

**2023 Survey of America’s College Students**

Conducted on Behalf of:

**The Panetta Institute for Public Policy**

***By Hart Research Associates***

May 2023

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**I. Introduction**

Every spring, the Panetta Institute for Public Policy commissions a nationwide survey of college students to help guide its curriculum and programs. Conducted by Hart Research Associates, the study explores the attitudes and opinions of college students on many topics, including current national and international issues; social, political, and economic trends; level of political involvement; students’ experiences on and off campus; views on public service and civic engagement, and personal career expectations.

Over the course of twenty-three years, the Panetta Institute’s nationwide poll of college students has become a highly respected source of information for academics, researchers, political scientists, policymakers, and journalists interested in analyzing two decades of collected data. Given the continuity and depth of the survey, scholars and political campaigns find the Panetta Institute’s poll to be one of best barometers for measuring college students’ opinions.

This year’s survey measures attitudes of college students as they are grappling with an uneven economic landscape that is dominated by concerns about inflation. We explore inflation’s impact on their own situation both presently on campus and how the current economic situation may be impacting their views on what might be possible for them to accomplish once they leave campus. This report is based on online interviews with a representative sampling of 804 students at four-year colleges across the country, taken from May 5 to 11, 2023.

**Methodology**

Hart Research contracted with an online survey vendor to administer the survey to students who are enrolled in four-year, higher-learning institutions. The screening sample was drawn from the vendor’s multi-million-member respondent panel. A total of 804 interviews were completed online. All interviews were conducted from April May 5 to 11, 2023. Some demographics were weighted to achieve representative samples of four-year college students nationwide.

**Key Findings**

Key findings from this year’s survey show:

**College students have a very pessimistic view of the current situation in the country and this also impacts their future outlook and concerns about democracy.** Across several measures, including the direction of the country, college students have record low levels of optimism about where the country is headed, and this also impacts their outlook on democracy.

* Seven in ten college students (70%) say the country is headed on the wrong track, up from 66% last year, and a new low in the history of the Panetta Institute Poll.
* More than 3 in 4 college students (76%) feel more uncertain and concerned about the future of the country, up from 73% last year, and also a record low.
* Just 50% say that democracy is working well in the United States, down 8 points from last year, and college students are divided about whether or not democracy will get better or worse over the next 10 years.

**The economy and cost of living are pervasive and dominant many aspects of how college students are thinking about the country and their situation.** Inflation and the cost of living is the top issue facing college students personally, and many students are facing the real-world impact of a difficult economic landscape.

* Dealing with inflation and the cost of living is the most important issue for college students personally (63% say it is one of their most important issues for them).
* Three in four college students (76%) say the nation’s economy is not so good or poor, up from 69% last year.
* Two in five students (41%) report that their family’s income is falling behind the cost of living.
* Economic insecurity is impacting many students in a very real way right now – 44% have skipped meals at college because they could not afford it, and 19% have taken time off from school because they could not afford tuition.

**For the first time, students are more likely to question their ability to be better off than their parents and for many this raises doubts about their ability to achieve the American Dream.**  Students have become more pessimistic about their own situation and what the future will be like for them.

* College students are now more likely to believe they will be worse off than their parents financially (38% worse off, 35% better off).
* Seven in ten college students (70%) believe that it will be harder for them to achieve the American Dream than it was for their parents.
* Specifically, many college students have doubts about whether they will be able to achieve aspects of the American Dream that they want to achieve, most notably having enough money to retire comfortably (38%), being debt free (33%), and owning a home (31%).

**While the economy remains front and center, international issues, in particular the war between Ukraine and Russia, have receded in importance.** However, college students do want the United States to remain involved internationally, and regarding the war, to remain at its current level of engagement.

* In 2022, we saw an uptick in the belief that international problems would be a focus for this generation of college students, up to 46% (54% said domestic), but that has declined to 39% this year (61% say domestic).
* Last year, 30% of college students said the war between Russia and Ukraine was a top issue for them personally, this has dropped to 10% this year.
* Still, majorities of college students want the United States to generally be engaged, but not in a leadership role in the world (58%, 57% last year) and stay as involved in the war between Russia and Ukraine as it is now (51%).

**Students provide the nation’s political leaders with low marks and are deeply dissatisfied with the country’s leadership. However, at the same time they continue to believe that politics are relevant in their life.** For the second year in a row, President Biden’s job rating has declined, though dissatisfaction is not limited only to him. Not a single national political figure of either party receives a positive personal rating.

