



**Kirwan Institute**  
Many Differences **One Destiny**

March 2012

**Democratic Merit Project  
On-Line Opinion Survey  
Summary of Findings**

Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity  
The Ohio State University

The Democratic Merit Project receives generous support from  
Public Interest Projects – Fulfilling the Dream Fund

Tom Rudd  
Director of Education and Emerging Research

## INTRODUCTION

The Democratic Merit Project challenges institutions to operationalize “merit” in a way that promotes the conditions necessary for a thriving democracy and to define and use merit as an incentive system to reward those actions that a society values. One principal objective of the project is to link diversity and equal opportunity with the democratic mission of higher education. This objective is stimulated by the proposition that, in the United States, institutions of higher education are not uniformly meeting their responsibility to promote diversity and energize democracy by admitting students who have the will to advance a democratic society.

When measuring merit among applicants, colleges and universities too often focus heavily on traditional “objective measures of excellence” based on what students have done, who their parents are, and how they have performed on standardized achievement tests. This strategy assists in reinforcing the selectivity of some institutions while ignoring or deemphasizing what students might produce or contribute to the larger society after they graduate—a transformative way of contextualizing the concept of merit and connecting merit to democratic values.

The Democratic Merit Project was developed in 2007 from a proposal crafted by Lani Guinier, Bennett Boskey Professor of Law at Harvard University, John Powell, then Executive Director of the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity and Williams Chair in Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, Moritz College of Law, Ohio State University (currently Director, Haas Diversity Research Center and Robert D. Haas Chancellor’s Chair in Equity and Inclusion, University of California, Berkeley) and Claude Steele, then Lucie Stern Professor in the Social Sciences and Director of Stanford University’s Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (currently Provost and Professor of Psychology at Columbia University). New grant support from Public Interest Projects – Fulfilling the Dream Fund has enabled the Kirwan Institute to make progress on this project in the following areas:

- Engage more deeply in the national conversation about the value of diversity—particularly racial and ethnic diversity—and democratic merit in higher education including enhancing the project’s web presence.
- Deepen our understanding of how traditional measures of academic merit may have constrained progress toward the public mission of colleges and universities.
- Gather public opinion about the value of diversity in higher education, the public mission of colleges and universities and the college admissions process.
- Employ systems science methodologies to produce a comprehensive structural analysis of factors that influence access to and diversity in higher education and the causal interactions of these factors.

The on-line survey project addresses the third goal above. This goal is stimulated by the understanding that while many of the barriers to equal opportunity in higher education are structural in nature and race neutral on their face—historic overreliance on standardized test scores in the college admissions process, for example—the public and private attitudes and opinions of individual actors do indeed influence these structures and can energize or restrain the creation and implementation of strategies and mechanisms designed to eliminate structural barriers to

educational opportunity. For example, research suggests that most white Americans harbor some level of subtle implicit bias toward African Americans and other people of color. These biases can influence decisions at every level of public and private enterprise, from sentencing decisions made by judges to funding decisions in public programs designed to lift up poor people and people of color.

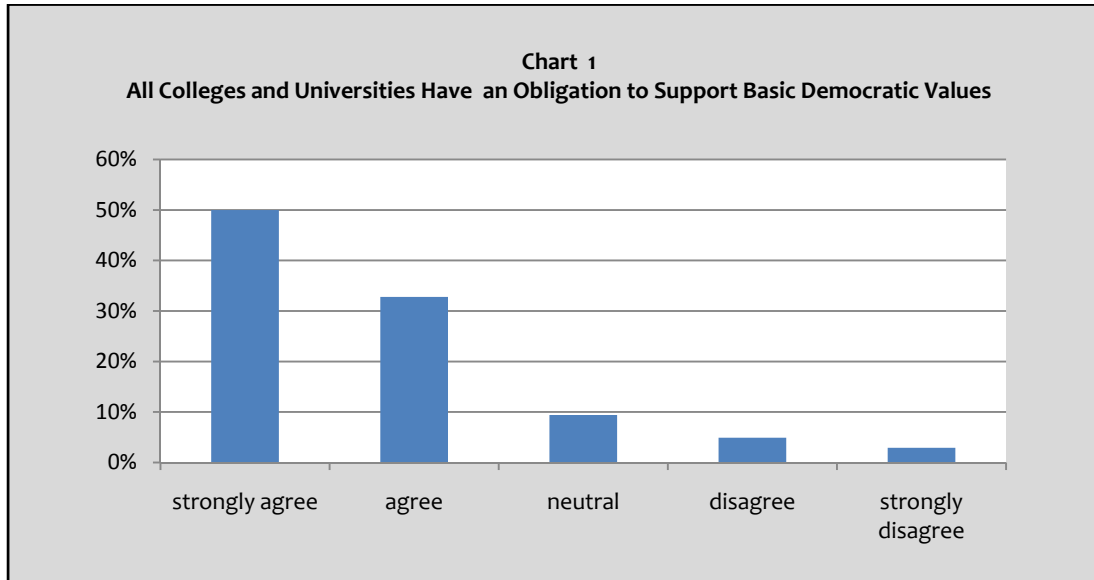
So, why do these opinions and attitudes matter? They matter because our individual and collective understanding of race and how race operates in the society strongly influences the “distribution of opportunity” in our society and the development and implementation of strategies to overcome racialized barriers to opportunity in education and other critical life domains. These attitudes and opinions also influence the relative position of race and social inequality on the “public agenda.”

As we design tools to counteract a growing “colorblind” ideology in the U.S. and level the opportunity playing field, should these tools look the same for all groups or should we take into account differences in the attitudes and opinions of various audiences about the operation of race on the distribution of benefits and burdens in our society? The answer is certainly that differences must be accommodated. As this survey suggests, reality is nuanced; very often different groups look at the same picture and see very different scenarios and causal relationships. The more we know about these differences in attitude and opinion, the better equipped we will be to conceive of strategies to create a society in which all citizens have equal opportunity to achieve success.



