

Leadership Under Pressure: How Higher Ed Is Responding To Mounting Challenges

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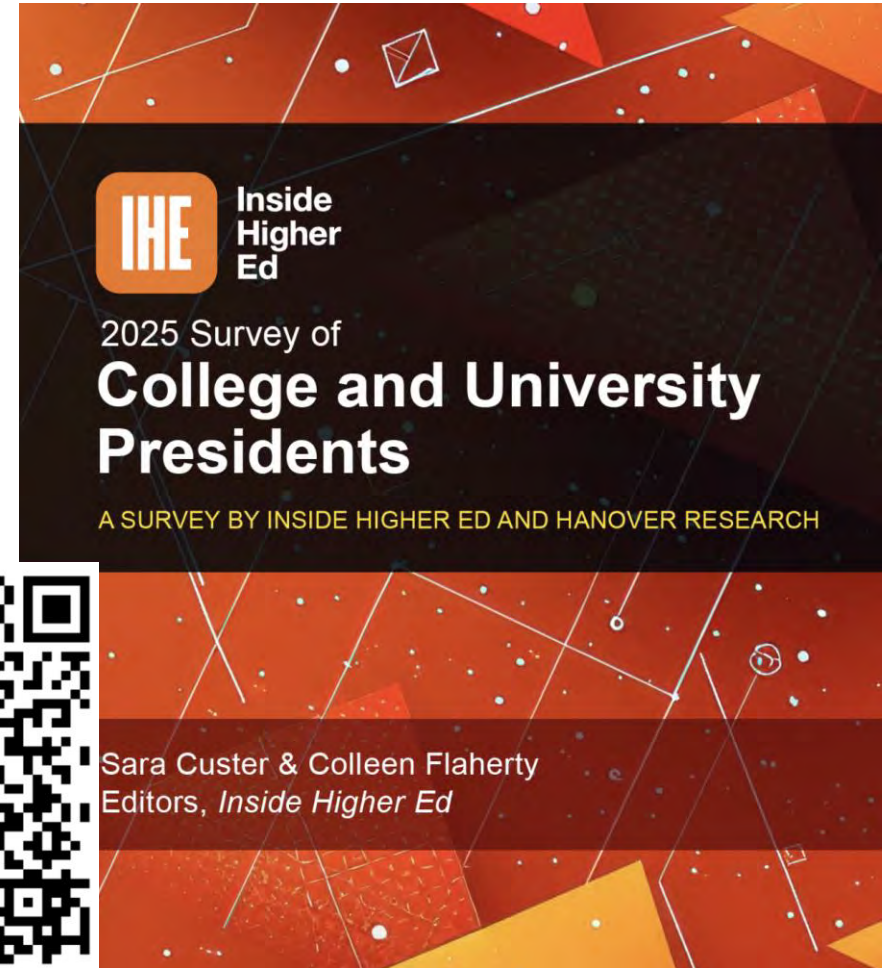
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About the Survey

IHE's 15th annual survey of presidents

- Partnered with Hanover Research
- Fielded December-January 3
- 298 responses (2-yr/4-yr, public/nonprofit private)
- 10% response rate



Presidents on: The Financial Outlook

Presidents (all) express their level of agreement with the following statements on financial stability:

● Strongly disagree ● Somewhat disagree ● Neither agree nor disagree
● Somewhat agree ● Strongly agree



Bottom line:

Most presidents are confident in their institution's financial stability, with presidents of publics especially confident.

Numbers to know:

89% vs. 83%: Public vs. nonprofit private institution presidents who somewhat or strongly agree their institution will be financially stable over the next 5 years

77%: Private nonprofit baccalaureate institution presidents who somewhat or strongly agree their institution will be financially stable over the next 5 years

71%: Presidents (all) who somewhat or strongly agree their institution will be better off financially a year from now, with many expecting enrollments to increase

Presidents on: Mergers & Acquisitions

Presidents, by sector, who say senior leaders (including governing board members) at their institution have had serious internal discussions in the last year about merging with another college or university:



Bottom line:

19% of presidents report having serious internal discussions about mergers in the last year, about the same share as the year prior.

