

**TO: Lauren Noble, Executive Director – The Buckley Institute**  
**FROM: Rob Schmidt, McLaughlin & Associates**  
**Re: National Undergraduate Study – Executive Summary**  
**Date: September 19, 2023**

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Below are the key findings from our ninth annual national study of undergraduates on behalf of the Buckley Institute at Yale.

## **Part I – The Constitution, First Amendment, Free Speech and Intellectual Diversity**

*Once again, a majority perceives the U.S. Constitution as important and the vast majority still sees the First Amendment as important. Despite broadly professing commitments to free speech and the value it serves, students are increasingly supportive of speech regulation.*

- A majority (57%) now say the U.S. Constitution is a very important document for our country compared to 33% who say it is an outdated document. This is the second highest “Important” response since 2019 and an eight-point rebound from last year.
  - Eight in ten (81%) conservative students say the Constitution is important as do 61% of moderate students. Liberal students divide with slightly more saying outdated, 46% to 45%.
  - Social and Behavioral Sciences majors – which include Liberal Arts and Politics/Government majors – are most divided with 46% saying important and 45% saying outdated.
- The First Amendment continues to be overwhelmingly perceived as an important amendment that still needs to be followed and respected (78%) rather than it being outdated and can no longer be applied in today’s society (14%).
- A majority (51%) now favors speech codes to regulate speech for students and faculty (38% oppose). This is only the third time more students have favored speech codes than opposed them and the first time an outright majority favored them.
  - By race, black students are most likely to favor speech codes, 73% to 20%, followed by Hispanic students, 57% to 29%, and Asian students, 50% to 37%. A plurality of white students oppose speech codes, 45% to 44%.
  - Liberal (54% to 39%) and moderate students (55% to 35%) are aligned, while a near majority of conservative students oppose speech codes, 48% to 43%.
- By a 69% to 26% margin, students say it is more important for their college or university to encourage free speech and intellectual diversity rather than preventing offensive or insensitive dialogue among students. This is very similar to last year's margin of 68% to 25%.

- Eighty-five percent (85%) agree that incoming students and current college students need to be better educated on the value of free speech and the diversity of opinion on campuses (8% disagree). Last year, a similar 84% agreed.
- Another 85% agree that hearing and discussing opinions I disagree with gives me a better education and better prepares me to be a leader in the future (10% disagree).

## **Part II – Expression in the Classroom**

*Six in ten students continue to say they have often felt intimidated in sharing their ideas, opinions or beliefs in class because they were different than their professors or classmates. Politics remains the issue students feel most uncomfortable speaking about and there is much stability in comfort levels for all the topics retested. Nearly half say they cannot be close friends with someone who affiliates with a different political party.*

- Six in ten (61%) say they have often felt intimidated in sharing their ideas, opinions or beliefs in class because they were different than those of their professors, while 35% have not often felt intimidated. Perceived intimidation continues to increase and for the first time this metric has exceeded 60%. Specifically, 18% say they have frequently felt intimidated.
  - There continues to be similarity on intimidation level by ideology – 66% conservative, 63% moderate and 62% liberal.
  - By race, intimidation level is highest among black students at 71%.
- Intimidation in sharing ideas, opinions or beliefs that were different than classmates or peers is similar to that of professors – 59% intimidated to 38% not intimidated. This has tightened slightly from last year when it was 63% intimidated to 34% not intimidated. While the overall intimidation score is two-points lower than the previous question with professors, those who say “frequently” is seven-points higher at 25%.
  - Again, there is no significant difference in intimidation levels among liberal (62%), moderate (61%) and conservative students (59%).
- When given a list of hot-button issues, for the third consecutive year, students are again most likely to cite politics (46%) as a topic they are uncomfortable speaking about or are off limits for discussion. Compared to last year, the level of discomfort for all of the topics re-asked is largely unchanged. Climate change (12%), Israel (10%), Election Integrity (10%) and Affirmative Action (8%) drew the lowest levels of discomfort.

- A plurality (48%) agrees that they cannot bring themselves to being close friends with someone who affiliates with a different political party than them because that person likely harbors opinions they find unacceptable. Forty-four percent (44%) disagree.
  - Nearly two-thirds (64%) of liberal students agree, while 53% of moderate students and 64% of conservative students disagree.

### **Part III – Insensitive and Offensive Speech**

*For the first time, a slight plurality believes offensive opinions should be reported to school administrators. By a similar divided margin, students believe that a student who is alleged to have made an insensitive remark should have to attend sensitivity training or undergo some type of re-education regardless of whether the allegation has been proven. Two-thirds favor requiring trigger warnings.*

- By a slight 46% to 45% margin, students agree that political opinions they find offensive from fellow students should be reported to school administrators. This has increased modestly from 43% last year and the first time more students agree than disagree.
  - Similar to last year, there are differences by school type, as students in private schools agree 51% to 41% while students in public school disagree 47% to 43%.
  - A majority (53%) of liberal students agree, as do a plurality (49%) of moderate students. Two-thirds (66%) of conservative students disagree.
  - By race, white students are the only ones who disagree – 54% to 38%.
- A plurality (46%) agrees that if one student claims that another student made an insensitive remark, the student who is alleged to have made the remark should have to attend sensitivity training or undergo some type of re-education regardless of whether the allegation has been proven. Forty-three percent (43%) disagree.
  - A majority (53%) of liberal students agree as do a plurality (46%) of moderate students. Nearly six in ten (59%) conservative students disagree.
- A majority (51%) agree that there are certain issues that school administrators or professors should prohibit from being debated on campus (40% disagree). These findings are consistent with last year - 51% agree to 41% disagree.
  - Once again, there are no significant differences in level of agreement by liberal (54%), moderate (50%) and conservative students (50%).