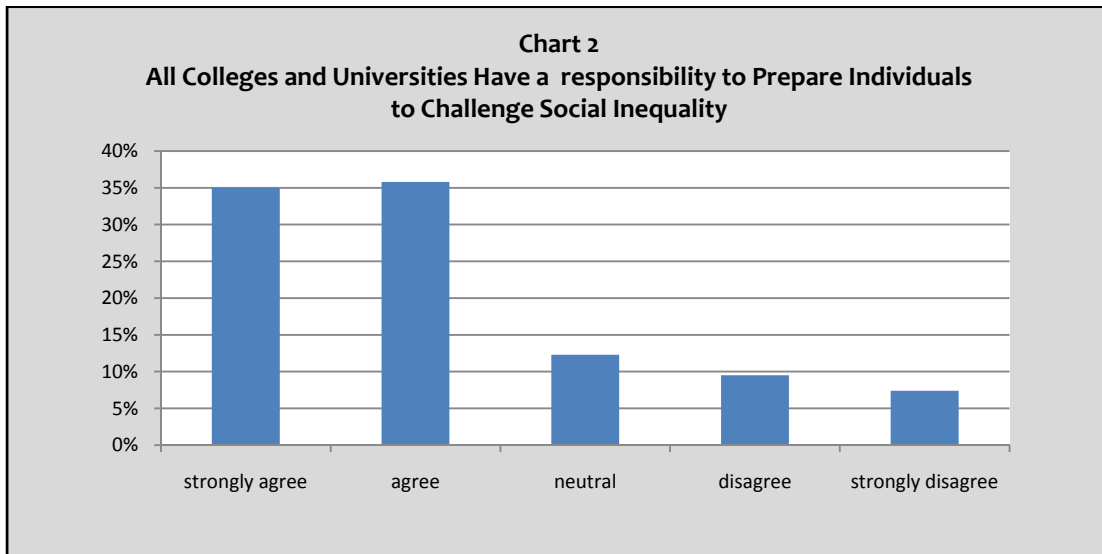
## FINDINGS

**Item #1: Do all colleges and universities have an obligation to support basic democratic values?**



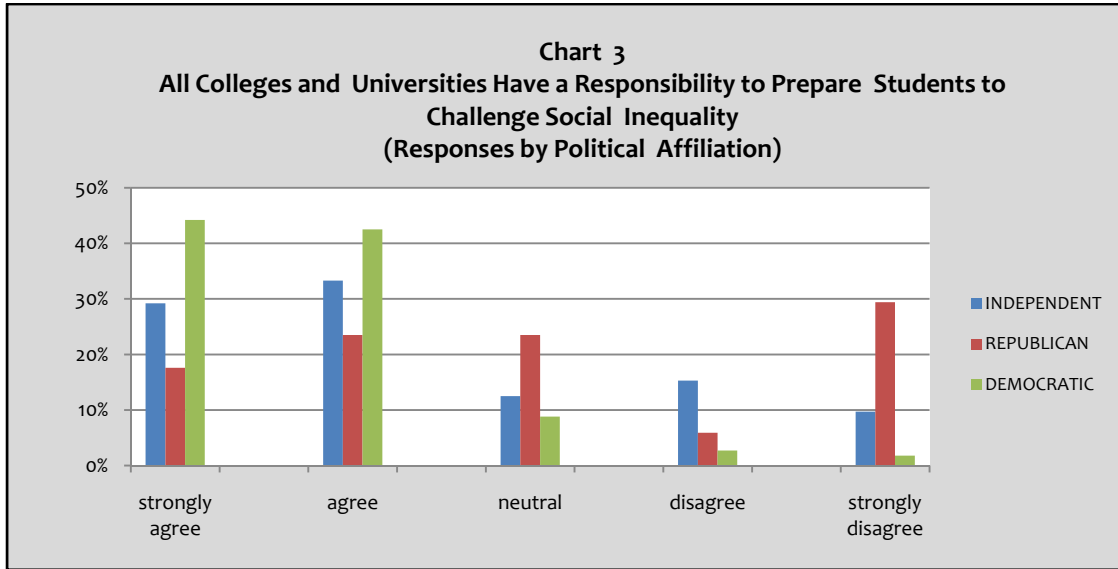
Roughly 83% of respondents agree with this statement. Not surprisingly, all respondents who strongly disagree with this statement also strongly disagree with the statement that “all colleges and universities have a responsibility to prepare individuals to challenge social inequality.”

**Item #2: Do all colleges and universities have a responsibility to prepare individuals to challenge social inequality?**

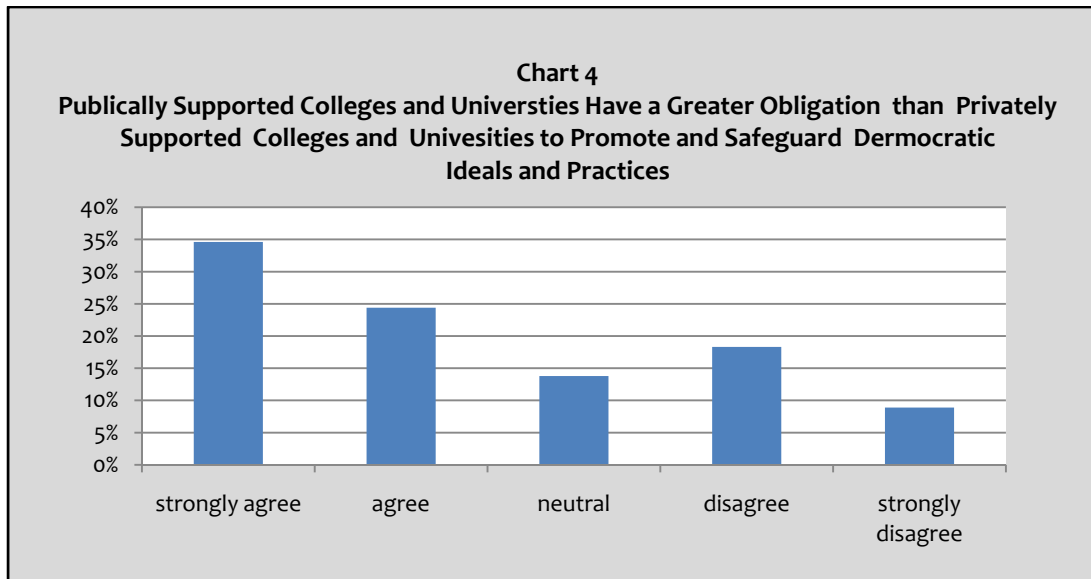


A clear majority of respondents either strongly agree or agree with this statement. Approximately 32% of respondents who strongly agree that “preparing students for active participation in a democratic society” is the central mission of higher education in the U.S. also strongly agree that all colleges have a responsibility to prepare individuals to challenge social inequality.

Responses to this item differ by political affiliation. While only 17.6% of republicans strongly agree with this statement, 29.2% of independents and 44.2% of democratic strongly agree.

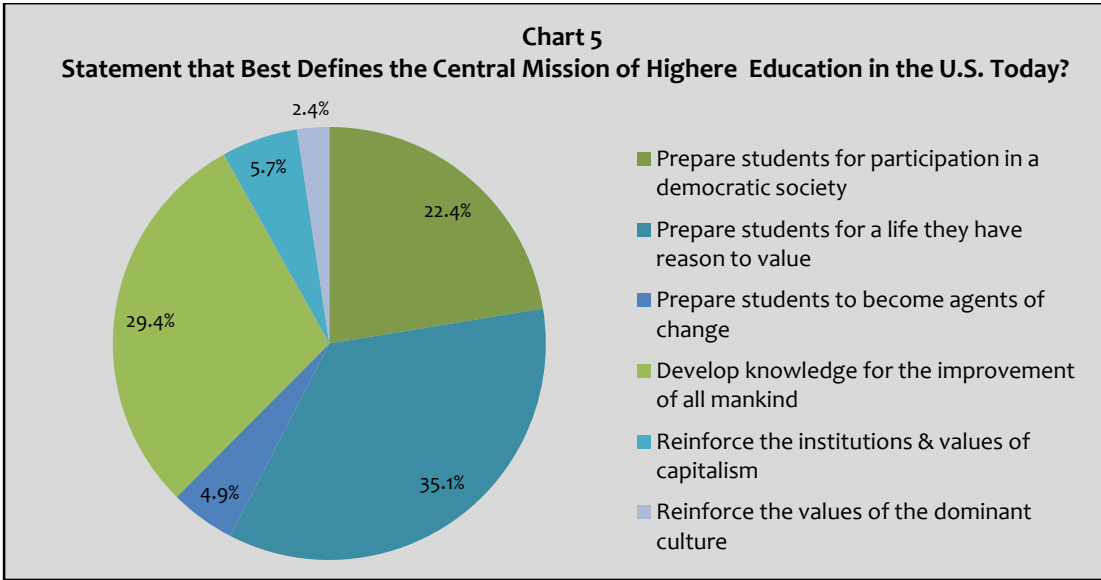


**Item #3:** Do publically supported colleges and universities have a greater responsibility than privately supported colleges and universities to promote and safeguard basic democratic ideals and practices?



