



A SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE REPORT

Rebuilding Public Trust in Higher Education

National discourse on the value of a college degree is at an all-time high and public confidence in higher ed is declining.

Institutions are in an impossible position, with decreasing options and consistent roadblocks to implementing fundamental changes on campus.

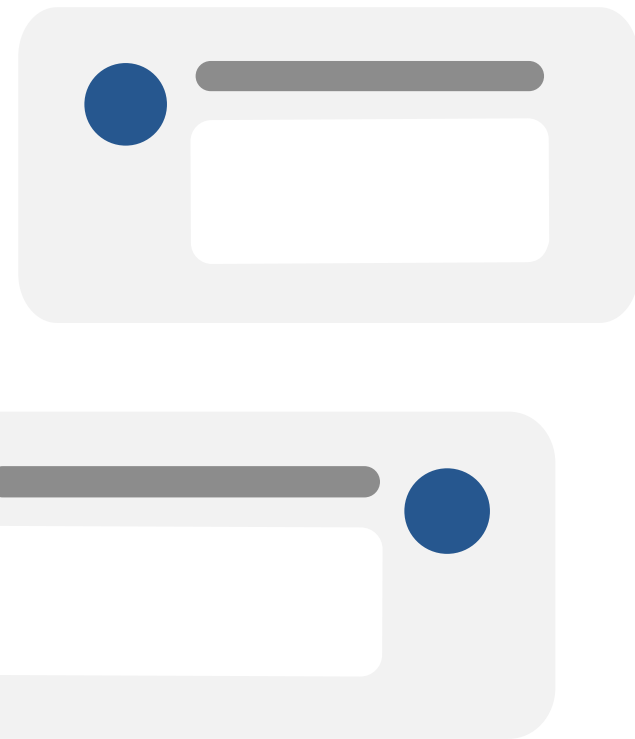
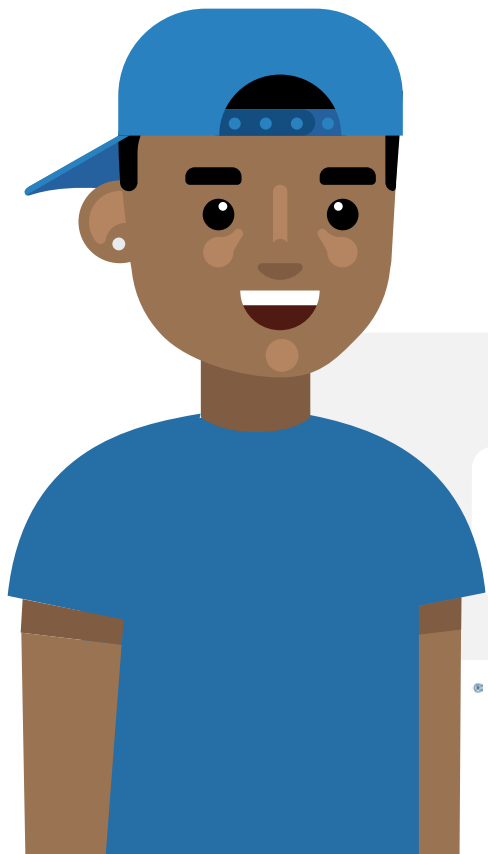
The solution lies in understanding what the population believes is true and clarifying higher ed's outcomes and role in an increasingly complex and uncertain world.

What We Set Out to Uncover

Campus Sonar explored the gap between trust and value to understand what audiences discuss about a college degree using social intelligence, focusing on how audiences explain the purpose of higher ed, the value of a degree based on current outcomes, and how those outcomes could evolve if trust and values aligned.

This report shares our social intelligence insights into current public perception and recommendations for campus leaders to begin to rebuild trust with prospective and current students, alumni, and the public at large.

Social Intelligence Research Framework



The Social Intelligence Data

Campus Sonar analysts explored how individuals think and feel about the value of higher education by **analyzing more than 13,000 online mentions from June–December 2023**, deriving insights into how audiences discuss:

- 1 The purpose of higher ed.
- 2 The value of a college degree based on current outcomes.
- 3 The outcomes higher ed could deliver if trust and values align.

How We Analyzed the Data

Applying higher education expertise, understanding of theory, and practical campus experience, Campus Sonar strategists leveraged social intelligence insights to **recommend actionable steps for campus leaders to rebuild trust and lead boldly.**

“Understanding the public perception gap—the difference between what is true about the value of a college degree and what the public believes to be true for themselves and others—is vital to design a strategy that changes behavior along with hearts and minds.

Rebuilding public trust is done person by person, story by story. A social intelligence approach captures real-time public sentiment and consumer insight to support organizational transformation, while preserving the personal narratives that inform effective engagement and communication strategies to shift the public’s perception.”

