

POLLING *Published March 4, 2026 · 15 minute read*

Now More Than Ever, Democrats Support Higher Education Reform

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Takeaways

- Democrats support higher education reforms that consider students' earnings after graduation and hold universities accountable for delivering a return on student and taxpayer investment.
- Earnings-based accountability has long been popular among Democrats, and they believe the new earnings threshold will lead to better outcomes for students.
- Democratic voters are tired of the government handing a blank check to colleges and universities and view graduate student lending caps as a key first step toward incentivizing institutions to lower costs.

Voters, lawmakers, and advocates have long been calling for reforms that uplift the value of higher education and the return on investment students receive from their degrees.¹ On both sides of the aisle, majorities of voters agree that the cost of college is a significant concern, and higher education legislation shepherded by Republicans last summer addresses these concerns head-on. In November 2025, Third Way partnered with Global Strategy Group and GS Strategy Group to survey 1,001 voters nationwide on these higher education reforms. Democratic voters believe that these policies will make notable strides toward holding colleges and universities accountable for bringing tuition costs under control and ensuring their students can get good jobs after they graduate, even under the shadow of the deeply unpopular *One Big Beautiful Bill Act* (OBBBA). This memo unpacks key findings and provides messaging guidance for Democratic lawmakers on how to productively discuss the higher education reforms supported by a majority of Democratic voters.

The State of Play for Higher Education

The Value of College Lies in Getting a Good Job

Despite the headlines, voters hold broadly positive views of four-year colleges and universities (67%) and the higher education system overall (58%). When asked about the most important goals of higher education, voters on both sides agree: preparing students

for better jobs than they could get with just a high school diploma and creating a skilled workforce to strengthen the economy are top priorities. And when forced to choose between “setting students up for success in their careers” versus “broadening the perspectives of students to make them better and more informed citizens,” 54% of voters side with career success as the definition of the value of higher education.

While the majority of voters prioritize jobs as a primary goal for higher education, they see colleges and universities falling short of delivering on that promise. On both sides, voters agree on several major problems affecting higher education’s ability to deliver for students:

- 88% believe costs and tuition are too high.
- 77% see too many graduates burdened with student loans.
- 65% think that too many students take out student loans and don’t graduate.
- 59% say that college programs are not adequately preparing students to get good jobs.

Cost is a key uniting factor across party lines, although each side assigns blame differently. Republicans point the finger at colleges and universities themselves for raising costs. Democrats tend to blame the government for providing institutions with no incentive to lower tuition by offering readily available, federally backed student loans. Either way you slice it, there’s broad and bipartisan support (89%) that the government should not be giving colleges and universities a blank check to keep raising tuition.

Voters Want a Bigger Federal Role in Student Success

To address these issues, voters are open to the federal government playing a greater role in making sure students succeed, with eight in ten (80%) agreeing that the federal government could do more to make sure students succeed in higher education. (That’s up from 75% when we asked the same question in March 2024.)² For voters, student success looks like strong postgraduate earnings outcomes and affordable student debt loads. Majorities of voters (61%) across party lines and ideologies want the federal government to provide basic guardrails to ensure that students aren’t encouraged to take out loans to attend college programs that leave them worse off than they would be without the degree.

This connection to college costs and jobs also appears in voters’ perceptions of the value of a degree. Eighty-three percent of voters say that rising student debt has made them worry that higher education is no longer worth pursuing, and 35% of voters disagree that a bachelor’s degree is worth the investment and usually pays off (up from 30% in March 2024). The desire for a strong federal role in ensuring student success and protecting value is clear, especially as voters increasingly question whether college is worth it.