Numbers to know:

27%: Presidents in the Northeast who say they've had serious merger talks in the last year

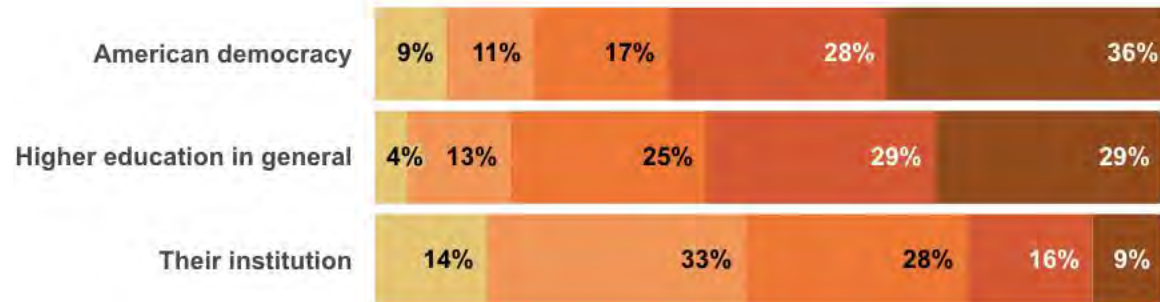
2% vs. 17%: Public vs. private nonprofit institution presidents who say it's somewhat or very likely their college or university **will merge into or be acquired** by another in the next 5 years

9% vs. 33%: Public vs. private nonprofit institution presidents who say it's somewhat or very likely their institution **will acquire** another college or university in the next five years

Presidents on: Politics, Policy and the Election

Presidents (all) indicate their level of concern about the growing education divide in the U.S. and its implications for the following:

● Not at all concerned ● Somewhat concerned ● Moderately concerned
● Very concerned ● Extremely concerned



Bottom line:

Relatively few presidents expect the new Trump administration to have any kind of positive impact on higher ed as a whole, across a swath of issues.

Numbers to know:

80%: Presidents (all) who say Trump 2.0 will have a somewhat or significantly negative impact on the climate for DEI across higher ed

71%: Presidents (all) who say Trump 2.0 will have a somewhat or significantly negative impact on the financial outlook across higher ed

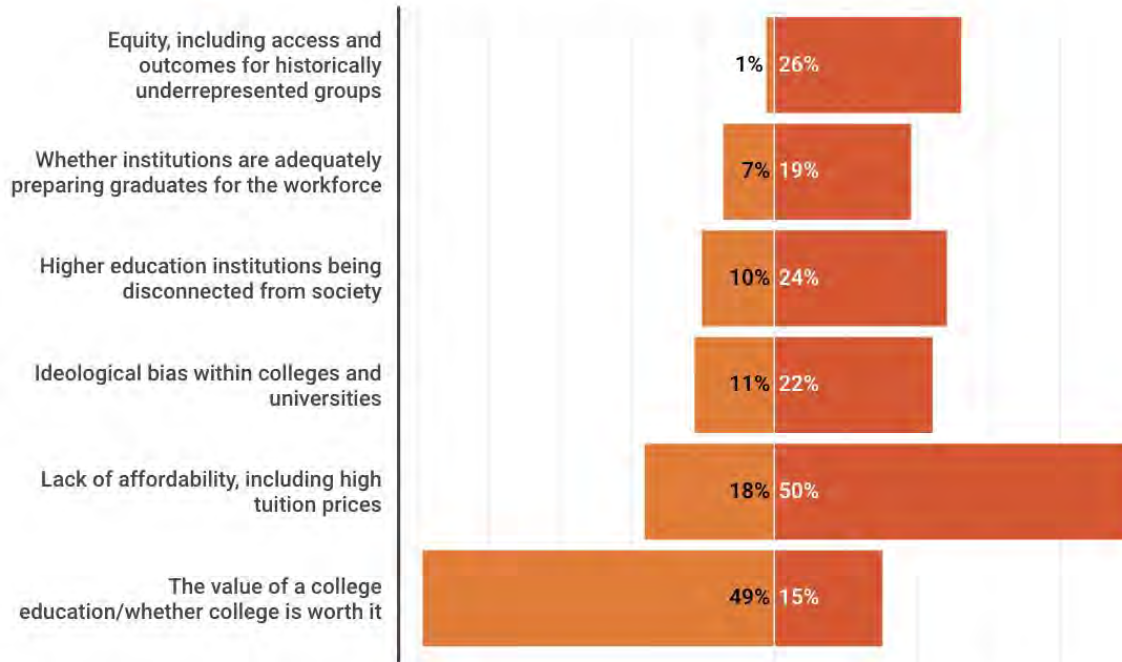
38%: Presidents (all) who say Trump 2.0 will have a somewhat or significantly negative impact on their institution's ability to carry out its mission

