Confidence in Academia Falls Nine Points in Three Years

By Alex Berezow, PhD — October 11, 2018

Academia is in meltdown. There simply is no nice way to put it.

A new survey by Gallup shows that only 48% of U.S. adults have a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in academia, down from 57% in 2015. And it's not just due to partisanship; confidence has fallen among people of all political persuasions.

While it is true that confidence has fallen the most among Republicans (17 points), it's also down among Independents (4 points) and Democrats (6 points). Also, note that in 2015, the gap in confidence between Republicans (57%) and Democrats (68%) wasn't all that wide (11 points). But today, that gap has expanded to 23 points. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Independents were quite skeptical of academia in 2015, as well, with only 48% expressing confidence.
Why Is Academia in Meltdown?

The question, "How many problems does academia have?" is sort of like asking, "How many rocks are there?" Where does one even begin to address the question? Here's a brief, far-from-exhaustive list:

1) **Tuition and other costs have gone way up.** According to an analysis by Camilo Maldonado in Forbes, the price of a four-year degree doubled from 1989 to 2016, even after considering inflation. Each year, tuition increased by about 2.6%. However, over that same time period, the median wage increased by an average of only 0.3%. Because the cost of education has grown eight times faster than median wages, Mr. Maldonado concluded that "each successive cohort of graduates is worse off than the last."

2) **"Credential inflation" decreases the value of higher education.** Because so many people are going to college, a bachelor's degree is now more like a glorified high school diploma. Everybody has one. As a result, some jobs that don't really require many skills beyond a high school education now require that the applicant has a bachelor's degree. This phenomenon can be thought of as "credential inflation." If everybody has a bachelor's degree, then bachelor's degrees aren't worth much anymore. Many students believe they have to get a master's or doctoral degree to set themselves apart, piling on even more costs.

3) **The quality of higher education is decreasing.** Businesses aren't entirely happy with the graduates that academia is producing. Hiring managers feel that candidates do not have proper writing or speaking skills, for instance. If a person can graduate college without being able to string together a coherent paragraph, then higher education has utterly failed in the most fundamental of ways.
4) Academics are not held accountable for their bad behavior or poor performance. Professors basically can’t be fired. Short of using university resources to hire hookers, like one of my former professors at the University of Washington did [6], there are very few things that can get a professor terminated. For the most part, professors are free to waste taxpayer or donor money, and nobody will hold them accountable. That explains how UCSF has become a nexus for conspiracy theorists [7], how anti-GMO professors win awards while pro-GMO ones get fired [8], how a professor can sue an academic journal over hurt feelings [9], and how an English professor can still have a job after celebrating the death of Barbara Bush [10].

A Breakdown in Trust in Society’s Institutions

Academia isn’t the only institution on the firing line. The Gallup survey showed dismal confidence ratings in the police (54%), religion (38%), the presidency and the Supreme Court (both 37%), banks (30%), television news (20%), and Congress (11%). In other words, Americans no longer trust the institutions that we have long seen as a bedrock of our modern society.

That’s a very bad thing. Democracy doesn’t work because of laws and rules; it works because people have respect for and trust in their fellow citizens. If those vanish, society becomes rudderless. Fixing academia -- in addition to the media [11] -- would be a good start toward putting our country back on the right track.