

# **ATTITUDES, POLITICS, AND PUBLIC SERVICE: A SURVEY OF AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS**

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*This report analyzes the findings of a survey of American college students conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Leon & Sylvia Panetta Institute for Public Policy. The research consists of 800 interviews among a representative sample of college students at four-year institutions of higher learning throughout the country. Interviews were conducted by telephone from April 28 to May 2, 2004. The margin of error is  $\pm 3.5\%$  for the overall sample and higher for specific subgroups.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

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Peter D. Hart Research Associates and the Panetta Institute for Public Policy have again joined efforts to explore the attitudes and opinions of American college students. This project was conducted to investigate students' opinions about contemporary issues, including their opinions about the state of the nation and its politics, their personal goals and attitudes, public service and volunteerism, and the upcoming presidential election. As do Americans overall, college students have real concerns about the country's direction and its leadership at this time. They are, however, more positive when thinking about their own goals and abilities. Moreover, the survey findings present a complex picture of public service among college students, including their recognition of the value of public service as well as some indications that they are spending less time doing it.

In this report, we explore opinions about each of these issues and look at the underlying demographic distinctions that contribute to the differences of opinion. The findings have been divided into the following topics: the current outlook of college students, the role of politics in students' lives (including a look ahead to the 2004 presidential election), the legacy of 9/11 and the war on terrorism, and college students' attitudes toward public service and volunteerism.

## I. THE CURRENT OUTLOOK OF AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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American college students' current outlook is best described as a combination of concern for the country and its leadership and an underlying confidence in their own ability to succeed. College students traditionally have professed strong confidence in their personal abilities and the survey results show that they have a clear sense of their life goals and priorities. The findings also confirm that college students approach national issues with a set of opinions and values that are far from monolithic.

The mood of the American public overall is tenuous at the present time. A prolonged involvement in Iraq, uncertain economic news, and divisive issues on the home front have contributed to mixed views about the country's direction. American college students' views reflect this nationwide picture, with two in five (40%) currently saying that the nation is headed in the right direction and 42% saying it is off on the wrong track; one in seven (14%) also volunteer a mixed view of the nation's direction. By comparison, a recent *NBC/Wall Street Journal* nationwide poll<sup>1</sup> finds that 41% of American adults feel that the nation is generally headed in the right direction and half (49%) believe that things are off on the wrong track.

Hispanic (50% wrong track) and African-American (59%) students are much more likely to express negative feelings about the nation's direction. Likewise, students majoring in the social sciences (50%) and humanities (49%) take the negative view, whereas a plurality of business majors feel that the nation is headed in the right direction (48% versus 32% wrong track). As is the case among the American public, assessments of the nation's direction also are strongly influenced by political party affiliation and ideology. Among college students, 68% of conservatives and 69% of Republicans say that the nation is on the right track. The results are reversed for those identifying themselves as liberal or Democratic, as 63% of each group say that the nation is off on the wrong track. Independents are equally divided (36% right direction, 36% wrong track), with 22% having mixed views.

In addition to the mixed assessment of the country's overall direction, more than half of students assess the nation's economy as failing, with 58% saying that it is not-so-good or poor at present. This is a slightly better evaluation, however, than that given by the American public

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<sup>1</sup> *NBC/Wall Street Journal Poll*, March 6-8, 2004 – 1,018 adults nationwide

overall. According to an ABC News poll concluded in April 2004<sup>2</sup>, 67% of adults say that the economy's current condition is not-so-good or poor. African Americans (77%), Hispanics (71%), Democrats (77%), and students living in the western United States (67%) are more likely to feel that the economy is not doing well. In the positive column, two in five (40%) students rate the nation's economy as excellent or good, and more than two-thirds (69%) of Republicans fall into this category.

### **STUDENTS' FEELINGS ABOUT THE FUTURE**

Students also feel uncertain about the country's future. In line with the net negative assessment of the nation's direction, 50% say that they feel more uncertain and concerned when they think about the country's future, versus 35% who feel more confident and secure in this regard. The same demographic differences that influence students' opinions about the nation's direction influence their level of concern and insecurity about its future: 60% of Hispanics, 74% of African Americans, and 69% of Democrats say that they are more uncertain and concerned about the country's future, whereas six in ten (61%) students who identify themselves as Republican feel more confident and secure.

To gauge students' feelings on these issues, we asked them separate questions about their feelings toward the future of the country and their feelings when considering their own future. Overall, students' personal responses are more positive—more than half (53%) feel confident and secure when thinking about their own future and a little more than one-third (35%) say that they are more uncertain and concerned; and one in every eight (12%) has mixed feelings or is not sure how they feel. Although partisan differences still occur on this question—74% of Republicans feel confident about their own future, versus 39% of Democrats—the varied opinions among students of different races and geographic areas in their assessments of the national state of affairs shifts significantly when it comes to the personal arena. Though African-American students have decidedly mixed feelings about their future (40% confident and secure, 40% uncertain and concerned), Hispanic students express more confidence than any other racial subgroup (59% confident and secure).

