Higher Education Students' Attitudes on Equity Gaps, Accountability, and Community Voice

Surveys Nationwide, and in the States of Louisiana, Tennessee, and Texas





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Methodology

- The Education Trust commissioned John Zogby Strategies to conduct a nationwide interactive survey. The survey fielded October 5th through the 9th, 2026. A random sample was extracted and respondents were screened for enrollment in a higher education degree or certificate.
- The total sample, N=800, has a margin of error of +/- 3.5 percentage points.
- Demographics analyzed throughout the report focus on gender, age, race, and degree level. Degree level compares Bachelor's students with graduate students (Master's students).
- Differences called out below are generally 8 points or more. Results for Asian students are more qualitative than quantitative.
- Surveys fielded in Louisiana, Tennessee, and Texas from October 5th through the 10th, 2026. Sample sizes are 150, 200, and 400, respectively. Respondents followed the same screening criteria as in the national survey.
- National sample characteristics include: men (45%), women (54%), under 25 (42%), 25 to 29 (16%), 30 and older (41%), White (45%), Black (31%), Hispanic (12%), Asian (7%), Bachelor's (43%), Graduate+ (14%).
- See topline frequencies for demographic representation nationally and within each state.
- Weights were not applied as demographic distribution appears sound following internal review.

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Executive Analysis

National Highlights

More than 4 in ten have received support programs, nearly 1 in 5 know someone close who has had a support program, and most of them say those programs have been cut or changed.

- 43% say they have been the beneficiary of a support program, 17% have a family member, or a close friend who has received a scholarship, grant, mentorship, or opportunity aimed at underrepresented students.
- Among those who personally benefited or have close ties to someone who has benefited from support programs, only 26% report no meaningful change. 30% say the support was reduced, 21% restructured, 14% discontinued, and 11% renamed.
- Students in this group referenced in the two bullets above, say the changes affected their ability to pay for college (38%), stay on track to graduate (28%), complete required courses (24%), and access food (23%).
- Men are more likely than women to have a connection to a recipient for scholarships etc., (76% vs 64%) and to say a program was restructured (27% vs 15%).
- A connection to a recipient of scholarships, etc. is found highest among Hispanic (80%) and Black (75%) students, compared with White (65%) and Asian (62%) students. Hispanic (35%) and Black (33%) students are the most likely to report reductions.

"An occurrence that affected my goal was having my financial aid taken away, which left me with an overdue balance, leading me to have to take time off from school, and which slowed down my progress." ~ Student from Texas

Half of students self-censor out of fear of backlash, and seven in ten say some topics are now less open for discussion.

- More than 50% report at least one self-censoring behavior. They have held back from speaking in class (30%), kept an opinion to themselves (26%), not joined a student group (16%), or not taken a class (11%).
- Topics cited as less open for discussion include LGBTQI+ topics (26%), immigration (26%), sexism and gender inequality (25%), present-day racism (25%), historical racism (23%), DEI (22%), and settler colonialism (15%).

"*Some students have been contacted directly from my school's vice president after posting on Reddit about our school issues. The emails were threatening in nature, and it intimidated & scared those students from speaking freely*." ~Student from Tennessee

While most students feel safe day-to-day, two in five have witnessed or experienced a race-motivated incident on campus in the past year.

- 85% feel safe on a day-to-day basis regarding their race or ethnicity, and 13% feel unsafe.
- However, 32% have either witnessed or experienced an incident they believed was motivated by race or ethnicity. Separating out those who have experienced one personally, it is 13%.
- Men are slightly more likely than women to report having experienced one personally (16% vs 10%).
- Students ages 25 to 29 are the most likely to have reported witnessing/experiencing an incident (42%) and to have experienced one personally (19%).
- 20% of Black students have personally experienced a race-motivated incident, compared with 10% of White students. 27% of Asian students feel unsafe, compared with 14% of Hispanic, 13% of Black, and 10% of White students.

"*Just a few weeks ago a Caucasian student was dragging a black baby doll by a rope that was tied around its neck around campus*." ~Student from Louisiana

Students take action following cuts.

- Talked with an advisor or administrator (27%), posted on social media (21%), attended a meeting or rally (19%), signed a petition (19%), or joined or started a student group (17%).
- Furthermore, respondents turned to peers (22%), or found a similar resource under a different name (19%), or 16% went off campus for a similar resource.
- 63% believe they can influence their school's decisions, and 41% follow these issues daily or more often. Students hear about changes through official emails (39%), friends and classmates (39%), social media (37%), and faculty or staff (34%).
- Men follow more frequently than women, and 51% follow the issues daily, compared with 33%.
- Looking at Black students in particular, who appear the most engaged 54% follow the issues daily. 33% believe they can have a great deal of impact, compared with 22% of White students.

Students give positive ratings for responsiveness, but say campus leaders now speak about these issues more cautiously.

- 72% say their school has been responsive to student concerns about cuts, and 20% say it has not.
- 36% say leadership now discusses these issues less or cautiously, 28% say more openly, and 25% see no change.
- Students under 25, 28% say their school has not been responsive, compared with 13% of students 30 and older, and 40% those less than 25 say leadership has become more cautious. Students 25 to 29 are the most likely to say leaders are more open (42%).

"*I attend school in a strongly conservative state, which keeps me from feeling comfortable sharing my more left-leaning opinions*." ~Student from Tennessee.

Support programs drive enrollment decisions, and restoring them would make a difference.