* In 2021, 71% of college students approved of the job that Joe Biden was doing as president. That dropped to 52% last year, and now is just 49%.
* Only 35% of college students are satisfied with the country’s political leadership.
* Majorities of college students do not want either Joe Biden (74% among Democrats and Independents) or Donald Trump (62% among Republicans and Independents) to be their respective party’s nominee for president.
* However, students remain engaged, with 59% saying that politics are relevant in their life.

**On domestic issues, college students show record high levels of support for action on gun reform. Views on climate change, abortion, and immigration have become more progressive.** In particular, the issue of guns has increased in prominence for college students since last year, and many students have a personal connection to gun violence.

* Nearly half of college students (47%) say that the gun issue is important to them personally, up from 22% last year.
* Three in four students (76%) believe that the federal government is not doing enough to address gun violence, and students overwhelmingly support reforms, including 94% who support expanding background checks and 88% who support enacting Red Flag laws.
* Three in five students worry about a mass shooting at their school, up from 43% in 2018, and 1 in 20 students have personally experienced a mass shooting.
* Nine in ten college students (90%) say climate change is a serious problem, a record high, and 73% believe that the federal government is not doing enough to address it.
* Nearly 8 in 10 college students (79%) believe that abortion should be legal, also a record high, with 70% disapproving of the Supreme Court’s action to overturn a constitutional guarantee to an abortion.
* A record high 74% of college students say that immigration helps the United States more than it hurts.

**II. State of the Nation and Issues**

Views about the direction of the country and its future have continued to take a negative turn, with college students reporting record low levels of optimism about the current situation and the country’s future. Students also have concerns about the state of democracy in America but are more likely than not to believe that the two-party system can be improved rather than requiring the creation of a third party.

Seven in 10 college students (70%) say that things in the nation are headed off on the wrong track, which is the lowest rating on this key barometer of the nation’s mood that we have tracked in the history of the Panetta Institute survey. Just two years ago, 55% of college students said that things were headed in the right direction.

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Not only have students taken a more pessimistic view of the country right now, but they have also lost confidence about the future of the country. Just 24% say they are more confident and secure about the country’s future, while 76% are more uncertain and concerned. This degree of pessimism is also a record low and a decline from 58% who felt concerned two years ago, and 73% last year.

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Perceptions about democracy in America have also declined. Now just 50% of college students say that democracy is working well in the United States, an eight-point drop from last year (58%). While Republicans and Democrats hold very different views on many measures, on the state of democracy in America, they are in agreement – just 49% of Republicans say democracy is working well, along with 48% of Democrats. However, since last year, the drop has come with Democrats, among whom 64% said democracy was working well in 2022 (48% of Republicans felt this way last year).

There is also less optimism about the future of democracy in America. In 2019, by 31% to 20%, college students believed that looking ahead 10 years from now, democracy would be better rather than worse (49% about the same). Now just 26% say democracy will be better 10 years from now, and 25% say worse (49% about the same).

When asked to describe in their own words why democracy is working well, college students are most likely to mention our freedoms, particularly freedom of speech and the right to vote.

**“Although democracy is being undermined widely throughout the country, voting results show how democracy in action works.”**

**“It is working at the core of it but there is way too much division between the two political parties. We are still a democracy and as citizens have a lot more power and freedom then many other places but at the end of the day it could be better.”**

**“We uphold our tenants and responsibilities well. We have rights like free speech and voting, and our voice can be heard without punishment.”**

**“Even though we do have some issues going on in the country, I would say our democracy is still working well as we still have our rights and freedom. I feel our country would be worse if our democracy or type of government changed.”**

Among those who say democracy is not working well, the focus is on polarization in the country and politicians and government not addressing our concerns and not listening to the people.

**“I don't like the way this country handles disagreements, it often feels like the world is coming to an end.”**

**“The country is extremely divided and everyone is so strongly associated with one side that they cannot form educated opinions about politics.”**

**“I feel like none of the higher ups in the government really listen to what the actual people want and rule moreso on what they want.”**

**“There is no real democracy in America. The people have so little of a say in what goes on, and politicians are corrupted by corporations.”**

These open-ended views on democracy in America highlight concerns about our political system, and particularly the two parties. However, while only 16% believe the two-party system is working well, most college students believe that the two-party system can be improved (55%), with just 29% saying this system is seriously broken and the country needs a third party. While college students across the political spectrum are more likely to believe the two-party system is working well or can be improved, Independents (38%) and Democrats (35%) are much more likely than Republicans (8%) to say that the country needs a third party. There are also ideological divides, with Progressives (56%) and Libertarians (49%) much more likely than Conservatives (7%) to believe the country needs a third party. On this view, Moderates (28%) and Liberals (26%) look more like students overall (29%).

