

# 2021 FALL TERM PULSE POINT SURVEY OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS, PART II

**Brianna C.J. Clark and Morgan Taylor**

Over the past several years, ACE has regularly surveyed college and university presidents to capture their perspectives on key issues facing higher education. Most recently, our survey series unveiled insights on the institutional response to COVID-19. In this survey, 113 presidents\* identified their most pressing current concerns and shared their views regarding the impact that political discourse has had on their institution's ability to implement COVID-19 mitigation measures. What follows is a summary of our key findings.

\* Of the 113 presidents, 45 lead private four-year institutions (40 percent), 30 lead public four-year institutions (27 percent), 26 lead public two-year institutions (23 percent), and 12 lead other institutions (10 percent).

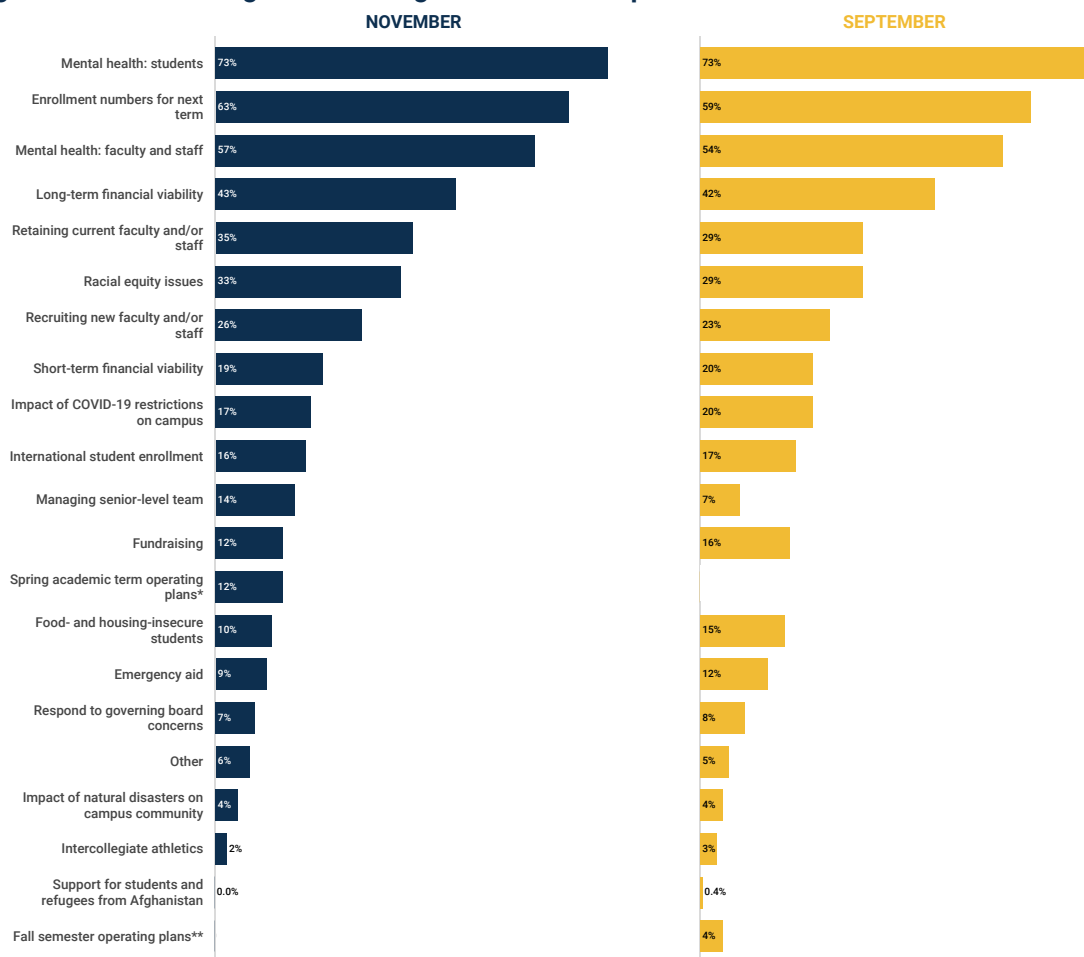
The survey was launched on November 5 and closed on November 22.

