

# Turning on the RADAR in Ohio: Civic Education and Public Trust in Higher Education



**Stephen M. Gavazzi, Director  
CHRR at The Ohio State University**

## **Introduction**

Public confidence in higher education has become increasingly fragile in recent years, with concerns about ideological bias, research integrity, and the civic preparedness of graduates rising to the forefront of public discourse. To better understand these dynamics, CHRR at The Ohio State University provided assistance to researchers interested in conducting a multiyear study of public opinion across the eight most populous states in America – California, Texas, New York, Florida, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Ohio, and Georgia – plus West Virginia. This longitudinal effort, spanning from 2021 to 2025, provides rare insight into how attitudes toward public universities have evolved amid shifting political and cultural landscapes.

Ohio occupies a unique position within the study of higher education and public perceptions. A demographically diverse state that often is regarded as a bellwether for national trends, Ohio offers a microcosm of broader public sentiment. Its responses not only mirror national patterns but also reveal distinctive nuances that warrant closer examination. For this reason, the present

paper narrows its focus to examine Ohio-specific findings, with particular attention to two interrelated themes: civic education and public trust in higher education.

To interpret these findings, the [RADAR framework](#) was employed as a model designed to help university leaders to move from one-off data points to continuous, actionable listening in five phases:

- **Recognizing** signals that matter by asking the public the right questions regularly.
- **Analyzing** what the signals mean by translating numbers into plain language and practical insights.
- **Diagnosing** the implications for mission, brand, and relationships with communities.
- **Acting** on findings in visible, credible ways.
- **Reviewing** what changed and recalibrating, ideally with longitudinal tracking of the same indicators.

This paper begins by summarizing Ohio's survey results on civic knowledge and attitudes toward civic education, followed by an analysis of trust across multiple dimensions – from confidence in research integrity to perceptions of political neutrality in the classroom. In addition, qualitative insights are drawn from an open-ended question that asked respondents what public universities could do to make them feel more comfortable about the use of taxpayer funds, providing a deeper understanding of trust-related concerns beyond numeric measures. Findings are then examined through the lens of informing institutional strategies aimed at rebuilding trust and reinforcing the civic mission of Ohio's public universities. Finally, Ohio's role as a bellwether state is thought to create an opportunity for this work to serve as a critical testing ground for innovations that could shape national approaches to higher education reform.

## Ohio-Specific Findings and Interpretation

The Ohio subset of the [overall higher education survey](#) closely mirrors national patterns but reveals important nuances that underscore both opportunities and challenges for the state's public universities. Two themes stand out: 1) civic knowledge and support for civic education; and 2) public trust across multiple dimensions of university performance.

### Civic Knowledge and Support for Civic Education

Ohioans demonstrated notable gaps in civic literacy. When asked whether their state has its own constitution, only 56 percent answered correctly, while roughly one-third selected "don't

know” and about 11 percent answered incorrectly. This finding signals a significant knowledge deficit on a basic element of state governance.

Despite these gaps, Ohio respondents expressed strong support for civic education in public universities. Nearly 85 percent indicated that universities should place at least “some” emphasis on civic education, with 17 percent favoring “a great deal” and 32 percent selecting “quite a lot.” Importantly, no Ohio respondent chose “none at all,” suggesting a broad consensus that civic education belongs within the mission of higher education. Further analysis reveals a clear relationship between civic knowledge and support for civic education: those who correctly answered the constitution question were significantly more likely to advocate for greater emphasis on civic learning. This pattern suggests that civic literacy not only reflects individual knowledge but also shapes expectations for universities’ role in strengthening democratic engagement.

### **Public Trust in Ohio’s Universities**

Trust in Ohio’s public universities is neither uniform nor absolute. Overall trust levels cluster in the middle range: 17 percent of respondents reported “a great deal” of trust, 36 percent “quite a lot,” and 34 percent “some,” while 10 percent expressed “very little” trust and 3 percent reported “none at all.” These figures indicate that while most Ohioans maintain at least moderate confidence in their universities, a nontrivial minority harbors skepticism.

Disaggregating trust into specific dimensions reveals sharper contrasts. Confidence is highest in universities’ ability to provide a good education, with 62 percent reporting “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust on this measure. By contrast, trust is lowest regarding the neutrality of classroom instruction: only 40 percent expressed high trust that education is free of political bias, while nearly 30 percent reported “very little” or “none at all.” Trust in research integrity and citizenship preparation falls between these extremes, suggesting that concerns about bias represent the most acute pressure point for Ohio’s institutions.

Taken together, these findings highlight a dual challenge. On one hand, Ohioans broadly endorse the idea that universities should play a role in civic education, creating an opportunity for institutions to demonstrate public value. On the other hand, persistent doubts about ideological neutrality threaten to undermine trust, even in areas where universities perform well. Addressing these concerns transparently and proactively will be essential for rebuilding confidence and sustaining public support for higher education’s civic mission.