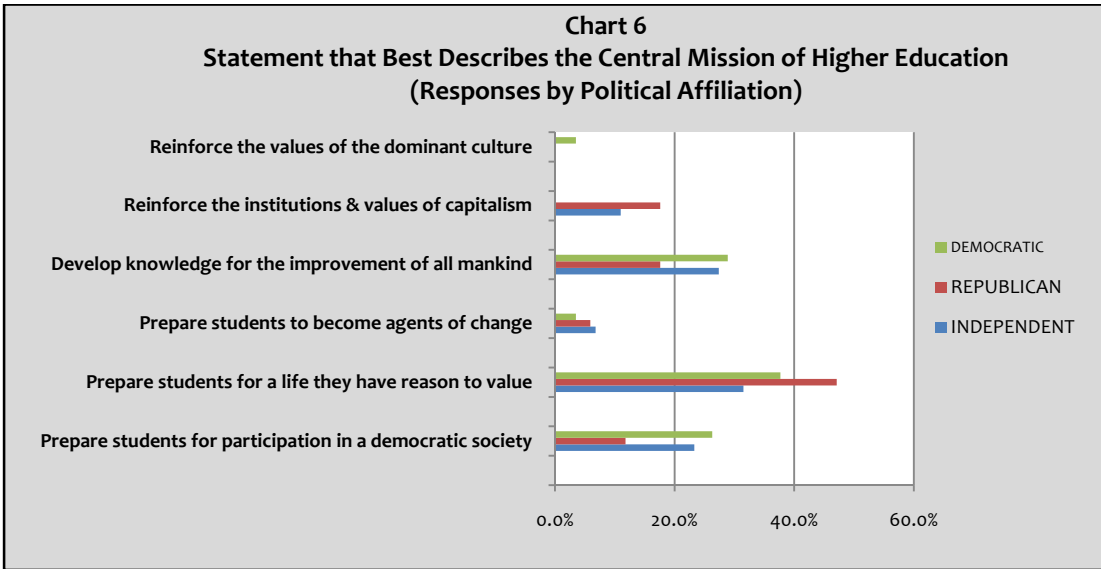
There is a clear lack of consensus here. Roughly 58% of respondents strongly agree or agree with this statement while the remainder is neutral or disagree.

**Item #4:** What is the central mission of higher education in the U.S. today?

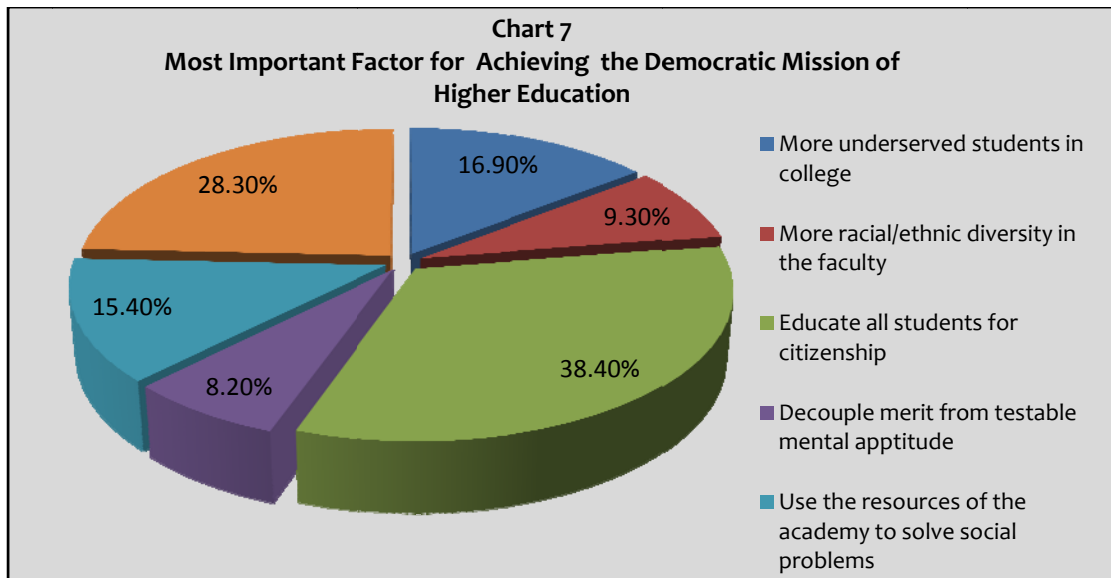


More than one-third of respondents believe that the central mission of higher education in the U.S. is to prepare students for a life “they have reason to value.” This language is borrowed from Amaryta Sen’s seminal book, *Development as Freedom* in which he defines development as “the enhancement of freedoms that allow people to lead lives that they have reason to value.” These responses might suggest that about one-third of the survey respondents favor an individual-centered role for higher education—one that equips students with the resources they need to achieve individual rather than collective goals.

Responses to this question differ by political party identification.