## MOST PRESSING ISSUES FOR PRESIDENTS

In the November 2021 survey, presidents were presented with a list of 19 issues and asked to select up to five that they viewed as most pressing (see Figure 1). For the seventh time since April 2020, “mental health of students” was the pressing issue cited most frequently by presidents. Nearly three-quarters of all presidents (73 percent) in the November survey identified student mental health as a pressing concern, the same percentage that chose it in the [September 2021 survey](#).

- Slightly less than two-thirds of presidents (63 percent) identified “enrollment numbers for the next academic term” as a pressing issue, a slight increase from 59 percent of presidents who reported this in the September 2021 survey.
- Over half of all presidents (57 percent) selected “mental health of faculty and staff” as a pressing concern, a 3 percentage point increase from the total share of presidents who reported this as a pressing issue in the September survey (54 percent).
- For the second consecutive survey, the fourth most frequently selected pressing issue was “long-term financial viability,” with 43 percent of presidents reporting this as a top-of-mind issue.
- “Retention of faculty and/or staff” was the fifth most frequently chosen pressing concern among college and university presidents, with 35 percent of presidents selecting this issue.
- “Racial equity issues” was selected by one-third (33 percent) of all presidents as a pressing issue, a 4 percentage point increase from the September 2021 survey (29 percent).

**Figure 1: Most Pressing Issues Facing Presidents in September and November 2021**



\*Denotes item available in the November survey only.

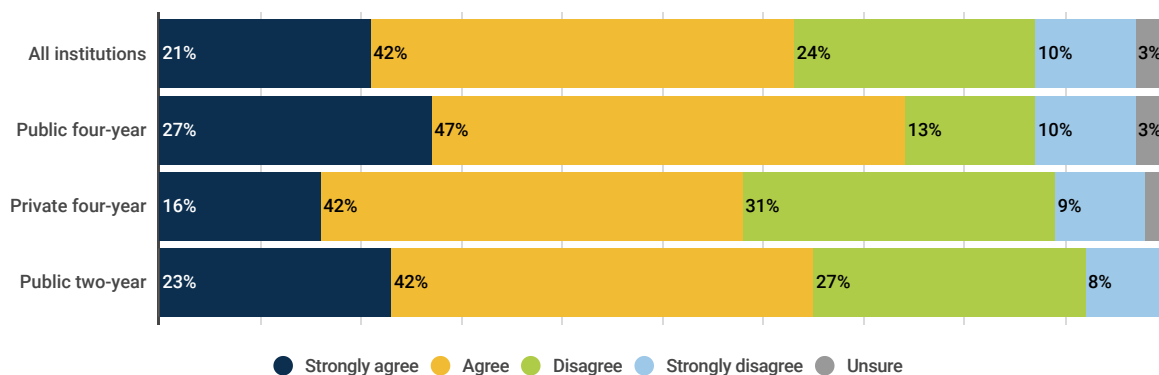
\*\*Denotes item available in the September survey only.

## POLITICIZATION OF COVID-19 VACCINES AND OTHER MITIGATION EFFORTS

Tensions and protests in response to some COVID-19 public health measures have cropped up in a number of places across the country, especially around the mitigation measures that businesses and governments can require, including mandatory vaccination and mask-wearing. Higher education institutions were not immune to these tensions as they brought their students, faculty, and staff back on campus for the fall term, though these pressures were not felt evenly across all sectors of institutions and all parts of the country. Importantly, most presidents who responded to this survey noted that the vast majority of campus stakeholders have been supportive of COVID-19 mitigation measures.

