

How well do we *really* know today's students?

- **Inside-Out Perspectives on the Shifting Demographics of Higher Education**
- October 2018





Today's Students: Pop Culture vs. Reality

The Pop Culture Archetype



18-24
years old



Attends a
4-year
university



Attends
full time



Lives on or
near campus



No children
or other
family
obligations



Has spending
money for
clothes, beer,
travel



Parents help
with costs



Participate in
social clubs,
campus student
organizations

What Today's College Students Really Look Like:



58%

of students work while in college



41%

of college students are older than age 25



34%

of undergraduates are first-generation college students



55%

of today's students are financially independent



39%

of students in 2016 attended an institution part-time



26%

of today's students are parents



42%

of independent college students live at or below the federal poverty line



36%

of undergraduate students attended a two-year college in 2016



13%

of first-year students live on campus



Picture an 18-year-old from a middle-class background who gets support from parents and goes to school full time. That is probably the experience of most of us in the policymaking community. But that is increasingly not representative of a college student today.

– Education Insider

Inside-Out Perspectives on Today's Students

To gauge perceptions of today's students among both the public and policymakers, Higher Learning Advocates commissioned a nationally representative survey of 1,000 Americans through Gfk Research. We also asked Whiteboard Advisors to survey beltway Education Insiders to understand what they know about today's college students.

Gfk CUSTOM RESEARCH

- Nationally representative survey (n=1000) of Americans. The survey was administered online from September 28 – 30. Responses were analyzed by gender, age, income level, educational level, and political affiliation.

WIA EDUCATION INSIDER

- Proprietary model designed to cut through the noise and provide real-time insights on national education trends, debates, and issues—from a bipartisan sample of policy experts. The result is not statistically valid data, but trendspotting and the capture of candid opinions from Insiders with unique perspectives on the education landscape.

WHO ARE THE INSIDERS?

Influential leaders shaping federal education policy, including individuals who have served or are currently serving as key policy and political roles:

- Current and former White House and U.S. Department of Education leaders;
- Current and former Congressional policymakers and staff;
- Higher education institution leaders; and
- Leaders of education associations, organizations and think tanks.

Executive Summary

- **INSIDERS IN TOUCH.** Beltway *Insiders* consistently demonstrated a keen awareness of higher education's shifting demographics when compared with the general public.
- **MONEY MATTERS.** Americans surveyed were more in tune with the financial pressures of college than the other characteristics of today's college students. While people were more likely to understand how college costs pose a barrier to completion, fewer people understand the stresses of commuting to campus, or balancing education and parenthood.
- **GENERATIONAL GAP.** Misconceptions about today's students were most prevalent among respondents over 65, according to the survey, suggesting a generational gap in understanding.
- **ACHIEVEMENT GAP.** Unlike *Insiders*, the general public appears to lack an understanding or awareness of achievement gaps between historically underrepresented groups at four-year institutions.

Insiders vs. the Public

Do gaps in understanding create political barriers to legislative and policy shifts that respond to the needs and aspirations of Today's Students?

- *Insiders* surveyed were significantly more accurate than the general public. In general, *Insiders* answered each question with **85-100%** accuracy—significantly higher and more consistent than the **37-81%** accuracy range of the general public.

ACCURACY



Greater Awareness for Financial Characteristics

- Although a national narrative focused on college cost appears to have shaped public perception of higher education, Americans are unaware of other shifts, like college students needing to balance parenthood and school, or commuting to campus.
- Respondents had a better understanding of financial issues than non-financial issues.



18-24 year-olds are particularly aware of the financial challenges of higher education

84%

of 18-24 year-olds knew that the majority of college students work while learning.

