The Trust Agenda

A Framework for Advancing Public Trust in US Higher Education



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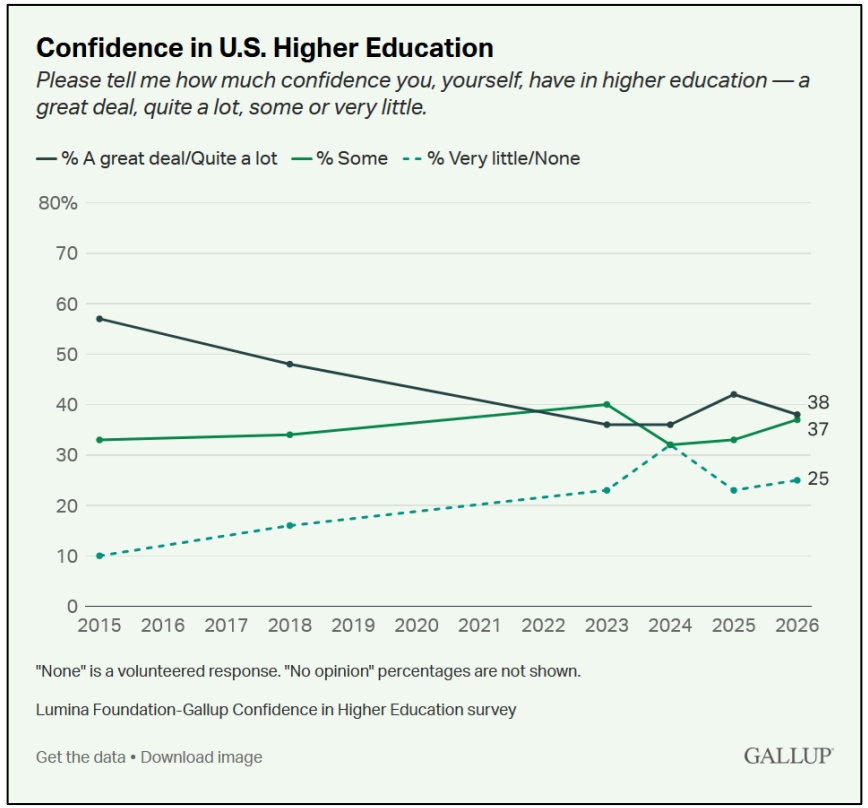
A Voice and a Force for Liberal Education