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<sup>2</sup> *ABC News/Money Magazine Consumer Comfort Index*, March/April 2004 – 1,000 adults nationwide

Just as they are more positive about their own future than about the country's future, students view the country's job market overall and their personal chances of finding an acceptable job in different terms. The first dimension of students' job outlook is evident in their responses to the broader question of how difficult it is for a recent college graduate to find an acceptable job in today's market: 71% feel that it is very or fairly hard for a recent college graduate to find acceptable employment in the current market, and just 21% think that it is easy. Students who are currently employed full time are less likely to believe that it is difficult to find an acceptable job, as fewer than half (47%) think that it is hard and the same proportion (46%) state that it is very or fairly easy for a recent college graduate to find a job.

Although skepticism reigns in considerations of the economy and the prospects of college graduates, students paint their personal job prospects in a better light. When we ask how confident they are that they will find a job that is acceptable to them after graduation, more than two thirds (68%) are very or fairly confident that they will be able to do so; an additional 26% are just somewhat confident about this prospect and just 3% are not at all confident.

Today's college students are divided on whether they will end up being better off financially than their parents. Half (51%) predict that they will fare better than their parents and half expect that they will either achieve the same level of affluence as their parents (34%), be worse off financially than their parents (6%), or are not sure (9%). Hispanic (75%) and African-American (60%) students are more likely to feel that financially they will end up being better off than their parents.

## II. THE ROLE OF POLITICS IN STUDENTS' LIVES

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Given students' mixed feelings about the state of the nation and its direction, an important question is how their beliefs translate into political behavior, and how they will vote is of particular concern in the upcoming presidential election. To understand the nexus between students' political beliefs and how these viewpoints surface in their daily life, we explore students' views about politics in a number of areas. A relatively small number of students are actively involved in political campaigns and issues, but as we will discuss, their interest in politics and political behavior is linked to their discussions with others about political issues.

### THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: THE QUALITY OF LEADERSHIP AND THE VOTE

College students' satisfaction with the quality of the country's political leadership is sharply divided. Nearly half (48%) say that they are satisfied with the country's political leadership and the same proportion (48%) are dissatisfied, although those who are very dissatisfied (19%) outnumber those who are very satisfied (8%) by more than two to one. A significant shift in perceptions has occurred since we last asked this question in March 2001, shortly after George W. Bush was sworn in as president. At that time, 68% of students reported being satisfied with the quality of political leadership in the country (20 percentage points higher than today) and 30% were dissatisfied. The biggest drop in satisfaction has occurred among male students (from 70% to 46%) and among

#### **The Influence of Parents' Political Views on Students' Partisan Identification**

According to the survey results, the partisan makeup of American college students is 44% Democratic, 30% Republican, and 21% independent.

In an attempt to identify which factors most strongly influence students' partisan leanings, we conducted a regression analysis that incorporated various demographic factors including income, region, gender, race, religion, and the party identification of a student's mother and father (measured separately). The goal of regression analysis is to determine the ability of certain variables to predict the outcome of other variables.

Even when taking into account demographic variables, the party identifications of an individual's parents emerge as the single most predictive variable. Moreover, while both parents' party identifications are a significant predictor, the party identification of an individual's father carries more weight in their own party identification development. *This is true for both male and female students.*

The  $R^2$  for this model (a determination of the strength of the relationship) is 0.488.

students who identify national problems as more important than international ones (from 72% to 47%). While the current perception of political leadership is linked to partisan affiliation, the downward trend among students overall is significant.

In a trial heat of the upcoming election, John Kerry holds a substantial advantage over George W. Bush among college students: 42% of college students intend to vote for Kerry and 30% for Bush. Ralph Nader receives just 4% of the intended vote among college students, a group that many have predicted are among Nader's core supporters. The proportion of students saying that they *definitely* will vote for their candidate is equal for both Kerry and Bush, at 63% each. Among students who are already registered to vote, Kerry holds a slightly larger advantage (45% to 32%). According to a CBS/*New York Times* poll conducted at the end of April<sup>3</sup> among adults nationwide, George W. Bush retained a slight lead over John Kerry (43% to 41%), with Ralph Nader garnering 5% of the vote.

One key group in the upcoming presidential election is undecided voters, who in this survey comprise one-quarter (24%) of students. In looking at the makeup of these voters, however, it seems more likely that they will support John Kerry over George W. Bush.