8%: Presidents (all) who support eliminating the Education Dept.

Presidents on: Public Perceptions of Higher Ed

Presidents (all) on what's driving declining public confidence in higher education and whether such concerns are founded, in their view:

- Presidents who most attribute declining public confidence in higher education to concerns about this*
- Presidents who say public concerns about this are very or extremely valid



*1% of respondents say they don't believe confidence in higher education is declining, and 4% choose "other."

Bottom line:

Presidents are most likely to attribute declining public confidence in higher ed to concerns about whether college is worth it, but they're more concerned about affordability—and largely feel higher ed has failed to respond effectively to public trust concerns.

Numbers to know:

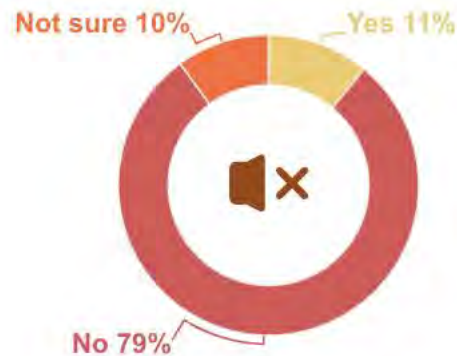
1%: Presidents (all) who say higher ed has been very or extremely effective at responding to declining public confidence

3%: Presidents (all) who say higher ed has been very or extremely effective at responding to the growing education divide

67% vs. 49%: Private nonprofit vs. public institution presidents who say higher ed has been **not at all** effective at responding to declining public confidence

Presidents on: Campus Speech

Presidents whose college or university does not have an institutional neutrality policy (n=184) say whether it's considering adopting one:



Bottom line:

Presidents rate their college's speech climate highly. Still, **52%** of public and **37%** of private nonprofit institution presidents say they've updated campus speech policies in the last 18 months.

Numbers to know:

85% vs. 39%: Presidents (all) who say the speech climate at their college is good or excellent vs. those who say same of higher ed as a whole

79%: Presidents (all) who indicate their institution has taken step(s) to educate students, faculty and/or staff on speech issues/civil dialogue in the last 18 months

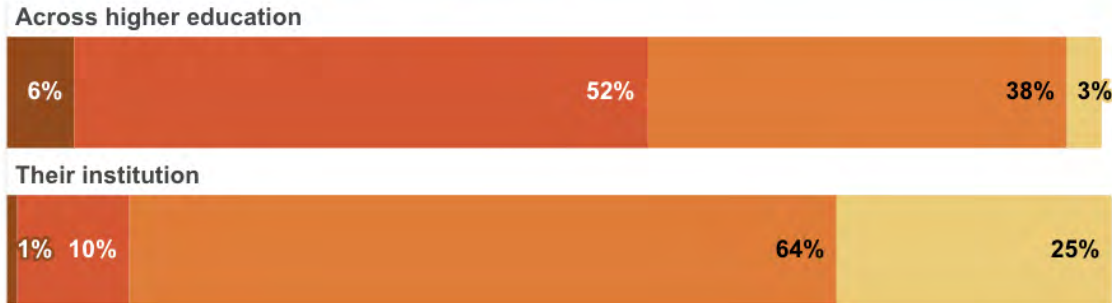
29%: Presidents (all) who report having an institutional neutrality policy