Liz Gross, Founder and CEO, Campus Sonar

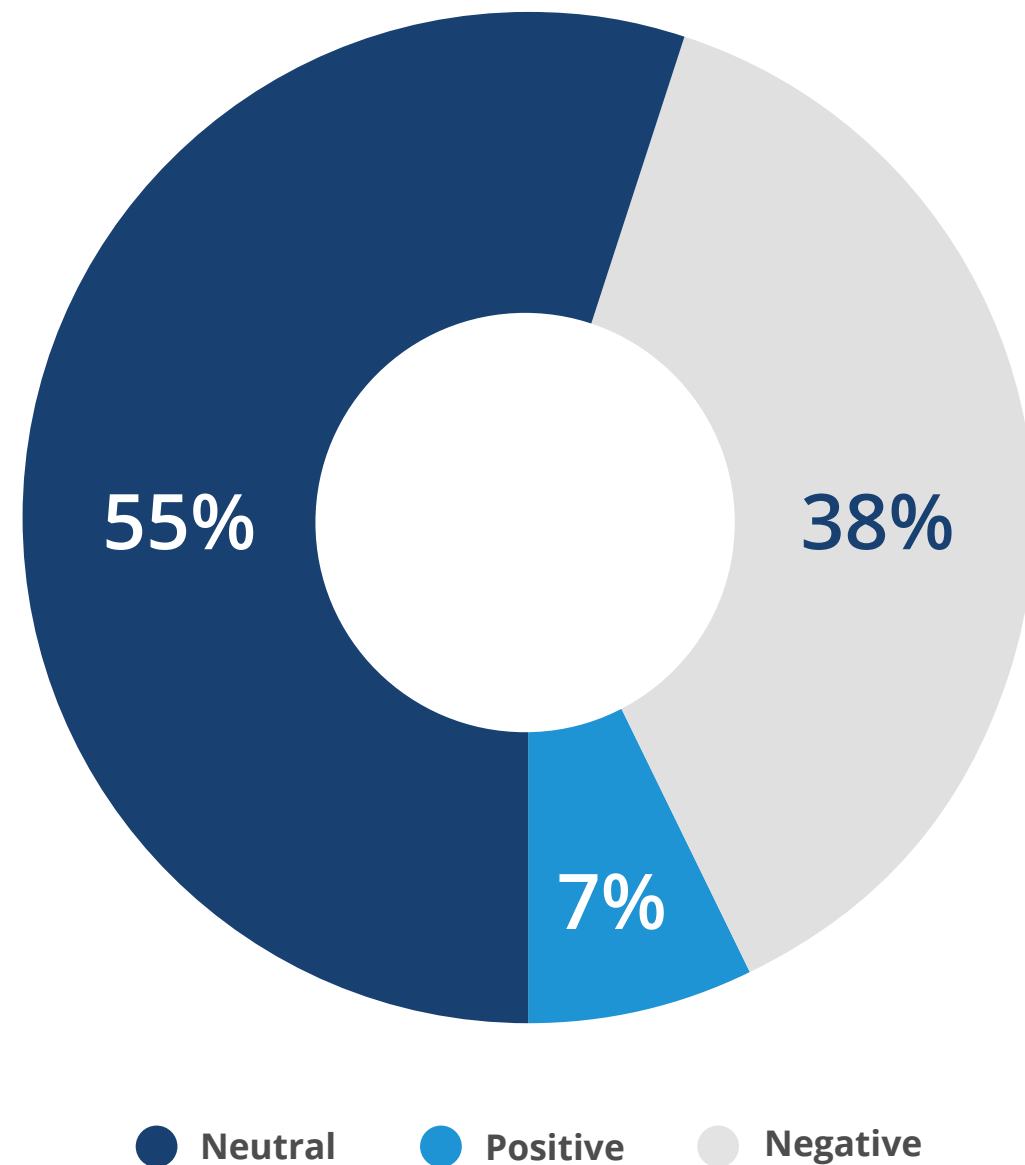


How Does the Public Define Higher Ed's Purpose?

The public equates trust with value, believing the purpose of higher ed is to gain value from the degree. Audiences regularly question the value of post-secondary degrees, whether the outcomes are "worth it," and what they gain.

This conversation was overwhelmingly neutral or negative even when searching for positive messages.

Is a College Degree Worth It? ~~~~~



Why Individuals Pursue College

Audiences determined the value or worth of college by the reasons they pursued a post-secondary degree in the first place.



REASON 1

Indisputable Advantages

Individuals make direct connections between the value of college and what they gain.

- Improved quality of life
- Financial stability
- Societal contributions
- Personal skills
- Pursuit of passions and purpose
- Knowledge acquisition



REASON 2

Unmatched Opportunities

30% of online conversation connected a degree.