Half (49%) of undecided students identify themselves as completely independent, but their partisan leanings appear to favor the Democrats, as almost one-quarter (23%) describe their views as Democratic and just one in seven (14%) describe their political viewpoint as Republican. In terms of other demographic characteristics, more than half (56%) of undecided voters are female and a significant proportion (13%) are of Hispanic origin, both groups that as a whole intend to vote for John Kerry more than for George W. Bush. In addition, more than one-third (36%) of undecideds say that economic issues will be the most important types of issues for them in deciding for whom to vote. Overall, students who are voting based on economic issues prefer Kerry to Bush by 44% to 26%. Undecided voters have a similar view as students overall of the quality of the country's leadership, with 46% saying that they are satisfied (48% overall). One of the strongest reasons to suggest that these undecided voters will more likely vote for Kerry than for Bush is that two-thirds (64%) say that they have mixed feelings about or oppose President Bush's approach to the war on terrorism. Of those among this group who favor a

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<sup>3</sup> CBS/*New York Times* poll, April 23-27, 2004 – 1,042 adults nationwide

candidate, 61% intend to vote for Kerry versus just 7% for George W. Bush. If the election were held today, John Kerry likely would win a significant majority of the college vote.

Other students who are more likely to vote for Kerry include African Americans, among whom Kerry holds a 39-percentage-point lead over Bush, students living in the Northeast (24-point Kerry advantage), those majoring in the social sciences (+18) and humanities (+31), and those who say that foreign policy issues are their main determinant in selecting a candidate (+25) (see Table 1). Bush has stronger support among students living in the South (though still a 3-point Kerry advantage) and students majoring in business (+4 for Kerry) and science or math (+4 for Bush). Bush earns the highest level of support among students who say that national defense issues will be most important to them in choosing a candidate (14-point Bush advantage). Another important indicator of vote choice among students is their perception of their own future. Those who feel confident and secure about their own future are more likely to vote for Bush by 43% to 30%, whereas those who are uncertain and concerned about their own future are more likely to vote for Kerry by 55% to 14%.

	<b><u>Kerry</u></b> %	<b><u>Bush</u></b> %	<b><u>Kerry Advantage</u></b> +/-
<b>All Students</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>+12</b>
Men	40	33	+7
Women	43	27	+16
Whites	41	33	+8
Hispanics	40	18	+22
African Americans	54	15	+39
Northeast	48	24	+24
South	38	35	+3
Midwest	38	32	+6
West	45	28	+17



	<b><u>Kerry</u></b>	<b><u>Bush</u></b>	<b><u>Kerry Advantage</u></b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>+/-</b>
<b>All Students</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>+12</b>
Social Sciences	46	28	+18
Humanities	55	24	+31
Science/math	31	35	-4
Business	40	36	+4
Computer Science	42	25	+17

### **CANDIDATE QUALITIES**

Although John Kerry retains a slight advantage among college students in a trial heat of the upcoming election, a comparison between him and George W. Bush on specific factors demonstrates why he is favored. Overall, college students feel that six of the eight items better describe John Kerry, including using good judgment in a crisis, being honest and truthful, caring about people like them, able to get things done, personally likable, and understanding the needs of college students (see Table 2). One area that stands out, however, is in the perception of Kerry's understanding the needs of college students, as almost half (47%) of college students feel that this phrase describes John Kerry better, versus one in five (19%) who believe that it better describes George W. Bush. The advantage that Kerry holds over Bush on these qualities is stronger than what we find among American adults nationwide. On the other two items, the candidates are virtually tied on being a strong leader (Bush 38%, Kerry 37%), and Bush has a significant edge on being willing to take a stand even if it is unpopular (42%, to Kerry's 34%). The latter is a true advantage against Kerry who is often described as flip-flopping on the issues.

**TABLE 2.**  
**DOES EACH PHRASE BETTER DESCRIBE JOHN KERRY OR GEORGE W. BUSH?**

	<u>Kerry_</u> <u>Better</u> %	<u>Bush_</u> <u>Better</u> %	<u>Kerry_</u> <u>Advantage</u> +/-
Understands the needs of college students	47	19	+28
Cares about people like me	45	27	+18
Honest and truthful	42	30	+12
Can get things done	41	32	+11
Personally likable	40	30	+10
Willing to take a stand, even if it is unpopular	34	42	+8
Would use good judgment in a crisis	41	35	+6
A strong leader	37	38	-1

### THE ISSUES IN 2004

When asked which issues are most important to them personally, two in five (40%) students say that dealing with the costs of college education is one of the two most important issues to them. This issue ranks above a host of others including improving the job situation, mentioned by one-third (32%) of students, defending the country from future terrorist attacks (22%), improving the health care system (22%), and improving education (21%). Just one in seven (14%) feel that making wise decisions about what to do in Iraq is important, and only a few (6%) choose protecting the environment.

Apart from their attitudes toward the candidates' personal and professional qualities, students more strongly endorse Kerry's abilities on a variety of policy issues (see Table 3). By a margin of two to one in most cases, Kerry is perceived as being better able to handle each issue, and he has the biggest advantage on protecting the environment (63%, Bush 18%). The only area in which George W. Bush is perceived as being able to do a better job is in defending the country from future terrorist attacks (44% to 31%).

