TO: Lauren Noble, Executive Director – The Buckley Institute
FROM: Rob Schmidt, Inquire
Re: National Undergraduate Study – Executive Summary
Date: September 18, 2026

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

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

Students continue to hold the Constitution and the First Amendment in record regard. At the same time, support for speech codes has returned with more students in favor of them than opposed. A majority say their professors make their political leanings clear in the classroom, and more than four in ten would avoid a professor whose publicly stated opinions they disagree with.

- By a 73% to 20% margin, students say the Constitution is a very important document for our country rather than an outdated document. This matches last year's 73% – the highest recorded response in the eight years this question has been asked.
    - Students in state schools (72%) and private schools (77%) are both likely to say the Constitution is important. There is no meaningful ideological split either. 72% of liberal students say it is important, as do 78% of moderate students and 79% of conservative students.
- Eighty-seven percent (87%) say the First Amendment is an important amendment that still needs to be followed and respected in today's society. This is down three points from last year's record 90%, but is the second highest response in the twelve years this question has been asked.
- More students favor than oppose their college or university having speech codes to regulate speech for students and faculty – 49% favor while 44% oppose. The 49% favor score is up five points from last year and is the second highest ever recorded, trailing only 51% in 2023.
    - Liberal students (53%) are the most likely to favor speech codes, followed by moderate students (46%) and conservative students (42%).

  - Among men, 55% favor speech codes and 40% oppose them. Women are evenly split, with 46% in favor and 46% opposed.

- A majority (54%) say they have often felt intimidated in sharing their ideas, opinions or beliefs in class because they were different from those of their professors. This is essentially unchanged from last year's 53%.

  - The ideological dynamic has shifted. Conservative students are now the least likely to often feel intimidated by their professors (47%), compared to 55% of liberal students and 54% of moderate students. Last year, conservative students were the most intimidated group at 59%.

- 53% have often felt intimidated in sharing ideas, opinions or beliefs that were different from their classmates or peers, down from 57% last year.

  - For only the third time in twelve years, the intimidation score for professors (54%) is higher than the score for classmates and peers (53%) – though this is effectively a tie.

- Six in ten (61%) agree that, in general, their professors make their political leanings clear in how they teach, particularly on politically contested issues. One third (34%) disagree.

  - Agreement is higher among students in private schools (69%) than state schools (58%), and among men (69%) than women (55%). There is no ideological divide – 63% of liberal students, 61% of moderate students and 63% of conservative students agree.

- Forty-four percent (44%) of students agree that they would avoid taking a class with a professor who publicly shares opinions they disagree with, while 50% disagree.

  - A majority (55%) of liberal students agree, compared to 33% of both moderate and conservative students.

- Forty-eight percent (48%) of students agree that they cannot bring themselves to be close friends with someone who affiliates with a different political party than them, while an identical 48% disagree. Agreement is up two points from last year and ties the high of 48% recorded in 2023.

    - The ideological gap is wide – 65% of liberal students agree compared to 33% of moderate students and 27% of conservative students.

Part II – Offensive Speech

Both measures of tolerance for offensive speech moved against free expression this year and are now at their highest recorded levels.

- Four in ten (40%) agree that offensive speech should be subject to criminal prosecution, while 52% disagree. Agreement is up seven points from last year and is the highest in the three years this question has been asked.

    - Nearly half (47%) of liberal students agree, compared to 34% of moderate students and only 24% of conservative students.

- Forty-two percent (42%) agree that political comments they disagree with can be harmful to their mental health, while 53% disagree. This is up four points from last year and is the highest reading in the five years this question has been asked.

    - A majority (51%) of liberal students agree, compared to 31% of both moderate and conservative students.

Part III – Hate Speech

A record high two thirds now recognize that hate speech is constitutionally protected. At the same time, agreement that physical violence can be justified in response to hate speech has returned to its all-time high.

- Two thirds (66%) agree that hate speech – no matter how racist or bigoted it is – is still technically protected under the First Amendment as free speech, while 29% disagree. This is up six points from last year and is a record high over the ten years this question has been asked, clearing the previous high of 60% in 2025.

    - Majorities of every key subgroup agree. Agreement is highest among men (76%) and lowest among women (59%).

- By race, agreement is highest among white students (73%), followed by Hispanic students (63%) and black students (62%).

- Forty-six percent (46%) agree that it is sometimes appropriate to shout down or disrupt a speaker on their campus, while 47% disagree. This is down two points from last year's record high of 48%.

    - Nearly six in ten (59%) liberal students agree, compared to only 33% of moderate students and 30% of conservative students.

- Forty-five percent (45%) agree that physical violence can be justified to prevent a person from using hate speech or making racially charged comments, while 50% disagree. Agreement is up six points from last year and ties the all-time high of 45% set in 2023. In 2017, the first year this question was asked, agreement was 30%.

    - A majority (54%) of liberal students agree, compared to 36% of moderate students and 30% of conservative students.

    - By race, agreement is highest among black students (48%) and Hispanic students (47%), compared to 44% of white students.