## Issues Facing the Country

As was the case in 2022, inflation and the cost of living remains the predominant issue for college students personally. Improving the healthcare system remains a high priority as well, with the gun issue jumping up in importance for college students. Dealing with the war with Russia and Ukraine has dropped dramatically as an issue that college students cite as important to them personally.

Fully 63% of college students say inflation and the cost of living is important to them personally, with improving the healthcare system (50%) and dealing with the gun issue (47%) also among the top three most important issues. Last year, just 22% of college students mentioned guns as a top issue for them.



Students across the political spectrum hold different points of view on issues of importance to them, even though inflation is the top issue across party lines. Inflation and the cost of living is far and away the dominant issue for Republicans (76%) with the national debt (56%) a distant second, followed by the job situation (42%). Independents also select inflation as their top issue (63%), followed by improving the healthcare system (58%) and dealing with the gun issue (45%). Democrats are more divided in their issue agenda priorities, with three issues all at near-parity – inflation (57%), guns (54%), and improving the healthcare system (52%). And underscoring the partisan divide on some issues, two in five Democrats (46%) and Independents (40%) mention addressing climate change as a top issue for them personally, compared with just 11% of Republicans. On the other hand, immigration is a top issue for 31% of Republicans, while it is much lower of a priority for Democrats (13%) and Independents (16%).

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **The Issue Agenda by Party Identification** | | | | |
|  | **All students %** | **Democrats %** | **Independents %** | **Republicans %** |
| Dealing with inflation and the cost of living | 63 | 57 | 63 | 76 |
| Improving the healthcare system | 50 | 52 | 58 | 39 |
| Dealing with the gun issue | 47 | 54 | 45 | 29 |
| Addressing climate change | 37 | 46 | 40 | 11 |
| The national debt | 33 | 24 | 33 | 56 |
| Dealing with the costs of college education | 31 | 31 | 29 | 32 |
| Dealing with abortion | 30 | 37 | 25 | 18 |
| Improving the job situation | 29 | 22 | 32 | 42 |
| Dealing with race relations | 24 | 29 | 24 | 13 |
| Protecting voting rights and election integrity | 19 | 18 | 17 | 21 |
| Dealing with immigration | 17 | 13 | 16 | 31 |
| Dealing with the Russia-Ukraine War | 10 | 9 | 9 | 14 |
| Dealing with China | 10 | 7 | 8 | 17 |

**III. Issues in Depth**

On a series of domestic issues, from guns to abortion to climate change to immigration, college students take a more progressive position, and this has grown over the past few years, with record high levels taking these views in this year’s survey. Of particular note is the increase in concern about guns as an issue, along with concerns about a mass shooting occurring on their campus.

## Guns

## Not only has dealing with the gun issue jumped in import on the issue agenda for college students, but far too many students have a personal connection to mass shootings, and concerns about a mass shooting occurring on their campus have also increased.

## When reflecting on gun violence and the impact on their personal lives, 62% of college students worry a great deal or quite a bit about a mass shooting occurring at their school. This marks a 19-point increase from 2018, when 43% of college students were worried about this. Students who are more worried about a mass shooting on campus include Progressives (79%), humanities majors (78%), Democrats (70%), Latinx students (70%), and women (68%). Even more alarming is that 5% of college students have experienced a mass shooting themselves.



## More than three in four college students (76%) believe that the federal government is not doing enough to address gun violence, with just 16% saying the federal government is doing enough, and the remaining 8% say that the federal government should not be involved. More than seven in 10 students (73%) who grew up in households with guns say that the federal government should be doing more to address gun violence. And this feeling is held across partisan lines, with majorities of Democrats (86%), Independents (78%), and Republicans (52%) all saying that the federal government should be doing more. Among the students who say the federal government should be more involved, 74% say it should be doing a lot more.



## When asked about specific pieces of legislation to address guns, there is agreement across the political spectrum, with majorities of Republicans, Independents, and Democrats all supporting each of the four measures tested in the survey: expanding background checks to all firearm sales and transfers, enacting red flag laws, raising the age of gun ownership to 21, and banning the sale of assault weapons.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Gun Reform Measures by Party Identification** | | | | |
|  | **All students %** | **Democrats %** | **Independents %** | **Republicans %** |
| Expand background checks to all firearm sales and transfers | 94 | 98 | 92 | 88 |
| Enact Red Flag laws that help law enforcement to temporarily remove guns from those deemed to pose an imminent danger to themselves or others | 88 | 92 | 86 | 79 |
| Raise the age that someone can own a firearm to be 21 or older | 83 | 91 | 78 | 66 |
| Ban the sale of selected semi-automatic firearms referred to as assault weapons | 78 | 89 | 75 | 54 |

## Abortion

Nearly four in five college students (79%) now say that abortion should be legal in all or most cases. This marks an all-time high in the history of the Panetta Institute poll and an increase over last year’s then all-time high of 73%, which was conducted prior to the Supreme Court’s ruling that overturned the constitutional right to an abortion. And seven in 10 students (70%) disapprove of the Supreme Court’s ruling.