**TABLE 3.**  
**WHO WOULD DO A BETTER JOB OF HANDLING SELECTED ISSUES?**

	<b>Kerry_</b> <b>Bette</b>	<b>Bush_</b> <b>Bette</b>	<b>Kerry_</b> <b>Advantage</b>
	£ %	£ %	+/-
Protecting the environment	63	18	+45
Improving education	52	25	+27
Dealing with the costs of college education	52	25	+27
Improving the health care system	52	26	+26
Improving the job situation	51	27	+24
Making wise decisions about what to do in Iraq	39	35	+4
Defending the country from future terrorist attacks	31	44	-13

### **VIEWS ON GAY MARRIAGE**

We asked college students about their views on the issue of gay marriage to compare them to those of the American public. Among the public, when asked whether they would favor or oppose allowing gay and lesbian couples to enter into same-sex marriages<sup>4</sup>, 62% of adults say that they would oppose allowing same-sex marriages, 51% strongly; 30% of adults would favor allowing these marriages, including 18% who strongly favor this option. While Americans say that they oppose these marriages by more than two to one, college students hold the opposite view, with more than half (52%) saying that they would favor allowing them (30% strongly) and 38% opposing them (26% strongly). Female students (57%), students living in the Northeast (61%), and social sciences (68%) and humanities (69%) majors all are more likely to approve of allowing these marriages. Clear divisions exist along party lines, with 69% of Democrats approving of gay marriage and 67% of Republicans in opposition.

The views of students on this issue are even stronger when it comes to a constitutional amendment that would define marriage as a union only between a man and a woman and that would make same-sex marriages unconstitutional. By more than two to one, college students say that they would oppose such an amendment (63%, 45% strongly) and three in 10 (29%) would favor it. These results are at odds with those among Americans overall, more than half (54%) of whom say they would favor such an amendment, and four in ten (42%) of whom concur with

<sup>4</sup> *NBC/Wall Street Journal Poll*, March 2004 – 1,018 adults nationwide

college students in opposing such an amendment. Although we find similar tendencies on this question among Republicans and Democrats as were found for general attitudes toward gay marriage, fewer Republican students favor passing this amendment than are opposed to the concept of gay marriage overall: 50% say that they would favor the amendment, compared with 18% of Democrats who feel this way.

### **THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: ITS IMPORTANCE AND THE ISSUES**

There is a downward trend in the perception that voting is a way to change society. In March 2001, almost half (47%) of students felt that voting in elections for president was a way to bring about a lot of change in society. In April 2002, that proportion dropped to 41%. In the current survey, a little more than one-third (35%) of college students say that voting in presidential elections is a way to bring about a lot of change in society.

Nationwide, registered voters report that they are paying a great deal of attention to the upcoming presidential election, but students are less engaged. According to a CBS News poll concluded in April of this year<sup>5</sup>, two in five (43%) voters say that they are paying a lot of attention to the 2004 presidential campaign and an additional two in five (39%) say that they are paying some attention to the campaign. Our results show a lower level of engagement for college students who are registered to vote: 22% are paying a lot of attention and 54% some attention. Registered students who are male (81%), living in the Midwest (83%), or identify with one of the two major political parties (Democrats 82%; Republicans 78%) are paying attention at higher rates than others, whereas just three in five (61%) independents are paying this level of attention to the campaign.

Despite the lesser amount of attention that college students are paying to the presidential campaign, overall they are convinced that the outcome of the election really matters for making progress on the important issues facing the country, and they believe this at even higher levels than does the American public overall. Four in five (79%) students say that the outcome of the election matters, whereas one in six (16%) say that it does not really matter. A March 2004 Pew Research Center survey<sup>6</sup> conducted among adults nationwide finds that six in 10 (63%) adults

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<sup>5</sup> *CBS News poll*, March 30-April 1 2004, 1,024 adults.

<sup>6</sup> *Pew Research Center News Interest Index*, March 17-21, 2004 – 1,703 adults nationwide

nationwide feel that the outcome of the election matters, 16 fewer percentage points than among college students. The same proportion of Republican (85%) and Democratic (86%) college students feel that the election is important, but just 61% of independents agree.

### **THE RELEVANCE OF POLITICS AND MEASURES OF ENGAGEMENT**

Few American college students believe that politics is very relevant in their life. Just one in five (19%) affirm that politics is very relevant and an additional third (37%) say that it is fairly relevant; two in five (43%) say that politics is just somewhat or not relevant at all to their life. Whereas Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives all report similar levels of relevance, one of the more consistent predictors of political relevance to the lives of students is their course of study. Social sciences (67%) and humanities (72%) majors report higher levels of relevance, business majors and science and math majors are closer to the norm, but computer science students (36%) express very little relevance of politics to their daily life. African Americans also are somewhat more likely (64%) to feel that politics is relevant to their life than are students of other races.

To understand more about where students get their information regarding politics and civic affairs, we presented a list of media and asked them to select the one or two sources from which they get most of their information. Of eight possible sources, four emerge as the main sources of information and one as the most pervasive: 61% of students select television as one of their most frequent sources of information, and it appears that it is increasing in importance as a source of information for college students. The proportion of students getting their information from television has increased by 15 percentage points in the past two years. In April 2002, television was the most popular source of information about politics and civic affairs, but fewer than half (46%) of students said that it was a major source of information. The remaining three sources that are fairly important for students are community or city newspapers (26%), the Internet (25%), and family and friends (19%). Other sources selected by fewer than one in ten students are the campus newspaper (7%), magazines (7%), campus organizations (5%), and radio (3%).

