

POLLING *Published June 26, 2026 · 11 minute read*

Shining the Spotlight on Regional Public University Students

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Takeaways

- Regional public universities (RPUs) are where access and opportunity meet—providing an affordable education with high ROI for nearly 70% of US college students each year.
- Even though RPU students recognize their school’s relative affordability, nearly four in five worry that a financial emergency could prevent them from completing their degree, and over half are working full-time while attending school.
- RPU students feel like they belong on campus. Two-thirds reported both feeling a sense of community at their school and having at least one friend with a different political opinion than their own.

The United States has nearly 4,000 degree-granting four-year colleges and universities.¹ Yet because attention often centers on the handful of elite universities that top the college rankings, it can be easy to overlook regional public universities (RPUs), which educate nearly 70% of all US college students each year.² Despite the scale of their impact, they often get less airtime from policymakers and the media—and they often have fewer resources than other types of colleges. These institutions do more with less, serving college students from all backgrounds while balancing affordability and value to deliver a strong return on investment upon graduation.³

Recognizing the important role of RPUs in the higher education system, we wanted to learn more about what students at these institutions think of the quality of their education and their overall campus experience. In April 2026, Third Way partnered with GS Strategy Group to survey 500 current RPU students about their views on higher education and their college experiences. To highlight a sector of colleges and universities that don’t often generate headlines, this memo unpacks key facts about who RPU students are and how they perceive their college or university is doing in delivering value and helping them reach their full potential.

RPU Students Reflect Their Local Communities

Regional public universities are often referred to as “anchor institutions”—a term that reflects their role in driving economic growth, supporting social mobility, and serving the communities in which they are located. ⁴ Because of this symbiotic connection, RPUs are representative of the communities that they serve. Far from the image of college students packing up the U-Haul and moving across the country for school, research shows that students overwhelmingly attend college close to home, with 69% attending college within 50 miles of where they grew up. ⁵

RPUs answer this call to serve students in their local communities as broad-access institutions—meaning they make it their mission to serve all students, many of whom are the first in their families to attend college, rural students, and veterans, among other demographic groups, trends mirrored in participant demographics in our survey: ⁶

- 86% of students are attending an RPU in the same state where they grew up or went to high school.
- 56% of RPU students are female, and 53% of RPU students are non-white.
- 48% of RPU students report attending religious services regularly. In total, 57% are Christian (including Catholic, non-denominational Christian, Protestant, and Latter-Day Saint), 20% are atheist or agnostic, 4% are Muslim, and 2% are Jewish.
- 38% of RPU students are the first generation in their families to get a college degree.

Overall, RPU students in this sample report positive experiences on campus and believe their campuses foster environments that help them succeed. Nearly nine in ten (87%) RPU students say they have two or more close friends, and 75% feel a sense of community at their school. They also largely believe that their college or university is committed to their success, with one participant noting that “my school actually helps us get resources we need in order to meet our educational goals.”

“[My school] gives me a sense of belonging and helps me reach my full potential.”

RPUs Deliver on Affordability

RPUs often receive less per-student funding than other public four-year institutions. Yet they consistently demonstrate a commitment to access and affordability in higher education, delivering some of the strongest returns on investment and serving as engines of economic and social mobility. ⁷ In Third Way’s most recent Economic Mobility Index, all the top 10 institutions delivering the best returns for low-income students are regional public universities. ⁸

Considering their school’s cost compared to other colleges and universities, 44% of RPU students sampled said it was typical, while 32% said it was less expensive. When asked about what makes their school different from other colleges or universities, one student noted that their RPU is “more welcoming and affordable than any other, and I wouldn’t choose to go anywhere else,” while another noted that their school “provides a cheaper alternative for an education and I can afford to live without loans.”

Sixty-eight percent of current RPU students in our sample took out some form of loan to help them pay for school, while 29% are attending their current college or university without borrowing at all. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities found that the average in-state tuition and fees for RPUs is about \$10,000, nearly \$2,000 less than the average cost of \$11,950 for in-state students at all public four-year institutions. ⁹ While college costs vary widely across states, RPUs often provide the best bang for a student’s buck.

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Even So, Financial Pressures Are Top of Mind for RPU Students

Compared with other options, RPUs are typically a more affordable way to pursue higher education. However, that doesn’t exclude RPU students from the same cost-of-living and affordability concerns shared by most Americans. ¹⁰ When asked about their current financial situation, a majority (52%) of students described themselves as “just getting by,” compared to 34% who said they live “comfortably,” and 13% who noted that they are “finding it difficult to get by.” The sentiment of “just getting by” spans student populations

across racial groups and majors. Seventy-seven percent of students—nearly four in five—are concerned that a financial emergency will prevent them from continuing their college education.

77% of RPU students—nearly four in five—are concerned that a financial emergency will prevent them from continuing their college education.

That financial pressure also appears in students' reported usage of campus resources that support basic needs. We asked students whether they had used, heard of but not used, or never heard of various resources, and over half of students had heard of each (but had not used them)—indicating that colleges and universities have made strides in informing students about campus-based supports.

- **Campus food pantry:** Overall, 37% of students had used their campus food pantry. Among students who feel that they are “just getting by” or having “difficulty getting by,” 68% mention having used this resource.
- **SNAP, TANE, or food stamps:** While the federal government funds public benefits like SNAP or TANE, there can be challenges at the state level for eligible students to access these benefits. ¹¹ Thirty-two percent of all students, and 42% of those who feel they are having “difficulty getting by”, identified using these resources.
- **Emergency housing support:** Twelve percent of students have used emergency housing support through their college or university.