Nearly equal proportions of women (80%) and men (77%) on campus believe that abortion should be legal, as well as majorities of Democrats (90%), Independents (78%), and Republicans (52%). Across the ideological spectrum, there is widespread agreement that abortion should be legal, including Progressives (94%), Liberals (92%), Moderates (80%), and Libertarians (68%), with the exception being Conservatives, among whom just 39% agree that abortion should be legal.



## Climate Change

## College students remain passionate about addressing climate change, ranking it as the fourth most important issue to address (37%). The perceived severity of climate change has increased since last year – a record high 90% of college students say it is a serious problem, with 58% of students saying it is a very serious problem. There are some differences by party identification, with 98% of Democrats, 91% of Independents, and 70% of Republicans believing climate change is a very or somewhat serious problem.



When asked how the federal government is addressing climate change, overall, 73% of students say that the federal government is not doing enough to address climate change, with 67% believing the federal government should be doing a lot more. Again, there are differences by political identification, with 83% of Democrats, 78% of Independents, and only 44% of Republicans believing the federal government is not doing enough to address climate change. When asked if the federal government should be involved at all, only 1% of Democrats and 4% of Independents say the federal government should not be involved, compared with 22% of Republicans.

More than half (51%) of students believe that when addressing climate change, gradually transitioning away from fossil fuels to cleaner sources of energy over the next 10 to 20 years is the preferred approach compared with 42% of students who say to end the use of fossil fuels in the next few years. Only 7% of students prefer to continue the use of fossil fuels at the same levels as we are now. On this question, a majority of Democrats want to end the use of fossil fuels in the next few years (51%), while majorities of Independents and Republicans (52% and 57%) prefer a more gradual transition.

## Immigration

## Almost three in four (74%) students say that immigration helps the United States more than it hurts it (26%), and this marks an all-time high in the history of the survey for students who see immigration as a benefit. Support for immigration varies based on party identification. Fully 85% of Democrats believe that immigration helps more than it hurts, along with 74% of Independents. Republicans are more divided but lean to the side of immigration hurting more than it helps by 54% to 46%.

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## International Issues & Russia and Ukraine

## A year ago, the war between Russia and Ukraine was much more of a concern for college students, as was an uptick in concerns about international problems facing their generation in the future. Now, that focus has dissipated, but college students generally want the United States to remain as active in world affairs and in the war between Russia and Ukraine as we are now.

## Last year, in the early stages of the war between Russia and Ukraine, college students were more divided about whether problems their generation will face will mostly be national in scope (54%) or international in scope (46%). A year later, students have shifted away from international concerns, with 61% saying problems facing their generation will be more national in scope than international (39%).

## In assessing America’s role on the world state, students are most likely to prefer that our level of involvement remain as it is (53%), with students divided on whether the United States should be more (23%) or less (24%) active.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **United States Involvement in World Affairs** | | | | | |
|  | **Become MORE active**  **%** | | **Stay as active**  **%** | **Become LESS active**  **%** | | |
| **All College Students** | 23 | 53 | | 24 | |
| Satisfied with political leadership | 31 | 60 | | 9 | |
| Dissatisfied with political leadership | 19 | 50 | | 31 | |
| Biden voters | 30 | 55 | | 15 | |
| Trump voters | 17 | 51 | | 32 | |
| Democrats | 26 | 52 | | | 23 |
| Independents | 22 | 57 | | | 21 |
| Republicans | 19 | 53 | | | 28 |

## Further highlighting the turn away from international issues, last year, 30% of college students mentioned the Russia-Ukraine War as a top issue for them personally, and this has dropped to just 10% in this year’s survey. When asked about the United States’ involvement in the war between Russia and Ukraine, only 20% of students believe that the United States should become more involved, 51% saying stay as involved, and 29% saying the United States should be less involved.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **United States Involvement in the Russia-Ukraine War** | | | | | | |
|  | **Become MORE active**  **%** | | **Stay as active**  **%** | **Become LESS active**  **%** | |
| **All College Students** | 20 | 51 | | 29 | | |
| Satisfied with political leadership | 21 | 59 | | 20 | | |
| Dissatisfied with political leadership | 20 | 46 | | 34 | | |
| Biden voters | 26 | 55 | | 20 | | |
| Trump voters | 10 | 41 | | 49 | | |
| Democrats | 24 | 56 | | | 20 | |
| Independents | 16 | 45 | | | 39 | |
| Republicans | 14 | 43 | | | 43 | |