One measure of college students' level of political interest is the proportion who say that they have visited the Web site of a political interest group, party, or candidate for political office (39%). Upper classmen are more likely to report having visited such a Web site (45% seniors,

42% juniors, 36% sophomores, 32% freshmen), and 49% of social science majors also have done so.

As we will see in the last section, though college students acknowledge the importance of the outcome of the upcoming presidential election, slightly more than half (54%) say that volunteering time on a political campaign is a way to bring about a lot of or some change in our society, ranking last among a battery of ways to bring about change in society (see Table 4). Slightly more than a third (35%) say that voting in elections for president is a way to bring about a lot of change.

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**TABLE 4.**  
**HOW MUCH CHANGE WILL EACH ITEM BRING?**

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	<u>A Lot Of Change</u>	<u>Some Change</u>
	%	%
<b>Volunteering with an organization that is concerned with a particular issue</b>		
May 2004	30	46
April 2002	29	49
March 2001	30	53
<b>Voting in elections for president</b>		
May 2004	35	38
April 2002	41	34
March 2001	47	37
<b>Convincing friends to take an issue more seriously</b>		
May 2004	20	45
April 2002	26	36
March 2001	19	40
<b>Volunteering time on a political campaign</b>		
May 2004	17	37
March 2001	12	40

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Fewer than one in 10 (9%) students say that they have volunteered for a political campaign for the upcoming election or plan to volunteer on a political campaign before the election—a very low proportion. Nonetheless, nearly three in four (73%) students who are registered to vote—82% of students overall—say that they definitely will vote in the November election; this represents 60% of all students, including those who are not registered. An additional one in five (22%) registered voters—18% of all students—say that they probably will vote in the upcoming election.

### **III. THE LEGACY OF 9/11 AND THE WAR ON TERRORISM**

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In the April 2002 survey among college students, we concluded that while many of the changes in students' behaviors and activities after 9/11 were ephemeral, 9/11 had changed some of their lives in measurable ways and promoted certain issues to the top of the nation's political agenda. The current study's results show some of the ways in which 9/11 has left its mark as a historical event in the eyes of college students and how their views of the war on terrorism seem increasingly influenced by their concerns about the country's direction and the way that leaders have handled it.

#### **INTERNATIONAL VERSUS NATIONAL PROBLEMS**

One of the ways in which 9/11 appears to have left its mark on this generation of students is a slight shift in perception of the importance of international problems. The post-9/11 world is one in which concerns about terrorism at home and abroad are a mainstay. America's college students are evenly divided over whether the main problems that their generation will face are mostly international (45%) or mostly national (46%) in scope. This is virtually the same balance as in April 2002, when 46% of students felt that international problems were of more concern and 49% sided with national problems. Before 9/11 (as measured in a 2001 poll), six in 10 (59%) students felt that problems that were national in scope would be of more concern to their generation. Without more chronological data it is difficult to measure the lasting impact, but it appears that one of the few lingering effects of 9/11 is that there is a more even balance in the eyes of college students about the relative importance of national versus international problems facing their generation. Some important differences exist on this topic by subgroup: African Americans (55%) put more emphasis on national problems, whereas Republicans (55%) and Bush voters (51%) are more likely to view international issues as more problematic.

To put 9/11 in context with other events in American history, we asked students which of the following items were most important in the country's history: the Declaration of Independence, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the attacks on Pearl Harbor, the 1929 stock market crash, the Supreme Court deciding the outcome of the 2000 Presidential election, or the assassination of John F. Kennedy. More than half (53%) of students say that the Declaration of Independence is the most important event in the country's history, but the terrorist attacks of



9/11 rank second (22%), and 10% choose Pearl Harbor as the most important. Clearly, September 11 is among the most important historical events in the eyes of American college students, but not so important as to drown out the prominence of other historical events.

Compared with 2002, college students say that they are somewhat more concerned about terrorism's threat to the country. Two years ago, when asked whether terrorism or poorly performing schools were a bigger threat to the future of the United States, the overwhelming response sided with the latter (74%). In the present survey, students express a higher level of concern about the threat of terrorism, as more than half (56%) still believe that poorly performing schools are the bigger threat to the nation, but two in five (40%) consider terrorism the bigger threat. These results are consistent across subgroups, although Democrats believe more strongly that poorly performing schools are the bigger threat (65%) whereas Republicans (57%) see terrorism as the bigger threat to the country.