70%: Presidents (all) who most blame politicians for escalating tensions around campus speech; few blame students

Presidents on: Race on Campus

Presidents (all) rate the state of race relations on their campus vs. colleges and universities in general:

● Poor ● Fair ● Good ● Excellent



Bottom line:

Presidents tend to rate the climate for race relations on their campus highly. But institutions that previously practiced affirmative action may be struggling to maintain racial diversity, relative to the overall sample.

Numbers to know:

88% vs. 59%: All presidents vs. just those whose institution previously practiced race-based admissions (n=22) who say they've been able to maintain/increase previous levels of student diversity since 2023's U.S. Supreme Court decision on affirmative action

10%: Presidents (all) who say their institution has curtailed DEI efforts beyond just admissions in response to the Supreme Court's decision; those in the South and Midwest are likeliest to say so

Presidents on: AI

Presidents (all) on whether their college or university has an institutionwide AI task force and/or strategy:



Bottom line:

57% of presidents are somewhat or very optimistic about AI's growing impact on higher ed, up slightly from last year. Just over half say their institution has a campuswide strategy or task force on AI.

Numbers to know:

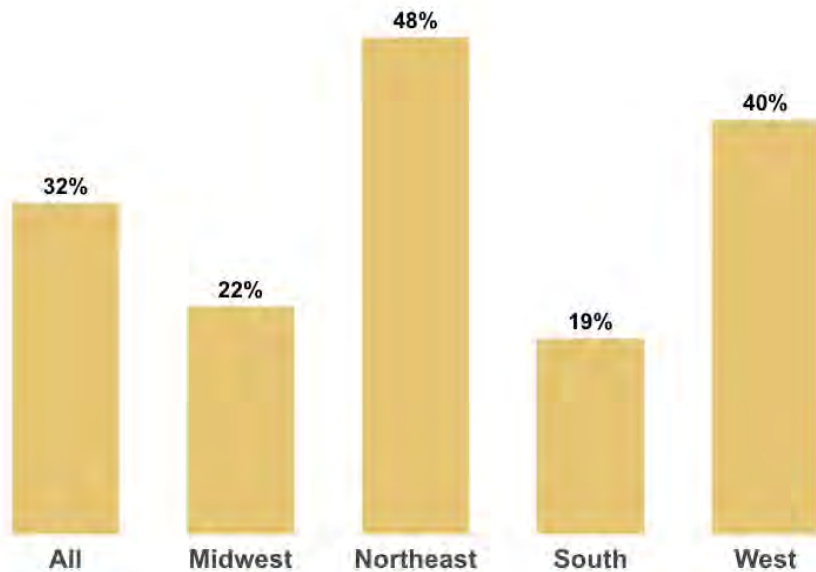
51% vs. 28%: Presidents (all) who somewhat or strongly believe that their institution is responding appropriately and adeptly to the rise of AI vs. those who say the same of higher ed as a whole.

53%: Presidents (all) who say their institution is using chatbots, making this the No. 1 use of AI again this year

21% vs. 8%: Presidents (all) who last year said their institution wasn't using AI in any capacity, vs. those who say the same this year

Presidents on: Environmental Sustainability

Presidents, all and by region, who say their institution has set specific climate-related or environmental sustainability goals:



Bottom line:

30% of presidents say sustainability is very or extremely important to their institution's strategic priorities and goals, with those in the Northeast and West most likely to say so.

Numbers to know:

34%: Presidents (all) who say their institution has a designated senior administrator responsible for institutional sustainability initiatives.

