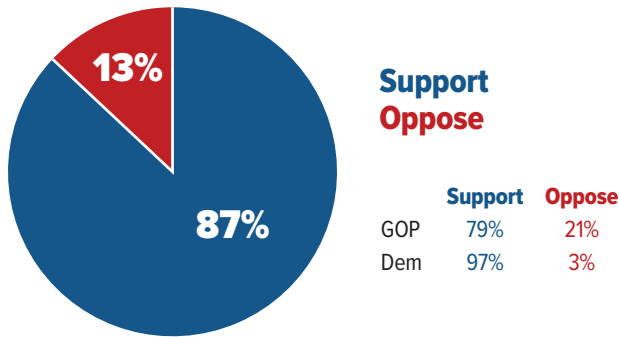
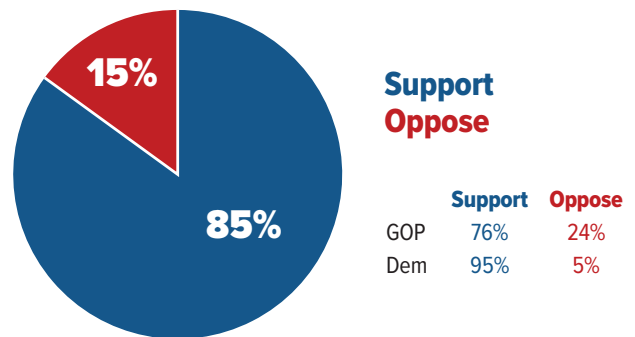


Figure 4.5B. Each Virginia public college and community college should provide a set of student support services, funded by the state of Virginia, that helps address built-in disadvantages faced by low-income, first-generation, veteran, and under-represented minority students so those students can successfully complete certificate and degree programs.



Voters support continuing improvement in performance through restructuring, tying funding to outcomes, collaboration, innovation, and more partnerships with business.

Figure 4.6A. Would you be more or less likely to vote for 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 funded based mainly on their success in producing good outcomes for students, including specific factors like the number of students enrolled, graduation rates, and student success in securing good jobs?

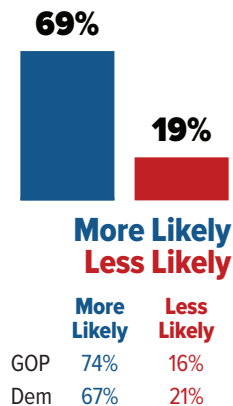
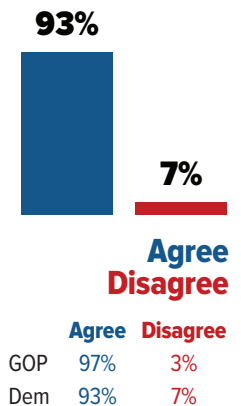


Figure 4.6B. Virginia's colleges and universities have high graduation rates and spend less per degree than neighboring states, but there is much more they should do to become cost-efficient. They should work closely with business partners to adopt more efficient business practices, reduce duplication by sharing administrative and academic resources among the colleges, make better use of advanced technology, and streamline coursework to move students more efficiently through their studies into internships and eventually into full-time jobs.



CONCLUSION

Virginia voters say it is time to invest in talent so that all Virginians have access to education and job opportunities and so that our state wins the competition for business investment and job creation. Internships, talent pathways, and investments in affordability all generate intense voter support. Virginians are proud of their top-ranked higher education system, understanding that it outperforms colleges in other states and produces an exceptionally strong ROI. They are more likely to support candidates this fall who express similar views.

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 investment and innovation in the Virginia higher education system.

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. Our current board consists of:

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