

MEDIA ANALYSIS:

# Today's Students

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# Executive Summary

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- Although coverage of today's students is increasing, non-traditional students are often overlooked by the mainstream media.
  - In fact, articles about today's students represent a small minority of the coverage of several key topics in postsecondary education.
    - Today's students were discussed in just 2% of coverage of student loans, 10% of coverage of financial aid, and 14% of coverage of student success published between November 1, 2018 and October 31, 2019.
    - Across all three topics, just 6% of coverage referenced non-traditional students (between November 1, 2018, and October 31, 2019).
- **But a shift is afoot.** In 2018, there was 150% more media coverage of today's students than in 2015, and 2019 is on pace for even more coverage than 2018.
- Coverage of today's students in trade publications is growing more quickly than in national media.

# Background and Objectives

## Background

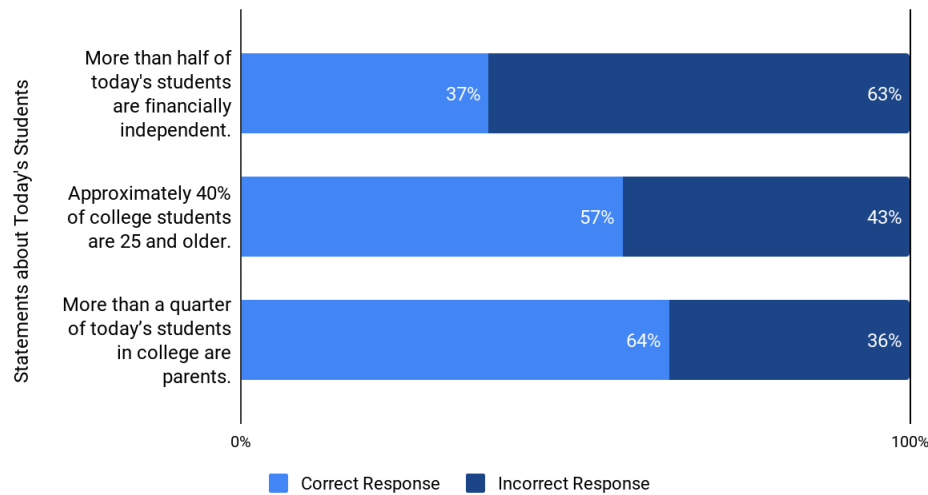
The profile of the American college student has undergone a radical change since the days when undergraduates were mostly newly-minted high school graduates. In 2018, nearly 3 in 4 college students were “non-traditional”: financially independent, parent learners, single caregivers, lacking a traditional high school diploma, enrolling in college not directly out of high school, attending part-time, and/or working learners. [1] But public perception hasn’t caught up with this new reality.

In 2018, we surveyed 1,000 Americans and conducted interviews with Beltway education insiders (e.g., policymakers, staff) to compare their perceptions and awareness about the shifting demographics of college students. We found that relatively few Americans recognized that non-traditional students represent a majority in postsecondary education. [2]

## Objectives

This year, we wanted to understand whether and how “today’s students” are portrayed through mainstream media coverage of postsecondary education. Are their stories, challenges, and aspirations being acknowledged in the media?

Public Understanding of the Shifting Demographics of Higher Education



# Methodology: Overview

- This analysis used a proprietary media database to analyze media coverage of “today’s students” as a subset of all postsecondary education coverage.
- We limited the search to English-language, U.S.-based coverage in online and print news between November 1, 2018, and October 31, 2019. [1]
- While all students are today's students, we particularly wanted to examine traditionally overlooked subsets of today's students. Therefore, for the purposes of this analysis, “today’s students” was defined to include parent and adult learners, working learners, and first-generation students.
- Twenty-eight national outlets, each with more than 10 million unique visitors, and five top-tier trade publications were included in the analysis.

National Media Outlets (10,000,000 UVPM)		Trade Publications
<i>ABC</i>	<i>MSNBC</i>	<i>The Chronicle of Higher Education</i>
<i>Bloomberg News</i>	<i>NBC</i>	<i>Inside Higher Ed</i>
<i>Business Insider</i>	<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>Education Week</i>
<i>CBS</i>	<i>PBS</i>	<i>Diverse Issues in Higher Education</i>
<i>The Chicago Tribune</i>	<i>Politico</i>	<i>Education Dive</i>
<i>CNBC</i>	<i>Quartz</i>	
<i>CNN</i>	<i>Roll Call</i>	
<i>The Dallas Morning News</i>	<i>The Seattle Times</i>	
<i>Fast Company</i>	<i>Time</i>	
<i>Forbes</i>	<i>U.S. News &amp; World Report</i>	
<i>The Houston Chronicle</i>	<i>USA Today</i>	
<i>The Huffington Post</i>	<i>Vox</i>	
<i>The Los Angeles Times</i>	<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	
<i>MarketWatch</i>	<i>The Washington Post</i>	

# Methodology: Search Queries

- We searched for coverage of “today’s students” by using various formulations of the following search terms:
  - non-traditional students
  - parent learners/student parents
  - working learners/working students
  - first-generation students
  - underrepresented students
  - adult learners
  - post-traditional learners [1]
- We also included mentions of “changing” within two words of “student demographics” (e.g., “changing student demographics,” “student demographics are changing”).
- We specifically excluded mentions of “hardworking students,” which were elicited by the “working students” search term but were not relevant for this analysis.
- We used the terms to search for coverage of today’s students over the past five calendar years.

