

SURVEY RESULTS

Higher Ed Insights

Results of the Spring 2017 Survey

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ITHAKA S+R



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Introduction

In May and June of 2017, we surveyed the Ithaka S+R Higher Ed Insights panel—164 senior leaders and experts at colleges and universities, associations, research groups, and philanthropies—about the state of higher education and the likely impact of recent events and trends.

While respondents were generally positive about the state of undergraduate education in the United States, they expressed urgency about the need to improve degree completion rates, the quality of student learning, and affordability for students. Respondents' reactions to a list of twenty high-profile higher education events and trends suggest that federal policy is moving in a direction that will not help and may stand in the way of efforts to meet those urgent needs.

Of the trends and events presented, respondents rated the appointment of Betsy DeVos as the US Secretary of Education as the highest impact and most negative. In line with this finding, panelists generally viewed higher education policies advanced by the Obama administration as having a high and positive impact on students or the sector, and viewed both the reversal of those policies and newly adopted policies of the Trump administration as having a high but negative impact.

I am sad to see important Obama era advances rolled back
or in danger.

Trustee, Liberal Arts College

Across the survey, respondents rated events related to financial aid and student financing of education as having the highest impact on students or the sector. For instance, respondents rated the use of tax returns from two years prior to complete FAFSA as the most positive high-impact event. On the other hand, the reversal of regulations constraining private student-loan servicers, and the unavailability of the IRS's Data Retrieval Tool to support FAFSA completion at that time and uncertainty surrounding the Trump administration's approach to income-contingent loan repayment were all viewed negatively and were among the highest impact events.

A similar concern about student financial well-being appears to underlie respondents' high impact ratings for several items related to for-profit colleges. Respondents viewed the release of the first set of findings under the gainful employment rule, the revocation of accreditation authority from the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (which accredited mostly for-profit institutions), and the downward trend in for-profit enrollment as having a positive impact on students or the sector. Since the survey was administered, the Department of Education has suspended the enforcement of the gainful employment rule.

Limiting the excesses of the for-profit sector has the potential to significantly reduce problems with student debt, low-completion rates, and other problems.

Researcher, Research Institute

Another theme of the survey was the respondents' focus on the importance of state funding for public institutions. They viewed the slight upward trajectory of most states' appropriations for public colleges and universities over the past two years as high-impact. However, respondents' comments indicate broad agreement that the increases are insufficient and more funding is needed. Respondents were more divided concerning the impact of the New York State Excelsior program, a scholarship for low- and middle-income students in New York State that covers tuition at public institutions. The program elicited both praise and criticism from the panel, including positive remarks about its influence on the national conversation surrounding free college, and disapproval of its requirement that scholarship recipients reside in New York after graduating.

Respondents' concern for protecting students extends beyond their financial well-being and career opportunities. Respondents rated the intensification of efforts to prevent and address sexual assault on campus as high-impact and positive. They were more neutral, on average, about the impact of institutions' efforts to assert "sanctuary campus" status for undocumented students, although they expressed support for protecting those students more generally. The survey was administered several months before the Department of Education's revocation of guidance regarding campus sexual assault and President Trump's executive order suspending Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), each of which may cast new light on these questions.

Finally, respondents viewed trends related to both racial and viewpoint diversity on US campuses as important. They rated the Supreme Court's decision in *Fisher v. University of Texas* upholding the constitutionality of race-conscious admissions as high-impact and positive, and high-profile student protests prompted by controversial speakers as negative.

In the following sections, we provide background on Ithaka S+R's Higher Ed Insights project, describe the respondents, and report our more detailed analysis of the Spring 2017 survey findings. The full set of survey results is included in the appendix.

Background

In fall 2015 and winter 2017, Ithaka S+R invited a select group of higher education administrators and experts to join a panel of advisors and take part in annual surveys on issues of national importance in higher education. The first two of these surveys were administered in the fall of 2015 and spring of 2016.¹ Ithaka S+R analyzes and publishes the results of these surveys to inform the broader higher education community about the panel's views on current debates, initiatives, and challenges. The results of the Higher Ed Insights surveys also help guide Ithaka S+R's research agenda.

This report presents findings from the Spring 2017 survey, administered between May 24 and June 25, 2017. The survey asked respondents to rate items regarding the current state of undergraduate education and the impact of twenty higher education trends or events from the prior year.² Items pertaining to the current state of undergraduate education are the same as items included in the fall 2015 survey to allow longitudinal analysis. The twenty trends/events were identified through review of higher education media coverage and recommendations by higher education experts.

¹ See <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/landing/higher-ed-insights>.

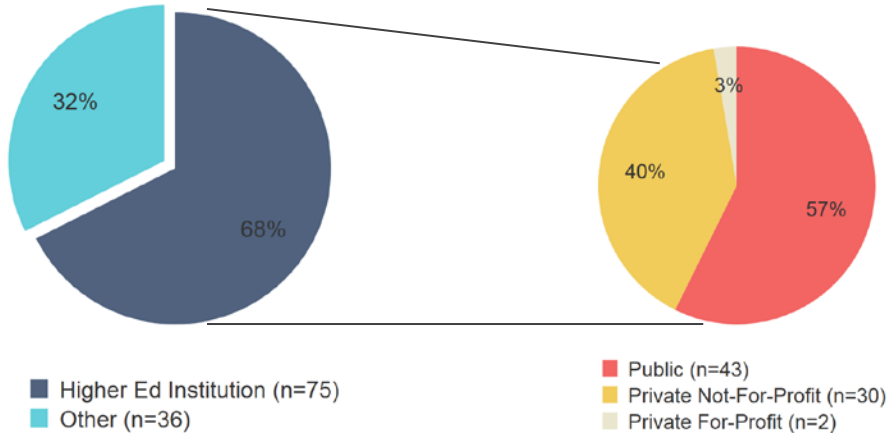
² The survey also included items about the collection and use of student data in higher education, drawn from panel members' open-ended responses in prior surveys, which will be reported separately.