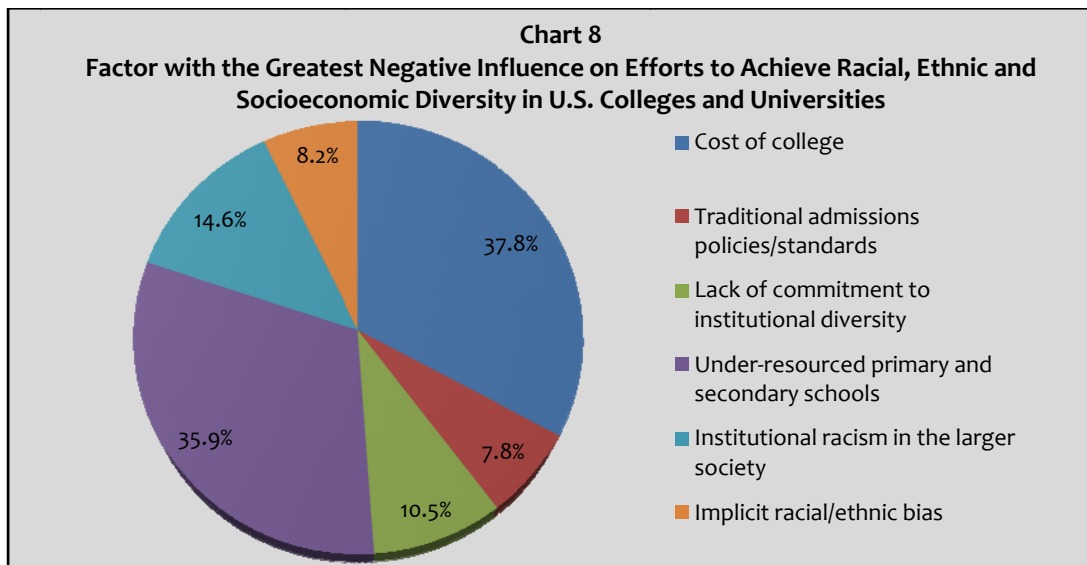


**Item #5: What factors are most important for achieving the democratic mission of higher education in the U.S.?**



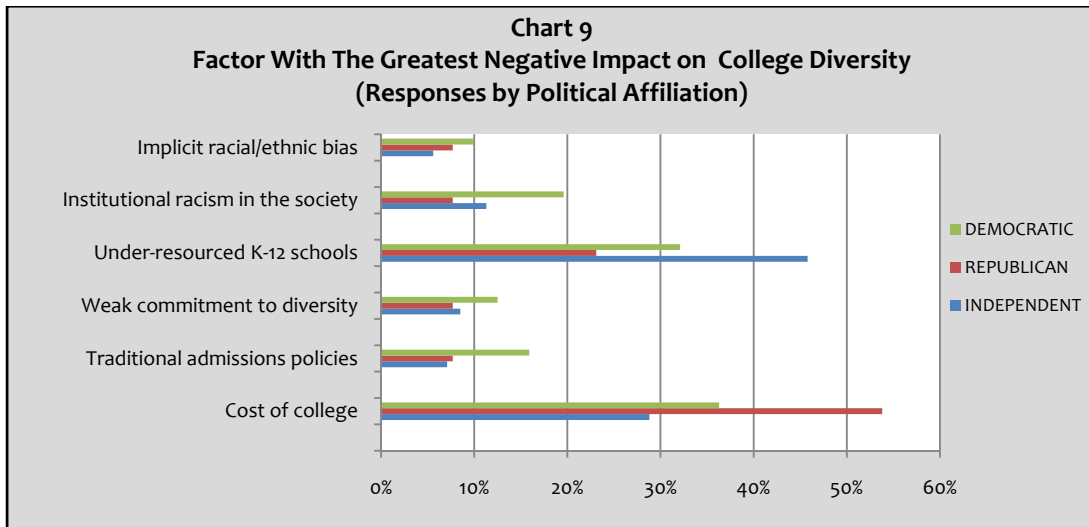
Almost 40% of respondents identified “educating all students for citizenship” as the most important factor for achieving the democratic mission of higher education in the U.S. This goal is identified either explicitly or implicitly in the mission statements of most colleges and universities in the U.S. However, the implementation of this goal differs from institution to institution. Lowering the cost of college is identified as the second most important factor for achieving the democratic mission of colleges and universities. This response suggests that the ability to pay for a college education is not uniform across all populations and that cost is indeed a barrier to educational opportunity.

**Item #6: What factors have the greatest negative influence on efforts to achieve meaningful racial, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity in U.S. colleges and universities?**



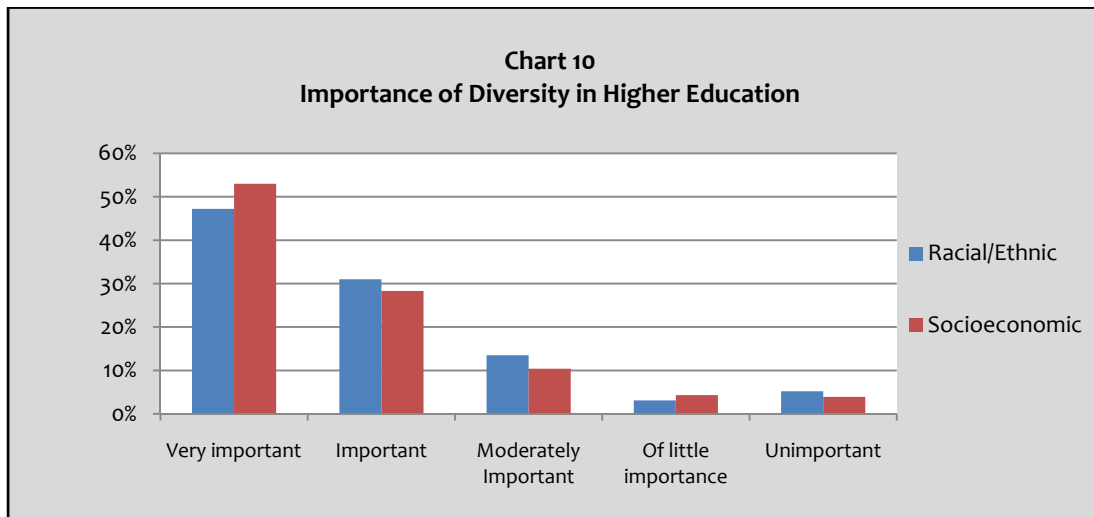
Here, the high cost of college is viewed as the most significant barrier to diversity in higher education in the U.S. by approximately 38% of respondents. This is consistent with the responses in item #5 where respondents identified the cost of college as the second most significant factor for achieving the democratic mission of higher education.

As we might expect, responses to this item differ by political party identification.



**Item #7 and #8: How Important are Racial/Ethnic and Socioeconomic Diversity in Higher Education?**

Roughly 80% of all respondents feel that racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity are important or very important in higher education. Slightly more respondents (53% versus 47%) feel that socioeconomic diversity is very important.

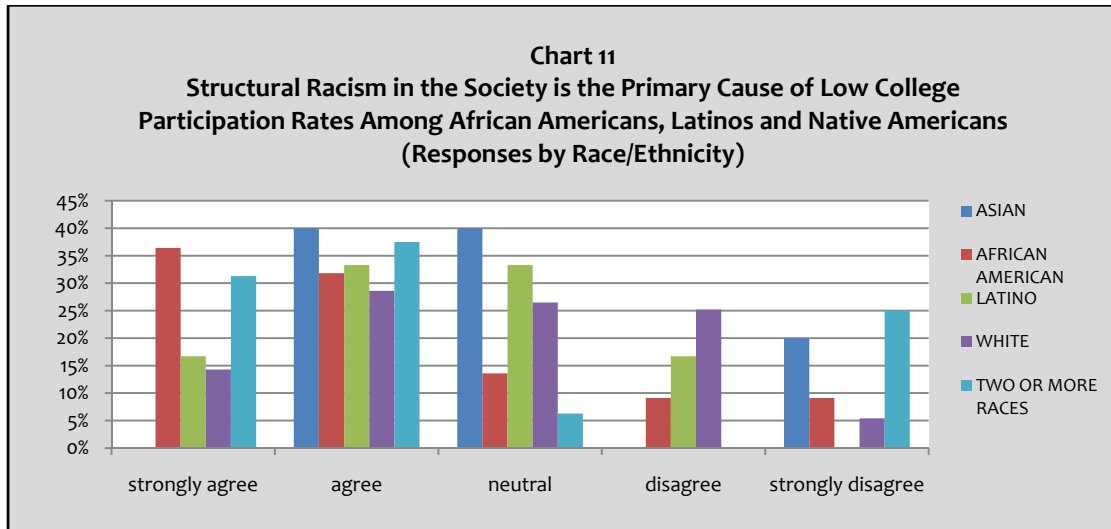


**Item #9: Is structural racism in the society the primary cause of low college participation rates among African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans?**

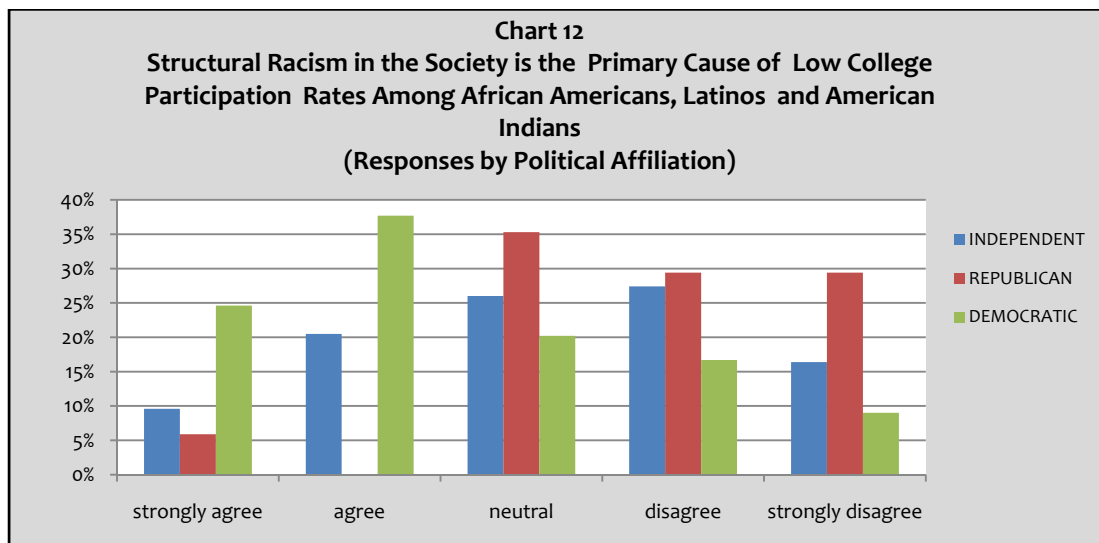
Responses to this item are clearly influenced by racial classification. Approximately one-third of African American respondents strongly agree that structural racism is the primary cause of low



college participation among historically disadvantaged groups. Among white respondents, only 14% strongly agree with this statement. Asians comprise the largest group of respondents who agree with this statement (40%); however, no Asian respondents indicate that they strongly agree. Respondents who identify as “two or more races” represent the strongest disagreement with this statement (25%).