# Methodology: Subcategories

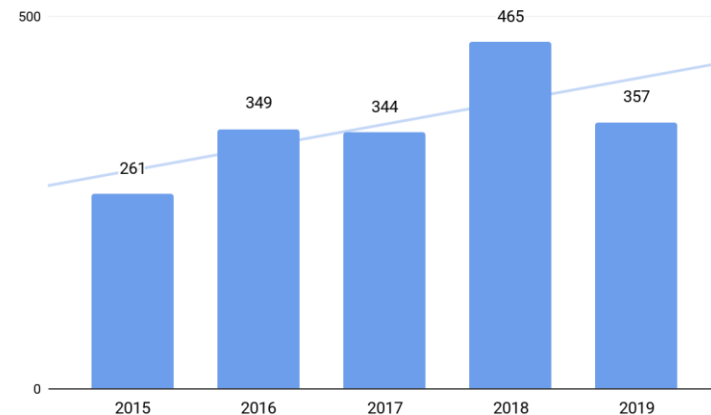
We then identified three main subcategories of postsecondary education coverage and the search terms associated with each subcategory.

Subcategory	Search Terms
Financial aid	"student" + at least 3 mentions of "financial aid," "scholarship," "scholarships," "Pell," and/or "grant"
Student loans	"student" + at least 3 mentions of "loan," "loans," "repay," "repayment," "borrow," "borrower," "owe," or "debt"
Student success	("student success" OR "college completion" OR "student retention" OR "on time graduation" OR "on-time graduation") NOT "NAEP"

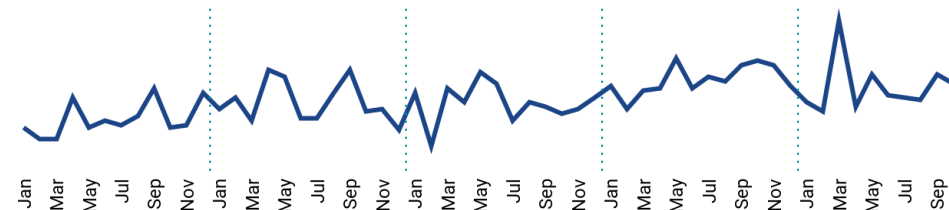
# Coverage of Today's Students Appears to Be Growing

- There was **more than 1.5 times** as much coverage of today's students in 2018 as in 2015.
- On average, the number of articles about today's students has increased by **more than 30 articles per year**.
- That number will increase to **45 articles per year** if reporters continue to publish at the same rate for the last two months of 2019 as they did through the first ten months.

Number of Articles about Today's Students by Year, 2015-19



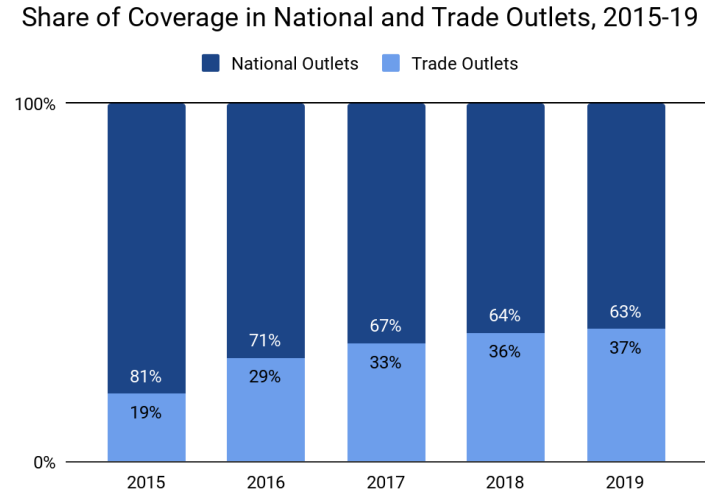
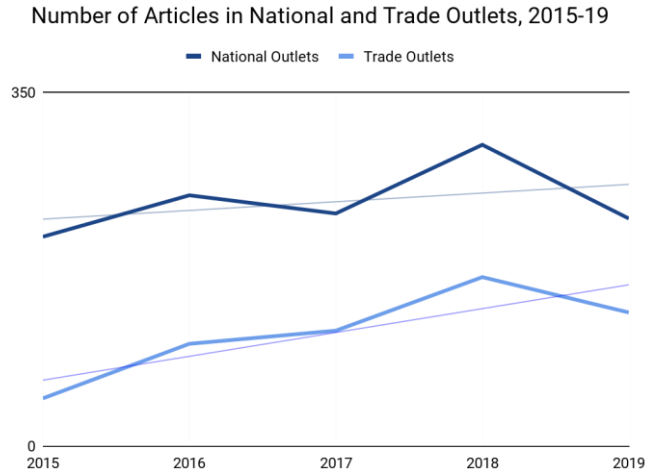
Articles about Today's Students, January 2015 - October 2019