Panel and Respondents

The Higher Ed Insights panel consists of 164 higher education experts who were invited to join based on their expertise in the field and their affiliation with innovative or influential institutions.³ A total of 111 panel members completed the Spring 2017 survey (68% of the panel). Information about respondents is presented in Table 1 in the appendix.

The majority of respondents are affiliated primarily with institutions of higher education (68%; *n*=75). The remaining 32 percent of respondents are affiliated with other types of organizations, such as research institutes or think tanks, member associations, and philanthropic foundations. Of those respondents affiliated with institutions of higher education, most are affiliated with public institutions (57%) and private not-for-profit four-year universities and colleges (40%), and two respondents (3%) are affiliated with a for-profit college. Respondents affiliated with public institutions represent public four-year universities and colleges (*n*=24), community colleges (*n*=9) and public college or university systems (*n*=9).

Figure 1.



Close to half of respondents (45%; *n*=50) identified their primary role as administrators at higher education institutions, mostly as presidents of colleges, universities, or systems (*n*=28). The remaining respondents identified their primary roles as presidents, chief

³ The original panel included 111 members. Additional experts were invited to join the panel in January of 2017, resulting in a final panel of 164 members.

academic officers, or leaders of other types of institutions (15%), faculty members (13%), researchers (12%), program officers or grant makers (4%), or “other” roles such as consultant, policymaker, or trustee (10%). Most respondents have had prior experience as faculty members (76%) or higher education administrators (80%). As a group, respondents had an average of 29 years of experience in the field of higher education, ranging from 3 to 53 years ($M=28.96$; $SD=11.89$, $n=110$).

Survey Responses

Current State of Undergraduate Education

As a group, respondents expressed a slightly positive and hopeful stance toward the state of the sector. They rated the current state of undergraduate education in the US as somewhat above neutral ($M=4.71$; $SD=.95$) on a 7-point scale ranging from “1=extremely poor” to “7=excellent.” Only 13 percent rated it as below neutral while 20 percent rated it as “very good” or “excellent.” Respondents who rated the current state of undergraduate education as less than “very good” ($n=103$) were slightly hopeful that it will improve significantly by 2025 ($M=4.80$; $SD=1.39$).

Respondents considered addressing degree completion rates, the quality of student learning, and affordability for students as equally urgent or very urgent for improving undergraduate education. They also considered addressing the cost of providing an undergraduate education as urgent, albeit slightly less so. This is consistent with respondents’ focus in their open-ended responses throughout the survey on students’ ability to afford college and receive a quality education. Respondents’ mean ratings of these items are presented in Table 2 in the appendix.

A total of 74 panel members completed both the Fall 2015 and current Spring 2017 surveys, both of which asked the same questions about the state of undergraduate education at the time. These respondents provided similar ratings for all items in this section, with a slightly higher rating for the state of undergraduate education in the US in 2017.⁴

⁴ On a 7-point scale ranging from “1=extremely poor” to “7=excellent,” among these 74 respondents, the mean rating for the state of undergraduate education was 4.46 ($SD=1.14$) in 2015 and 4.73 ($SD=.99$) in 2017 ($p=.04$).

Impact of Higher Education Trends

Respondents were presented with a list of 20 select higher education trends or events that had been prominently featured in the higher education media between June 2016 and May 2017. They were asked to consider the impact of each trend/event on undergraduate students in the US, whether directly or indirectly through the institutions that serve them, and to rate its degree of impact (1=very low; 5=very high) and the valence of its impact (1=very negative; 5=very positive).⁵ Respondents were then invited to elaborate on trends/events they rated as non-neutral on the two scales, by discussing how or why they impact students.

We dropped an item asking respondents to rate the impact of new research publications that highlight the significant food, housing, and financial insecurity of many college students, as open-ended responses for that item revealed that some respondents rated the impact of student hardship, rather than the impact of the research itself. Open-ended responses to this item are discussed in the next section of this report.

Table 3 in the appendix lists the 19 remaining trends or events that were presented to respondents and their ratings, sorted from highest to lowest average impact.

On average, respondents rated Betsy DeVos's confirmation as US Secretary of Education as the most negative and high-impact event on the list. Conversely, they rated a change in federal policy that allowed students to complete FAFSA forms earlier using tax returns from two years prior as the most positive high-impact event. These two items highlight an overarching theme in the survey—that respondents, as a group, felt positively about a number of higher education policies developed by the Obama administration and are concerned about policy changes advanced by the current administration. A few respondents described this explicitly, in response to the item concerning Betsy DeVos's confirmation as US Secretary of Education:

[...] Her focus on deregulating education, especially the loan and for-profit college industries, will hurt most Americans, especially low-income Americans. The market was not serving students well before the Obama administration cracked down on the for-profit and private loan industries and it will not serve them well if the field returns to the status quo ante.

- Grant Maker, Philanthropic Foundation

⁵ Throughout the report, calculations that report response percentages only include those respondents who provided a rating for the given item.

Her efforts to abandon standards for performance of [institutions of higher education] and loan providers will likely reverse many of the advances the Obama administration made and prevent further advancement.

