

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

Benjamin G. Cecil and Danielle Melidona

ACE's Pulse Point survey series seeks to capture college and university presidents' perspectives on key issues facing higher education. Most recently, our **November 2021 survey** unveiled insights on the politicization of COVID-19 mitigation measures. In this survey, 91 presidents* identified their most pressing current concerns and shared their views regarding the changing demographics of students enrolled at their institution, as well as the value of Pell Grants in providing low- and moderate-income students access to postsecondary education.

* Of the 91 presidents, 42 lead private four-year institutions (46 percent), 24 lead public four-year institutions (26 percent), 17 lead public two-year institutions (19 percent), and eight lead other institutions (9 percent).

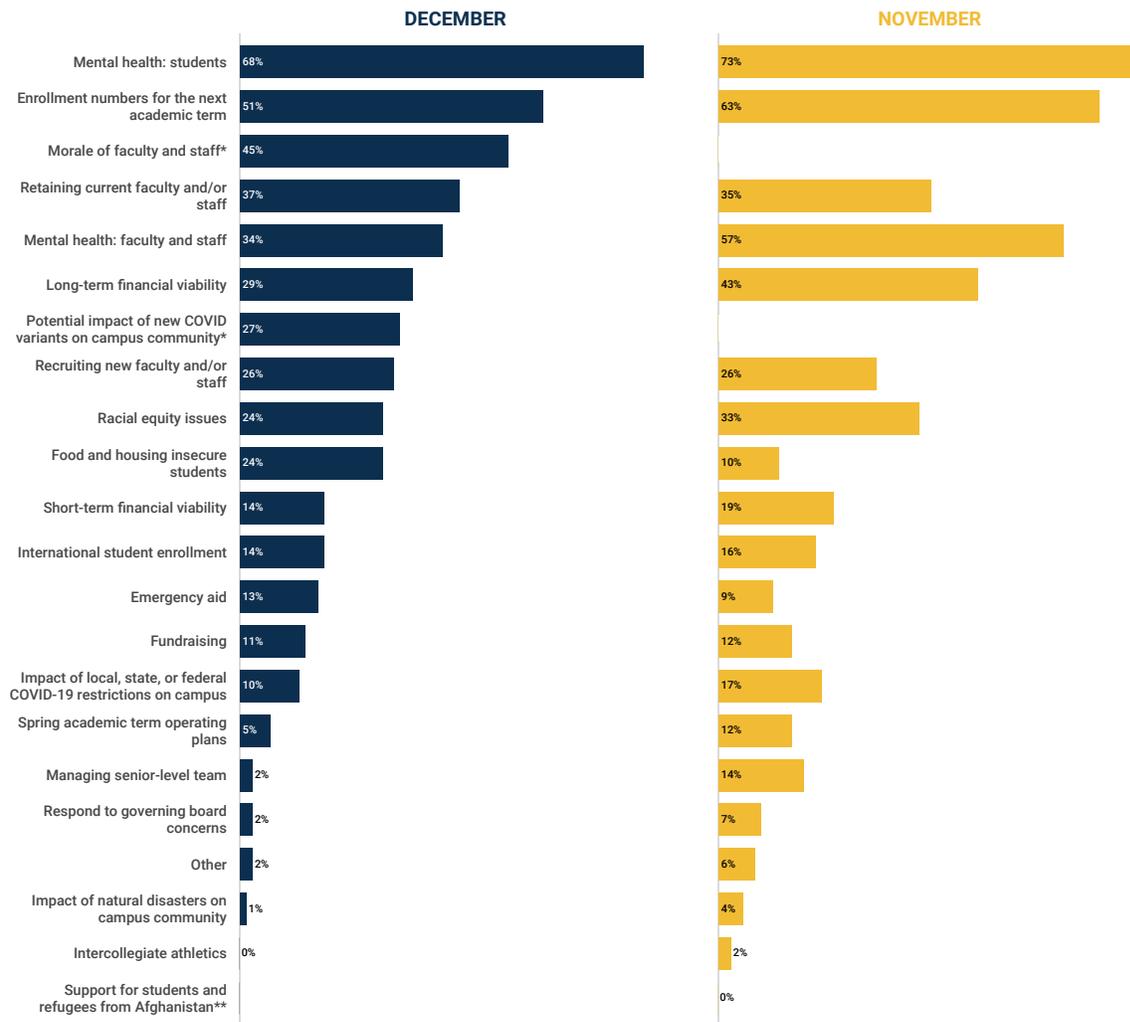
The survey was launched on December 8 and closed on December 20.