#### **THE WAR ON TERRORISM AND U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN IRAQ**

Support for President Bush and his administration's approach to the war on terrorism has dropped significantly since April 2002, when more than half (57%) of students said that they totally or mainly supported the President's approach. The current survey results show that fewer than four in 10 (37%) students feel this way. The proportion of students having mixed views or opposing the war on terrorism has increased from 42% in 2002 to 59% now. In addition, the proportion who say that they oppose the approach to the war on terrorism has more than doubled from just 12% in 2002 to 27% at the present time. Those among whom support has dropped most radically from 2002 include whites (23-percentage-point drop), men (-23), and Democrats (-26).

Half (50%) of America's college students feel that the United States should have taken military action to remove Saddam Hussein from power, more than one third (37%) believe that the United States should not have taken military action to remove Saddam Hussein, and 13% are not sure. African-American students demonstrate a much stronger disapproval of the U.S.'s taking action to remove the Iraqi leader, as fewer than three in 10 (29%) feel that the U.S. should have removed Saddam Hussein and almost half (47%) disagree. Strong differences are also apparent by party: three in five (62%) Democrats feel that the U.S. should not have taken this action, whereas 88% of Republicans think it should have. The March 2004 NBC/*Wall Street*

*Journal* poll<sup>7</sup> shows that almost two-thirds (64%) of the American public agrees with the U.S.'s military action to remove Saddam Hussein from power—14 percentage points higher than college students— and half as many (32%) disagree.

Though half of students feel that the United States should have taken action to remove Saddam Hussein, their views are tempered when they are asked to weigh the worth of the conflict against its costs. More college students than not—47% versus 41%—believe that removing Saddam Hussein from power was *not* worth the number of casualties and the costs of the war. African-American students (60%) and Democrats (66%) especially feel that the costs of removing Saddam Hussein were not worth it, and Republican students believe more strongly that it was worth it (80%). Students living in suburban or small town and rural campuses also are more likely to believe that the costs of removing Saddam Hussein were more worth it (48%) than not (42%). Nationwide<sup>8</sup>, half (50%) of Americans, nine percentage points more than college students, say that removing Saddam Hussein was worth the number of U.S. military casualties and the financial costs of the war, significantly fewer than the 64% who say that the U.S. should have removed Hussein from power. Clearly, college students are ambivalent about the war although they lean toward a negative opinion of it. In addition, support for George W. Bush's approach to the war is falling.

### **THE DRAFT**

Support for U.S. military operations would meet stronger opposition if students themselves were asked to serve in the military. American college students voice an overwhelming opposition to the idea of a military draft, as almost three in four (73%) do not support the return of the draft. One in seven students (14%) say that they would support a military draft and 6% volunteer that their support would depend on certain factors. Support for a draft is slightly higher among conservative (24%) and Republican (25%) students, but is no higher among students whose parents served in the military (15%) than among students overall.

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<sup>7</sup> *NBC/Wall Street Journal Poll*, March 2004 – 1,018 adults nationwide

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

## IV. ATTITUDES TOWARD VOLUNTEERISM AND PUBLIC SERVICE

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The story of American college students and their predilections toward public service and volunteerism is a complex one. Students who have volunteered their time recognize the benefits to themselves and society. Most students feel that they are able to make a difference in the world around them although the perceived impact that they believe they can have varies greatly. Students also express interest in various public service programs, but volunteerism is just one among many competing goals in their life. Reported volunteerism is down overall among students and interest in specific public service organization has not increased despite numerous recent calls by public leaders of all political persuasions for young adults to pursue volunteerism as a way of bettering society.

### MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN SOCIETY

To varying degrees, many college students feel that they are able to make a difference in the world around them. More than four in five (87%) students believe that they can make a difference in society, but among those students, 57% say that they have the ability to make just somewhat of a difference in their local community and 30% believe that they have the ability to make a *big* difference. More than half (52%) of this core group is made up of humanities and social sciences majors, though they comprise only 37% of the survey's sample overall. College students who identify themselves as liberals also are more likely to believe that they can make a big difference in their local community (39%).

In terms of *how* students believe that they can have an impact and bring about change in society, we asked them to evaluate a battery of ways in which they might effect change in society. As mentioned, one-third (35%) of students feel that voting in elections for president is a way of bringing about a *lot* of change, yet this number constitutes a downward trend. In March 2001, 47% of students said that this was a way of bringing about a lot of change; that number dropped to 41% in April 2002 and to 35% in the current survey. If we combine the results for those who say that a particular measure can bring about a lot of as well as some change, volunteering with an organization that is concerned with a particular issue garners the highest score (765) among students. Voting in elections for president ranks second (73%), and convincing friends to take an issue more seriously is mentioned by 65% of students as a way to

bring about a lot or some change in society. Volunteering time on a political campaign is seen by just 54% of students as a way of bringing about at least some change.

### **VOLUNTEERISM**

When it comes to actually having volunteered in their communities, slightly more than half (53%) of students say that during their time in college they have volunteered their time in the local community and 46% have not been involved in this way. This represents a significant drop in reported volunteerism among college students. Just one in four (39%) freshmen say that they have volunteered in their community. We also find that the level of volunteerism varies according to a campus's location: students living on campuses in large cities are the least likely to have volunteered their time (42%), versus 55% of students at campuses in medium or small cities, suburbs, and more rural areas. Students from families with above-average incomes (61%) also report higher levels of civic involvement than do other students, as do students in the humanities (63%) and students who say that politics has more relevance to their life (60%).

