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How to Talk About Tough Issues in Higher Education



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With more Americans questioning if college is worth it, a national debate roiling around what to do about student debt, and high-profile campus climate challenges in the headlines, 2024 is a consequential election year for higher education. News media suggest the debate on higher ed is inextricably polarized, but the reality is much more nuanced—and to appeal to the mainstream, we must effectively thread the needle to uplift higher ed’s value and focus on policies that can fix what is broken. This memo looks at Americans’ mindset on three key questions:

1. Is college worth it?
2. Is student debt cancellation actually popular?
3. Are colleges really “woke” indoctrination centers?

For each topic, we'll examine data from Third Way's recent public opinion polling to explain the state of play, offer guidance on appealing to voters in the mainstream, and describe how to talk about the most significant higher education issues of 2024.¹ The Third Way Education Team can provide further information or assistance as needed.

Is College Worth It?

What Americans Think

Higher education doesn't send most voters to the ballot box, but it is something they care about and want to see work well. Eighty percent believe that college is valuable; across party lines, Democrats (88%), Republicans (75%), and Independents (74%) feel the same. Voters believe in the opportunities higher ed creates, but perceptions have soured as expected outcomes don't always match reality. Sixty-eight percent recognize that students need new types of degrees to adjust to the changing economy and be successful in the job market, and 64% believe that the pandemic has made institutions less able to keep up with the needs of today's economic reality.

A college degree is one of the most expensive investments an American will make in their lifetime, and 81% of voters believe the cost of college is increasing—and cost drives perceptions of value. Just over half (57%) of voters feel that while pursuing higher education costs money now, it is ultimately worth it. However, 65% believe that in the next decade, fewer high school graduates will pursue higher education because of the perception that it doesn't offer the same value and advantages in the job market as it once did. To shore up that value, voters want to see that the investment is worthwhile—and they want to see accountability when it isn't. Bottom line: 62% want policymakers to provide basic guardrails to ensure students aren't encouraged to take out loans to attend predatory institutions that will leave them worse off than if they hadn't attended at all.

The upshot? There's still room for optimism: 68% believe that higher education has problems but can be fixed with reforms that make changes to what's broken while leaving what works in place—and they *don't* want a complete overhaul of the system. A majority of Democrats (72%), Independents (69%), Republicans (64%), and voters aged 18–44 (63%) share this view. Voters want policymakers to advance value-centered reforms that make it easier to attend college and reap its benefits—focusing on changes that fix what's broken and improve what's lacking.

Appealing to the Mainstream

Keep in mind that the vast majority of voters do not have a four-year college degree and that vocational schools (77%) and public community colleges (75%) have higher favorability ratings than four-year colleges and universities (65%). Avoid the trap of only talking about career pathways that require degrees and emphasize that for students who choose college, schools need to

show the ROI they're providing to prove it's worth the cost. To play up higher education's role in unlocking a secure and stable life for many Americans, zoom in on why most students attend college today—to get a job and be financially secure. ² While higher education plays a crucial role in broadening students' perspectives, voters most want to see improvement in tangible outcomes, like employment in good jobs. Effectively staking out a position that higher education *can* and *should* do all of the above is important—while recognizing at the end of the day, jobs are the priority.

Advice for Talking About Higher Education

- Emphasize that although higher ed costs money now, it is worth it in the long run—a view most voters hold. Uplift education's economic return and how it is both a safe and worthwhile bet: the number one reason students go to college is to get a good job, and college graduates earn upward of \$1 million more over their lifetimes.
- Remember that “college” is not a monolith, and many different types of colleges and training pathways exist. Voters love community colleges and vocational schools, so highlight their role in the ecosystem in addition to four-year colleges and universities. Talking about higher ed from a non-elite perspective and giving credit to community colleges and vocational schools goes far with voters across the political spectrum.
- Voters on both sides of the aisle believe that the federal government and colleges need to do more to help students graduate. Emphasize this agreement as an opportunity for bipartisan reforms and regulation that increase transparency about college outcomes to promote better family-level decisions and hold institutions' feet to the fire to deliver better ROI for students and taxpayers.

Is Student Debt Cancellation Actually Popular?

What Americans Think

Once a fringe idea, debt cancellation has made its way into prevailing policy conversations all the way up to the White House, Supreme Court, and the Department of Education over the last few years. ³ However, that doesn't mean it's popular. Of the 20 policy solutions to improve higher education we tested, it ranked 20th, *or dead last*, with only 53% of voters (70% of Democrats and 35% of Republicans) supporting full federal student loan cancellation—and that isn't the whole story.

Here's the thing about debt cancellation that the mainstream recognizes—*it isn't solving the problems that voters want addressed in higher education*. When putting debt cancellation up against

proposals such as creating more guardrails for students taking out loans or ensuring higher education institutions provide a return on investment for students, these reforms outrun no-strings-attached debt cancellation by over a two-to-one margin (71% vs. 29%). The preference for substantive reforms over just canceling debt holds the majority across age groups, college and non-college graduates, those with and without student debt, and across the political spectrum. Voters support *more* guardrails around loans, and most voters don't want to see complete cancellation of student debt without actions to prevent déjà vu down the line.