## Qualitative (and Longitudinal) Findings Related to Trust

To further examine levels of public trust in Ohio's universities, we employed an open-ended question as a qualitative proxy for trust: *"If there was one thing that the public universities in your state could do that would make you feel more comfortable about how taxpayer money was being used to support higher education, what would it be?"* This question taps into perceptions of trust by prompting respondents' expectations for actions that would increase their confidence in the responsible use of public funds. Importantly, we have collected responses to this question at two distinct time points, creating an opportunity to examine longitudinal shifts in trust-related concerns and identify emerging patterns over time. Trust in institutions typically is closely tied to perceptions of accountability, transparency, and alignment with public interests. Therefore, the nature and intensity of suggested actions that universities should be undertaking likely serve as solid indicators of trust levels.

This approach provides a richer understanding of trust than traditional Likert-scale items by uncovering the underlying reasoning behind public attitudes toward higher education funding. To better illustrate the richness of this information, responses were coded into thematic categories to allow for both qualitative insights and quantitative measures of trust-related concerns. This effort revealed practical expectations for accountability and value. Several dominant themes emerged across both waves of data collection, reflecting how Ohioans link trust to visible financial stewardship and tangible benefits for students and communities.

**Transparency** was the most prominent theme, especially in the second wave of data collection. Respondents repeatedly called for clear, accessible reporting on how taxpayer dollars are allocated and spent. Suggestions included publishing detailed breakdowns, creating dashboards, and explaining the impact of spending decisions. One participant wrote, *"Transparency and publication of where taxpayer dollars are being utilized,"* while another urged, *"I would like spending to be entirely transparent. I would like to be able to EASILY compare spending between departments and colleges."* These comments underscore a strong desire for universities to demonstrate fiscal responsibility in ways the public can understand.

**Affordability and tuition** concerns also were widespread. Many respondents linked comfort with taxpayer spending to lowering tuition, capping costs, expanding scholarships, and reducing reliance on student loans. Some advocated for free public higher education. Illustrative comments include: *"Higher education should be affordable," "Make them more affordable,"* and *"Public universities should be free to attend."* These responses frame affordability as a core measure of whether taxpayer dollars are being used effectively.

**Community engagement** emerged as another trust-building priority. Respondents suggested that universities should invest in local communities, partner with schools, and provide

mentorship and educational pipelines. One participant wrote, *“Give more back to local communities with the taxpayer money,”* while another recommended, *“Visit with local middle and high schools. Offer more programs that would move them from the local school to the University.”* These comments position trust as a reciprocal relationship between universities and the communities that fund them.

A growing emphasis on **curriculum and life skills** appeared in the second wave. Respondents called for courses on financial literacy, credit management, and basic economics, alongside a broader curriculum that prepares students for real-world challenges. Examples include: *“Mandatory life skills—how to manage money/banking/credit/filling out paperwork/loans,”* and *“Teach more basic economics.”* These recommendations suggest that comfort with taxpayer spending is tied to perceived relevance: universities that equip students for everyday responsibilities signal value for public investment.

Although mentioned less frequently, concerns about **bias and free speech** were present in both waves of data collection. Respondents stressed the importance of viewpoint diversity and classroom neutrality, framing these as essential to trust in how funds are used. Representative comments include: *“End politically biased teaching and strictly abide by the First Amendment,”* and *“Eliminate ideology and focus more on practical knowledge and critical thinking.”* While not dominant in a numerical sense, these concerns carry reputational weight and point to the need for visible safeguards around academic freedom and civility.

Finally, some respondents highlighted **job readiness and workforce alignment**, urging universities to strengthen connections between education and employment through internships, partnerships, and trade programs. Others focused on **administrative costs and athletics spending**, recommending reductions in executive salaries and sports budgets to redirect resources toward instruction and student support. Comments such as *“Decrease the salaries paid to their administration and spread the wealth to the faculty and staff,”* and *“Stop spending so much money on sports instead of learning”* reflect skepticism about resource allocation and its alignment with core educational priorities.

### **Interpretive Summary**

Taken together, these qualitative findings reveal that Ohioans want taxpayer dollars to be used in ways that are transparent, equitable, and visibly tied to educational and community outcomes. Comfort with public spending depends on clear reporting, affordability, practical skill development, and evidence that funds support teaching and local engagement rather than administrative excess or athletics. These insights provide a roadmap for Ohio’s public universities: demonstrate fiscal transparency, prioritize affordability, deliver real-world value, and show how investments strengthen both students and communities.

## Applying the RADAR Model to Ohio's Findings

The RADAR framework – **Recognize, Analyze, Diagnose, Act, Review** – offers a structured approach for turning Ohio's survey signals into actionable strategies. Below, we apply each phase to the state-specific data on civic education and trust.