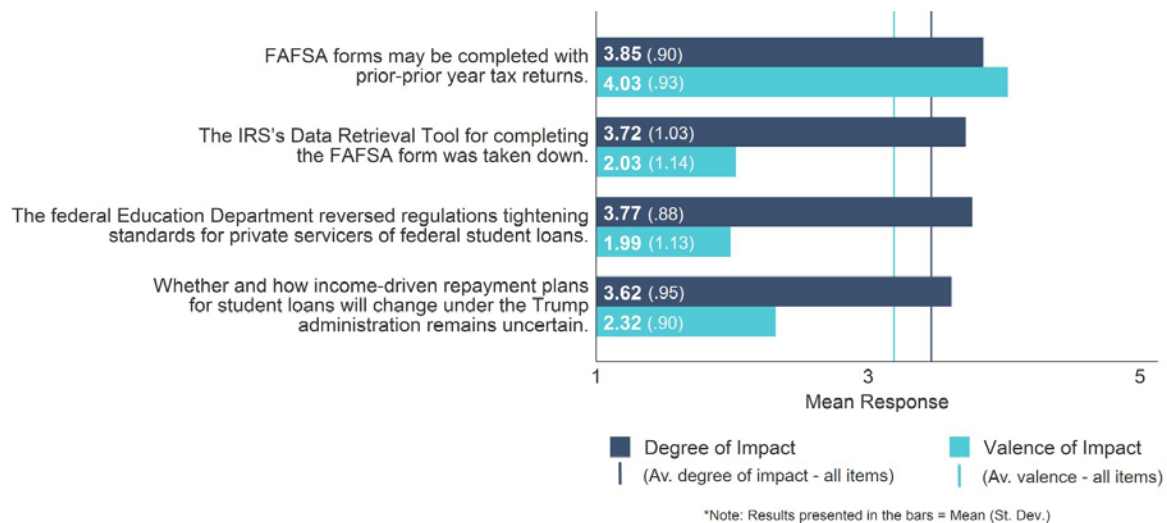
- Program Director, Research Institute

Substantively, the ten trends or events rated as having the most impact on students or the sector fall into one of the following five categories, which are discussed in more detail below: 1) student financial aid, 2) regulation of for-profit colleges, 3) state support for higher education, 4) protecting students at risk, and 5) diversity, inclusion, and free speech.

Student Financial Aid

Respondents rated all four items related to student financial aid among the top ten trends or events in terms of their impact on students or the sector.

Figure 2.



For instance, respondents rated the regulation permitting the use of prior-prior year tax returns to complete FAFSA forms, which took effect in October 2016,⁶ as the most positive high-impact event on the list.

⁶ The rationale for removing the Data Retrieval Tool was its vulnerability to hacking. The tool was restored in September 2017, just before the new FAFSA completion cycle began. Federal Student Aid, "FAFSA Changes for 2017-2018," U.S. Department of Education, accessed October 24, 2017, <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/about/announcements/fafsa-changes>.

For students and families to have faster and easier means to complete complicated FAFSA forms is highly valuable. For universities and colleges, it also improved the ability to package aid and get information to students more quickly. This is all beneficial for low-income student access to higher education.

- CAO of governing board, Public University System

This is incredibly important in ensuring students and families are prepared to pay for college. Knowing earlier what the financial gap is heightens awareness and provides time to prepare to pay the cost. It also familiarizes students and families with the FAFSA, helps school personnel to become more familiar, and equips students with knowledge of the financial aid process [...].

- Program Executive Director, Philanthropic Foundation

On the other hand, actions by the federal Education Department in March and April 2017 that reversed Obama-era regulations tightening standards for private servicers of federal student loans,⁷ and removed the IRS' Data Retrieval Tool that facilitates students' access to information for completing the FAFSA,⁸ were in the top three events or trends with the most negative impact on students or the sector. When the survey was launched, the Trump administration had floated the idea of limiting student loan repayment options and forgiveness programs, which has since been fleshed out in the President's 2018 budget request to Congress.⁹ Respondents viewed the uncertainty surrounding changes to income-driven repayment negatively, expressing support for income-driven repayment plans in their comments.

Completing the FAFSA is not an easy task and not having the IRS's Data Retrieval Tool makes it even more cumbersome.

- Administrator, Public Research University

⁷ Danielle Douglas-Gabriel, "DeVos Dials Back Consumer Protections for Student Loan Borrowers," *The Washington Post*, April 11, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/04/11/devos-dials-back-consumer-protections-for-student-loan-borrowers/>.

⁸ The tool was restored in September 2017, just before the new FAFSA completion cycle began. See Craig Munier and Lisa DiCarlo, "Changes to the IRS Data Retrieval Tool Process for the 2018-19 FAFSA® Form," *U.S. Department of Education*, August 7, 2017, <https://ifap.ed.gov/eannouncements/080717ChangestoIRSDRT1819FAFSAForm.html>.

⁹ In August 2017, the Education Department proposed a set of reforms to the federal student loan program that would eliminate the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, increase monthly payments from 10 to 12.5 percent of the borrower's discretionary income, and abolish the standard repayment caps while shortening the loan forgiveness mark for borrowers with debt from undergraduate studies from 20 to 15 years. See U.S. Department of Education, "Student Loans Overview: Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Proposal," *U.S. Department of Education*, May 22, 2017, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget18/justifications/q-sloverview.pdf>.

Private loan servicers had been allowed to be abusive of students, and undoing regulations that were intended to curb such abuse is a bad idea. The unconstrained free market was not working well in this domain.

- CAO, Membership Association

Making it unclear or uncertain what might qualify [for an income-driven repayment plan for student loans] makes it tougher to attract students to lower-paying, socially beneficial fields.

