



Fact Sheet: How Well Do We Really Know Today’s Students?

Public opinion research commissioned by Higher Learning Advocates

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Introduction

Public perceptions of college students typically come from a favorite past-time movie - involving a recent high school graduate who lives on campus, always surrounded by a group of friends, and has the luxury of their parents paying all their expenses (e.g. tuition, rent, groceries). The reality is that today's students are more racially diverse, financially independent, older, and have more time constraints than ever before. As of 2015, 41% of today's college students are older than 25 years-old meanwhile 42% of colleges students live at or below the federal poverty line. The narratives for today's students are rapidly shifting and we found it essential to test the public and Education Insiders on the evolving student demographics.

Survey Methodology

To gauge perceptions of today's students among both the public and policymakers - Higher Learning Advocates commissioned a nationally representative survey of 1,000 Americans through GfK Research. But we also asked Whiteboard Advisors to survey beltway *Education Insiders* to understand what they thought about today's college students.

The survey of the general public was conducted online in GfK's Omnibus using the web-enabled "KnowledgePanel," a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the US general population, not just the online population. The study consisted of 1,000 nationally representative interviews conducted between September 28 – 30 among adults aged 18+. The margin of error is +/-3 percentage points. Responses were analyzed by gender, age, income level, educational level, and political affiliation.

Education Insider is proprietary model designed to cut through the noise and provide real-time insights on national education trends, debates, and issues—from a bipartisan sample of policy experts. Goal is not statistically valid data, but trendspotting and the capture of candid opinions from Insiders with unique perspective on the education landscape.

Who are the Education Insiders?

- Influential leaders shaping federal education policy, including individuals who have served or are currently serving as key policy and political roles;
- Current and former White House and U.S. Department of Education leaders;
- Current and former Congressional policymakers and staff;
- Higher education institution leaders; and
- Leaders of education associations, organizations and think tanks.

Topline Findings

College is expensive, and the public understands that basic fact well. But they're less aware of the practical realities many students face, like commuting or balancing school and parenting.

Survey respondents were more likely to accurately answer questions about student poverty and working while learning compared to questions about parenting or living on campus.

- 78% of respondents correctly stated that a majority of college students work while enrolled, and 72% of respondents correctly identified that more than 40% of independent college students live at or below the poverty line.
- Respondents were less familiar with the fact that a most students don't live on campus (36% accuracy) and that a quarter of today's students are parents (64% accuracy).
- 18-24-year-olds are particularly aware of the financial challenges of higher education: 84% knew that the majority of college students work while learning, perhaps because they or their friends are currently doing so.

Education Insiders—influential leaders shaping federal education policy—were significantly more likely than the American public to correctly identify characteristics of today's students. This means that while policymakers may not agree on solutions, they at least agree on the challenges today's students face.

- This high level of awareness among Insiders provides an opportunity for them to lead—either by changing policy to better accommodate the needs of today's learner, or by increasing public awareness.

Overall, the survey shows that while the public is generally aware of the prevalence of students over 25, first-generation students and students attending 2-year schools, some outdated assumptions about conventional college kids—funded by mom and dad and living in dorms—remain.

- 62% of respondents believe most first-year students live on campus—but this is the experience of only about 13% of first year students. And only 37% of respondents knew that most of today's college students don't depend on parents or family for financial assistance.

While respondents overall accurately identified many facts about today's college students, results show a generational gap in understanding among those 65 and older.

- Respondents 65 and older were less likely to correctly identify statistics on the number of students over 25, and the realities of student poverty, prevalence of working while in school, and being financially independent from parents.
- Only 27% of those 65+ knew that a majority of today's college students are financially independent, and only 62% of those 65+ knew that 40% of these independent students live at or below the poverty line.

And while the respondents were relatively accurate identifying facts about student demographics, they were less confident when asked about student outcomes for underrepresented groups.

- Only 47% of people correctly identified that Hispanic and African American college students are less likely to complete their degree than their white peers.