NON-FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

63%

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

75%



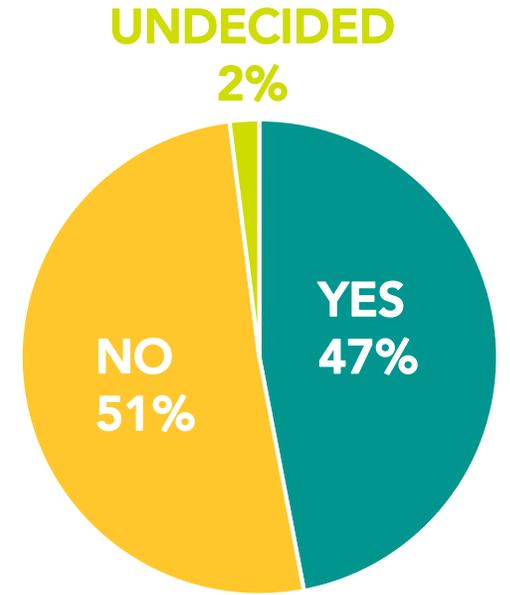
Given the cost...of textbooks [is] a major hurdle, we have seen that students have tuition money to sign up for the class but cannot access the materials.

Are there opportunities to defer textbook costs to help students have the resources they need to redirect their limited funds to childcare, food, rent or offset the number of hours they have to work in order to make ends meet as a student?

– Education Insider

Achievement Gaps

- The data suggest that the public lacks awareness of achievement gaps in higher education.
- When asked whether Hispanic and African-American college students attending four-year public institutions were less likely to complete their degree than their white peers, a majority (51%) of respondents answered “no.” The truth is that these students **graduate at rates 10 to 20 percentage points lower** than their white peers.
- Those with a bachelor’s degree (62%) were most likely to answer correctly.
 - Those 65 and older were least likely to answer correctly, with only 38% answering “true.”



Public vs. Insiders on Achievement Gaps (% accurate)

Q4 | True or False

Hispanic and African-American College Students attending a four-year public institution are less likely to complete their degree than their White peers.



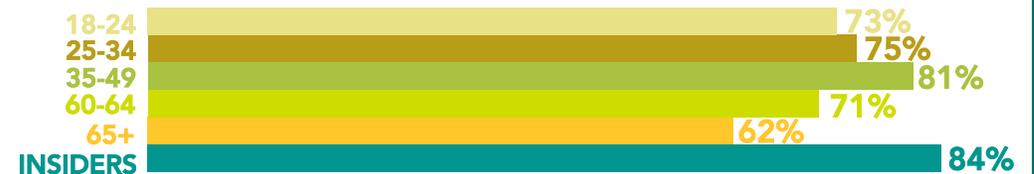
Generational Gap in Understanding Today's Students

- Respondents 65 and older were less likely to identify the percentage of students over 25, realities of student poverty, prevalence of working while in school, and the likelihood that Today's Students were financially independent from parents.
- Only 27% of those 65+ knew that a majority of today's college students are financially independent, and only 62% of those 65+ knew that 40% of these independent students live at or below the poverty line.

More than half of today's college students are defined as financially independent, rather than depending on parents or family members' incomes.



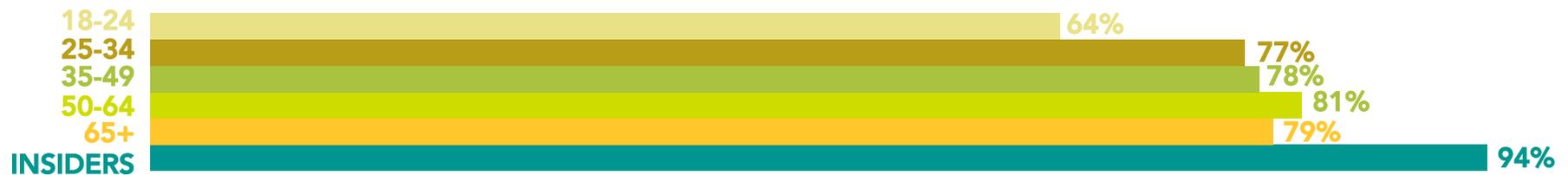
More than 40% of independent college students live at or below the federal poverty line.