- Strategy Director, Philanthropic Foundation

Respondents who are primarily affiliated with a public institution of higher education ($n=42$) rated most of these events as having a significantly higher impact compared to those affiliated with private institutions ($n=32$) and to other respondents more generally ($n=64$).¹⁰

An additional item asked respondents to rate the impact of new research publications that highlighted the significant food, housing, and financial insecurity that many college students face.¹¹ Because respondents appear to have interpreted their ratings for this item in different ways, we do not report average ratings. Open-ended responses indicate a belief that student financial hardship is a significant and widespread barrier to student success that is not adequately addressed. Respondents differ, however, in their beliefs about whether research findings can help address this problem by influencing policy and practice in substantial ways.

This research is helping us realize the propensity and impact of insecurity. We used to not think of college students as being homeless or in insecurity. Knowing the research aids campuses and society with being proactive and addressing these needs.

- Program Director, Philanthropic Foundation

¹⁰ $p = .01 - .07$

¹¹ Sara Goldrick-Rab, Jed Richardson, and Anthony Hernandez, "Hungry and Homeless In College: Results from a National Study of Basic Needs Insecurity in Higher Education," Wisconsin HOPE Lab, March 2017, <http://wihopelab.com/publications/hungry-and-homeless-in-college-report.pdf>.

This topic had gotten little attention prior to the past year, and it's crucial to remind policymakers that not all college students are upper-middle-class 19-year-olds from the suburbs like many of them were.

- Faculty Member, Private Research University

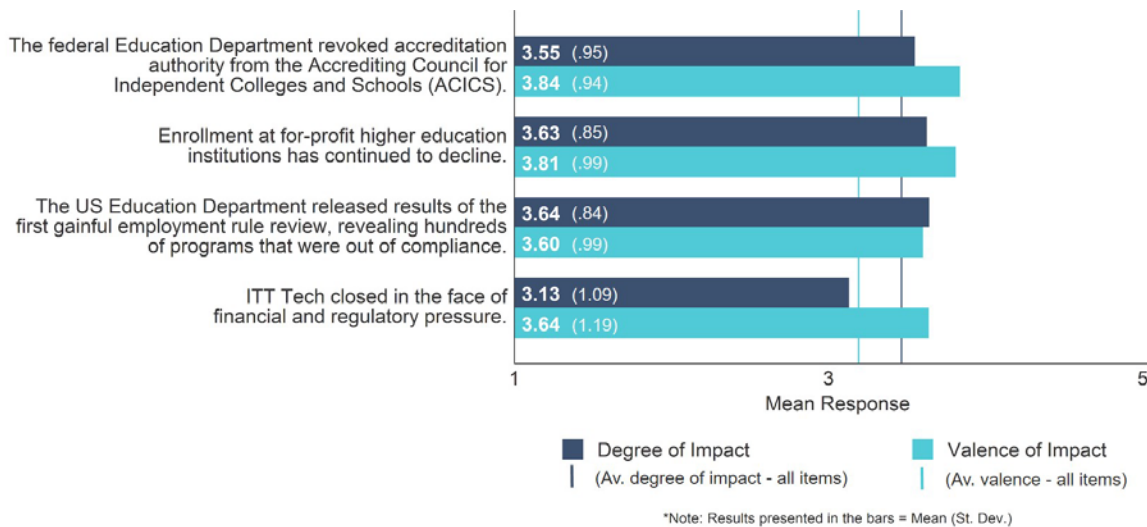
An important issue but I am not sure that the research per se will have a big impact. We need practices that are effective and can be replicated.

- President, Liberal Arts College

Regulation of For-Profit Colleges

On average, respondents tended to rate events or trends that promote the regulation of the for-profit sector, or limit its reach, as having a positive impact on students or higher education, more generally.

Figure 3.



More specifically, respondents rated the revocation of accreditation authority from the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS)¹² and the continued

¹² Federal Student Aid, "Secretary King Upholds Recommendation to No Longer Recognize the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools as an Accreditor," U.S. Department of Education, accessed October 24, 2017, <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/about/announcements/acics>.

decline in enrollment at for-profit institutions¹³ among the top five most positive high-impact events or trends. They also rated the release of the first gainful employment rule review¹⁴ results as somewhat positive in its impact. The closure of ITT Tech in the face of financial and regulatory pressure¹⁵ was rated as somewhat positive, but neutral on average in terms of the degree of its impact.

[ITT Tech closure] demonstrated flaws in for-profit business model excessively trumpeted by trustees and reformers.

- Professor Emeritus, Private Research University

For-profit higher education, as a sector, has done more to extract money from students and less to serve them than any other part of higher education.

- President, Liberal Arts College

While there are appropriate concerns about over emphasizing "income" with a college degree, done well, gainful employment can be a valuable metric in helping students select colleges and degree paths.

- Chancellor, Public Research University

Numerous respondents who rated these events as having a positive impact elaborated on their responses by focusing on how they signal structural or systematic change in the regulation of higher education more globally.

[...] What we really need to do is apply the same standards to all educational institutions - we should close any institution that is not providing value to learners and their employers. Tax status should not be the marker - just quality of learning outcomes for students.

- CAO, Education Delivery Company

¹³ Associated Press, "Enrollment is Tanking at the University of Phoenix, DeVry, and other For-Profit Colleges," *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-for-profit-enrollment-20160922-snap-story.html>.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Education Press Office, "Education Department Releases New Graduate Earnings Data for Career College Programs," November 17, 2016, <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/education-department-releases-new-graduate-earnings-data-career-college-programs>.

¹⁵ See footnote 13.

Accreditation requires universal redesign. This signals a potential focus on this problem.

- President, Community College

[The gainful employment rule review] is a huge leap forward in publicizing program-level outcomes. Now we need these data for all programs, regardless of whether government sanctions are attached.