## Students do perceive Russia as the greatest threat to the United States internationally (26%) followed closely by China (25%) and terrorism (24%). Democrats believe that Russia is the greatest threat (28%), however, both Independents (31%) and Republicans (30%) assert that China is the greater threat.

**IV. The Political Landscape**

College students are deeply dissatisfied with the country’s political leadership, and this starts at the top, with students preferring that both parties nominate someone else for president in 2024 besides Joe Biden and Donald Trump. Still, college students continue to believe that politics are relevant in their lives and are looking for a presidential candidate who is intelligent beyond all else and also understands America today, including young people in particular.

Of all the political figures tested in the survey, there is not a single one that is viewed more positively than negatively. While the Democratic Party overall is viewed in a much better light (40% positive, 33% negative) than the Republican Party (21% positive, 58% negative), there is less division between the dominant figures in both parties, who are both viewed negatively. Even though 68% of college students who reported voting in the 2020 election voted for Joe Biden, just 28% have positive feelings toward Biden, and 45% are negative. But Biden fares much better than Donald Trump, for whom just 24% of college students have positive feelings and 64% are negative. Moreover, when it comes to investigations into Trump’s alleged wrongdoing, 79% of college students say he is being held to the same standard as anyone else accused of doing what he did.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Feelings toward Selected Public Figures and Institutions** | | | |
|  | **Positive %** | **Negative %** | **Differential ±** |
| The Democratic Party | 40 | 33 | +7 |
| Hakeem Jeffries | 10 | 10 | - |
| Gavin Newsom | 14 | 17 | -3 |
| Kamala Harris | 30 | 35 | -5 |
| Chuck Schumer | 12 | 18 | -6 |
| Nikki Haley | 9 | 16 | -7 |
| Kevin McCarthy | 10 | 26 | -16 |
| Joe Biden | 28 | 45 | -17 |
| Ron DeSantis | 15 | 38 | -23 |
| The Republican Party | 21 | 58 | -37 |
| Mitch McConnell | 8 | 48 | -40 |
| Donald Trump | 24 | 64 | -40 |

Joe Biden’s professional and personal ratings are both net negative for the first time, though his -2 margin on his job performance (49% approve, 51% disapprove) is far better than his -17 margin personally.

Of particular concern for Biden is his drop in job rating among Democrats (-5 compared with 2022) and women (-6), as well as a more precipitous decline with Latinx students (-12), given that these are three groups of students who are critically important to his electoral success.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Joe Biden Presidential Job Rating** | | | |
|  | **2022 Approve %** | **Approve %** | **Disapprove %** |
| All students | 52 | 49 | 51 |
| Men | 47 | 48 | 52 |
| Women | 55 | 49 | 51 |
| White students | 42 | 41 | 59 |
| Black students | 66 | 67 | 33 |
| Latinx students | 59 | 47 | 53 |
| Asian American students | 67 | 72 | 28 |
| Social class: upper-middle/upper | 54 | 54 | 46 |
| Social class: middle | 52 | 50 | 50 |
| Social class: lower/lower-middle | 50 | 42 | 58 |
| Democrats | 70 | 65 | 35 |
| Independents | 47 | 44 | 56 |
| Republicans | 17 | 14 | 86 |
| Economy: Excellent/good | 78 | 74 | 26 |
| Economy: Not so good/poor | 41 | 41 | 59 |
| State school | 51 | 50 | 50 |
| Private school | 54 | 46 | 54 |

Despite these largely negative views of their political leaders, nearly three in five college students (59%) continue to believe that politics are very or fairly relevant in their lives. Democrats (68%) are more likely than Republicans (59%) to feel that politics are relevant to them, with Independents being much less likely to feel this way (36%).

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Only 35% of college students are satisfied with the country’s political leadership, with 65% saying they are dissatisfied. Satisfaction has dropped year over year, from 54% in 2021 to 41% last year. Dissatisfaction is expressed across the political spectrum, including 61% of Democrats, 72% of Independents, and 71% of Republicans. Freshmen (68%) and Sophomores (71%) are more dissatisfied than Juniors and Seniors (62% respectively).