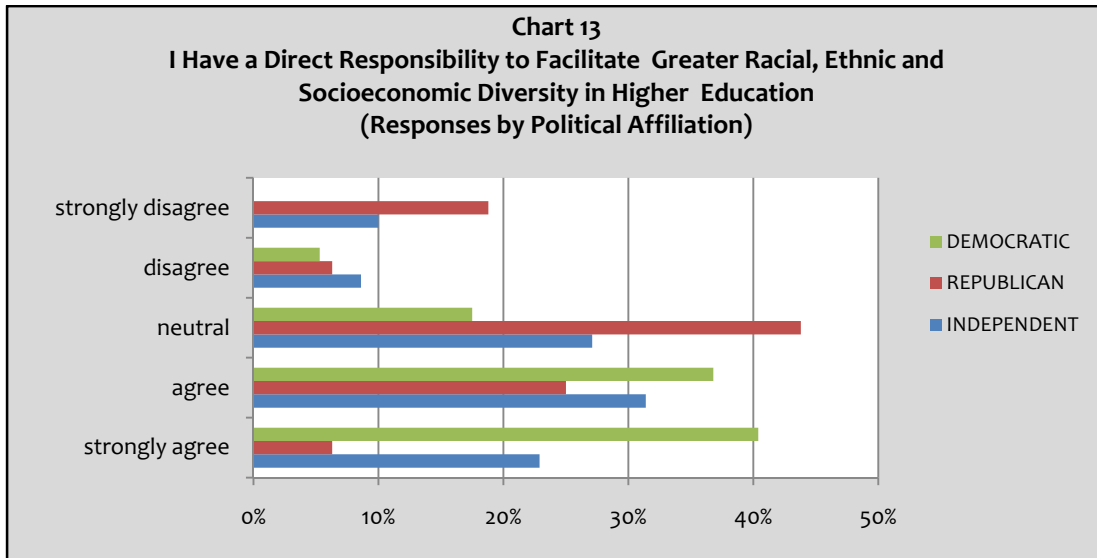
Opinions on this item are influenced by political party affiliation. Roughly 95% of republican respondents are neutral, disagree or strongly disagree that structural racism is the primary cause of low college participation rates among African American, Latino and American Indians.



**Item #11: Do respondents feel that they have a direct responsibility to facilitate greater racial, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity in higher education?**

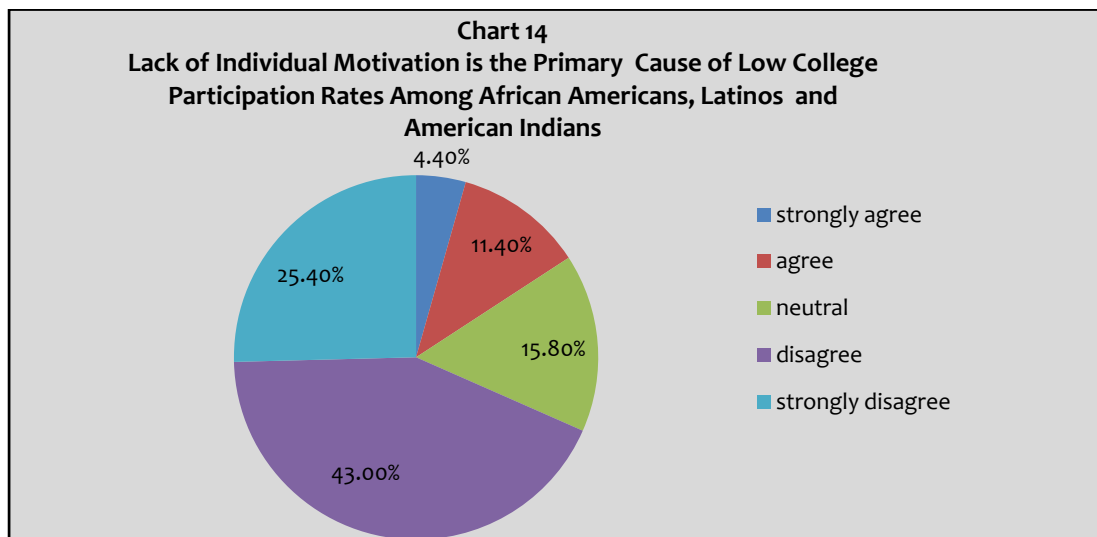
Feelings of personal responsibility for facilitating racial, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity in higher education are strongly correlated with political affiliation. For example, 31% percent of respondents

who identify as republican feel that they have a personal responsibility here, compared to 77% of democrats.

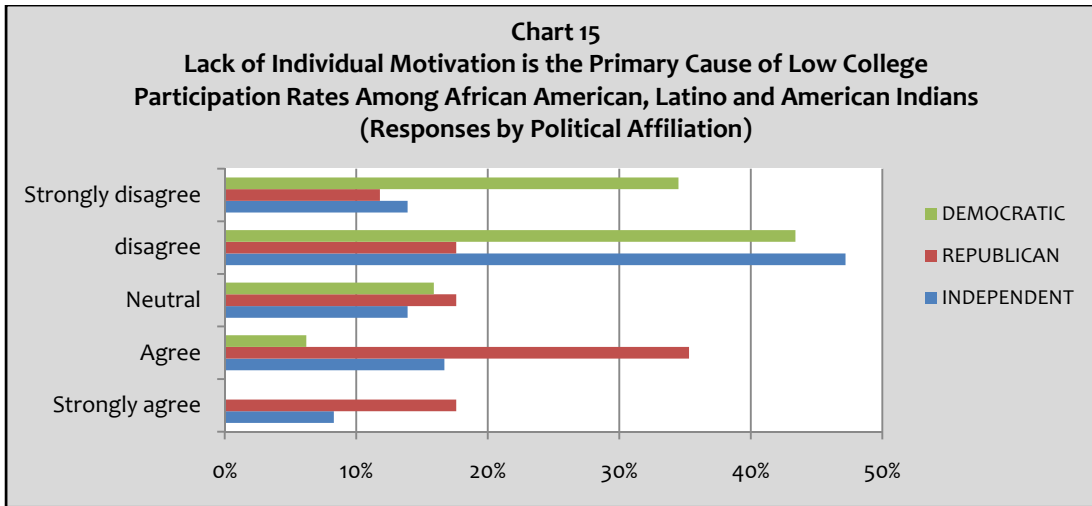


**Item #12: Do respondents feel that lack of individual motivation is the primary cause of low college participation rates among African Americans, Latinos and American Indians?**

Approximately 84% of respondents strongly disagree, disagree or are neutral on this item.