- Faculty Member, Private Research University

Respondents also focused on how these events highlight the importance of emphasizing educational quality and students' outcomes at the institutions they attend, as well as their positive impact on controlling student costs and college-related debt. On the other hand, respondents who rated these events as having a negative impact on students or the sector were either concerned with the loss of the beneficial elements of for-profit institutions, such as innovation and tailored quality experiences for working adults at affordable prices, or the impact on the reputation (and consequently funding) of higher education institutions more generally.

For profit education was an engine of innovation. True, many schools lost their way, but they went where public institutions could not or would not.

- Researcher, Research Institute

Bad publicity, despite the educational entity, impact us all.

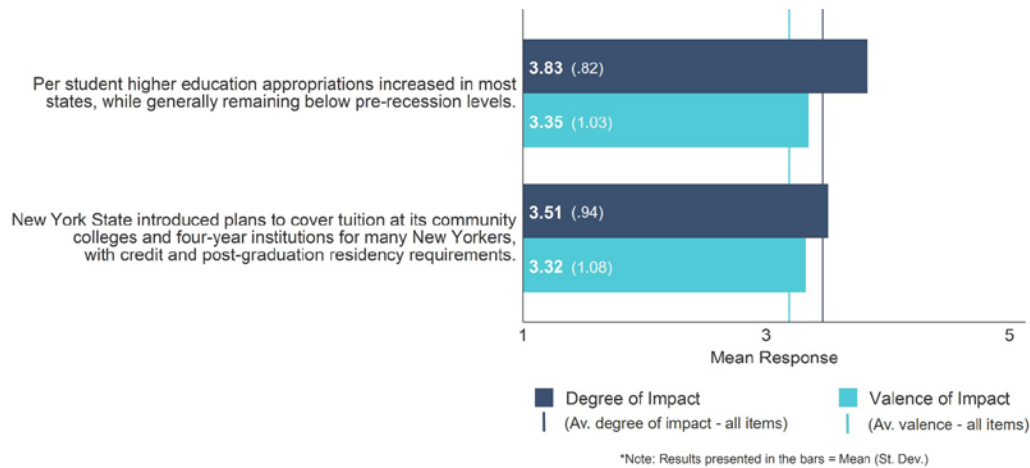
- President, Community College

Participants' responses to the items in this section indicate that they value regulation across the sector to help protect students' financial well-being and the quality of the education they receive. Respondents expressed similar values in their open-ended responses to an item pertaining to Purdue University's acquisition of Kaplan University, where they discussed their concerns over legitimizing practices that harm students financially and lower the quality and market value of the education provided, while providing a for-profit institution sanctuary from regulatory scrutiny.

State Support for Higher Education

Two items referenced state support for higher education and were rated as impactful by respondents, particularly those affiliated primarily with higher education institutions.

Figure 4.



That per student higher education appropriations increased in most states, while generally remaining below pre-recession levels, was rated the third highest-impact trend on the list. Irrespective of whether they considered this trend to have a positive or negative impact on students or the sector, most participants who elaborated on their responses considered the increases to be insufficient and current levels of funding to be a threat to access and quality. Several voiced concern that funding levels are a symptom of policymakers' diminished view of higher education as a socially valuable public good.

It is a step to realizing again the public value in public investment in education over making it a private, debt-financed good.

- Faculty Member, Public Research University

Per student funding state and local has declined 7% in real terms since 2005 and 20% since 1990. The continuing disinvestment by states in public higher education is the biggest threat to higher education. [...] Research suggests that declines in college completion are due mostly to the fact that more students are attending low-resource institutions rather than the result of declining student preparedness. As state/local funding is cut, the capacity of broad-access institutions to provide quality education at an affordable price declines. [...]

- Researcher, Private Research University

It's a positive sign that state appropriations are increasing, as whatever rate of increase, it is in the right direction. There is still a public policy belief that higher education serves the individual rather than the greater good so there is an expectation that students and families should pay for the privilege.

- Administrator, Community College

Although participants agree that state funding is crucial for public institutions and the students they serve, the majority rated the New York State Excelsior Program plan as either low-impact (45 percent of respondents rated the impact as neutral or low) or as having a non-positive impact (18 percent of respondents rated the impact as above neutral but the valence of impact as neutral or negative). A few respondents elaborated on their responses, citing the program as “smoke and mirrors designed to score political points,” “bait and switch,” or as a poorly designed plan that does not adequately redirect funds to the neediest students and can harm their trajectories or careers.

Nonetheless, over one one-third of participants (36%) rated the program as having a high and positive impact on students or the sector. Some of these respondents elaborated that the program contributes to conversations about affordability and access, and how it is an “important experiment” that other states could learn from. A few respondents also emphasized the program’s ability to improve access to higher education, although some voiced concerns over quality and completion rates.

This has changed the conversation about higher education, but I hope it will also raise questions of quality. A free education that is low-quality (due to insufficient resources) is detrimental and a waste.

- Faculty Member, Private Research University

The critical issue is whether these institutions will bring a higher proportion of students to success.

- Administrator, Public University System

This should increase opportunities/access to higher education in the state of New York. Any program that does so is significant. Also, this program could serve as an exemplar for other states that might be considering a similar program [...].