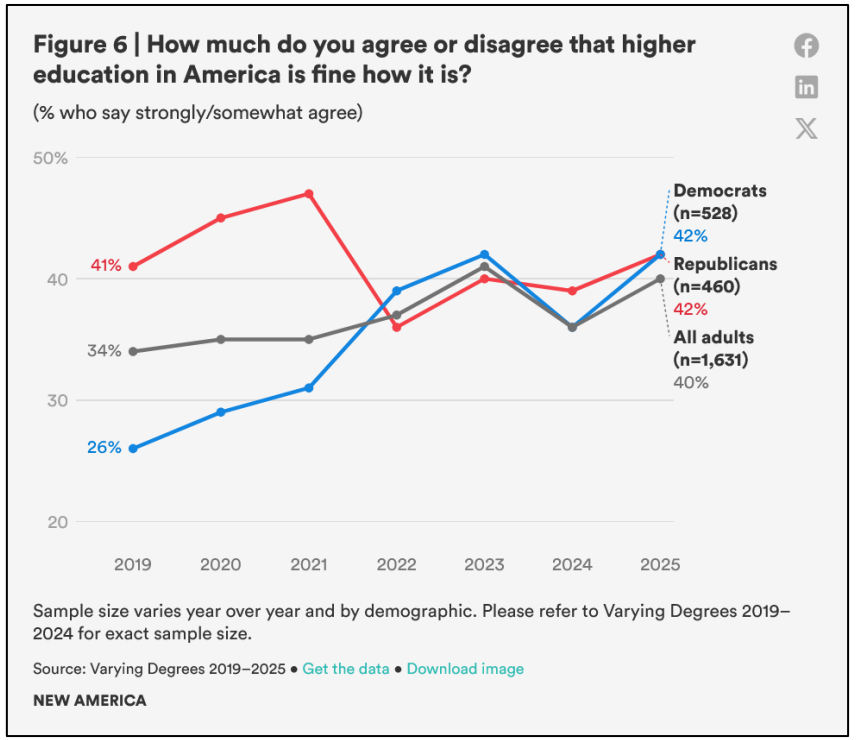
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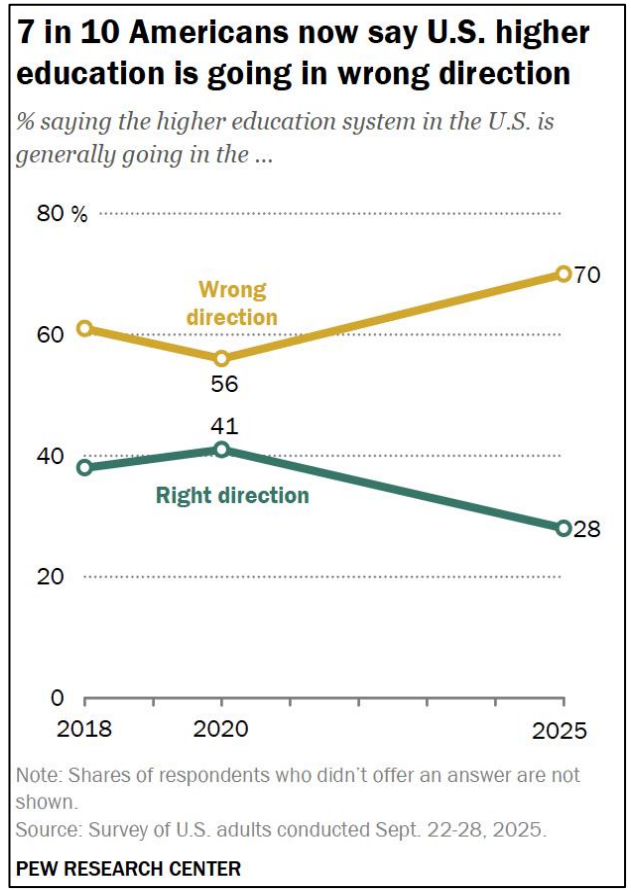
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Public Confidence in US Higher Education Has Declined