Compared with the findings among American college students in the past, however, the 53% of student volunteers constitutes a decline in the level of community service. In March 2001, more than two thirds (68%) of college students reported having volunteered in their local community, and in April 2002 the same proportion (67%) had volunteered. The biggest drop in reported volunteerism has occurred among African-American students. They reported the highest level of volunteerism of any racial group in 2002 at 76%, but that proportion has fallen by 25 percentage points to 51%. Volunteering time to engage in community or public service ranks at the bottom of students' priorities in terms of their personal goals, so although this goal receives a mean score of 7.0 on a 10-point priority scale, one-quarter (24%) rate this goal as a "9" or "10," below the goals of enjoying oneself and having a good time (mean – 7.9) and doing well financially and making a lot of money (mean – 7.7).

Students who have volunteered during their college years feel that their participation in service activities has had an impact on them in many different ways (see Table 5), the largest of which is in how students feel about themselves. Virtually all (96%) students who have volunteered say that their service has made an impact in this regard, and more than half (55%) say that it has had a strong impact on them. More than eight in 10 (85%) students say that their

service has increased their interest in following news about a particular issue or area of the community in which they were not previously interested (42% a lot). Students who have volunteered also report enhanced understanding of public issues (37% a lot, 51% somewhat), increased levels of tolerance or a change in their views about people of different backgrounds (38% a lot, 47% somewhat), changes in their views of public issues (31% a lot, 50% somewhat). Fewer students say that their service has made them reconsider their academic or career goals (27% a lot, 36% somewhat).

**TABLE 5.**  
**HOW HAS YOUR PARTICIPATION IN SERVICE ACTIVITIES HAD AN IMPACT ON YOU?**

	<u>A Lot</u> %	<u>Somewhat</u> %
Made you feel better about yourself	55	41
Enhanced your understanding of public issues, politics, government, or civics	37	51
Increased your interest in following news about a public issue or area of the community that you had not been interested in before	42	43
Increased your tolerance or changed your views on people of different racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds	38	47
Changed your view on a public issue	31	50
Made you reconsider your academic or career goals	27	36

### **PERSONAL GOALS AND THE RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC SERVICE**

The survey results show that American college students have clear priorities in terms of their personal goals; unfortunately, public service is often not at the top of their list. Students were presented with a variety of goals and asked to rate each one's importance to them on a one-to-ten scale, on which a "10" means that it is extremely important and a "1" that it is not that important (see Table 6). At the top of their list of priorities, given ratings of "9" or "10," are being successful in school (72%) and having a close-knit family life (68%), with the latter ranking higher among students living in large cities (82%). More than half (56%) of students also feel that being a good American who cares about the good of the country deserves a "9" or "10" in terms of its importance. Being aware of important issues in the country and around the world (46%) and being involved in helping their community be a better place (47%) also rate as fairly important goals. About two in five students say that enjoying themselves and having a good

time and doing well financially and making a lot of money are important goals—43% and 39%, respectively—though one in five (21% and 23%) ascribe lesser importance to these areas, giving them a rating of “6” or less.

Rounding out the list of goals in terms of importance is “volunteering your time to engage in public or community service”—one-quarter (24%) of students feel that this is an extremely important goal, whereas more than one-third (37%) give it a rating of “6” or less. Students who are more likely to say that volunteering their time for public or community service is extremely important include those who also say that they are interested in working for government (36%), those who have volunteered or plan to volunteer on a political campaign (39%), students of the humanities (39%), and those who say that they have been paying a lot of attention to the upcoming presidential election (34%). While public or community service ranks at the bottom of students’ list of personal goals, one should not conclude that college students are averse to public service. In fact, the survey results show that college students feel that public service has clear benefits, even though they indicate that in relation to other goals that students have, community or public service is of lesser importance.

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**TABLE 6.**  
**HOW IMPORTANT TO YOU IS EACH OF THE FOLLOWING GOALS?**

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	Ratings of “9” or “10” %
Being successful in school	72
Having a close-knit family life	68
Being a good American who cares about the good of the country	56
Being involved in helping your community be a better place	47
Being aware of important issues in the country and around the world	46
Enjoying yourself and having a good time	43
Doing well financially and making a lot of money	39
Volunteering your time to engage in public or community service	24

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## **WORKING FOR PUBLIC SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS**

Coupled with this drop in reported volunteerism is a decrease in reported interest in working for a public service organization after graduating from college. Just 30% of students say that they would be very or fairly interested in working for one of these organizations (in April 2002 this proportion was 43%). In addition, the proportion of students who have no interest in working for one of these organizations has increased by nine percentage points since 2002 to 30%. This proportion is higher among students who say that politics is just somewhat or not that relevant to their life (38%) and even higher among non-registered students (45%). The biggest drop in interest in working for public service organizations has occurred among Hispanic students, 58% of whom reported in 2002 that they were very or fairly interested in working for one of these organizations, compared with 23% who have the same level of interest now, a 35-point drop.