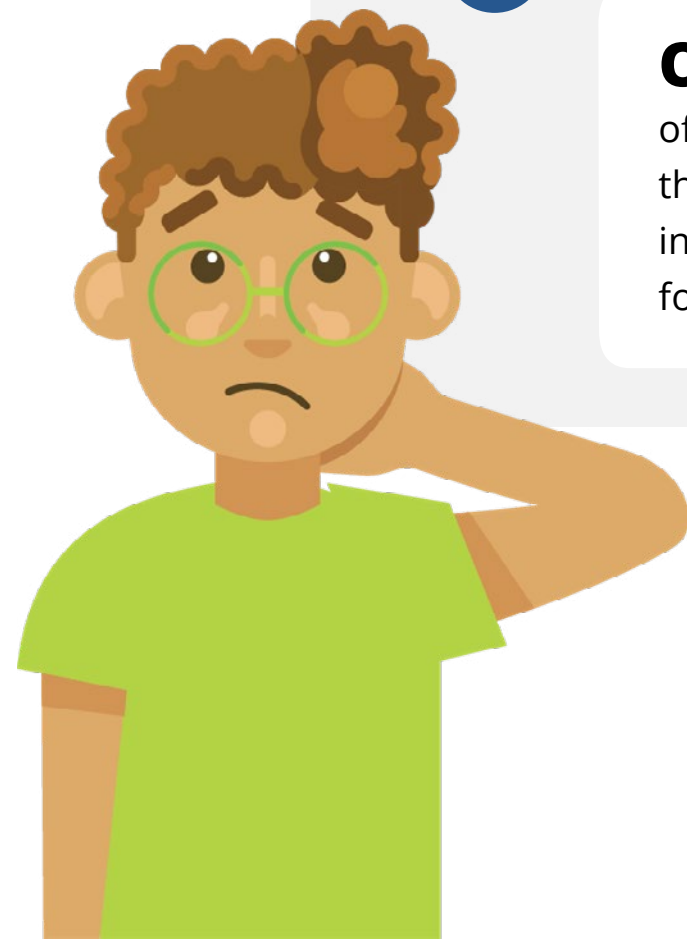
- Diversified career paths
- Increased long-term earning potential
- Specialized skill development
- Larger professional network



“Transparency builds trust. If we’re open and honest about the places where we need to improve, folks are more likely to trust.”

~ Former Nevada System of Higher Education Chancellor, [Melody Rose](#)

Caveats to the Value of College



Over 44%

of conversations about the purpose of college, included cautionary advice for prospective students.

Overcoming Negative Trends

In conversations about the purpose of college, about half (45%) included cautionary advice for prospective students.

- **Be motivated** to take advantage of opportunities.
- **Tailor their major** to prepare for advanced degrees.
- **Consider their major's ROI.**
- **Prioritize the potential** for career experience.

“If you do not trust the people around you or do not believe your institution well serves your interests, you are **undoubtedly less likely to have a positive experience that will sustain you to graduation.**”

~ [National Survey of Student Engagement, 2020](#)

How Campus Leaders Can Rebuild Trust



Lead with Transparency

Apply transparency in your communications and messaging to build credibility.

- **Actively address pain points, weaknesses, and barriers** to understanding the financial aid and enrollment processes.
- **Clearly communicate** cost and value early and often.
- **Differentiate your offerings** with realism and transparency.



Frame Messaging with Outcomes

Use indisputable advantages and unmatched opportunities to progress forward—aligning your operations and messaging in support of individual, community, and societal outcomes.

- **Use graduation, job placement, and alumni data** to inform actionable insights and storytelling.
- **Amplify alumni stories** with positive professional, philanthropic, and community engagement outcomes.
- **Leverage alumni brand affinity.**
- **Form community partnerships** to identify employer needs, inform economic development, and support regional career pipelines.



Prioritize Preparation

Assess, streamline, and re-prioritize efforts to ensure students are aware of and have access to support services and preparation resources.

- **Assess student support resources**, from academic advising to career services.
- **Clearly and regularly communicate** about critical student services.
- **Invest in career readiness resources.**
- **Establish mentorship relationships** and invest in those campus professionals.



Listen to and Serve your Audiences

Trust depends on context and isn't experienced equitably. There's a gap between value and whether students from marginalized and underrepresented communities trust institutions.

- **Put students first** by listening.
- **Reach students at all phases of the funnel** to align support and value early in the college exploration process.
- **Empower your DEIB** experts to make decisions and directly influence decisions.
- **Engage in community outreach.**
- **Drive change through proactive, intentional strategy**—don't let it drive you!

Takeaways

What this Means for Higher Ed Leaders

- ➔ **Rebuilding trust is necessary** for higher ed to reclaim its relevance and continue serving its audiences as their needs evolve. By mission, campuses are learning organizations—the foundation for change is there.
- ➔ **Leaders must be willing to lead boldly**, think differently, and approach their decisions with an audience-first framework.
- ➔ **As a public good, higher ed can't relinquish this work** to private industry. Individuals and communities depend on it.



To find out more about how we're rebuilding trust at institutions, visit campussonar.com or [contact us](#).