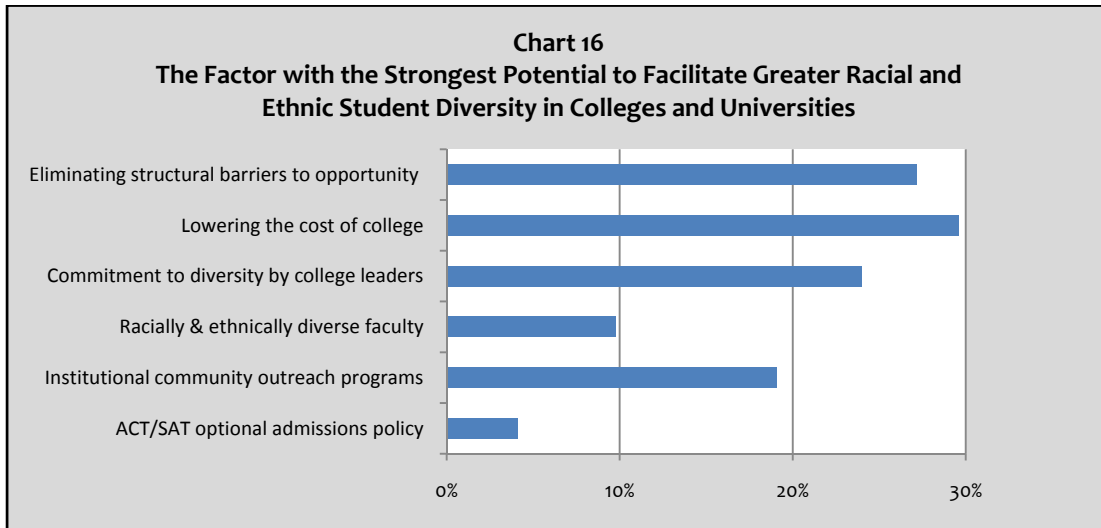
It appears that responses to this item are significantly influenced by political affiliation. Roughly the same percentage of democrats strongly disagrees with this statement as republicans who agree with it (34.5% and 35.4% respectively).



**Item #13:** Roughly 63% of respondents agree that the quality of cross-racial/ethnic interaction on college campuses is more important than the numeric diversity of the student body.

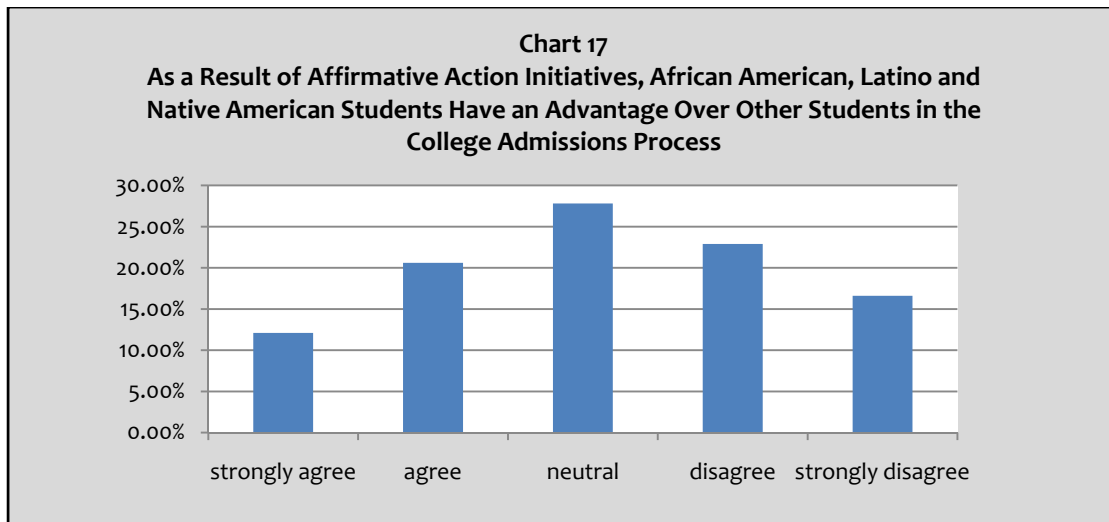
**Item #14:** Approximately 74% of respondents feel that unplanned, casual encounters between college students of different races and ethnicities lead to improved educational outcomes.

**Item #15: What factors facilitate greater racial and ethnic diversity in colleges and universities?**

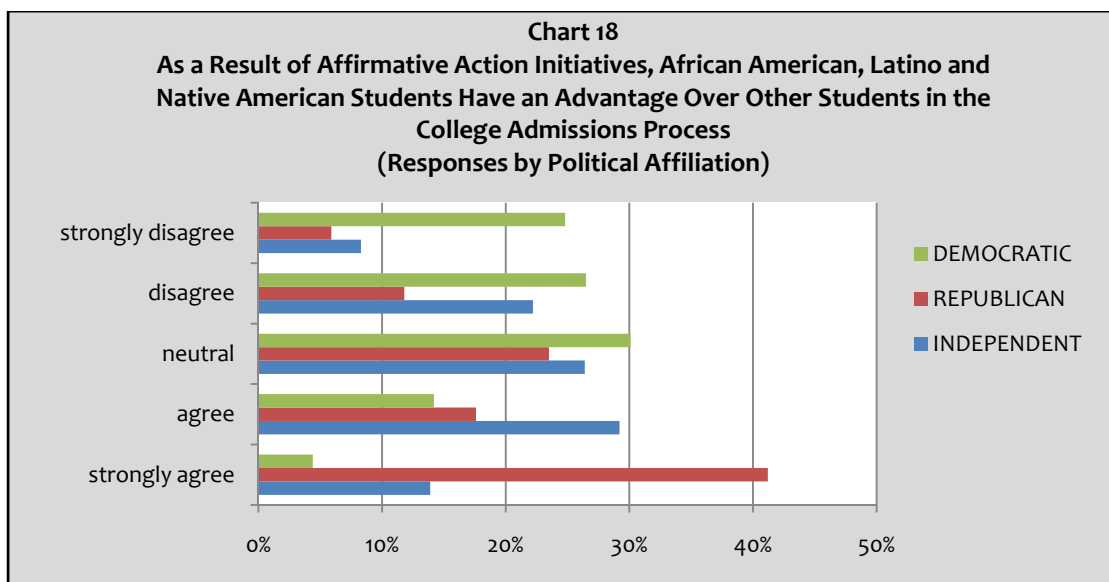


**Item #16: As a result of affirmative action initiatives, do African American, Latino and Native American students have an advantage over other students in the college admissions process?**

There is no consensus on this question among all respondents. Slightly more respondents disagree with this statement than agree (39.5% compared to 32.7%) and the largest group is neutral.



When cross tabulated with political party affiliation, a significantly different picture emerges. Roughly 58% of republicans agree or strongly agree that these student groups do have an advantage over other groups in the admissions process. In contrast, only 18% of democratic respondents agree or strongly agree with this statement.



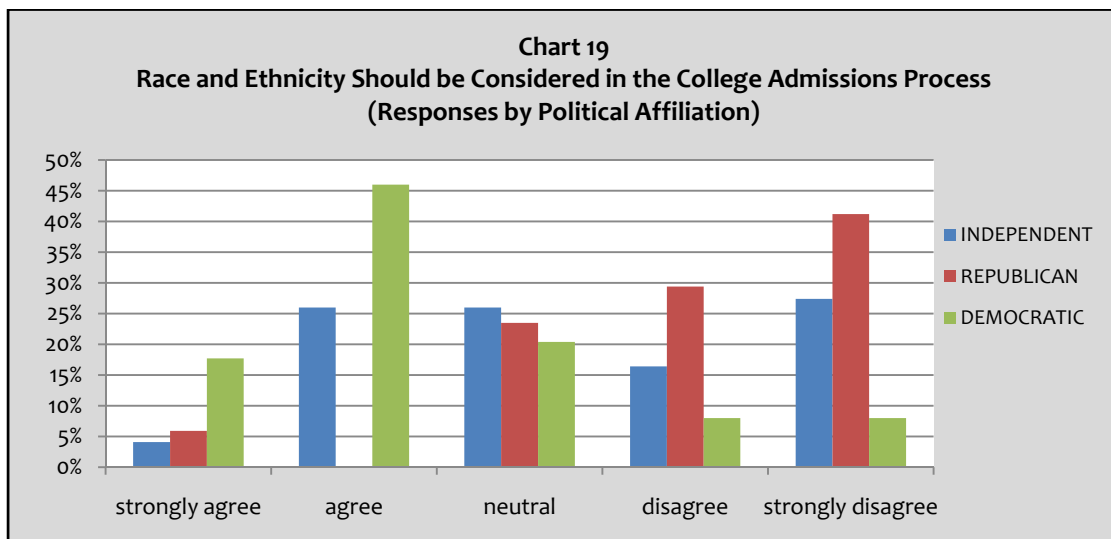
**Item #17:** Twenty-seven percent of respondents agree and 22.8% disagree that a **student’s interest in and experience with racial and ethnic diversity** should be actively considered in the college admissions process while 8.9% strongly agree and 11.6% strongly disagree.

