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How the Biden-Harris Administration Is Fulfilling Voters' Higher Ed Accountability Wishlist



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Higher education is a hot topic in Washington, with policymakers debating how to ensure that institutions do right by their students and are good stewards of the over \$100 billion in taxpayer dollars they receive each year.¹ In recent Third Way [polling](#) of registered voters coast to coast, we explored voters' views on higher education, what problems they see in the current system, and the strategies they support for effective reform. The takeaway? Voters embrace the Biden-Harris Administration's actions to make institutions across all sectors accountable for their student outcomes and support increased federal policy action to further shore up higher ed's value to students and taxpayers.

Voters Give Most Biden-Harris Higher Ed Policies Two Thumbs Up

In April 2024, Third Way partnered with Global Strategy Group to survey 1,500 registered voters about higher education. Specifically, we asked voters to tell us if they support or oppose higher education policies that have already or could be implemented at the federal level to hold institutions accountable for what they deliver, provide more transparency around outcomes, and help ensure higher education works for all students. Five of the 20 policy options we tested have already been implemented by the Biden-Harris Administration—with each of those polling at over 70% support from voters:

1. 74% support: Providing federal grants for colleges and universities to implement student success initiatives proven to improve retention and graduation rates.

President Biden laid the foundation for a federal college completion fund in the Build Back Better framework, and Congress provided funding to create the Postsecondary Student Success Grant (PSSG) program in 2022. Since then, PSSG has received over \$100 million in Congressional appropriations for evidence-based practices that support student success.² The program has bipartisan and bicameral support, with legislation to permanently authorize ongoing investment in the grant introduced earlier this year.³

2. 74% support: Requiring college accreditors to consider student outcomes, such as graduation rates, loan repayment rates, and post-college employment, as a part of their review of institutions.

Through the negotiated rulemaking process in the spring of 2024, the Department of Education proposed requiring accreditors to set minimum standards and expectations of performance for their institutions related to student achievement and outcomes. Given that accreditors are the gatekeepers to taxpayer-funded Title IV grants and loans and are supposed to serve as watchdogs for institutional quality, the Biden-Harris Administration recognized the need for them to step up to the plate and better ensure quality for students and taxpayers.⁴ The proposed rule is currently in development and will be released in 2025.

3. 74% support: Requiring the Department of Education to publish an annual list identifying college programs that consistently provide low financial returns to students.

As a part of its regulatory efforts, the Biden-Harris Department of Education established a new Financial Value Transparency (FVT) framework, under which all institutions will have to report program-level information related to costs, financial aid, and student outcomes. This information will be available to all students online starting in 2025, and students choosing to enroll in a low-

financial-value non-degree or graduate degree program will be required to acknowledge having viewed the associated warnings before spending Title IV dollars at one of those programs.

4. 73% support: Requiring career training programs to demonstrate their students earn more than the typical high school graduate and have reasonable student debt levels to receive federal financial aid.

The *Higher Education Act* requires that career education programs “prepare students for gainful employment in a recognized occupation” to be eligible for federal funding. The recently finalized Biden-Harris gainful employment (GE) rule requires that career training programs leave their graduates with manageable levels of debt and receive an earnings premium above that of a high school graduate by attending their program.⁵ The rule is slated to take effect in 2025 and will help ensure students are earning a quality credential that opens the door to a well-paying job—not being left worse off than if they had never attended the program.

5. 72% support: Allowing borrowers holding federal loans to have them discharged if the school they attended engaged in fraud, misrepresentation, or illegal conduct or closed suddenly.

The Biden-Harris Administration strengthened the borrower defense to repayment rule, which allows targeted loan forgiveness for students who were defrauded by their institution. After Secretary Betsy DeVos and the Trump Administration received bipartisan rebuke for making this process *more burdensome* for borrowers, the new rule has provided over \$28 billion in discharges to nearly 1.6 million borrowers who had been left in the lurch by their institutions through no fault of their own.⁶ The Biden-Harris Administration’s rewrite of the closed school discharge regulation also allows streamlined loan relief for borrowers who struggle to repay their loans following a precipitous college closure—a protection supported by 69% of voters. Both rules were finalized in 2022, though their effective date has been postponed pending litigation.

Voters Want More Institutional Accountability, Not Less

Voters are open to—and want to see—more accountability in higher education, not less. The amount of taxpayer dollars that higher education receives each year is high, and voters understand that the math doesn’t work when some students are left worse off after attending taxpayer-funded programs than if they had never enrolled at all. They want to see more students completing college and accountability for institutions that don’t deliver positive outcomes or equip students to land jobs that set them up for financial security and an ability to repay their loans. The Biden-Harris Administration has led the charge to ensure students and taxpayers see a return on their investment in higher education and that institutions fulfill their end of the bargain. As a result, many of the policy ideas that excite voters in this area are already in the works—including the

Postsecondary Student Success Grant program, implementing the financial value transparency and gainful employment rules, and updating the borrower defense rule in the best interest of defrauded students.

Conclusion

Voters have a long wish list for accountability and improving value in higher education. While the Biden-Harris Administration has checked several big-ticket items off the list, there's still more to be done to ensure that higher education works for *all* students who are willing to work hard to earn it. The number one reason a student goes to college today is to get a good job and climb the income ladder—and accountability plays a crucial role in ensuring institutions fulfill their end of the bargain for students and taxpayers to make that vision a reality.

ENDNOTES

1. Author's calculation of National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity data, July 2024. <https://sites.ed.gov/naciqi/>. Accessed 24 July 2024.
 2. Dimino, Michelle and Emily Rounds. "Mapping Postsecondary Student Success Grants." *Third Way*, 28 May 2024, <https://www.thirdway.org/blog/mapping-postsecondary-student-success-grants>. Accessed 15 August 2024.
 3. United States, Congress, House. Postsecondary Student Success Act of 2024. Congress.gov, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/7811>. 118th Congress, 2nd Session, House Resolution 7811, introduced 22 March 2024.
 4. Rounds, Emily. "When Will the Watchdogs Bite?" *Third Way*, 6 February 2024, <https://www.thirdway.org/blog/when-will-the-watchdogs-bite>. Accessed 15 August 2024.
 5. Dimino, Michelle. "Q&A: What's in the New Gainful Employment Rule?" *Third Way*, 5 July 2023, <https://www.thirdway.org/blog/q-a-whats-in-the-new-gainful-employment-rule>. Accessed 15 August 2024.
 6. "Biden-Harris Administration Approves \$6.1 Billion Group Student Loan Discharge for 317,000 Borrowers Who Attended The Art Institutes." Press Release, United States Department of Education, 1 May 2024, <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/biden-harris-administration-approves-61-billion-group-student-loan-discharge-317000-borrowers-who-attended-art-institutes>. Accessed 15 August 2024.
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