Taking these feelings into account, it is unsurprising that 74% of Democrats and Independents want someone other than Joe Biden to be the Democratic Party’s nominee in 2024. And 62% of Republicans and Independents want the Republican Party to nominate someone other than Donald Trump.

Across the survey, it is clear that college students are looking for something new in candidates for president. When asked to identify the qualities that matter most to them, 66% say it is very important that a presidential candidate is intelligent. Below that, a series of qualities that are focused on understanding America today and young people, along with the ability to take action, address the economy, and bring people together matter most. However, Democrats and Republicans prioritize different qualities. For Republicans, qualities that matter most are intelligent (66%), is practical and realistic, knows how to get things done (64%), and understands the concerns and values of young people (54%). Democrats also place the greatest importance on intelligent (65%) but are more likely to emphasize understands the way that America is changing (61%) and caring and compassionate (60%), which just 31% of Republicans consider very important.

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**V. Economic Outlook**

Even as inflation slows, it continues to dominate college students’ view of the economy – driving down their overall rating of the economy to its lowest standing in over a decade. Pessimistic college students today, however, look far different than those who expressed similar sentiments in 2012. Now, the overall economic skepticism extends into the future, as for the first time, college students report that they expect to be worse off than their parents financially. Despite that, college students remain optimistic about the job market after graduation and are less anxious about their level of debt.

College students’ view of the economy continues to plummet, with more than three in four students (76%) describing the state of the economy as not so good or poor. This is the lowest rating among college students since 2012. These results are particularly dramatic for students studying social sciences (93%) and humanities (85%), those from low-income/lower-middle class families (85%), and White students (85%). In their minds, this is not a temporary downturn, as almost half (49%) believe there will be a recession in the next year. Moreover, 51% of college students say the economy will continue to get worse – the highest we have recorded since we began asking this question in 2017.



Even as inflation slows, it continues to dominate college students’ view of the economy. Two in five students (41%) say their family’s income is falling behind the cost of living. When asked to rank the four most important issues for them personally, 63% chose inflation as one of their top four issues (far and away the top issue). Among those that say inflation is important to them, 83% rate the economy as not so good or poor, and 79% say we are either in a recession or one will start in the next 12 months. Tracking with their perspective of the economy, students dissatisfied with the current political leadership rate inflation as a more important issue.

This anxiety is not just theoretical – students are experiencing significant economic hardships, including 44% saying they have skipped meals at college because they could not afford it, 35% have avoided a necessary medical or dental procedure because they could not afford it, 28% have not eaten any food for at least a day because they could not afford it, and 19% indicate that they have taken time off from school because they could not afford tuition.

Inflation is also the largest driver of why college students today think that they will be financially worse off than their parents. It has become such a strong factor that for the first time in the Panetta Poll’s history, more college students believe they will be worse (38%) rather than better off (35%) than their parents financially. This is a remarkable 12-point increase in negative sentiment since just 2018 and a 32-point increase since we began asking this question in 2004.



Against this backdrop of persistent economic anxiety and concern about the future, seven in 10 students (70%) say that compared with their parents’ generation, it is harder to achieve the American Dream. This is 12 points higher than the 2008 Panetta Institute survey found (58%), which was conducted in April of that year as the global financial crisis was spreading.

When asked to evaluate aspects of what many would consider to be the American Dream, majorities of college students say they want to achieve each of these. However, many students do not believe that they will be able to achieve many of these, including having enough money to retire comfortably (38%), being debt free (33%), and owning their own company (32%).



In evaluating these goals, professional success and financial security rank very highly, with being successful in work (49%), having enough money to retire comfortably (37%), having a work-life balance (37%), and being debt free (37%) all outranking many personal milestones like getting married (35%), having children, (24%), and even owning a home (34%). While there is some variation, that trend largely holds true across demographics and class.



In thinking about what their career will look like, most believe they will have three or more jobs before retirement (68%), including 17% who say six or more jobs. Just 32% expect to have just one or two jobs in their career. Nearly seven in 10 college students (68%) say they expect to retire, while 32% believe they will always be working. Among those who expect to always be working, 68% say it will be because they have to work for financial reasons.

## Job Prospects

Despite their deep pessimism about the overall state of the economy, college students are as confident as ever that they will be able to find a job that is acceptable to them after graduation. Almost three quarters of students (73%) report that they are either very or fairly confident they will find such a job. While there is some of the similar variation we saw among subgroups when rating the overall economy, much of the partisan division disappears when it comes to finding a job.