### **Recognize: Signals That Matter**

Ohio's data reveal two critical signals that demand attention. The first is a clear gap in civic literacy. Nearly half of respondents either answered incorrectly or admitted they did not know whether Ohio has its own constitution. This finding underscores a fundamental weakness in public understanding of state governance and suggests that universities have an opportunity – and perhaps an obligation – to address this knowledge deficit through targeted civic education initiatives.

The second signal concerns trust, particularly around the neutrality of classroom instruction. While confidence in universities' ability to provide a good education remains relatively strong, trust in politically unbiased teaching is markedly weaker. This disparity points to a perception challenge that could undermine broader confidence in higher education. Concerns about ideological bias in the classroom are not isolated; they intersect with questions about research integrity and citizenship preparation, amplifying skepticism about whether universities are fulfilling their public mission.

Together, these signals highlight two interconnected challenges: one rooted in knowledge and the other in perception. Both have significant implications for the legitimacy and public value of Ohio's universities. Addressing these issues proactively will be essential for strengthening trust and reinforcing the civic role of higher education in the state.

### **Analyze: What These Signals Mean**

The signals emerging from Ohio's data point to two important interpretations. First, civic education represents a significant opportunity for public universities. Despite widespread gaps in civic knowledge, Ohioans overwhelmingly support the idea that universities should play a role in teaching students how to be responsible citizens. This suggests that the public does not view civic education as a partisan endeavor but rather as a shared responsibility that strengthens democratic life. For institutions, this is not a barrier. Instead, this is an opportunity to demonstrate relevance and leadership in an area where public expectations are clear.

Second, trust in higher education is not a single, uniform concept but a multidimensional one. While confidence in universities' abilities to provide a good education remains relatively strong, trust in politically unbiased instruction is substantially weaker. This distinction matters because it reveals that overall trust scores can mask critical vulnerabilities. Concerns about ideological

bias in the classroom are not just about pedagogy; they have the potential to erode confidence in other areas, including research integrity and citizenship preparation. In short, trust deficits in one domain can spill over into others, amplifying skepticism about whether universities are fulfilling their public mission.

Qualitative responses to the open-ended question – collected at two distinct time points – reinforce this interpretation by revealing the specific actions Ohioans believe would restore confidence in universities' use of taxpayer funds. These insights not only highlight recurring themes such as transparency and fiscal responsibility but also allow us to observe shifts in public priorities over time, offering a longitudinal perspective on trust that complements the quantitative measures.

Together, these interpretations underscore a strategic imperative for Ohio's public universities: they must treat civic education as both a service and a signal of commitment to democratic health, while simultaneously addressing perceptions of bias with transparency and rigor. Failure to act on either front runs the risk of deepening public doubts or weakening the legitimacy of higher education in the state.

#### **Diagnose: Implications for Mission and Reputation**

The findings from Ohio point to two critical implications for the mission and reputation of its public universities. First, civic education is not merely an academic offering; it is a public signal of institutional commitment to democratic health. By expanding civic learning opportunities, universities can demonstrate that they are not only preparing students for careers but also equipping them to participate meaningfully in civic life. This dual role strengthens the perception that higher education serves both individual advancement and the common good.

Second, trust deficits around perceived political bias represent a reputational vulnerability that cannot be ignored. When the public doubts the neutrality of classroom instruction, skepticism can spill over into other areas, including confidence in research and citizenship preparation. These concerns, if left unaddressed, risk eroding the legitimacy of universities even when they perform well on traditional measures such as graduation rates or job placement. For Ohio's institutions, acknowledging these concerns openly and demonstrating safeguards for viewpoint diversity and academic freedom is essential to maintaining credibility.

In short, the data suggest that Ohio's universities must treat civic education and trust-building as interconnected priorities. Both are central to fulfilling the public mission of higher education and to sustaining the confidence of the citizens who support these institutions.

## **Act: Practical Steps for Ohio**

Ohio's public universities have a clear opportunity to respond to these findings with visible, credible actions. The first priority is to make civic education tangible and accessible. This means embedding civic competencies – such as understanding state and local governance, evaluating evidence, and engaging in civil discourse – across general education requirements. Beyond the classroom, universities should create community-based civics labs where students collaborate with local governments, nonprofits, and schools to address real-world challenges. These initiatives not only build civic skills but also signal to the public that universities are committed to strengthening democratic life.

Equally important is addressing concerns about political bias in teaching. Institutions must demonstrate their commitment to viewpoint diversity and academic freedom through transparent practices. Departments can publish clear statements affirming neutrality, while faculty can reinforce these principles by including learning objectives, evidence standards, and norms for civil debate in their syllabi. Professional development programs should equip instructors to facilitate discussions across differences without advocacy. Inviting external reviewers to observe courses on controversial topics can further strengthen public confidence in the integrity of classroom instruction.