Part IV – Higher Education and Campus Speech

A majority say the political climate of a school factored into where they chose to enroll, and more than four in ten say their parents' view of that climate impacted their final decision. On the assassination of Charlie Kirk, a majority say nobody should be killed for their political beliefs – but more than one in four say his rhetoric was harmful and that the consequences should not have been a surprise.

- A majority (55%) agree that when they were deciding which college or university to attend, the political climate among the student body and the political values of the school were an important factor in their decision. Four in ten (40%) disagree.

    - Two thirds (67%) of liberal students agree, compared to 48% of moderate students and 39% of conservative students.

    - Students in state schools (58%) are more likely to agree than students in private schools (49%).

- Forty-four percent (44%) agree that their parents' perspectives on the political climate and political values of the schools they considered impacted their final decision, while 52% disagree.

    - Men (49%) are more likely than women (39%) to say their parents' views affected the decision, as are students in state schools (46%) compared to private schools (37%).

    - By race, only 29% of Asian students say their parents' views affected their decision, compared to 42% of white students, 47% of Hispanic students and 52% of black students.

- On the assassination of Charlie Kirk, a slight majority (54%) say that regardless of how someone feels about his rhetoric, nobody should be killed for their political beliefs. A notable 26% say his rhetoric was harmful and threatening to many people and that it should not be a surprise that his words had consequences. Thirteen percent (13%) say his rhetoric was neither harmful nor threatening and that his assassination is a bad sign for public discourse on college campuses.

    - Nearly four in ten (38%) liberal students say it should not be a surprise Kirk's words had consequences, compared to 17% of moderate students and 7% of conservative students.

    - Women (33%) are significantly more likely than men (18%) to say it should not be a surprise Kirk's words had consequences, as are black students (38%) and Hispanic students (32%) compared to white students (21%) and Asian students (19%).

    - Conservative students are the group most likely to say his rhetoric was neither harmful nor threatening, at 31%.

Part V – Economic Systems and Countries

Preference for socialism over capitalism has reached its widest margin ever recorded, driven by a collapse in support for capitalism. On the new country ratings, the United Kingdom is viewed most positively and North Korea most negatively. Israel is rated just about as unfavorably as Iran, while Palestine is viewed nearly as positively as Ukraine.

- By a 42% to 28% margin, students would prefer to live under a socialist economic system rather than a capitalist one. A notable 31% are unsure. This 14-point margin in favor of socialism is the widest recorded in the five years this question has been asked and represents an 18-point swing from last year, when students preferred capitalism by four points.

    - The movement is almost entirely a decline in capitalism rather than a gain for socialism. Support for capitalism fell twelve points from last year (40% to 28%) while socialism rose five points (36% to 42%) and "unsure" rose seven points (24% to 31%).

    - Nearly six in ten (58%) liberal students prefer socialism. Conservative students prefer capitalism 48% to 19%. Moderate students are largely undecided – 50% are unsure, with 28% preferring socialism and 22% capitalism.

    - Men divide evenly – 37% capitalism to 38% socialism – while women prefer socialism 44% to 21%.

- Of the twelve countries rated this year, the United Kingdom is viewed most positively – 64% favorable to 15% unfavorable, a net of +49. Germany follows at +38, then the United States at +32, Palestine at +29 and Ukraine at +29.

    - Six in ten (62%) have a favorable opinion of the United States while 30% have an unfavorable one. Men rate the United States at +52 net favorable compared to +19 among women.

    - North Korea is viewed most negatively at -39, followed by Russia at -31, Iran at -21 and Israel at -20. Israel's rating is statistically indistinguishable from Iran's.

- Israel is rated 27% favorable to 47% unfavorable. Palestine is rated 50% favorable to 21% unfavorable. China (+13), Cuba (+7) and Venezuela (+1) are all rated net positively.

- Among liberal students, Palestine (64% Favorable/16% Unfavorable) is rated more positively than the United States (59% Favorable/37% Unfavorable).

- Forty-seven percent (47%) agree that socialist countries like Cuba and the Soviet Union offer a better economic model than capitalist countries like the United States, while 33% disagree and 20% are unsure. Agreement is up one point from last year.

    - A majority (57%) of liberal students agree, as do 57% of black students. A majority (53%) of conservative students disagree.

- By a 38% to 25% margin, students say Palestine is a better ally for the United States than Israel, with 37% unsure. Last year the margin was 33% to 29%—a nine-point swing toward Palestine.

    - A majority (55%) of liberal students say Palestine, while conservative students say Israel 50% to 17%. Moderate students are largely unsure (54%).

    - Women say Palestine 42% to 20%, while men are more closely divided – 32% Palestine to 31% Israel.

Part VI – Artificial Intelligence

Four in ten students are comfortable using artificial intelligence for significant portions of their coursework, and only one in eight never use it. Very few say they simply trust what it tells them.

- Four in ten (40%) say they are comfortable using AI for significant parts of or all of their coursework—from generating ideas for papers to helping write reports and completing take-home tests. Forty-five percent (45%) say they only use AI to catch minor mistakes such as transcription errors, grammatical mistakes, and typos, and 13% say they never use AI.