For many students, that acceptable job is likely to be in the private sector. Students continue to be more interested in working for the private sector (53%) than nonprofits (44%) or the government (38%). More than four in 10 students are very or fairly interested in high tech (46%), including 56% of Seniors. With economic pressures rising, fewer students are interested in public service careers. Only a quarter (26%) of students are interested in teaching in a public school, down from 31% since last year and almost half of what was measured in 2006 (45%). After peaking from 2017-2022, less than two in 10 college students are interested in serving in the military – a return to a pre-2016 norm. Fewer students in this year’s survey (22%) are interested in pursuing a service-oriented experience such as Teach for America, VISTA, or AmeriCorps after completing their degree.

In thinking about their ideal work situation, most students prefer a hybrid option (68%), with 44% preferring to be mostly in person, 24% mostly remote. One in five students (22%) want to be fully in person, and just 10% say their preference is work that is fully remote.

## Personal Finances and Student Loan Debt

Student loans and debt remain a defining issue for the personal finances of college students that they believe will impact them far after they graduate. However, perhaps due to some of the efforts by the Biden administration and its loan forgiveness policies, there are signs at the margins that these feelings are not as dire as they have been.



A majority of college students (54%) have taken out student loans to pay for some or all of their tuition. With the majority of those students (65%) reporting that they expect to take more than six years to repay their loans, debt will have a great or quite a bit of an impact on what type of job students pursue for more than six in 10 students (64%). For those with debt, they expect to owe an average amount of $34,356 after they graduate, with almost a quarter (23%) expecting to owe more than $50,000. A third (33%) of students do not expect to be able to ever be debt free – which includes 43% of students with less than $30,000 in debt and 53% of those with more than $30,000. However, perhaps because of pending federal student loan relief, students are less likely to be worried about having too much student loan debt than they were last year (50% compared with 58%), and this marks the lowest proportion worried about this since 2010.

**VI. Civic Engagement, Public Service, and News Consumption**

College students remain engaged civically, and many have been involved in activities in their local community during their time on campus. While students remain interested in national service programs and running for office, for the second year in a row, fewer students report that someone has spoken to them about getting involved in politics or public service.

## Civic Engagement

Eight in ten college students (80%) have taken courses focusing on American democracy, government, and their role as a citizen. Those who are registered to vote are more likely to have taken a civics class (81%) than those who are not registered (70%).

During their time in college, 66% of students say they have been involved in activities to help their local community, such as volunteering their time or helping solve local community problems. Women (72%) are more likely than men (60%) to say this is the case, and students who are focused in the humanities (79%) and social sciences (75%) are more likely than other students to be involved in community activities.

## Public Service

While the numbers on civic engagement are generally consistent with trend data on these measures, one trend line where there is a notable decline for the second year in a row is that 41% of college students say someone has spoken with them about getting involved in politics or public service (42% in 2022). In 2021, 48% of students reported that someone had spoken to them about this. More concerning is that seniors are the least likely of any class to say someone spoke to them about pursuing politics and public service (just 36%). On the other hand, those who are interested in working in government are more likely to report that someone has spoken to them about public service (47%).

After they graduate from college, 22% of students say they have considered a service-oriented experience such as Teach for America, VISTA, or AmeriCorps. And fully 50% of students say they would be very or fairly interested in a program that provides a grant or financial assistance to help pay for college in exchange for two years of national service, such as teaching, serving in the military, or another form of service. Among the students more interested in this service are Black and Asian students (62% and 57% respectively) and those interested in working in the government (66%). There is widespread interest across the political spectrum in this form of national service, including 53% of Democrats and 52% of Republicans.

College students are as interested in running for federal elected offices (31%) as they are in local or state elected offices (30%). There continues to be a significant gender gap in interest in running for federal elected offices, with 39% of men indicating they would be interested in this compared to only 25% of women. The gap is much narrower when it comes to running for local or state elected office (men: 31%, women: 29%).

## News Consumption

Over the history of the Panetta Institute Poll, we have documented many findings and changes in behavior and attitudes, but none have been more profound than how students receive news and information. Consider that the predominant source for news and information today, social media, did not even exist in our first survey in 2001. However, while students are turning most to social media, it is not their most trusted source.

Indeed, the change in how college students receive news and information is profound, and also shows us where the future of news and media is likely to head. Social media is now the top source for all students (65%), while television, which was the top source in 2001, has now dropped to 22%. But even on campus, you can see how rapidly students are moving away from television, as this is a top source for 26% of seniors, but just 15% of freshman.