Democrats Give Two Thumbs Up to Earnings-Based Accountability

Earnings-based accountability is an idea Democrats have long supported in principle—and they still do now that it’s the law. An overwhelming number of Democrats—97%—support the statement that “students who graduate from college programs should be able to get jobs that earn more than a high school graduate.” In line with their recognition that too many graduates are burdened with high amounts of student debt, 64% of Democrats support holding colleges and universities accountable for ensuring their graduates can get good jobs and not be left with debt levels they can’t repay. This belief has solidified earnings-based accountability as a cornerstone of Democrats’ approach to higher education reform, offering a common-sense, logical way to evaluate a college program’s economic value.

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Accordingly, Democrats support the earnings-based accountability threshold passed under the reconciliation law. Democrats agree that too many low-value college programs are saddling students with debt and believe the law will hold higher education institutions accountable, leading to better outcomes for students. This support remains even when faced with opposing arguments that earnings outcomes are beyond a college or university’s control. In open-ended responses, voters cited the return on investment in education, post-graduation employment opportunities, and desire for institutional accountability as key reasons for their support.

Talking About Earnings-Based Accountability

Earnings-based accountability is a sea change in higher education for the better. Yet we understand that many voters may still have questions about the nuance, necessitating a way for Democrats to address concerns while still highlighting the benefits for students and taxpayers. To understand why Democrats support the earnings threshold, we message-tested several supportive statements. Arguments that focus on students not being able to pay off debt and the cost of living resonate the most with Democrats:

- **58% of Democrats are convinced:** Too many Americans are held back for years, even decades, because of mounting student debt. This needs to stop. This law protects students by making sure they don’t end up in programs that saddle them with debt without providing a realistic path to pay it off.

- **56% of Democrats are convinced:** As so many of us are being squeezed by the rising cost of living, we should be doing everything we can to make sure that young people can be financially stable. That starts with holding taxpayer-funded colleges and graduate schools accountable for preparing students to get good-paying jobs.

It's no secret that affordability is a top-of-mind issue for voters, and earnings-based accountability helps ensure that college costs are appropriately calibrated with earnings outcomes. When discussing earnings-based accountability, Democrats should maintain a bullseye focus on good jobs that provide economic security. Leaning into the promise of a college degree, recognizing the longstanding challenges of student debt, and returning to earnings-based accountability as a tangible solution to help students see a return on their investment in higher education make for an effective approach. For example:

- One of the main reasons students pay for a college degree is to **get a higher-paying job** than they could without one.
- But right now, **too many Americans are held back for years, even decades, because of mounting student debt**—without a realistic path to pay it off.
- This policy will **hold colleges and graduate schools accountable for preparing students for good-paying jobs** that will allow them to pay back their debt and be financially stable.

It is also important to be clear about the scope of concerns: only 1% of programs fail to meet the earnings threshold. For the 1% of programs that fail, 99% have at least one alternative program in the same state (and 98% have more than one), and 86% have at least one alternative program in the same county or commuting area. ³ At the end of the day, the number of failing programs is tiny—and 65% of Democrats agree that this shift will help colleges improve their programs and career services, while empowering students to choose programs that will pay off.

- **When opponents say:** “Earnings alone do not tell the whole story of whether a program is valuable because many fields, such as those in public service or liberal arts, do not pay a lot, yet are important for society.”
- **Respond with:** “Exceedingly few programs in these fields actually fail a high school earnings test. For the few that do, institutions should be held to account for ensuring that students with a college degree are not left earning poverty-level wages. This policy can help colleges *improve* their programs while *empowering* students to choose programs that will pay off.”

Democrats Support Graduate Student Loan Reform to Address Student Debt

There's long been bipartisan agreement that graduate student loan policy was not working. The Department of Education sounded the alarm in 2023 that loans to graduate students were soon to comprise over 50% of the federal student loan portfolio, with alarmingly little reliable data on the return on investment associated with graduate programs.⁴ Reforms came to fruition in the same legislation last summer: to address high-cost programs with low ROI that left graduate students with unaffordable debt, Congress repealed the Graduate PLUS (Grad PLUS) lending program, which previously allowed graduate students to borrow up to the cost of attendance set by their institution.