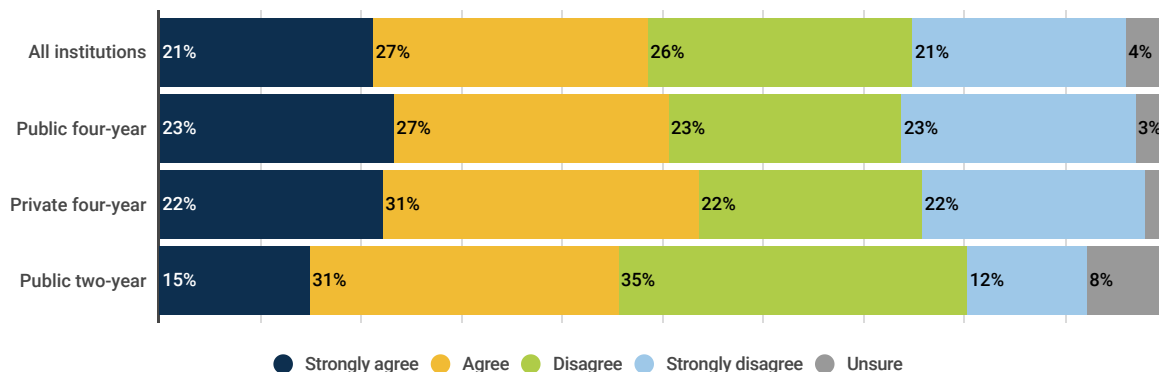
Presidents were asked to identify their level of agreement that political discourse about the pandemic negatively affected their institution's ability to implement COVID-19 mitigation measures (e.g., vaccine mandates, mask mandates, testing) (see Figure 2). Presidents at public four-year institutions (74 percent) were the most likely to indicate that they agreed that political discourse affected their institution's ability to implement these measures, followed by presidents at public two-year institutions (65 percent). Presidents at private four-year institutions (58 percent) were least likely to agree this was a problem.

**Figure 2. Reported Level of Agreement That Political Discourse About the Pandemic Negatively Affected Ability to Implement COVID-19 Prevention Measures**



Presidents were also asked to report their level of agreement with this statement: “Federal government requirements related to COVID-19 vaccines for faculty and staff had created tension with my state government.” (see Figure 3). Overall, 21 percent of presidents strongly agreed and 27 percent of presidents agreed that federal government requirements related to COVID-19 vaccines for personnel have created tension with their state governments.

**Figure 3. Reported Level of Agreement That Federal Government Requirements Related to COVID-19 Vaccines for Faculty and Staff Created Tension with State Government**