# Coverage of Today's Students Appears to Be Growing

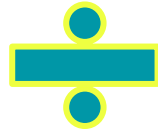
- Coverage has increased from 2015 to 2019 in both national and trade outlets. There are more articles in the national outlets we studied, but coverage is increasing more rapidly in the trade outlets studied.
- As a result, the share of coverage has gone from about 80% in national outlets/20% in trade outlets in 2015 to 63%/37% so far in 2019.



# But Today's Students Are Underrepresented In the Media

To calculate the amount of coverage of today's students in each subcategory, we used the following formula:

Number of articles  
in a subcategory  
that mention  
today's students

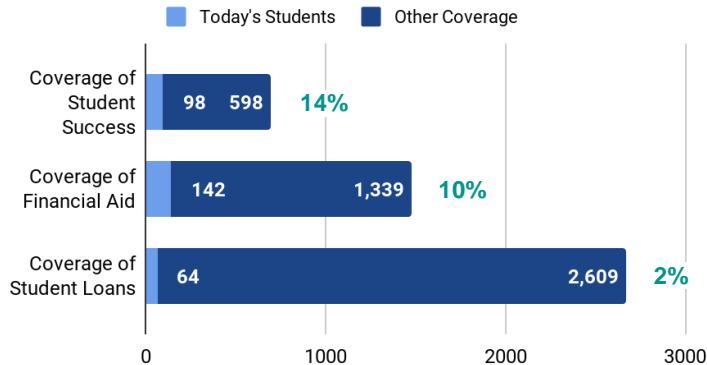


Total number of  
articles in that  
subcategory



Share of articles  
that mention  
today's students

Higher Education Coverage Mentioning Today's Students



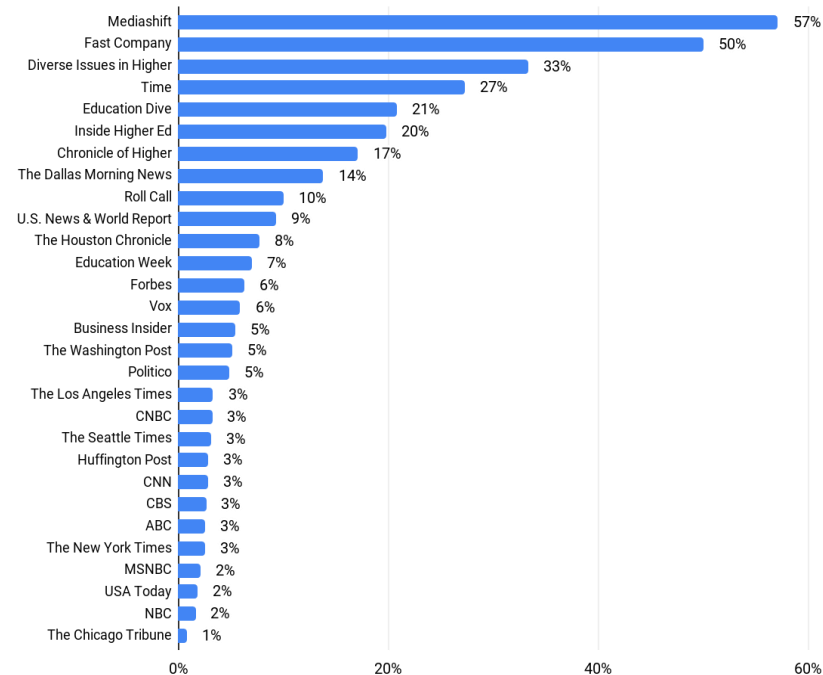
There were 696 articles on student success; 1,481 articles on financial aid; and 2,673 articles on student loans.