There are other targeted, codified loan forgiveness programs that voters support—which the Biden-Harris Administration has delivered on in record numbers. Seventy-two percent of voters support a policy known as borrower defense to repayment, which allows those holding federal loans to have them discharged if the school they attended engaged in fraud, misrepresentation, or illegal conduct.⁴ And voters don't want accountability on loans to be solely retroactive, with 59% wanting to prohibit institutions from accessing federal financial aid going forward if a significant portion of their students cannot repay their loans. The conclusion here is clear—on paper, a slim majority are okay with the idea of full federal student loan cancellation. But when considering the implications of complete cancellation, voters want accountability and fixes to the system instead of a short-term, expensive solution that lacks teeth to fix how we got here in the first place.

Appealing to the Mainstream

Appealing to the mainstream on student loans means threading a thin needle on an issue that has become a litmus test for some on the far left. To take a common-sense approach to a controversial issue, lean into targeted loan cancellation through codified means directed to those most need it—like those defrauded by predatory schools that take advantage of students and taxpayers and Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) for hard-working civil servants and nonprofit employees. Protecting students and borrowers from past and future harm by reducing the amount of student loans going to low-quality programs and ensuring return on investment are mainstream ideas that voters support and policymakers and candidates can proudly champion.

Advice for Talking About Student Loans and Student Debt

- With debt cancellation, there's a lot of nuance, but broad-based debt cancellation advocates leave little room for distinction. Remember that most undergraduates leave college with less than \$20,000 in loans. Redirect the focus to affordability reforms and emphasize that taking on reasonable student debt—particularly to attend lower-cost public universities—can be a wise long-term investment.⁵

- Much of the Biden-Harris Administration's record on canceling student debt was accomplished through legally codified means, like borrower defense for defrauded students and PSLF. As of July 2024, the Administration has approved nearly \$169 billion in relief to almost 4.8 million borrowers—including the largest-ever group discharges in history for borrowers from predatory chains like Corinthian Colleges, which Vice President Harris first prosecuted as California Attorney General. ⁶ This is an excellent opportunity to champion policies that are working and to promote public sector jobs as viable careers for graduates that *do* pay off because of PSLF eligibility. ⁷
- Use cost as a driving force to satiate voters' appetite for change. Canceling loans without making fixes on the front end only perpetuates the “bad” debt cycle we’re in now. Protecting value means addressing ROI through accountability and looking beyond debt cancellation as *the* sole solution.

Are Colleges Really “Woke” Indoctrination Centers?

What Americans Think

Most voters see career outcomes as the primary value-add of going to college. Yet many recognize it should also make students more informed citizens. Being well-informed means learning to understand and appreciate the perspectives of those different than they are and expanding their horizons through interaction with peers who come from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, social classes, and political affiliations. Research shows that a diverse learning environment is an important factor in helping students learn, and many colleges and universities have invested in programs that emphasize diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). ⁸ But DEI has now been co-opted into something it *isn't* and is often weaponized as a symbol of anything culture-war-related (including antisemitism, LGBT issues, and racial justice). And some of the right-wing talking points are sticking and making their way into voters' perceptions of higher ed.

Republicans have put a target on the backs of colleges and universities that fund DEI programs, and voters are connecting the dots between this perceived “wokeness” and higher education value negatively. Fifty-nine percent of voters (78% of Republicans and 41% of Democrats) agree that far-left “woke” ideology and DEI efforts on campuses are reducing the value of education. And when asked if professors and instructors are indoctrinating students with far-left “woke” ideology in classes, 58% of voters agreed—split at 79% of Republicans and 37% of Democrats. Despite diversity being an essential part of the educational experience, colleges and universities are losing in the court of public opinion as the divide widens between the political left and right when it comes to their views on college.

Appealing to the Mainstream

Voters want to see higher education deliver good outcomes for graduates and set them up for personal and career success. It is okay to say—and crucial to highlight—that all students of all backgrounds should have a safe and secure learning environment on college campuses that supports their individual growth and learning. Yet it can also be crucial to recognize the skepticism that some voters may have around DEI and “wokeness” on some college campuses. The concepts of DEI and wokeism easily fan the flames of controversy, limiting productive dialogue on both sides. Bring that message back to the overall goal of academic achievement and positive post-college outcomes to resonate with most voters.

Advice for Talking About DEI and Wokeism

- Draw a straight line for voters that students feeling supported and like they belong is critical to academic success and post-college outcomes. De-emphasizing the terminology of DEI or “woke” and shifting the narrative to “helping students feel connected and supported” to get across the finish line resonates with voters on the right—particularly when the focus is on supporting *all* students.⁹
- Talk about how ensuring that students feel like they belong on campus is a shared responsibility of students, faculty, and staff—with students taking the lead.¹⁰
- When it comes to student protests on campus, emphasize how colleges and universities are meant to support diverse perspectives. Still, that free speech must be balanced with ensuring a safe and secure learning environment for all. As President Biden said in May 2024 regarding the dichotomy these challenges present, “The first is the right to free speech and for people to peacefully assemble and make their voices heard. The second is the rule of law. Both must be upheld.” Frame this issue as both/and, not either/or.

Conclusion

Higher education doesn’t lack its own challenging issues in a consequential election year. Even amidst the myriad policy solutions from the left and right, most voters champion solutions that fix the problems preventing higher education from living up to its full potential. Mainstream voters want solutions that deliver ROI for students and taxpayers, focusing on reforms that fix the issues and keeping the attention on getting students across the finish line and into good-paying jobs along the road to financial security. This mainstream approach helps shore up higher education’s value, champions its benefits to students, and fulfills voters’ desire to see change that makes college work for *all*.

ENDNOTES

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