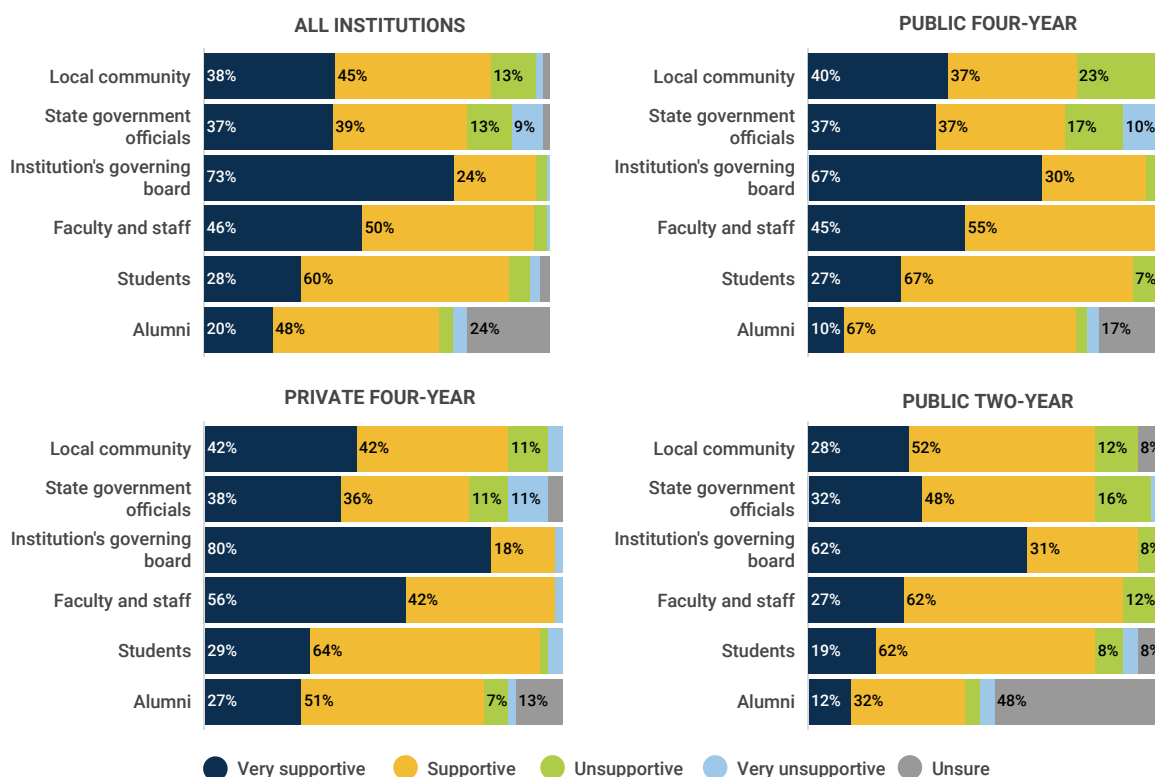


Note: Due to rounding, numbers may not equal 100 percent.

As institutions across the nation continue to navigate the implications of COVID-19, presidents were provided with a list of six stakeholder groups and asked to indicate the level of support their institution received from each group surrounding the implementation of COVID-19 prevention measures on their campus (see Figure 4). Across the board, presidents reported that they received support from all stakeholder groups in the implementation of COVID-19 prevention measures.

- Nearly three-quarters of all presidents (73 percent) reported that their governing board had been very supportive in the institution’s implementation of COVID-19 prevention measures. Just under half of all presidents (46 percent) reported that their faculty and staff had been very supportive.
- Overall, 88 percent of presidents reported that their students were very supportive or supportive in the institution’s implementation of prevention measures. By sector, presidents at public four-year (94 percent) and private four-year (93 percent) institutions were more likely than presidents at public two-year institutions (81 percent) to report support from students.
- Presidents at private four-year institutions (84 percent) were the most likely to report some level of support from their local community as it related to their institution’s efforts to implement COVID-19 prevention measures, the highest share of any sector. Nearly one-quarter (23 percent) of presidents at public four-year institutions reported that their local communities were “unsupportive,” the highest share across all sectors.

**Figure 4. Reported Level of Support Institution Received from Stakeholder Groups Related to Implementation of COVID-19 Prevention Measures on Campus**



We sought to better understand how presidents are navigating the politicization of COVID-19 prevention measures on their campuses. Presidents across the board expressed that they primarily avoid politicizing COVID-19 in their institutional decision-making processes and based their decisions on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), state, and federal guidelines backed by science. Presidents also shared that approaching conversations surrounding mandates and COVID-19 mitigation measures with stakeholders requires a delicate balance of consideration of stakeholder views and guidelines with communication that is clear and consistent. One president stated, “We never make anyone happy (we’re always doing too much or too little), but I think we’re consistent—we follow CDC and state guidelines (and thankfully those are in agreement).”

Collectively, presidents reported that although there have been “vocal critics,” those voices are minimal. The vast majority of campus stakeholders continue to support university efforts surrounding the implementation of COVID-19 mitigation measures on campus, such as required vaccination and indoor mask mandates. One president shared, “Our focus was not on what divides us in this space, but how we live up to our notion that we are a community of learners committed to doing all the good we can for and with each other.”

**The brief was prepared by Brianna C.J. Clark and Morgan Taylor, under the direction of Hironao Okahana. Clark contributed to data cleaning and analysis, as well as development of the written brief. Taylor contributed to the design and distribution of the instrument, development of the written brief, and data cleaning; prepared the figures; and supervised the project.**

**The authors would like to acknowledge the following individuals for their support in the production and review of this publication: Derrick Anderson, Hollie M. Chessman, Benjamin G. Cecil, Ty C. McNamee, Ashley Gray, Mushtaq Gunja, Robin Matross Helms, Liz Howard, Sherri Hughes, Anne Meehan, Jon Riskind, and Maria Claudia Soler, for their thoughtful insights and review of the survey instrument and written publication, and Lindsay Macdonald and Ally Hammond, for editorial support and making the data come to life through design.**