Public vs. Insiders on where today's students learn (% accurate)

Q2 | True or False

More than one in three students attends a two-year college.



Where Do Today's Students Learn?

Most survey respondents know that more than a third of college students are enrolled in two-year programs. Awareness generally increases with age.

CORRECT ANSWER: TRUE



36%

of undergraduate students attended a two-year college in 2016



Community colleges have, by and large, done a great job of expanding their reach, serving more students, and many are growing more flexible to better accommodate working students, adults balancing families and school, and those who want to earn credentials that will help them in the workforce.

But all schools need to do a much better job of anticipating students' long-term needs — what they need to earn in the workforce to be able to afford the program; what pathways are set up to help them come back to school if they drop out; and how they'll help transfer students re-enroll without losing most or all of their credits.

– Education Insider

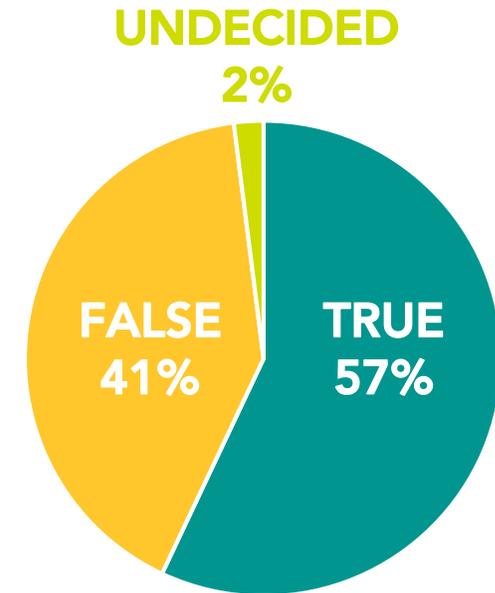
How Old Are Today's College Students?

Respondents were less certain about the age breakdown of today's students.

CORRECT ANSWER: TRUE

41%

of college students are older than age 25



Public vs. Insiders on Student Age (% Accurate)

Q3 | True or False

Approximately 40% of college students are 25 and older.





When I think of students today, I think of a group that is older, busier, working more jobs, having more responsibilities outside of actual school work. They spend more time supporting these endeavors than they do in class. They are trying to navigate a system that has not caught up with a unique older population, and on top of all the demands they are supporting, they are more stressed out.

– Education Insider

Do Today's Students Face Poverty?

72% of the public identified that 4 in 10 independent college students live at or below the poverty line. This awareness was highest among those 35-49.

CORRECT ANSWER: TRUE

42%

**federal
poverty
line**

of independent
college students
live at or below
the federal
poverty line

Public vs. Insiders on Student Poverty Levels (% Accurate)

Q5 | True or False

More than 40% of independent college students live at or below the federal poverty line.





The federal formula for diagnosing financial need is directed at the structural unaffordability of college, but policies are not directed at the volatility of what low income students/ adults face. Fluctuations are significant but colleges – especially the types of colleges that serve these students – do not have the resources they need to address individual’s expenses.

– Education Insider

Are Today's Students Earning While Learning?

Consistently across age and income brackets, Americans know that today's students work their way through school. Awareness among the general public was just slightly lower than that of *Insiders*.

CORRECT ANSWER: TRUE



58%

of students
work while
in college

Public vs. Insiders on Students Who Work (% accurate)

Q6 | True or False

The majority of students work to support themselves while in college.





I believe there is a lot more that can be done. Higher education can meet students needs by combining resources, keeping tuition and fees down, improving time to degree and getting students out into the workforce - for the first time, or not. Stackable credentials will support lifelong learning not just for adults, but for students who come in and out of higher education to advance in their career. This must become the norm. – *Education Insider*

Are Today's Students First Generation Attendees?

Awareness of first-generation students was the highest of any question asked in our survey, with 81% of Americans accurately stating that 3 in 10 college students are the first in their family to attend a higher education institution.