**Item #18:** Although research has shown that **stereotype threat** can negatively influence the performance of African American students on high stakes college admissions tests, more than 50% of respondents disagree or strongly disagree that test scores for African American students should carry less weight in the college admissions process because of this phenomenon.

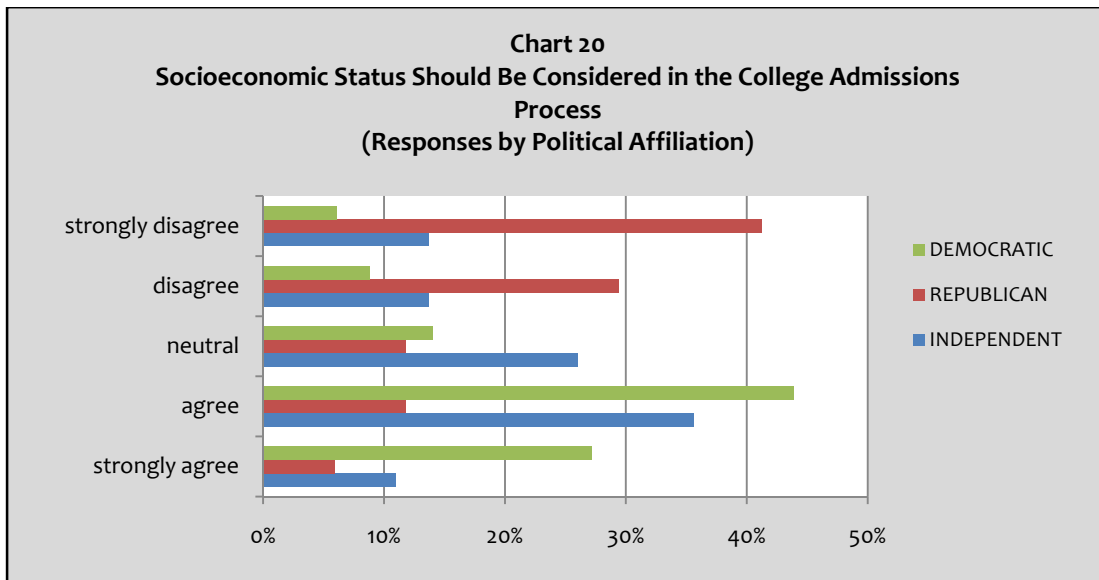
**Item #19:** Some 74% of respondents feel that **scores on standardized college admissions tests** are **not** a good indicator of a **student's leadership potential**. It is not know if this opinion is influenced by empirical research. In light of the relatively high number of respondents who are either educators or college administrators, it seems safe to assume that this opinion is based more on personal experience.

**Item #20:** Roughly 80% of respondents either disagree or strongly disagree with the statement that **“students with high school grade-point averages below 3.00** have no chance of succeeding at selective colleges and universities.”

**Item #21:** While overall, 45% of respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement that **“race and ethnicity should be considered in the college admissions process”** and 32% disagree or strongly disagree, responses look very difference when filtered through political party affiliation. These data show that 71% of republican respondents disagree or strongly disagree with this statement. The corresponding number for democratic respondents is 16%.



**Item #22:** While overall, 57% of respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement that **“socioeconomic status should be considered in the college admissions process”** and only 15% disagree or strongly disagree, responses look very difference when filtered through political party affiliation. These data show that 70.6% of republicans and 15% of democrats disagree or strongly disagree with this statement.



**Item # 23:** In the college admissions process, should equal emphasis be placed on an applicant's past achievements and her or his potential to succeed in the future?

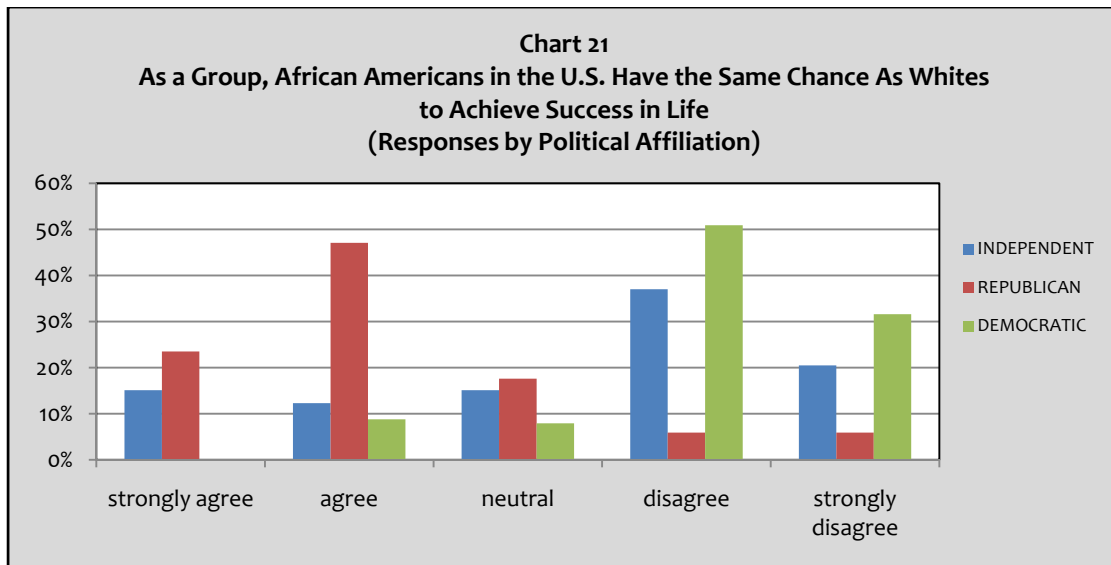
Not surprisingly, about 66% of respondents feel that the college admissions process should emphasize both past academic achievement and the potential to succeed in the future. Only 11% of respondents disagree or strongly disagree with this item.

**Item #24:** Are colleges and universities that do not require ACT/SAT scores in the undergraduate admissions process measuring merit in a more democratic way.

Only about 24% of respondents agree or strongly agree that the admissions process is more democratic when ACT/SAT scores are not used. These data may suggest an unclear understanding of “democratic” in this context or they may suggest an unwillingness to consider an admissions process without the prominent use of test scores.

**Item #25:** In the U.S., do African Americans have the same chance as Whites to achieve success in life.

Approximately 66% of all respondents disagree or strongly disagree that African Americans have the same chance as Whites to succeed in life. However, responses are more nuanced when viewed through the lenses of political affiliation and gender. Some 70% of Republicans agree or strongly agree that African Americans have the same chance of achieving success as Whites while only about 10% of Democrats agree or strongly agree. Eighty-two percent of Democratic respondents disagree or strongly disagree that African Americans have the same chance as Whites, as do 57% of Independents and 12% of Republicans.