**14% of coverage of student success and 10% of coverage of financial aid, but just 2% of coverage of student loans, discussed today's students.**

# Coverage of Today's Students by Outlet

- Five outlets wrote about today's students and financial aid, student loans, or student success **at least twice a month** (24 times in 1 year):
  - *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* (50 articles)
  - *Inside Higher Ed* (33)
  - *Business Insider* (28)
  - *Forbes* (28)
  - *U.S. News & World Report* (26)
- Three other outlets wrote about today's students at least monthly: *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Houston Chronicle*, and *The Washington Post*. Trade publications were much more likely than national media to cover today's students: nearly 22% of their coverage of financial aid, student loans, or student success referenced today's students, compared to less than 5% of coverage of the same topics by national media.
- 24 of 33 outlets referenced today's students in **less than 10% of their articles** on financial aid, student loans, or student success.
- On the other hand, today's students were represented in **at least one-third of articles** on these topics in Mediashift (57%), Fast Company (50%), and *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* (33%). (However, Mediashift and Fast Company combined to publish only 11 articles on these topics.)

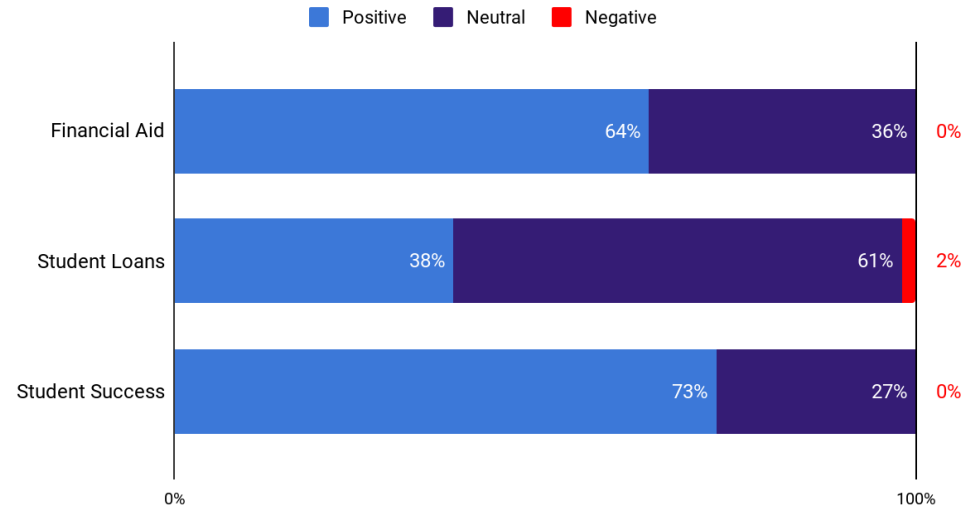
Percentage of Higher Ed Articles That Mention Today's Students by Outlet



# Sentiment Analysis

- The proprietary media database also determines the overall sentiment of each article.
- According to its algorithm that determines sentiment, about two-thirds of articles related to financial aid and nearly three-fourths of stories on student success were positive in tone and the remainder were neutral.
- However, less than 40% of articles on student loans were positive. The majority (61%) were neutral and a handful (2%) were negative—the only negative coverage within the three subcategories.

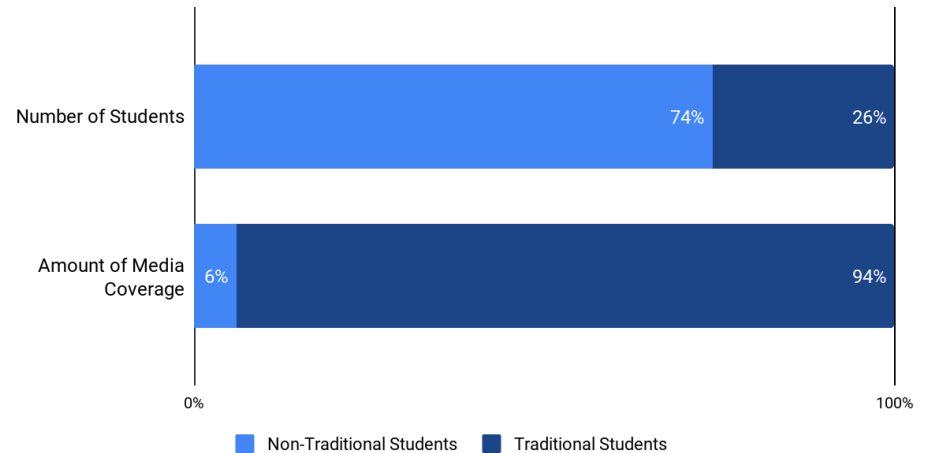
Tone of Higher Education Articles by Topic



# Conclusion

- Although coverage of today's students is increasing, **non-traditional students are still being overlooked** in the media, especially on a national scale.
  - Despite the fact that non-traditional students comprise 74% of all college students, articles about these students represent just 6% of the coverage of several key topics in postsecondary education.
  - The largest national media outlets are less likely than top-tier trade publications to cover today's students.

Non-Traditional Students Represent the Majority of Students, But A Small Minority of Media Coverage



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