- A majority (52%) continues to disagree that political comments they disagree with can be harmful to their mental health, while 39% agree. These findings are similar to last year when 38% agreed and 54% disagreed.
  - Liberal students are most likely to agree (50%), compared to just 36% of moderate and 26% conservative students.
- By a greater than two to one margin of 65% to 27%, students believe that professors should be required to provide trigger warnings rather than believing they are unnecessary.
  - Public school students are more likely to favor trigger warnings than private school students, 69% to 57%.
  - Three in four (76%) liberal students favor trigger warnings, as do 62% of moderate students and 50% of conservative students.

## **Part IV – Hate Speech**

*Students continue to take an increasingly confrontational posture towards hate speech.*

- By a 46% to 43% margin, students agree that hate speech - no matter how racist or bigoted it is - is still technically protected under the First Amendment as free speech. Last year, the plurality disagreed, 48% to 44%.
  - A notable gender divide continues to persist as male students agree 58% to 32% while female students disagree 51% to 38%.
- Forty-six percent (46%) agree that it is sometimes appropriate to shout down or disrupt a speaker on their campus, while 45% disagree. In the seven years of asking this question, this is the first occurrence where agreement exceeds disagreement.
  - The majority (55%) of liberal students continues to agree with this statement while 47% of moderate students and 61% of conservative students disagree.
- Forty-five percent (45%) agree that if someone is using hate speech or making racially charged comments, physical violence can be justified to prevent this person from espousing their hateful views. Forty-seven percent (47%) disagree. Agreement is up four-points from last year and this is the tightest agree-disagree margin in seven years. In 2017, the first year this question was asked, agreement was at 30%.
  - By ideology, agreement is highest among liberals at 54% and for the first time, this is the majority sentiment among liberal students. Among moderates, 43% agree and 49% disagree and among conservatives, 36% agree and 58% disagree.
  - By race, agreement remains highest among black students at 61%, compared to 47% among Hispanic students, 41% among white students and 34% among Asian students.

## **Part V – Diversity and Race Issues**

*Most continue to say professors should be required to make statements of diversity, equity and inclusion as a condition of employment. Six in ten support the creation of an office similar to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion that is dedicated to protecting free speech on campus. Nearly six in ten are supportive of affirmative action to some degree.*

- Sixty-three percent (63%) agree that their college or university should require that all professors and administrators make statements in favor of diversity, equity and inclusion as a condition of employment. This is down slightly from 67% last year.
  - Agreement is highest among liberal students at 76%, followed by 65% among moderates and 41% among conservatives.
- Another 63% support the creation of an office dedicated to protecting free speech on campus, while 24% oppose it. This is down from 69% support last year.
  - While broad majorities across ideology agree, support is slightly lower among conservative students, at 60%.
- By a greater than three to one margin, students favor ESG investing – 66% to 19%.
  - By ideology, support is highest among liberal students at 81%, followed by 66% of moderates and a plurality (45%) of conservative students.
- On affirmative action, about six in ten are supportive - including 28% who strongly support affirmative action and believe it is necessary to correct past societal injustice and 35% who say it has generally been more helpful than harmful. Just 16% oppose it and believe it should not be used in college admission.
  - There is relatively broad agreement across the student populace. Outright opposition is highest among conservative students, at 31%, but it is statistically no different to the 29% of conservatives who say affirmative action has generally been more helpful than harmful.
- By a narrow 46% to 44% margin, students believe America is inextricably linked to white supremacy and most minorities remain excluded from the American promise of equality rather than believing America is moving forward and the promise of equality continues to be extended to more people. This has tightened from last year when 50% said linked to white supremacy and 42% said America is moving forward.
- Nearly three in four (73%) agree that systemic racism is a big problem in society today and white people still contribute to it, whether they realize it or not, while 20% disagree. Agreement dropped by five-points since last year.

## Part VI – Gender Issues

*While most students believe gender can be fluid and almost six in ten support mandated preferred gender pronoun use, by a nearly two to one margin, students believe allowing transgender college athletes to participate in a sports league that is different from their assigned gender at birth is an issue of fairness and disadvantages other athletes over believing transgender athletes should be able to participate in whichever gender class they feel more comfortable in.*

- Almost half (48%) say gender can be fluid and 38% say gender is fixed.
  - Nearly seven in ten (68%) liberal students say gender is fluid. Moderate students split, 44% fluid to 42% fixed and 72% of conservative students say gender is fixed.
  - Male students say gender is fixed, 47% to 42%, while female students say gender is fluid, 50% to 32%.
  