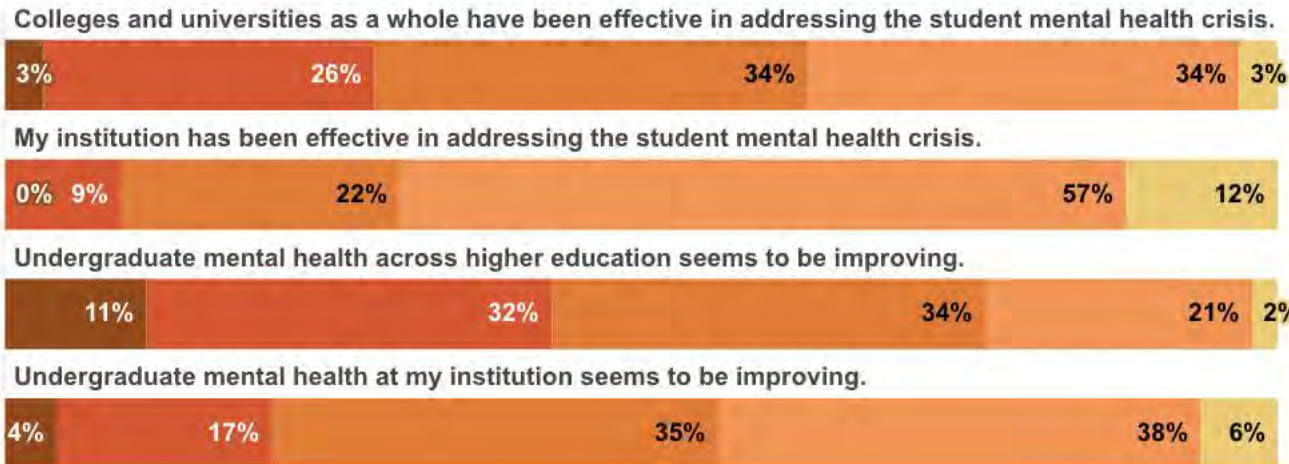
84%: Presidents (all) who indicate their institution has taken at least one of a list of steps to address climate change and sustainability concerns; renovating campus buildings is the most popular action

24%: Presidents (all) who say their institution has incorporated climate literacy into the curriculum

Presidents on: Campus Health and Wellness

Presidents (all) share their level of agreement with the following statements about student mental health:

● Strongly disagree ● Somewhat disagree ● Neither agree nor disagree ● Somewhat agree
● Strongly agree



Bottom line:

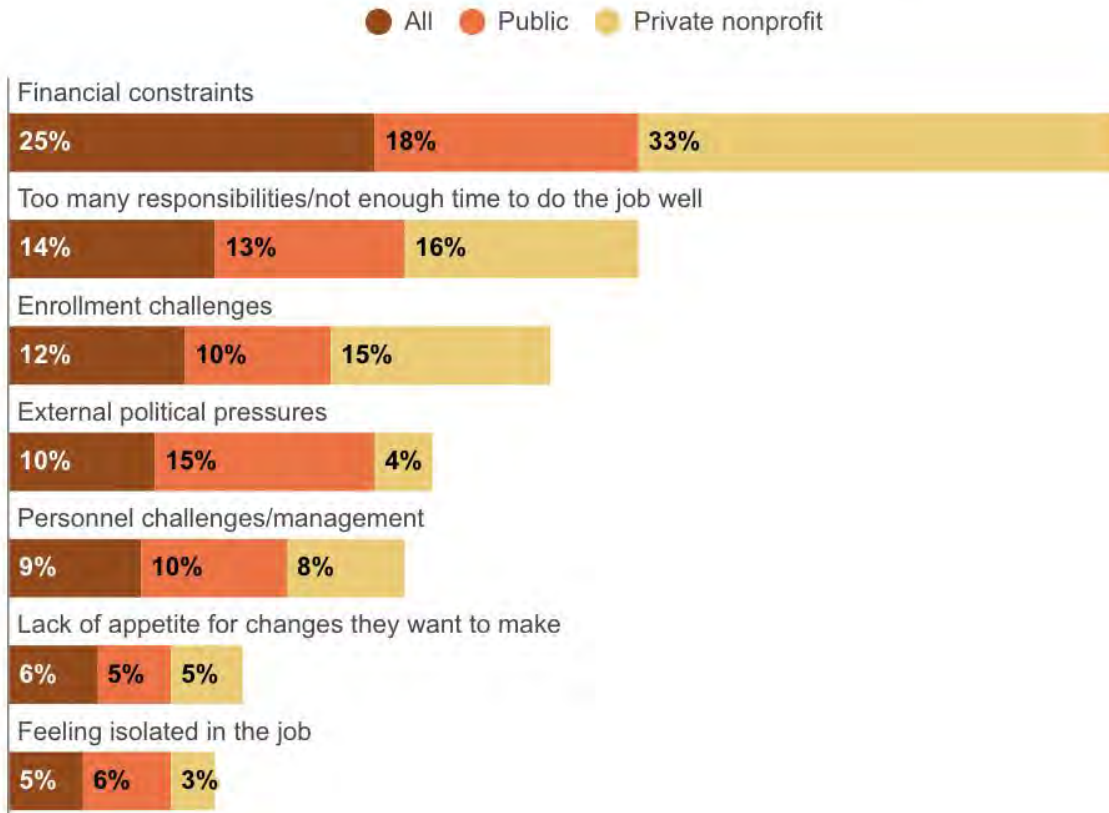
Most presidents say their institution is doing a good or excellent job promoting student health and wellness, including mental health (**81%**) and overall well-being (**78%**). They see more room for improvement on promoting students' physical health (**57%**) and financial literacy (**42%**). At the same time, presidents don't largely feel that student mental health is improving.

Number to know:

78%: Presidents (all) who say their institution emphasized the importance of social connection and/or created new opportunities for campus involvement in the last 12 months

Presidents on: Management, Governance & Being a President

Presidents, all and by sector, on what's the hardest part of being a college or university president today*:



*Chart excludes less popular choices, such as governing board relations

Bottom line:

Presidents have mixed feelings about the job, with **89%** somewhat or strongly agreeing they enjoy being a president. Most at least somewhat agree the governing board at their institution sufficiently supports them but a majority are concerned about politicians' efforts to influence institutional strategy. And just **56%** somewhat or strongly agree that the modern presidency is a job one person can reasonably handle.

Numbers to know:

37%: Presidents (all) who at least somewhat agree that the pros of faculty tenure outweigh the cons, with public doctoral institution presidents most likely to support tenure

3 vs. 3: Presidents most **want** to spend their time on strategic planning/innovation, fundraising and regular external relations. Presidents **actually** spend most of their time on finances + budgeting, personnel issues and strategic planning/innovation.

“There’s so much pressure to being a college president today. There’s always been a lot of pressure, but it really has become an impossible job.”

—Jorge Burmicky, assistant professor of higher education leadership and policy studies at Howard University and co-author of “Competencies for the College Presidency: A National Study of Effective Leadership in Higher Education”

Source: *Inside Higher Ed’s* The Key podcast, March 13, 2025

Audience Poll

Q1: How effective has higher education as a whole been in responding to declining public confidence?

- a. Not at all effective*
- b. Somewhat effective*
- c. Moderately effective*
- d. Very effective*
- e. Extremely effective*

Q2: What should institutions prioritize in their efforts to counter declining public confidence?

- a. Career readiness*
- b. Affordability*
- c. Transparency around outcomes*
- d. Telling their story better*
- e. Strengthening ties with local communities*
- f. Improving retention/graduation rates*
- g. Addressing perceptions of ideological bias*
- h. Addressing perceptions that higher ed is an “ivory tower”*
- i. Equity and access*
- j. Civil dialogue*

Thank you!



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