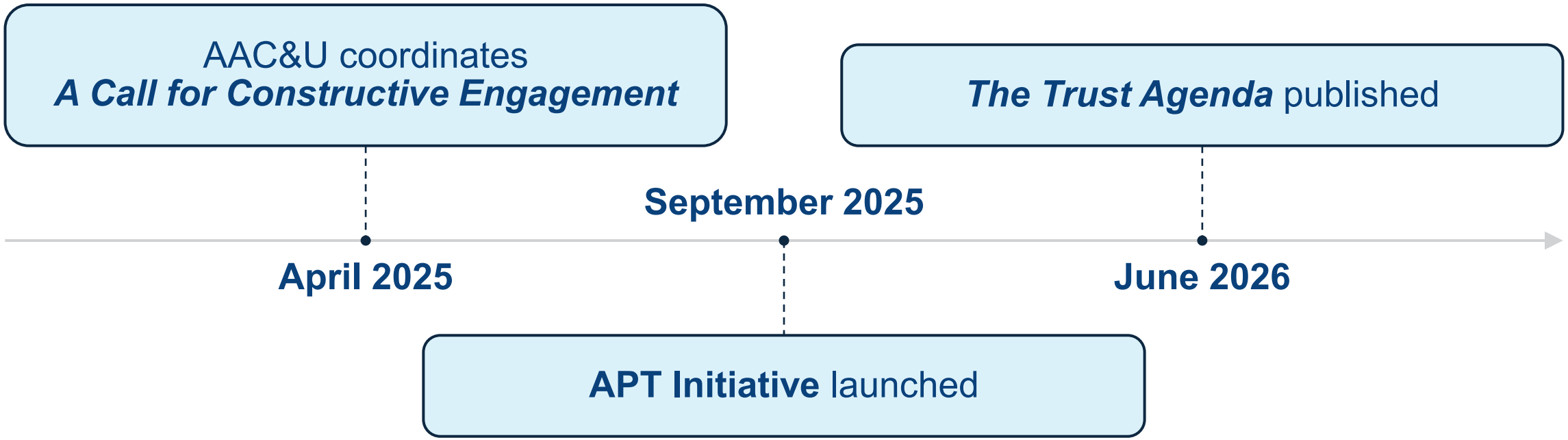




Advancing Public Trust in Higher Education (APT) Initiative

APT equips AAC&U members and partners across the US with tools to build a **trusted and trustworthy** higher education sector that is more effective, nimble, inclusive, in tune with the community it serves, and resilient in the face of political pressure.

APT Timeline



The Trust Agenda

The report outlines a response to the challenges US colleges and universities face that can:

- Build public trust,
- Make campuses more trustworthy, and
- Enable colleges and universities to defend their missions successfully.

Read the report

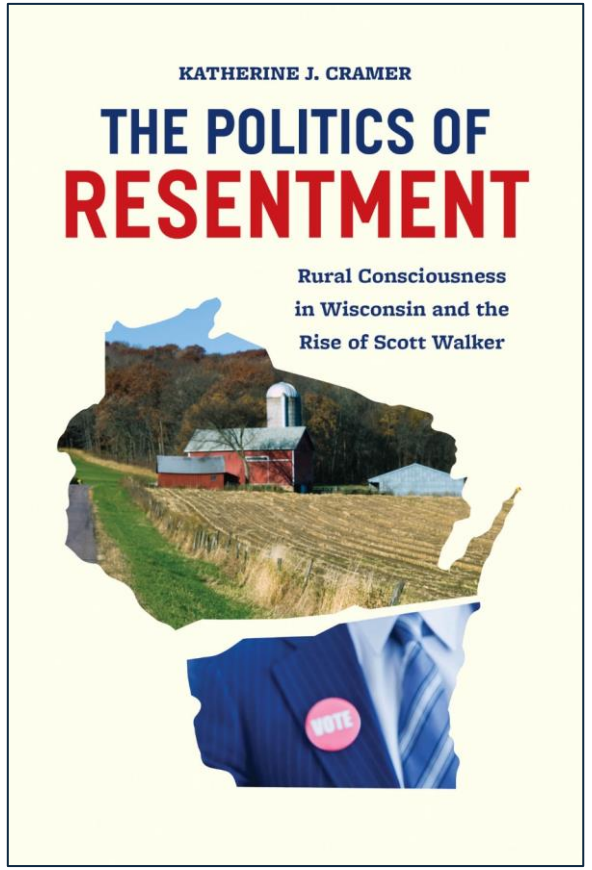
A Working Definition

Public trust in higher education
is a dynamic of the relationship between colleges and universities and the public.

Institutions and their representatives foster public trust by demonstrating their trustworthiness consistently through effective actions that promote the public good.