Democrats recognize that student loan debt remains a pressing issue and that graduate students' postgraduate outcomes don't always align with the cost of their programs. Over two-thirds (66%) of Democrats support moving away from unlimited borrowing for graduate students through the Grad PLUS program and instituting borrowing caps that help prevent overborrowing. Those who support the loan caps cite debt prevention, loan repayment ability, and more affordable tuition/cost control as the top three reasons for their support of graduate student lending reforms.

Reducing the amount of federal loans can trigger concerns about access to graduate programs, especially for students with greater financial need. Still, when asked which argument they agreed with more: that reasonable loan caps will force institutions to lower costs while preventing students from taking on debt they can't repay, or that loan caps will prevent access for lower-income students or students of color, a majority of Democrats side with the former. Fifty-seven percent of moderate Democrats, 54% of left-leaning Democrats, and 54% of Black voters believe that cracking down on unlimited loans and setting reasonable limits will help prevent students from taking out loans they'll have trouble repaying, and this outweighs their concerns about constrained access.

The likelihood of increased reliance on private student loans is another reason some Democrats have expressed concerns about caps on graduate student lending. While private lending should be viewed with caution and certainly isn't a magic fix, Democratic voters aren't writing it off entirely as an option within the student loan market.⁵ When asked about their take on the private student loan market, a plurality of Democrats (49%) acknowledge that "we can and should put more guardrails in place to protect consumers in the private loan market, but curbing unlimited borrowing is an important first step in getting the cost of tuition under control and protecting students from taking on endless debt."

Talking About the Graduate Student Loan Caps

While both parties have long agreed that the Grad PLUS loan program wasn't working, Democrats could still face tough questions about graduate student loan reform. There's an added complication for Democrats in the student loan reform debate: some Democrats who previously supported cancelling student debt now may be inclined to oppose loan caps. Those Democrats will have to decide if student debt is a burden that must be cancelled or a critical component of access to higher education that must be fully restored. ⁶ To help navigate this landscape, we message-tested several supportive statements about the graduate student lending caps to see which resonated most strongly with Democrats. Messaging that highlights institutions' blank check from the federal government through graduate lending and zeroes in on protecting students from unaffordable debt helps clarify support among Democrats:

- **52% of Democrats are convinced:** Higher education institutions have jacked up tuition in recent years because they know graduate students can just take out unlimited taxpayer-funded loans to cover it. To finally get tuition under control, the government needs to stop giving colleges a blank check.
- **50% of Democrats are convinced:** The law protects students by making sure they don't take on a huge amount of debt that they cannot repay.

Building on the prevailing view that the student loan system fails to provide colleges and universities with sufficient incentives to lower costs, it is helpful to ground conversation about graduate student debt and lending caps in the government's role to hold institutions accountable. For example:

- To finally get graduate school tuition under control, **the government needs to stop giving higher ed institutions a blank check.**
- Graduate programs have jacked up tuition in recent years because they know graduate students can just take out **unlimited taxpayer-funded loans to cover it.**
- Loan limits **incentivize lower tuition** by ending that practice, and **protect students** by ensuring they don't take on unaffordable debt.

It is also important for educational messaging to acknowledge that the bill does not prevent colleges themselves from providing extra financial aid to low-income students. Fifty-five percent of Democrats agree that the policy change is about ensuring students are not saddled with unreasonable debt for their entire lives, not about ending access to a great education. Emphasize that loan caps give institutions an incentive to lower tuition that they've never had before—and that benefits students and taxpayers.

- **When opponents say:** “Capping federal graduate loans will limit access to graduate school for lower-income students of color, blocking those students from pursuing high-paying professions and making income inequality worse.”
- **Respond with:** “The purpose of capping loans is to hold schools accountable for lowering their tuition and reducing the need for students to borrow money in the first place. In fact, law schools have already started publishing their tuition for the next school year. Since the law capped borrowing at \$50,000 a year, a few schools are already starting to lower their tuition by more than \$10,000.”