The survey also assesses students' interest in working with a variety of specific service organizations after college, including AmeriCorps, the Peace Corps, and VISTA. We tested interest in these three organizations in April 2002, and in tandem with the lower level of general interest in working for a public service organization, interest in these organizations has either remained at already-low levels of interest or decreased slightly. Only about one in five (19%) students express a fair amount of interest in working for the Peace Corps after graduation, and an additional 29% are just somewhat interested. Slightly more than one in 10 express a fair amount of interest in working with AmeriCorps (13%) or VISTA (11%) upon graduation. Those who have volunteered or plan to volunteer on a political campaign are much more likely to express an interest in working for these organizations than are other students (Peace Corps 49%; AmeriCorps 53%; VISTA 46%). African-American students also express a stronger interest than do other students (Peace Corps 29%; AmeriCorps 21%; VISTA 21%).

## **PROMOTING SERVICE**

To understand what factors might increase students' interest in participating with public service organizations, we tested a variety of incentives to participate, and as we concluded in 2002, financial incentives are the most attractive to students. When asked to select the one or two most popular incentives, most students say that receiving financial aid for college (50%) or forgiveness of some college loans (47%) might increase their willingness to participate in public

service organizations. An additional 17% say that receiving a monthly stipend might increase their interest. Incentives not involving monetary compensation such as knowing that close friends would be involved in the same program or having their parents encourage them to participate are the least attractive, with fewer than one in 10 students saying these might increase their interest.

### **INTEREST IN WORKING FOR GOVERNMENT**

Amidst the somewhat discouraging news about volunteerism, however, student interest in working for government does not appear to have dropped. Three in ten (29%) students say that they are very or fairly interested in working for government; the corresponding percentage in 2002 was 30%. To break down that number, one in five (20%) students are fairly interested and one in 10 (9%) are very interested in working for government. A subgroup analysis of this question shows that those with an interest in politics and campaigns express more interest in working for government: more than half (55%) of those who say that they have paid a lot of attention to the presidential election and three-quarters (74%) of those who have volunteered or intend to volunteer on a campaign affirm a high level of interest in working for government.

### **PUBLIC SERVICE PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS**

Although the decreases in reported volunteerism and interest in working for public service organizations do not paint a positive picture of the current state of volunteerism among students, the findings indicate that students are open to the idea of public service programs as part of their academic training, even if this type of program were required. In the survey, we test two versions of a hypothetical program through which hours of service would translate into credit toward a student's degree. For half the sample, the program is presented as voluntary and for the other half it is required. In both cases, the large majority of students feel that this kind of program would be a good idea to implement on their campus. Eight in ten (83%) students feel that the voluntary program would be a good idea, and introducing the program as an academic requirement still earns support from 74% of students, with just 20% saying that a mandatory program of this kind would not be a good idea to implement on their campus. Clearly this type of program is one plausible alternative for getting college students involved in public service.



The possibility of receiving academic credit or financial incentives could prove effective in getting some students involved in public service activities.

The survey also tested the idea of a mandatory national service program that would require graduating high school students to perform two years of public service after high school in return for assistance with college tuition or job training. Students are less laudatory of this type of program: 45% think that it would be a good idea and 43% feel that it is not a good idea.

### **DISCUSSIONS ABOUT POLITICS AND PUBLIC SERVICE**

Although the findings show that interest in public service and volunteerism is down, they also uncover a link between the level of discussion that students have had about politics and public service and their political and public service behavior. More than half (52%) of American college students say that during their time as a high school or college student, no one has ever spoken with them about getting involved in politics or in public service. A very high correlation exists between students who say that no one has spoken with them about getting involved in politics or public service and those who are not registered to vote (see Table 7). Nine in 10 (91%) students who say they have had discussions about these issues report being registered to vote versus 75% of those who have not spoken with anyone about these issues during their time as a student. Other indications of the link between discussions about these issues and students' behavior are the findings that nearly twice as many students (26%) who have had these discussions say that they have paid a lot of attention to the upcoming election as those who have not (11%). More than half (53%) of students who have had these discussions throughout their years as a student have visited a political Web site versus 28% of those who have not had them. Finally, students who have spoken about politics or public service are almost twice as likely (70%) as those who have not (38%) to have volunteered their time in the local community.

**TABLE 7.**  
**THE IMPACT OF DISCUSSION ABOUT POLITICS AND PUBLIC SERVICE ON BEHAVIOR**

	<b>Have Had Discussions As Student</b>	<b>Have <i>Not</i> Had Discussions As Student</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
Registered to vote	91	75
Pay a lot of attention to 2004 election	26	11
Visited a political Web site	53	28
Say politics is very/fairly relevant to their life	69	48
Volunteered/plan to volunteer on political campaign	15	3
Volunteered in local community	70	38