Causes

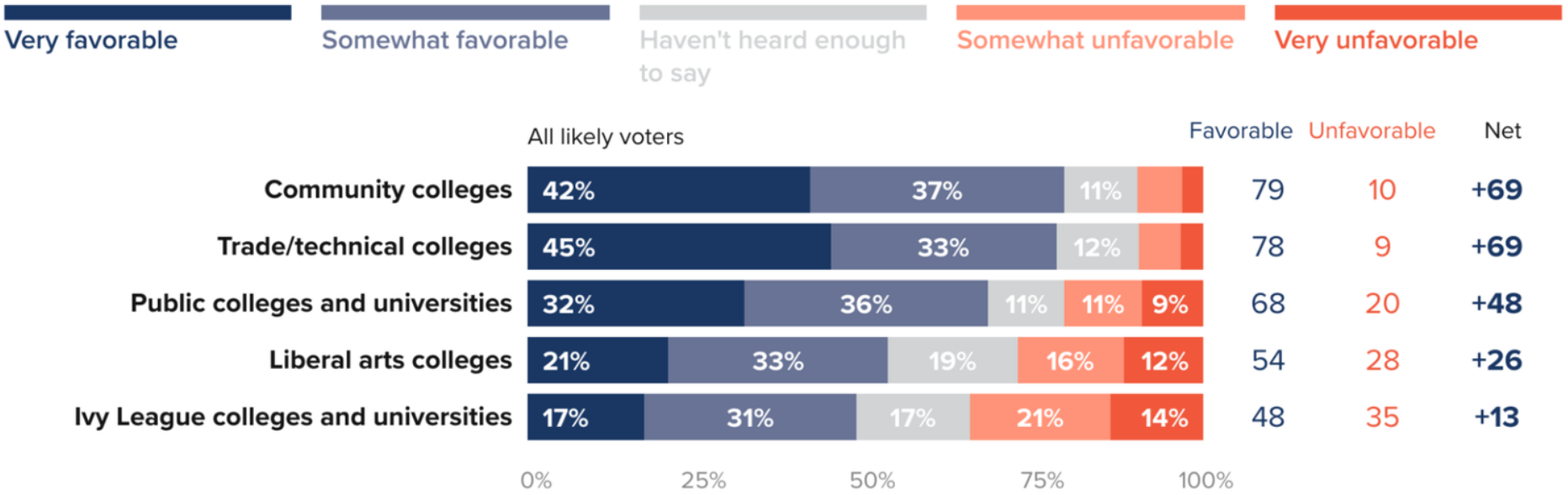
- Global decline in trust in democratic institutions
- Fraying of the academic financial model
- COVID-19 pandemic and culture wars
- Remoteness and elitism:
  “They don’t want anything to do with you. They think they’re better than you.”



Some US Colleges and Universities are More Trusted than Others

Most Voters View U.S. Colleges and Universities Favorably

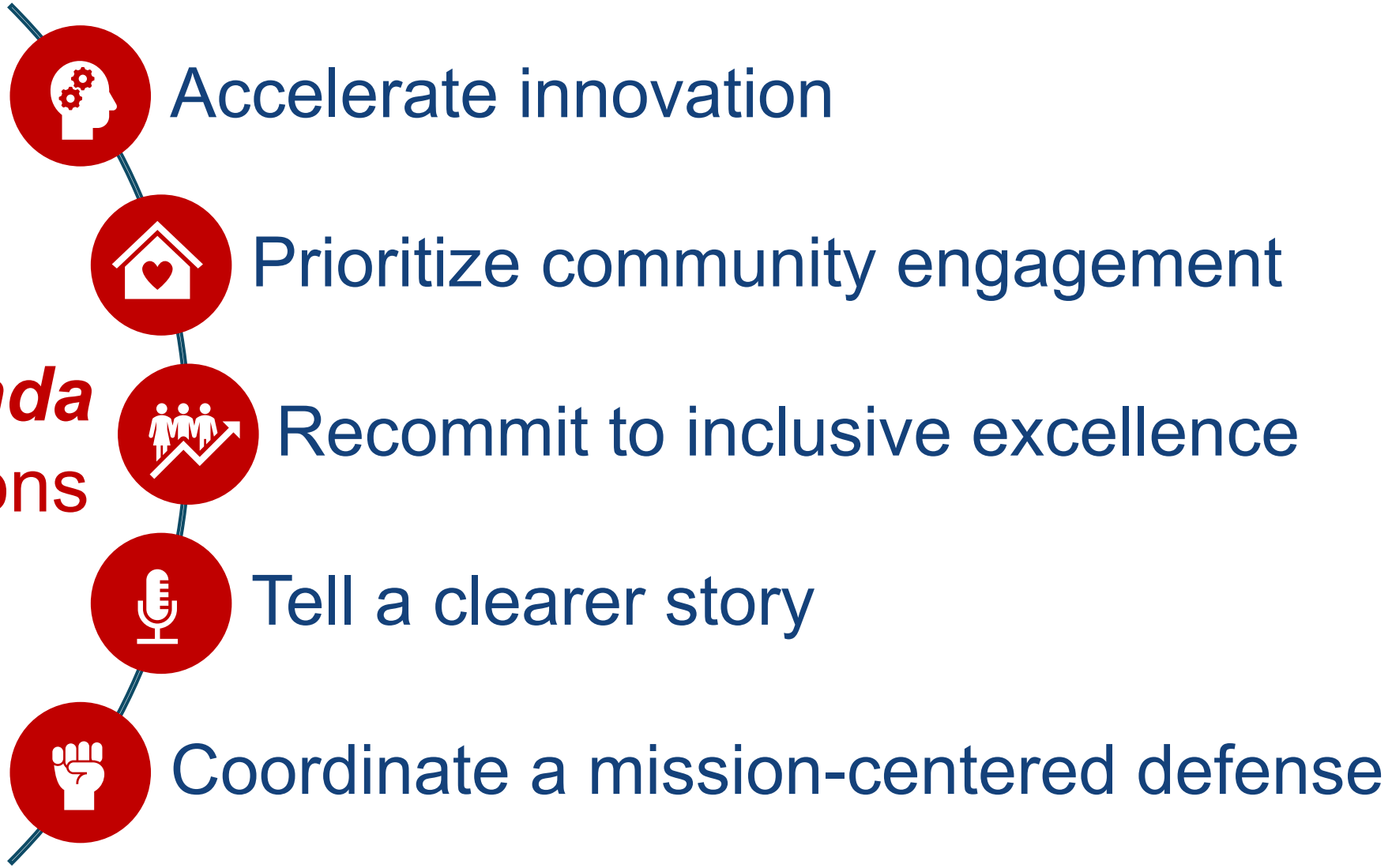
Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the following people or institutions?