    - Men (50%) are substantially more likely than women (33%) to use AI for significant portions of their coursework, as are students in state schools (43%) compared to private schools (34%).

- By major, Mathematics and Engineering students are the highest users at 54%.

- On the reliability of AI, a majority (52%) say they are cautious and periodically double-check the information it provides but rely on it for general direction. Twenty-four percent (24%) are very concerned about accuracy and either regularly check it themselves or opt not to use AI at all, while 22% say they generally trust that the information AI provides is accurate and reliable.

    - Liberal students are the most skeptical—30% are very concerned about accuracy, compared to 16% of both moderate and conservative students.
    - Women (29%) are more concerned about the accuracy of information than men (16%).

Part VII – Miscellaneous Issues

Belief that America is moving forward on equality has fallen to its lowest recorded level. For the first time in four years, more students say the Supreme Court decides cases on the law than say it is a partisan institution. Protest attendance rose, led by anti-ICE demonstrations, which drew more students than any other cause.

- On progress on equality in America, half (50%) say America is inextricably linked to white supremacy and in general most minorities remain excluded from the American promise of equality, while 39% say America is moving forward and the promise of equality continues to be extended to more people. The 39% "moving forward" response is the lowest recorded in the seven years this question has been asked.

    - Two thirds (66%) of liberal students say America is linked to white supremacy, while two thirds (66%) of conservative students say America is moving forward. Moderate students divide 42% forward to 36% white supremacy.

    - By race, majorities of black students (62%) and Hispanic students (60%) say America is linked to white supremacy. White students divide 45% to 43% in favor of "moving forward."

- A majority (53%) continue to say the issue of transgender athletes is one of fairness that disadvantages other athletes, while one third (33%) believe transgender athletes should be able to participate in whichever gender class they feel more comfortable. The 53% "fairness" response is down eight points from last year and is the lowest since 2022, though the decline went almost entirely to "unsure," which nearly doubled from 7% to 13%.

    - More than eight in ten (84%) conservative students say this is an issue of fairness, as do 53% of moderate students. Liberal students divide 47% fairness to 45% whichever gender class.

- For the first time in the four years that this question has been asked, more students say the Supreme Court tries to decide cases based on their understanding of the law regardless of political implications (43%) than say the Court has become nothing more than a partisan institution like Congress where one party is in power and the outcomes are predictable (39%).

    - A majority (56%) of conservative students say the Court decides cases on the law, compared to 44% of liberal students. Men say the Court decides on the law 53% to 31%, while women say partisan institution 44% to 37%.

- Just under half (48%) of students attended a rally or protest in the last year. Anti-ICE demonstrations drew the most students of any single cause (21%), followed by social justice (20%), LGBTQ+ rights (18%), anti-Trump (17%) and pro-abortion rights (16%). Pro-Palestine rallies drew 12%, anti-data center rallies 9%, pro-Trump 9%, pro-life 7% and pro-Israel 3%.

    - Black students were the most likely to have attended a rally of any kind (61%), followed by Hispanic students (53%).

Part VIII – Political Environment and America

Two thirds say they are proud to be an American, and a slight plurality say the country's best days are ahead rather than behind. More than one in five agree that America deserved September 11th. Six in ten continue to disapprove of the job President Trump is doing.

- Two thirds (65%) agree that they are proud to be an American, including 36% who strongly agree. Twenty-nine percent (29%) disagree.
    - Agreement reaches 86% among conservative students and 67% among moderate students, but falls to 62% among liberal students.
    - There is a substantial gender gap – 77% of men agree compared to 57% of women. By race, agreement is highest among white students (72%) followed by black students (62%), Hispanic students (59%) and Asian students (48%).
- If forced to choose, 42% say America's best days are ahead of us and 37% say they are behind us. One in five (21%) are unsure.
    - Nearly six in ten conservative students (59%) say America's best days are ahead of us, compared to 39% of moderate students and 41% of liberal students.
    - Men say ahead of us 55% to 25%, while women say behind us 46% to 32%.
- More than one in five (22%) agree that America deserved September 11th, including 11% who strongly agree. Seven in ten (72%) disagree, including 63% who strongly disagree.
    - Agreement is highest among liberal students (28%), compared to 17% of conservative students and 16% of moderate students, and among men (26%) compared to women (19%).
- By a 58% to 34% margin, students disapprove of the job Donald Trump is doing as President. This is not much different than last year when 33% approved and 62% disapproved of President Trump.

- Sixty-two percent (62%) of conservative students approve, while 62% of liberal students disapprove. Moderate students also disapprove by a 60% to 24% margin.

- By race, disapproval is higher among Hispanic students (74%), Asian students (74%) and black students (70%) compared to white students (46% Approve/44% Disapprove).

- The gender gap remains wide – 47% of men approve compared to only 25% of women.

Methodology: Inquire conducted a national survey of 803 undergraduate students from September 5 to 14, 2026. 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 (2024) 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 8,337,103 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 803 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 twelfth iteration of our undergraduate research on behalf of the Buckley Institute.