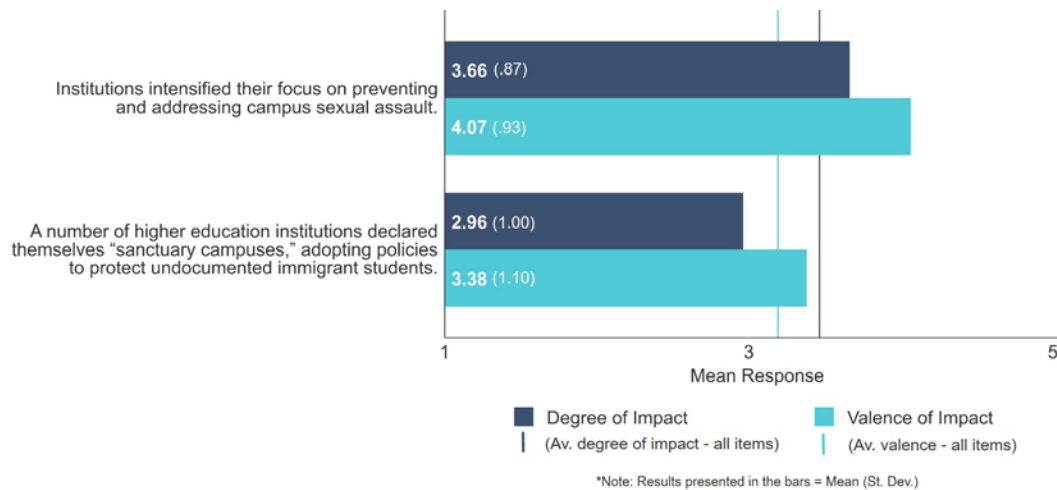
- Administrator, Private Comprehensive 4-yr Institution

Protecting Students at Risk

Throughout the survey respondents indicated their strong concern for students’ well-being, financial and otherwise. In this vein, respondents rated institutions’ intensified focus on preventing and addressing campus sexual assault as the second most positive trend on the list, and 60% considered it to have a high or very high impact. Respondents

were more divided concerning the impact of “sanctuary campuses” that aim to protect undocumented immigrant students from deportation. It is worth noting that the survey was administered before the Trump administration announced decisions to revoke guidance on campus sexual assault under Title IX and review the issue¹⁶ and to suspend the DACA program.¹⁷

Figure 5.



Respondents who rated institutions’ intensified focus on preventing and addressing campus sexual assault as having a positive impact on students highlighted that the effort was overdue or that much more work is needed in this area at the institutional and national levels.

Long-overdue effort on the part of colleges and universities to sustain a safe environment for students.

- Director & Researcher, Higher Education Research Projects

Much more is needed in this area. The stats are frightening and discouraging [...].

- Trustee, Liberal Arts College

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Education Press Office, “Department of Education Issues New Interim Guidance on Campus Sexual Misconduct,” *U.S. Department of Education*, September 22, 2017, <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/department-education-issues-new-interim-guidance-campus-sexual-misconduct>.

¹⁷ Department of Homeland Security, “Memorandum on Rescission of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA),” *Department of Homeland Security*, September 5, 2017, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2017/09/05/memorandum-rescission-daca>.

A societal problem asserting itself on our campuses. We need to fix the larger issue, though, not just hold colleges accountable.

- President, Community College

On the other hand, respondents were almost equally divided when it came to the perceived impact of “sanctuary campuses” that aim to protect undocumented immigrant students (high-impact; 31%; low-impact, 32%; neutral, 37%), though the majority viewed the trend as positive (79%). Open-ended responses to this item suggest that respondents who viewed “sanctuary campuses” as having a positive impact focused on institutions’ role in supporting and protecting their students, or on the symbolic value of the policy.

Higher education institutions as protectors and nurturers of human capital to support our global economy have to take this leadership role seriously - this is a good sign in my point of view.

- Administrator, Public University System

While a difficult thing to do, protecting undocumented immigrant students and creating spaces for their safety and completion of a degree or credential is fundamental to our work as colleges [...].

- President, Higher Education Support Organization

Respondents who rated “sanctuary campuses” as having a negative impact on students focused on how, in the absence of legal meaning or power, such declarations provide students and institutions with a false sense of hope or impact, at times at the expense of more effective actions for protecting undocumented students and of obeying the law.

The label "sanctuary campus" is confusing to students. A "sanctuary campus" cannot protect students from federal laws. Universities are compelled to follow federal laws [...].

- President, Private Research University

The important work of supporting undocumented students is much better done carefully and privately, without grandstanding pronouncements that do nothing but overpromise.

- President, Liberal Arts College

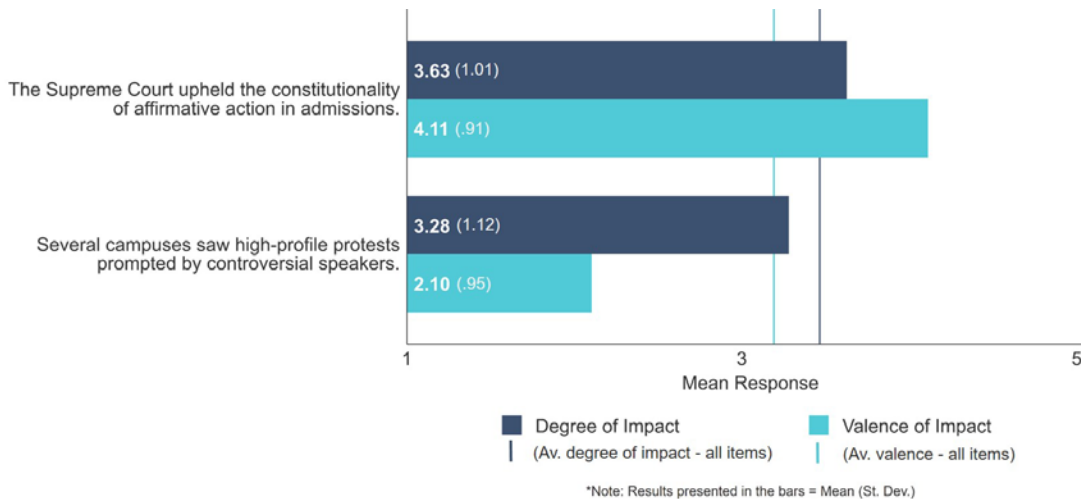
Not clear that these declarations actually do all that much except signal tolerance and resistance. Wish these schools spent time helping to update immigration reform rather than defying law.