- Nearly six in ten (58%) agree that their college or university should require that students, professors and faculty state their preferred gender pronouns when introducing themselves (35% disagree). Overall agreement has increased by seven points since last year.
  - There is a notable difference by class year, as 63% of underclassmen agree compared to a lower 52% of upperclassmen (juniors/seniors).
  
- On the issue of transgender college athletes, by a nearly two to one margin, students believe this is an issue of fairness and while they may support transgender rights, this disadvantages other athletes because there are biological differences between men and women (59%). One in three (32%) believe transgender athletes should be able to participate in whichever gender class they feel more comfortable in. Support for the "fairness" argument has increased by 10-points since last year.
  - By an 82% to 14% margin, conservative students say this is an issue of fairness as do 63% of moderates. Liberal students are deadlocked at 47%.
  - Unlike last year, there are not significant differences by gender, with male students saying fairness 64% to 29% and female students saying fairness 58% to 32%.

## Part VII – Miscellaneous Issues

*More students now say they want to live under socialism than capitalism. Almost half say shoplifting and petty theft are minor crimes that are often victimless. A similar 48% say the Supreme Court is outdated and contributes to the decline of America.*

- A plurality (37%) would prefer to live under socialism over capitalism (31%). A notable 32% were unsure. The preference towards socialism has increased since last year when 33% said socialism and 31% said capitalism.
  - Private school students say socialism 43% to 33%, while public school students are more closely divided, 34% socialism to 30% capitalism.
  - Once again, almost half (49%) of liberal students prefer to live under socialism while 54% of conservatives prefer to live under capitalism. Moderate students split, but are slightly partial to socialism, 34% to 31%.
- Most students (39%) believe they will be financially able to pay off their student loan debt after they graduate. Twenty-eight percent (28%) do not believe they will be able to.
  - Students in private schools are more likely to believe they will be financially able to pay off their debt after they graduate compared to public school students, 45% to 36%, respectively.
  - By major, Healthcare and Business students are most likely to believe they will be able to financially pay off their debt, 46% and 43%, respectively.
- Nearly half (49%) say shoplifting and petty theft are minor crimes that are often victimless and billion-dollar corporations like Target, Walmart and CVS are not harmed by this. A lower 43% say it is wrong to not investigate and prosecute shoplifting and petty theft because they are violating property rights and this practice encourages more crime and law-breaking.
  - By ideology, 60% of liberal students say these are victimless crimes. Moderate students are split at 46% and 59% of conservative students say it is wrong to not investigate and prosecute.
  - Male students by a 47% to 44% say it is wrong to not investigate while female students say these are victimless crimes, 51% to 41%.
- By an 11-point margin, students say the Supreme Court has become nothing more than a partisan institution like Congress, is outdated and contributes to the decline of America (48%) over believing that the Court - even with its flaws - is still important to the system of checks and balances in America government (37%).
  - By ideology, 60% of liberal students say the Court is outdated, as do a plurality of moderates (45% to 40%). Barely a majority (51%) of conservatives say the Court is still important.

## Part VIII – 2024 Presidential Primaries

*Former President Trump has a decisive lead on the Republican side and President Biden leads on the Democratic side, but with only 32% support.*

- Former President Trump has a commanding lead of 40-points in the Republican primary for President. No other candidate reaches double-digits.
- President Biden leads in the Democratic primary for President, but his support is only at 32%.
  - Among moderate Democratic voters, Biden’s vote share diminishes to 22%. Among liberal Democratic voters, it increases to 34%.
  - President Biden has a gender gap, as 39% of male Democrats support him compared to 28% of female Democrats.

**Methodology:** McLaughlin & Associates conducted a national survey of 802 undergraduate students from September 9<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023. All student participants were under the age of 25 and attend either a four-year private or public college or university on a full-time basis. This study’s universe is the “conventional” four-year undergraduate, therefore excluding undergraduates who either attend a two-year school, technical school, junior college or trade school, are over the age of 24 or attend on a part-time basis. All interviews were conducted online and respondents were carefully selected and screened from a nationwide representative platform of individuals who elect to participate in online surveys. Data for this survey have been stratified by age, race/ethnicity, gender and geography using the most recent National Center for Education Statistics Report (2021) to reflect the actual demographic composition of four-year, full-time undergraduate students in the United States. According to the NCES Statistics, there are approximately 7,856,529 undergraduates who fall within these parameters. Because the sample is based on those who initially self-selected for participation rather than a probability sample, no estimates of sampling error can be calculated. However, a confidence interval of 95% was calculated in order to produce an error estimate of +/- 3.5% for the 802 respondents. This error estimate should be taken into consideration in much the same way that analysis of probability polls takes into account the margin of sampling error. The error estimate increases for cross-tabulations. Totals may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding, refusals and the ability for respondents to give multiple answers to certain questions. All surveys may be subject to multiple sources of error, including, but not limited to question wording and ordering, sampling error, coverage error and measurement error. This study is the ninth iteration of our undergraduate research on behalf of the Buckley Institute at Yale.

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