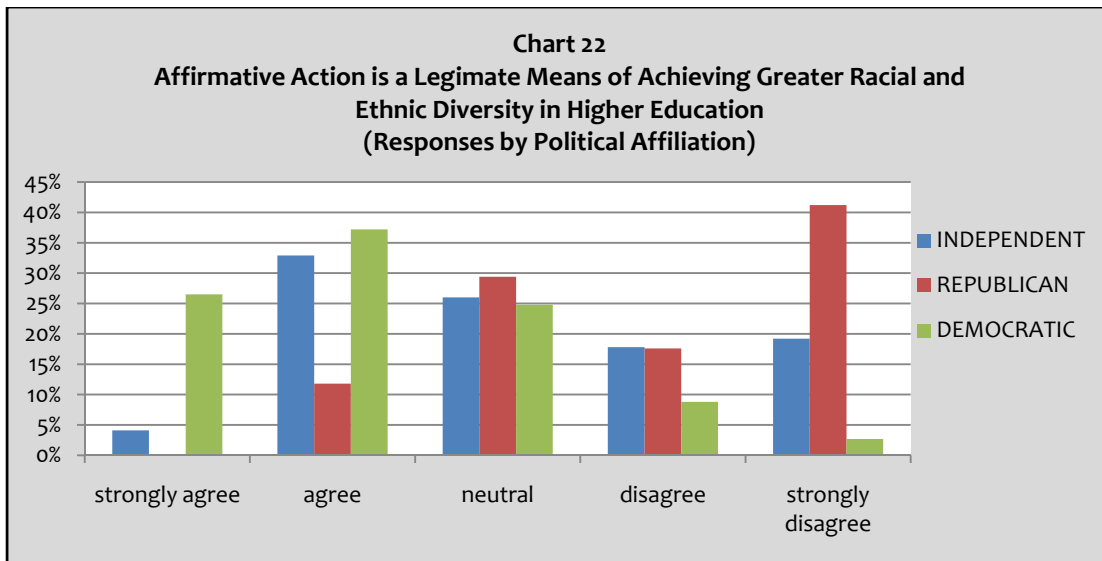
This item is somewhat nuanced by gender. Eighteen percent of female respondents indicate that they strongly disagree with this statement compared to 35.6% of males who strongly disagree.

**Item #26: How important are ACT/SAT scores to a student's academic success in college?**

One of the principal objectives of the Democratic Merit Project is to encourage colleges and universities to look beyond standardized test scores when considering applicants for admission. This objective is fueled by the understanding that test scores are not always the best representation of a student's potential to succeed in college and to participate actively in the society after graduation. Survey responses suggest support for this position. Among all respondents, 20% feel that ACT/SAT scores are important (17.6%) or very important (2.7%) to a student's academic success in college. Respondents who identify as political independents expressed the strongest connection between test scores and academic success; 26% of that group feel that test score are important or very important to a student's success in college.

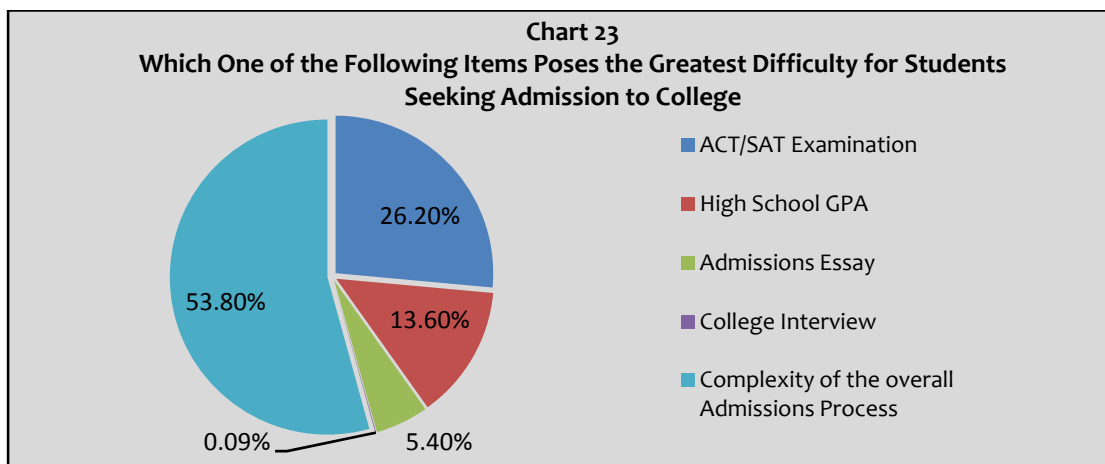
**Item #27: Is affirmative action a legitimate means of achieving greater racial and ethnic diversity in higher education?**

This is one of the most nuanced items in the survey. Thirty-three percent of all respondents agree that affirmative action is a legitimate means of achieving greater racial and ethnic diversity in higher education and 13% disagree. However, when viewed by political affiliation, the data show that 41.2% of republicans, 19.2% of independents and 2.7% of democratic strongly disagree.



**Item #28: What factor poses the greatest difficulty for students seeking admission to college?**

When asked about the factors that cause difficulty for students seeking admission to college, a majority of survey respondents (53.8%) identified “complexity of the overall admissions process” as the primary cause of difficulty.

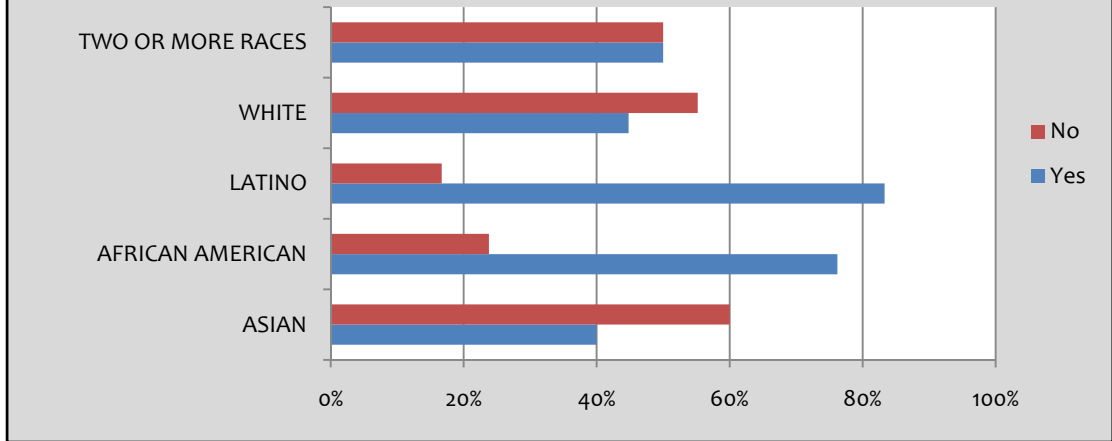


**Item #29: Within the past ten years, have you personally experienced or witnessed an act of racial discrimination or racial prejudice in a college/university setting?**

Roughly 48% of all respondents report that they have witnessed an act of racial discrimination or racial prejudice in a college setting. However, when viewing responses by race, we see a more nuanced picture.



**Chart 24**  
**Within the Past Ten Years, Have You Personally Experienced or Witnessed an Act of Racial Discrimination or Racial Prejudice in a College Setting**





**KIRWAN INSTITUTE**  
for the Study of Race and Ethnicity

33 West 11 Avenue  
Columbus, Ohio 43210  
(614) 688-5429

Sharon Davies, Executive Director  
Jason Reece, Research Director  
Christy Rogers, Outreach Director