While social media is the source that students turn to the most for news about politics and civic affairs, it is not the most trusted source. College students have the highest level of trust in national newspapers or websites (47% trust all or most of the time), but just 14% cite national newspapers as a source they rely on the most.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Use & Trust of News Sources** | | | |
|  | **Use most %** | **Trust All/Most of Time %** |
| Social media such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter | 65 | 26 |
| Family or friends | 33 | 39 |
| Internet news websites | 32 | 36 |
| Television | 22 | 27 |
| National newspaper or its website | 14 | 47 |
| Internet blogs | 6 | 17 |
| The community or city newspaper | 3 | 36 |
| The campus newspaper | 2 | 36 |
| Magazines | 1 | 14 |

**VII. On Campus, Technology, AI**

On campus, students continue to believe that they are receiving good value for the cost of the education that they receive. Most students also believe that their institution is striking the right balance on free speech. However, a major development in the past year is the rise of new technologies, particularly AI and chatbots. In this area, college students are more divided about its impact overall and how it should be utilized on campus.

## On Campus

Eight in ten college students (81%) say that they are receiving a good value for the education that they have received so far based upon the cost. This is essentially unchanged from our last track on this measure in 2018 (78%). Black (94%), Asian (88%), and Latinx (85%) students are even more likely than students overall to feel that they are receiving a good value for the cost of their education. And even with students who expect to have student loan debt after graduation, 77% say they are receiving a good value.

Students also provide high marks when it comes to how their institution is handling freedom of expression on campus. More than 3 in 5 students (64%) say their institution is striking the right balance, with equally small proportions saying that their institution is going too far in suppressing freedom of speech and not doing enough to protect individuals from hateful or offensive speech (18% on both sides). Across the political spectrum, 3 in 5 Republicans (60%), Independents (66%), and Democrats (65%) all say that their institution is striking the right balance.

## New Technologies & AI

## In assessing new technologies, college students generally believe these are positive developments, but offer different points of view about whether they are a step in the right direction or not. The use of chatbots is already pervasive, with many students knowing someone who has submitted work using them. However, students have low confidence in chatbots.

## Overall, by 60% to 40% college students believe that the increased use of technology in our economy is a good thing rather than a bad thing. In thinking about whether various forms of technology are a step in the right direction or wrong direction, college students provide a range of views. Students are more positive towards drones (+37), virtual reality (+25), self-driving cars (+14), while students are mixed on AI generally (+3) and chatbots (+2). Students view robots replacing manufacturing jobs more negatively (-16).



## Many college students are already using chatbots like ChatGPT or Microsoft Bing’s AI Chatbot. Fully 60% of students report experimenting with chatbots, with juniors (70%) and seniors (62%) being more likely to do so. And 49% of college students report that they know someone who has submitted work created by a chatbot as their own.



Among those who have used a chatbot, 59% (36% among all students) have used it to help completing personal tasks or organizing their life, and 51% (31% among all students) have used it for help in an assignment at their college or university. Men are more likely than women to report using chatbots for both personal tasks and completing assignments (44% and 35% respectively for men, 29% and 28% respectively for women). Business majors (45% and 33%) and majors in science, math, or computer science (39% and 40%) are also more likely than other college students to report using chatbots for organizing their life and completing assignments.

Although the technology is widely accessible to students, college students’ faith in the future of chatbots and the impact of chatbots is murky. Only 34% of college students say they have a great deal or quite a bit confidence in chatbots with 29% saying they have little to no confidence at all. Confidence is much higher for those students who are using chatbots for school assignments (62% great deal/quite a bit of confidence) than those who are not (32%), and the same pattern holds true for those who believe chatbots should be allowed to complete school assignments (49%) compared to those who believe chatbots should be banned (16%).

When asked specifically about using chatbots in a classroom setting, 54% believe they should be allowed, with 46% feeling that they should be banned. There are widespread differences of opinion on this question across groups on campus, with the starkest dividing line between those who currently use chatbots for completing assignments and those who do not.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Should Chatbots be Allowed in Completing School Assignments?** | | |
|  | **Yes %** | **No %** |
| **All College Students** | 54 | 46 |
| Social Sciences | 43 | 57 |
| Humanities | 37 | 63 |
| Science, Math, Computer Science | 58 | 42 |
| Business | 63 | 37 |
| Men | 60 | 40 |
| Women | 50 | 50 |
| Freshman | 50 | 50 |
| Sophomores | 53 | 47 |
| Juniors | 58 | 42 |
| Seniors | 57 | 43 |
| State School | 57 | 43 |
| Private School | 42 | 58 |
| Use Chatbots for school | 81 | 19 |
| Do NOT use Chatbots for school | 50 | 50 |