RPU Students Are Balancing School and Life

If asked to picture a “typical” college student, many people might imagine a young adult starting a four-year degree program straight after high school. This may be the case for some RPU students. Still, respondents reported navigating competing priorities while attending college, such as working and caring for children or other family members:

- **71%** of students are working while attending school (54% work part-time, while 17% work full-time).
- **17%** have children under 18 and/or are caregivers for their parents or another family member (**16%**).
- **36%** live on campus and **32%** live off-campus (alone, with roommates, or at home with their families). While living at home can offer potential cost savings for students, it also comes with additional day-to-day responsibilities unique to their circumstances.

RPU Students See AI As a Double-Edged Sword

While RPU students believe their school is preparing them well for their future careers, they are also increasingly concerned about the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on the overall job market. Recent Gallup polling found that AI is already a routine part of students' academic work, regardless of their institution's stance or AI policies.¹² This sentiment was echoed in our findings:

- **37%** of students reported using AI like ChatGPT or Claude daily (with 20% saying they use AI multiple times a day).
- AI usage is more concentrated among students majoring in engineering (49%) and business (41%) than among those majoring in liberal arts (31%) and social sciences (26%).
- At the same time, **35%** of students reported rarely or never using AI. **61%** of students are concerned that AI will eliminate or significantly impact their career paths, a concern felt most acutely by those majoring in social sciences (70%) and business (65%).

What The Media Gets Right and Wrong About College

RPU students largely believe (87%) that mainstream media coverage of college life in 2026 is accurate. When asked about where they get most of their news and information, 38% indicated TikTok, followed next by Instagram at 24%. This is echoed by 84% of students who mention watching TikTok videos or Instagram reels daily, with 52% indicating they watch multiple times per day. Beyond these platforms, fewer students get news and

information from outlets such as *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal* (13%), X/Twitter (11%), cable news like Fox or MSNBC (7%), or local TV stations (6%).

Even though students believe that coverage of college life is largely accurate, they also think much of it misses the mark in key ways. When asked what the media gets wrong, RPU students identified an overemphasis on partying, a misunderstanding of the levels of stress they face, and a misperception about the amount of free time they have. In open-ended responses, one student noted that there's a misunderstanding about "how much work college students actually do." Another referenced that "the media often portrays college life as one endless party ... in reality, college involves a heavy workload of lectures, assignments, group projects, and exams, with many students juggling part-time jobs, financial stress, and real academic pressure." The same student also referenced challenges with relationships and mental health, saying "friendships and romance require genuine effort amid busy schedules, and loneliness or mental health challenges are common but rarely shown."

“Not everyone experiences the classic residential campus with Greek Life or wild spring breaks—many are commuters, non-traditional students, or attending colleges where the 'Animal House' lifestyle simply doesn't apply.”

RPU Students Care About Politics, But Aren't Hyperpolitical

There's an age-old stereotype that all college students are as liberal as they come. And sure, 45% of RPU students in our survey identified as Democrats, compared to 30% as Independents and 19% as Republicans. These students also care about politics, with 39% acknowledging that, on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 indicating they are guaranteed to vote), they are a 10 in their likelihood to vote in November's general election. Even with that drive

to participate in the political process, students are disenchanted and have unfavorable views across the board: 69% hold unfavorable opinions of President Trump, 62% of the Republican Party, 34% of the Democratic Party, and nearly 20% dislike both President Trump and the Democratic Party simultaneously.

On campus, a plurality (40%) of students describe their political beliefs as moderate. They view the broader campus similarly, estimating nearly equal shares of liberals (35%) and moderates (34%) among their peers. Sixty-three percent of students said that they have at least one friend with a different political opinion than theirs—a sentiment felt by 81% of Republican students, 61% of Independent students, and 58% of Democratic students. As one student noted when asked what the media gets wrong about college life, “it’s not as politically divisive.” And while it’s easy to believe the stereotype that college students spend more time protesting than in the library, a majority (74%) told us that they’ve never attended a political protest on their campus. To the same question about what the media gets wrong, another student said, “The protests are based in history, but they’re not the norm. Most days, people just go to class and go back home and maybe hang out with friends a little bit in between.”

While it’s easy to believe the stereotype that college students spend more time protesting than in the library, a majority (74%) told us that they’ve never attended a political protest on their campus.

Conclusion

Our cultural obsession with highly selective universities has created an unrealistic picture of who today’s college students really are and the types of institutions they attend. Despite being the place where access and opportunity meet, regional public universities have largely been under the radar, working hard to deliver affordable education that leads to

well-paying jobs. With calls on both sides of the aisle for higher education reform, regional public universities offer a blueprint for moving forward and restoring public trust and value in higher education: fulfilling students' educational goals at an affordable price, supporting all students from different backgrounds and life experiences well, and providing the ROI that students and taxpayers crave.

Methodology

GS Strategy Group conducted an online survey of 500 regional public university students from April 2 to 6, 2026. Regional public universities were identified using the typology created by Dr. Cecilia Orphan.¹³ The margin of error is +/- 4.38%.

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

ENDNOTES



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- 7.** American Association of State Colleges and Universities. “Issue Summary: Regional Public Universities.” <https://aascu.org/resources/issue-summary-regional-public-universities/>. Accessed 18 May 2026.
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