Crosstab Analysis

Financial Status

- The greatest misconception around today's students was in their financial situation status and independence. Six in 10 of respondents incorrectly believed that most of today's students are dependent on their parents or family members' incomes as opposed to being financially independent.
- Republicans were significantly less likely to correctly guess that most of today's students are financially independent (30% vs. Democrats 44%).
- Males were more likely to incorrectly guess that most of today's students are financially independent (65%).
- Only 27% of respondents older than 65 believed that most of today's students are financially independent.
- At all educational attainment levels, over half of respondents incorrectly believed that most of today's students are dependent on their parents or family members' incomes as opposed to being financially independent. Fifty-four percent of respondents with bachelor's degrees incorrectly believed this.

Racial Disparities

- More than half of those surveyed (51%) did not believe that Hispanic and African-American students are less likely to complete at a four-year college. This misperception was largely consistent across political parties, and income levels, although the wealthiest respondents were the most likely to answer correctly. Higher income correlated with a greater belief in racial disparities in college completion.
- Republicans and Democrats were nearly evenly split on this misconception.
- Those with the lowest income levels were most likely to guess incorrectly (61%).
- Older Americans 65+ were least likely (38%) to believe in a racial gap in college completion.
- Individuals with a HS degree (35%) or less were far less likely to agree that there is a racial gap in college completion compared to those with some college or a bachelor's degree or higher.
- Those with a college degree are more aware of the racial disparities that exist in accessing and completing postsecondary education. Respondents with a bachelor's degree or higher were more likely (62%) to correctly answer. Respondents with a high school diploma or less were far less likely to answer have a correct perception of (35%) racial disparities.

Student Residence

- While only 13% of first-year students reside on campus, the majority of respondents (62%) incorrectly stated that the most first-year students live on campus.
- Most of the lowest income Americans view students as primarily living on campus.
- At all education attainment levels, about 60% of respondents incorrectly answered that the majority of first-year students live on campus.

Student Poverty

- Individuals with the highest household income levels (\$75K+) were more likely to correctly guess the percentage of students living at or below FPL than those with household income levels lower than \$25K.
- Most respondents with incomes between \$50K-\$74.9K (81%) correctly stated that the majority of students work during college.
- Adults ages 65 and older were least likely (36%) to have an accurate perception of student poverty levels compared to adults ages 24-59.
- Adults ages 35-49 were more likely to have an accurate perception of student poverty levels (81%).
- Democrats (76%) view student poverty levels more accurately than Republicans (71%).
- Respondents with a high school diploma or less were less likely to correctly guess the percentage of students living at or below FPL.

Student Age

- Mostly older Americans (65+) have an incorrect perception of student age.
- Over half of respondents correctly guessed that 40% of students are older than 25, at all educational attainment levels.

Student Attendance

- Over one-third of respondents (35%) were able to accurately identify the percent of today's students attending college part-time.
- The lowest income Americans were most likely to view college as a full-time pursuit. Those making \$25K or less were most likely to have incorrect about the number of part-time students.
- No matter educational attainment, over half of respondents had an incorrect view of the percentage of students attending college part-time.
- However, awareness of first-generation college attendance was strong. Across all education levels, 81% of respondents correctly answered that 3 out of 10 students are the first in their family to attend college.
- Mostly younger respondents ages 18-24 (24%) correctly stated that three out of ten college students are the first in their families to attend college.
- Few respondents ages 35 and up correctly stated that more than one in three students attend a two-year college.

- Most Democrats correctly stated (84%) that 3 out of 10 college students are the first in their families to attend college.

Work and Family Commitments

- Americans have a generally accurate perception of the high number of college students who work to support themselves while in college. However, women were significantly more likely than men to answer correctly (82% vs. 75%).
- More Democrats than Republicans accurately identified the number of students who work (84% vs. 74%).
- Fewer respondents older than 65 (24%) correctly answered that the majority of college students work to support themselves while in college.
- At all levels of educational attainment, over 70% of respondents correctly answered that the majority of students work to support themselves while in college.
- Over 30% of Americans surveyed failed to correctly state that more than a quarter of today's students in college are parents.
- Women had a slightly more accurate perception than men (66% vs. 62%) of the number of student parents.
- Most respondents with household income levels \$50K-\$74.9K (71%) correctly stated that more than a quarter of today's students in college are parents.
- Democrats and Republicans were fairly evenly split in correctly stating that more than a quarter of today's students in college are parents (63% vs. 66%).
- At all educational attainment levels, over 60% of respondents correctly answered that more than a quarter of today's students are parents.