- 83% say support programs, scholarships, or a sense of community factored into choosing their school, and 43% say it was a major factor.
- 69% say reinstating cut programs would make a positive difference for them personally, and 34% say it would make a great deal of difference.
- Men are slightly more likely than women to see a positive difference from reinstatement (73% vs 67%).
- Students 25 to 29 report highest positivity (82% positive, 42% a great deal), compared with 61% of those under 25.
- Black students are most likely to cite support programs as a major factor in choosing their school (49%) and to say reinstatement would help a great deal (42%). Though this is high among Hispanics, Whites, and Asians alike.

"*Things got changed with the program so now I have to pay 3800 a semester for room and board and almost had to dropout*" ~Student from Louisiana

Students value learning across backgrounds and expect to live and work in mixed settings.

- 90% say it is important to be around and learn from people with different backgrounds, and 55% say it is very important. 87% expect to live or work in a mixed setting, and 71% say they look forward to it.
- 84% agree colleges have an obligation to expand opportunity for students from all communities. Majorities also agree that being around people from different backgrounds makes campus feel safer (79%), creates academic opportunities (79%), and creates career opportunities (75%).
- 60% of Hispanic students learning across backgrounds is very important. Asian students are the least likely to feel very prepared by their school (25% vs 43% overall, directional).
- The value gap by degree level is the largest in this section. 76% of graduate students say learning across backgrounds is very important, compared with 56% of Bachelor's students. 88% look forward to mixed settings (vs 72%), and 55% feel very prepared (vs 45%).

Roughly four in five students in nearly every group support protecting scholarships, restoring centers, and requiring student input

- 83% support protecting scholarships for students from underrepresented backgrounds, and 13% oppose. 83% support requiring student input before support programs are eliminated, and 13% oppose. 82% support restoring funding for cultural or identity-based centers, and 14% oppose.
- Women are slightly more likely than men to strongly support protecting scholarships (57% vs 49% with choice "strongly support").
- Support by race ranges from 79% to 84% among White, Black, and Hispanic students. Black students are more likely than White students to strongly support restoring centers (54% vs 44%).

"*I think students should play a major role because these programs are created for the students to help the students in any way they can. So not having any input from the students is not helpful at all for the community that they are trying to provide education for*."
~ Student from Texas

Financial aid is the support students say would help most, and one in four is navigating college on their own

- Students say support that would make the greatest difference is financial aid (43%), mentoring (26%), mental health services (25%), advising (24%), basic-needs assistance (21%), and cultural or identity-based centers (12%).
- Women are more likely than men to prioritize mental health services (28% vs 21%).
- Hispanic students are the most likely to prioritize financial aid (49%) and to say they have mostly navigated college alone (35%).

"*I was approached by a staff member who helped me get in contact with the financial aid staff. Which they helped solve my own issues. Now I can confidently go to the university without worrying about the costs*." ~ Student from Texas

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Louisiana, Tennessee, & Texas Highlights

About four in ten students in Tennessee and Texas are considering leaving, and support for protecting scholarships is strong.

- In all three states, roughly 60% have a personal connection to someone receiving a scholarship, etc. On considering leaving (38% nationally), 43% in Tennessee, 40% in Texas, and 34% in Louisiana.
- Across the three states, support for each policy protection runs 76% to 82%. Opposition runs 15% to 23%.

In Tennessee a quarter of students feel unsafe and has highest retention risk.

- 25% of Tennessee students feel unsafe on campus regarding their race or ethnicity. That compares with 20% in Louisiana, 12% in Texas, and 13% nationally. The figure is the same for White and non-white Tennessee students, both at 25%.
- 36% have witnessed or experienced a race-motivated incident, the highest of the three states. Among non-white Tennessee students, 37% experienced one personally.
- 43% are considering leaving, and 29% are in the process or strongly considering it, both the highest of the three states.
- Take note of Tennessee men. 48% are considering leaving, 34% are in the process or strongly considering it, and 33% say they were significantly pulled off track.
- 39% say campus leaders now speak more cautiously, note 46% of Tennessee women. Additionally, 38% of Tennessee women have kept an opinion to themselves. 43% of non-white Tennessee students say present-day racism is less open for discussion.

Louisiana shows the sharpest racial divide in the survey.

- Non-white Louisiana students are three times as likely as White Louisiana students to say they were pulled off track (62% vs 20%). They are more than twice as likely to be considering leaving (52% vs 22%).
- Non-white Louisiana students are the most likely in any group to say reinstatement would help them (81%). 85% believe students can influence decisions.

- White Louisiana students are the most resistant group. 29% oppose restoring identity-based centers, and 29% oppose requiring student input, though 71% still support restoring centers and 69% support requiring student input.
- Louisiana women back restoring centers more than Louisiana men (84% vs 71%).
- Louisiana has unusually high "not sure" responses. 32% of White Louisiana students are not sure whether they will leave, and 31% are not sure whether they were pulled off track.
- Louisiana reports the highest rate of discontinued programs (25%, compared with 16% in Tennessee and 18% in Texas).

Texas students report highest rate of reduced support programs and 40% say their ability to pay for college affected.

- 38% of Texas students with a connection say their support was reduced. That compares with 27% in Louisiana and 16% in Tennessee. 40% say their ability to pay for college was affected.
- Texas women are the most likely of any state group to name financial aid as the support that would help most (51%).
- 74% of non-white Texas students say they look forward to living and working in mixed settings, the highest of any state group.
- Texas is the most positive state on values. 55% say learning across backgrounds is very important, compared with about 40% in Louisiana and Tennessee. Texas students also feel the safest of the three states 87% feel safe (12% unsafe).