December 6–8, 2024 survey of 1,216 U.S. likely voters

DATA FOR PROGRESS

The Trust Agenda
Recommendations



1. Accelerate Innovation

Break down internal barriers to change and improvement, showing that colleges can solve their own problems without external pressure and can develop new and effective initiatives to advance their missions.

2. Prioritize Community Engagement

Develop trusted and mutually beneficial relationships with community partners, improving the quality of life for all—those who attend college and those who do not.

3. Recommit to Inclusive Excellence

Build a campus that is student-centered, where learners from all walks of life feel welcomed and supported toward success.

4. Tell A Clearer Story

Deploy public communications that **tie higher education's role as an engine of social and economic mobility to popular civic values** like freedom, fairness, and strength.

CORE VALUES TO EVOKE IN U.S. PRO-DEMOCRACY MESSAGING

FREEDOM	FAIRNESS	FEARLESSNESS / STRENGTH
REPRESENTATION	RESPONSIBILITY	SAFETY / SECURITY
HONESTY	PROSPERITY	FAMILY / BELONGING

5. Coordinate a Mission-Centered Defense

Collaborate within and across institutions to defend the mission of higher education against government overreach.

Advancing Public Trust in Higher Education (APT) Initiative

Implementing the Trust Agenda

A three-pronged strategy:

- **APT Coalition** – launched June 2026
- **APT Leadership Institute** – launching January 2027
- **APT Indicators** – development begins July 2027

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APT Coalition

A cross-sector collective impact coalition that:

- Promotes a shared understanding of the drivers of public trust in US higher education
- Enables meaningful collaboration within and beyond the sector
- Deepens community and student engagement
- Encourages institutional innovation in developing and implementing trustworthy practices

Coalition members include leaders in higher education organizations, advocacy groups, and business/civil society organizations, and experts in public trust in higher education.

Advancing Public Trust Leadership Institute



January 22–June 25, 2027

Register Now: aacu.org/apt-institute

APT Indicators

A planned suite of self-assessment metrics that will:

- Empower campuses to evaluate and improve their own trust levels
- Provide insight into the impact of individual programs, policies, and practices on public trust and public perceptions of higher education
- Track public trust in higher education at a local, regional, and national level

Magna Charta Observatory

Supporting the Trust Agenda

- Act as influencers on behalf of global higher education
- Reaffirm core values that underpin higher education: academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and the university's responsibility to society
- Highlight trust and trustworthiness
- Engage in global mission-centered defense


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