- Chief Strategy Officer, Higher Education Consulting Firm

Diversity, Inclusion, and Free Speech

Respondents rated the Supreme Court ruling in *Fisher v. University of Texas* upholding affirmative action in admissions as the most positive high-impact event on the list, and the series of high-profile student protests against controversial speakers on campuses as the most negative trend that is not centered on federal policy. In both instances, respondents explained their responses by noting that the open exchange of ideas among a community that is diverse in both background and viewpoint is integral to the mission of higher education and to providing high quality learning experiences for students.

Figure 6.



The majority of respondents (63%) rated the Supreme Court ruling in favor of affirmative action as having a high impact on students and sector, and almost all of these respondents considered its impact to be positive. In their comments, most respondents described the value of affirmative action as a tool for helping institutions enroll a diverse student body and provide access to underrepresented groups. A number of respondents further elaborated on how student diversity confers educational benefits for all students.

An environment with diverse populations of students is essential to providing a well-rounded and grounded education in today's world. Affirmative action is an essential tool in making such environments possible.

- President, Public Research University

Evidence supports the hypothesis that diversity within the classroom enhances learning. [If] affirmative action in admissions is assumed to mean taking affirmative action to increase diversity in admissions, such actions will assist institutions of higher education in their education of students.

- Researcher, Public University System

This promotes diversity and inclusion of underrepresented populations, which enriches the educational experience for all students.

- President, Membership Association

Conversely, although respondents were divided in terms of whether they believe the trend of student protests of controversial speakers is impactful or not (47% vs. 53%), the majority rated its impact as negative in nature (71%). In their open-ended comments, respondents cited the importance of protecting free speech on campuses, as well as the educational and social costs of suppressing dialogue and diversity of opinion on controversial issues.

[...] I do not think the actual situation is nearly as dire as is reported in the press, but I also see growing intolerance of conservative and even moderate views in ways that can chill real learning and discourse on campuses.

- President, Liberal Arts College

Campuses must balance the exercises of both free speech and the right to assemble and protest. But one should not take precedence over the other.

- Administrator, Community College

These recent events are frightening and show that we are losing the capacity to listen to people whose experiences and opinions we do not share. Freedom of speech is a fundamental value in our democracy but honest and thoughtful listening and exploration of ideas that are different from our own are essential to building a diverse and equitable community and to the working of democracy. [...]

- Faculty member, Public Research University

A few respondents also discussed how student protests harm universities by threatening their reputation as open forums and centers for learning, and can lead to decreased support from state legislatures, taxpayers, and philanthropists. Since the survey, the Trump administration has announced that it will challenge affirmative action admissions policies in court,¹⁸ and student protests of controversial speakers have continued to raise concern over freedom of speech and constructive campus dialogue among higher education leaders.¹⁹

Trends in Teaching, Learning, and Technology

In general, respondents did not rate as high-impact the two trends that focus on teaching and learning, or the use of technology in higher education. Responses were slightly different among respondents who identified as higher education administrators. That subgroup rated increases in the use of virtual reality in instruction as more positive and more impactful than their counterparts,²⁰ and were more likely to offer comments on their support for digital badging and credentialing to signal students' academic and non-college skills to potential employers.

Virtual reality is an effective supplement to traditional teaching/learning models to reinforce ideas and practice skills. Virtual reality also engages learners more actively, which promotes learning and skill building.

- President, Community College

¹⁸ Charlie Savage, "Justice Dept. to Take on Affirmative Action in College Admissions," *The New York Times*, August 1, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/01/us/politics/trump-affirmative-action-universities.html>.

¹⁹ For example, see Michael H. Schill, "The Misguided Student Crusade against 'Fascism,'" *The New York Times*, October 23, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/23/opinion/fascism-protest-university-oregon.html>.

²⁰ On average, respondents who identified as higher education administrators rated the increased use of virtual reality in the classroom as more impactful than their counterparts (M(SD)=3.06(1.09) and M(SD)=2.65(1.11) respectively; $p < .03$) and as more positive in its impact (M(SD)=3.71(68) and M(SD)=3.31(.85) respectively; $p < .01$).

[Digital badging and credentialing] initiatives provide the students with help in "connecting the dots" and demonstrating that colleges and universities ARE preparing students for the real world. [...] These initiatives provide clear and relatively concise evidence of the broad skills and abilities that students are gaining by attending our institutions.

- Chief Academic Officer, Public University System

Similarly, in their open-ended responses, a number of panelists identified the increased use of predictive analytics and other technologies to enhance student services, retention, and completion, as well as the redesign of developmental educational education, as additional trends that have had an impact on the sector. (An additional section of the survey, which will be reported separately, did focus on the collection and use of student data to improve undergraduate education.)

Conclusion

Federal policy is top-of-mind for the higher education insiders we surveyed. In general, they favored policies of the Obama administration that streamlined financial aid application, eased student loan debt burden, and enforced standards on for-profit colleges. They are concerned about the ways that the Trump administration is beginning to change those policies. Respondents also expressed support for approaches to affirmative action and sexual assault that the Trump administration has subsequently called into question. And they recognized the challenge of mitigating risks faced by undocumented students even before President Trump decided to end DACA.