CORRECT ANSWER: TRUE

34%

of undergraduates
are first-generation
college students



Public vs. Insiders: First-Generation College Students (% Accurate)

Q7 | True or False

3 out of 10 college students are the first in their families to attend college.





There's still a sizable portion of undergrads who are traditionally aged, but they come from more diverse backgrounds (income, race, first-generation status) and are considering more diverse experiences (working while in school, attending shorter-term programs) for college. – *Education Insider*

Are Today's Students Also Parents?

The American public is much less aware of the proportion of college students who balance going to school with raising a family. Women were slightly more likely than men to answer correctly.



CORRECT ANSWER: TRUE

26%

of today's
student
population are
parents

Public vs. Insiders on Students with Children (% accurate)

Q8 | True or False

More than a quarter of today's students in college are parents.



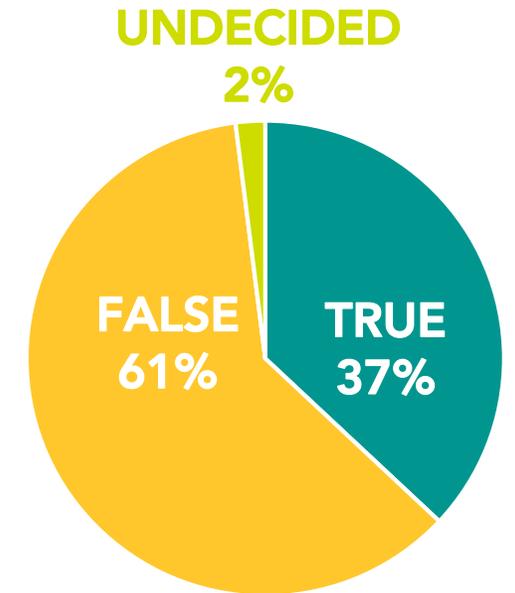


“[Today's student is] juggling multiple priorities and fiscally stretched. For most students, college is a precarious balancing act they are trying to navigate.

– Education Insider

How Do Today's Students Pay for College?

- At a time when nearly half of parents with a child 18 or older have kept them on the family cell phone plan, it's not surprising that most Americans think that today's college student is likely funded by mom and dad.
- Only 37% of Americans could accurately identify that more than half of today's college students are financially independent. Those 65 and older were the least likely to identify the correct answer — only 27% of 65 and older respondents answered "true" for this question.
- *Insiders*, however, were much more in tune with this reality, answering with 84% accuracy.



CORRECT ANSWER: TRUE

55%

of today's students
are financially
independent

Public vs. Insiders on Financial Independence (% Accurate)

Q9 | True or False

More than half of today's college students are defined as financially independent, rather than depending on parents or family members' incomes.





In many ways even though [we have] older students, students working, our programs are still designed with full-time younger students in mind. Financial aid programs do not do a good job supporting today's students, in particular the need for living expenses. With respect to the volatility of low-income households, many are still struggling. Pell grants remain as important as the broader safety net of Medicaid and SNAP. – *Education Insider*

Where Do Today's Students Live?

Much as the notion of parent-funded college students remain, so too does the vision of college students living in dorms, Greek housing, or other campus accommodations. 62% of Americans surveyed believe that a majority of college students live on campus. The reality is that only a tiny fraction — 13% — have this experience.



CORRECT ANSWER: FALSE

13%

of first-year students
live on campus

Public vs. Insiders on Campus Living (% accurate)

Q10 | True or False

The majority of first-year students live on campus while attending college.





It's easiest to serve traditional full-time students, but its quickly becoming a small part of [higher education institutions'] student body (with exception of highly selective and flagships). But this is how institutions are set-up and there is a disconnect between easy and what they should be doing. – *Education Insider*



Take Action for Today's Students

Get solutions and
hear first hand
student stories at

TodaysStudents.org