Finally, Ohio's universities should invest in building a "Trust Dashboard" that tracks key indicators – such as trust in research, teaching neutrality, and citizenship preparation – alongside measures of civic education availability and participation. Sharing these results publicly, and on a regular basis, will reinforce transparency and accountability. By acting decisively on these fronts, Ohio institutions can begin to close the gap between public expectations and institutional performance, laying the groundwork for renewed trust and engagement.

## **Review: Why Longitudinal Tracking Matters**

The findings presented here offer valuable insights, but they (mostly) represent only a snapshot in time. Without longitudinal tracking, universities cannot determine whether interventions are working or whether public attitudes are shifting in meaningful ways. For Ohio's institutions, committing to regular measurement of trust and civic education indicators is essential. This means asking the same questions at consistent intervals – perhaps biannually but at least once a year – to capture trends and identify emerging challenges before they escalate.

Longitudinal data provide more than descriptive statistics; they reveal direction and momentum. For example, a modest improvement in trust around teaching neutrality could signal that transparency efforts are gaining traction, while a decline might indicate the need for recalibration. Tracking these indicators within specific cohorts – such as graduating classes or

communities engaged in civic initiatives – also can help Ohio’s universities assess the impact of targeted programs.

In addition to quantitative indicators, longitudinal analysis of qualitative responses to the open-ended trust question provides a unique lens on evolving public expectations. Comparing themes across two time points allows universities to detect shifts in priorities – such as growing emphasis on fiscal transparency or community engagement – that may not be captured by numeric trends alone. This layered approach strengthens the RADAR model by combining statistical momentum with narrative insight, ensuring that institutional strategies remain responsive to both measurable attitudes and the underlying reasoning behind them.

Equally important is sharing these findings publicly. A “Trust Dashboard” that reports year-over-year changes in plain language would reinforce accountability and demonstrate that universities are listening and responding to public concerns. In short, continuous monitoring transforms leadership from reactive to proactive, enabling Ohio’s public universities to navigate turbulence with foresight and credibility.

## **Implications and Next Steps**

Ohio’s findings carry significant implications for both institutional strategy and statewide policy. First, the data confirm that public universities remain central to civic life in the minds of Ohioans – but, that confidence is conditional. While most respondents trust universities to deliver a good education, skepticism about political neutrality and research integrity signals a fragile foundation. If left unaddressed, these concerns could erode support for public funding and weaken universities’ ability to fulfill their civic mission.

The strong endorsement of civic education presents an opportunity to rebuild trust through visible, nonpartisan engagement. By embedding civic competencies into curricula and creating community-based learning experiences, Ohio’s universities can demonstrate their relevance to democratic health. These efforts should be paired with transparent safeguards against ideological bias, including clear departmental commitments to viewpoint diversity and faculty development focused on civil discourse.

Next steps should prioritize measurement and accountability. Institutions need to move beyond one-time surveys and adopt longitudinal tracking of trust and civic education indicators. CHRR at The Ohio State University offers an ideal platform for this work, enabling universities to monitor trends across regions and demographic groups. A publicly accessible “Trust Dashboard” could further reinforce transparency, showing Ohioans what universities are doing to address concerns and how those efforts are making a difference over time.

Finally, Ohio's role as a bellwether state positions it to lead nationally. By piloting trust-building and civic education initiatives – and rigorously evaluating their impact – Ohio can provide a model for other states grappling with similar challenges. In doing so, its public universities will not only strengthen their own legitimacy but also contribute to restoring confidence in higher education as a cornerstone of American democracy.

## **Conclusion**

Ohio's survey results offer both a warning and a navigational map. The warning is clear: trust in public universities is not guaranteed, and concerns about political bias threaten to undermine confidence even in areas where institutions excel. At the same time, the navigational map is equally evident: Ohioans value civic education and expect universities to play a role in strengthening democratic knowledge and engagement. These findings create a mandate for action, one that combines transparency, responsiveness, and innovation.

By applying the RADAR framework, Ohio's public universities can move from passive listening to proactive leadership. Recognizing trust as a multidimensional concept and civic education as a public priority positions institutions to act decisively. Through visible commitments to classroom neutrality, expanded civic learning opportunities, and rigorous longitudinal tracking of trust indicators, Ohio can demonstrate how higher education earns – not assumes – the confidence of the citizens it serves.

As a bellwether state, Ohio is uniquely situated to lead a national conversation on rebuilding trust and revitalizing the civic mission of public universities. Success here will not only strengthen local communities but also provide a model for institutions across the country. In an era of polarization and skepticism, turning on the RADAR in Ohio is more than a strategy. It is a necessity for navigating turbulence and charting a course toward renewed public confidence in higher education.