With the flux and tension in national politics, it is hard to imagine focusing on anything else. But respondents also elevated, in different ways, state funding for higher education, state-level "free college" policies, and meeting the basic food and housing needs of students as trends to watch.

In designing this survey, we intentionally focused more on federal policies and national issues and less on institutional practices related to instruction and support than we have in our previous Higher Ed Insights surveys. We believe it is important to surface panelists' views on these hot-button issues and their impact on higher education. At the same time, we and our readers should keep in mind the advice of panel members in our very first Higher Ed Insights survey: institutional leaders and faculty are the lynchpins for achieving the improvements in completion, student learning, and affordability that

respondents to this survey still consider urgently needed.²¹ There is much they can and should do, even in the face of national headwinds.

²¹ See Rayane Alamuddin, Martin Kurzweil, and Daniel Rossman, "Higher Ed Insights: Results of the Fall 2015 Survey," *Ithaka S+R*, February 22, 2016, <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/publications/higher-ed-insights-results-of-the-fall-2015-survey/>.

Appendix

Table 1. Spring 2017 Higher Ed Insights Survey Respondents

Primary institution of affiliation	n	%		
Research University	36	32.4		
College or University System	13	11.7		
Research/Policy Institute or Think Tank	13	11.7		
Philanthropic Foundation	11	9.9		
Liberal Arts College	9	8.1		
Community College	9	8.1		
Comprehensive 4-year	8	7.2		
Membership Association	6	5.4		
Other	6	5.4		
Main role at primary institution of affiliation	n	%		
President/Chief Executive Officer/Chancellor	41	36.9		
Other Administrator or Emeritus Leader	21	18.9		
Faculty member/Instructor	15	13.5		
Researcher	13	11.7		
Other	12	10.8		
Provost/Chief Academic Officer	4	3.6		
Grant Maker/Program Officer	4	3.6		
Policymaker	1	0.9		
	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Number of years in higher education	28.96	11.89	3	53

Table 2. Current State of Undergraduate Education in the US: Mean Responses

	n	Mean	SD
How would you rate the current state of undergraduate education in the US? (1= "Extremely poor" 7= "Excellent")	111	4.71	0.95
How hopeful are you that the state of undergraduate education in the US will improve significantly by 2025? (1= "Not at all hopeful" 7= "Extremely hopeful")	103 ²²	4.80	1.39
How hopeful are you that the state of undergraduate education in the US will remain at its present high quality by 2025? (1= "Not at all hopeful" 7= "Extremely hopeful")	8 ²³	5.38	0.75
In your opinion, how urgent is it to address each of the following in order to improve undergraduate education in the US? (1= "Not at all urgent" 7= "Extremely urgent")			
Degree Completion Rates	111	5.85	1.29
Quality of Student Learning	111	5.90	1.17
Affordability for Students	111	5.74	1.35
The Cost of Providing Undergraduate Education	111	5.28	1.63

²² This question was only asked of respondents who rated the current state of undergraduate postsecondary education in the US at the present time as less than 6 (on the 7-point scale).

²³ This question was only asked of respondents who rated the current state of undergraduate postsecondary education in the US at the present time as 6 or higher (on the 7-point scale).

Table 3. Impact of Higher Education Trends: Mean Responses

1="Very low" or "Very negative" 5="Very high" or "Very positive"	Degree of Impact	Valence of Impact
	M (SD)	M (SD)
Betsy DeVos was confirmed as US Secretary of Education.	3.89 (1.08)	1.71 (1.00)
FAFSA forms may be completed with prior-year tax returns.	3.85 (.90)	4.03 (.93)
Per student higher education appropriations increased in most states, while generally remaining below pre-recession levels.	3.83 (.82)	3.35 (1.03)
The federal Education Department reversed regulations tightening standards for private servicers of federal student loans.	3.77 (.88)	1.99 (1.13)
The IRS's Data Retrieval Tool for completing the FAFSA form was taken down.	3.72 (1.03)	2.03 (1.14)
Institutions intensified their focus on preventing and addressing campus sexual assault.	3.66 (.87)	4.07 (.93)
The US Education Department released results of the first gainful employment rule review, revealing hundreds of programs that were out of compliance.	3.64 (.84)	3.60 (.99)
The Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of affirmative action in admissions.	3.63 (1.01)	4.11 (.91)
Enrollment at for-profit higher education institutions has continued to decline.	3.63 (.85)	3.81 (.99)
Whether and how income-driven repayment plans for student loans will change under the Trump administration remains uncertain.	3.62 (.95)	2.32 (.90)
The federal Education Department revoked accreditation authority from the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS).	3.55 (.95)	3.84 (.94)
New York State introduced plans to cover tuition at its community colleges and four-year institutions for many New Yorkers, with credit and post-graduation residency requirements.	3.51 (.94)	3.32 (1.08)
Institutions are increasingly using and supporting evidence-backed digital badging and credentialing to signal students' academic and non-college skills to potential employers.	3.34 (1.01)	3.59 (.91)
Several campuses saw high-profile protests prompted by controversial speakers.	3.28 (1.12)	2.10 (.95)
ITT Tech closed in the face of financial and regulatory pressure.	3.13 (1.09)	3.64 (1.19)
Purdue University acquired Kaplan University.	3.00 (1.13)	2.96 (1.02)
The EQUIP program allows students to access federal student aid to enroll non-traditional credentialing programs partnered with Title IV institutions (e.g. coding boot camps).	3.00 (.99)	3.29 (.96)
A number of higher education institutions declared themselves "sanctuary campuses," adopting policies to protect undocumented immigrant students.	2.96 (1.00)	3.38 (1.10)
Virtual reality is being increasingly used in classrooms to provide students with immersive educational experiences.	2.84 (1.12)	3.49 (.80)