Critics are also concerned that these loan caps may encourage some students to turn to the private student loan market. This concern is legitimate—and Democrats can acknowledge the risks of the private market while also advocating for additional guardrails in private student lending to benefit students. It is also productive to remind critics that loan caps will go a long way toward addressing the ballooning federal student loan portfolio.

- **When opponents say:** “Loan caps will push students into the private loan market, where they take on more risk, are less protected, and pay higher interest rates, plus many lower-income students may not qualify for these loans at all.”
- **Respond with:** “We can and should put more guardrails in place to protect consumers in the private loan market, but curbing unlimited federal borrowing is an important step in getting the cost of tuition under control and protecting students from taking on exorbitant debt.”

Finally, recent criticisms of loan limits focus on their potential impact on health care professionals, particularly nurses.⁷ The overall effect on nursing programs is small and primarily impacts the most expensive programs. Even so, Democrats are likely to face questions about graduate student loan reform and the impacts on health care professions.

- **When opponents say:** “The Department of Education is reclassifying nurses as unprofessional and lowering the amount that they can borrow to attend graduate nursing programs.”
- **Respond with:** “Referring to degrees as ‘professional’ can be sensitive because it speaks to how people see themselves, their training, and the value of their work. We need to have real conversations about how different fields are recognized and compensated. At the same time, we can’t ignore the reality that these loan limits will mostly affect high-cost graduate programs, where too many students are being pushed into debt that their salaries in the fields they are entering can’t sustain. Setting reasonable caps is about protecting borrowers and ensuring their education leads to opportunity, not long-term financial strain.”

Conclusion

For Democrats, there's a lot not to like in OBBBA, but the higher education provisions are not only liked but also sincerely popular. That popularity reflects longstanding efforts across party lines to center college value and address challenges with unlimited graduate student borrowing. While it's tempting to criticize partisan legislation wholesale, Democrats would be wiser not to dismiss productive education reforms based solely on the vehicle in which they passed, and instead focus on how the changes will begin to protect students from overborrowing and hold colleges and universities accountable—in ways that can be built on in the future.

Methodology

Global Strategy Group and GS Strategy Group conducted an online survey of 1,001 voters nationwide from November 4 to 9, 2025. The margin of error is +/- 3.1%.

To view the topline results, [click here](#).

ENDNOTES



- 1.** Cecil, Ben. “Voters Want Less Talk and More Action on Higher Ed Value.” *Third Way*, 14 May 2024, <https://www.thirdway.org/report/voters-want-less-talk-and-more-action-on-higher-ed-value>. Accessed 21 November 2025.
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- 3.** Rounds, Emily. “Earning Their Keep: Better Alternatives Abound Near Programs That Fail the Earnings Threshold.” *Third Way*, 2 December 2025, <https://www.thirdway.org/blog/earning-their-keep-better-alternatives-abound-near-programs-that-fail-the-earnings-threshold>. Accessed 24 February 2026.
- 4.** Monarrez, Tomás and Jordan Matsudaira. “Trends in Federal Student Loans for Graduate School.” *US Department of Education, Office of the Chief Economist*, 2023 August, [https://assets.arnoldventures.org/uploads/PDFs/OCE Graduate Debt Report.pdf](https://assets.arnoldventures.org/uploads/PDFs/OCE_Graduate_Debt_Report.pdf). Accessed 21 November 2025.
- 5.** Cecil, Ben. “Privatizing Student Loans Isn’t a Silver Bullet.” *Third Way*, 31 March 2025, <https://www.thirdway.org/memo/privatizing-student-loans-isnt-a-silver-bullet>. Accessed 21 November 2025.
- 6.** Akers, Beth. “Democrats, Student Debt Can’t Be Both the Problem and the Solution.” *American Enterprise Institute*, 12 February 2026, <https://www.aei.org/education/democrats-student-debt-cant-be-both-the-problem-and-the-solution/>. Accessed 24 February 2026.

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