MOST PRESSING ISSUES FOR PRESIDENTS

In the December 2021 survey, presidents were presented with a list of 20 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. More than two-thirds of all presidents (68 percent) in the December survey identified student mental health as a pressing concern, a five percentage point decrease from those that chose it in the November 2021 survey.

- Slightly more than half of presidents (51 percent) identified “enrollment numbers for the next academic term” as a pressing issue, a decrease from 63 percent of presidents who reported this in the November 2021 survey.
- “Faculty and staff morale,” a new item for presidents to choose from on the December survey, was the third most frequently chosen pressing concern among college and university presidents, with 45 percent reporting this as a pressing concern.
- Over one-third of presidents (37 percent) selected “retention of faculty and/or staff” as a pressing concern, similar to the share of presidents who reported this as a pressing concern in the November survey (35 percent).
- “Mental health of faculty and staff” was the fifth most frequently chosen pressing concern, with 34 percent of presidents selecting this issue.
- Notably, “food-insecure and/or housing-insecure students” was reported as a pressing concern by nearly one-quarter of presidents (24 percent), a 14 percentage point increase from the November 2021 survey (10 percent). According to an [April 2021 report](#) released by the Hope Center, 58 percent of students who completed the center’s #RealCollege 2021 survey reported experiencing basic needs insecurity, including food and housing insecurity. Basic needs insecurity, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic, is a problem students continue to face.
- The “potential effects and/or impact of new COVID-19 variants on campus community,” a new item on the December survey, was reported by 27 percent of presidents as a pressing concern. *Note: the December survey was in the field not long after the Omicron variant became a major concern, but closed just as institutions were beginning to make decisions about campus operations.*

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



* Denotes item available in the December survey only.
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CHANGES IN ENROLLMENT LEVELS

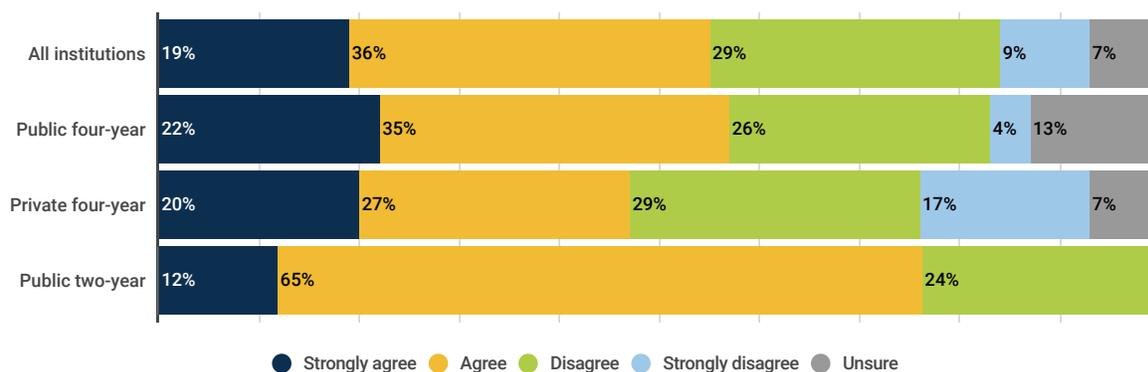
The changing nature of enrollment in postsecondary education in the United States over the last decade is well-documented across institutional types and sectors.¹ With further disruptions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, future postsecondary enrollment demographics prove challenging to predict. Research shows that this is especially true for communities that have been hit hardest by the pandemic, namely *low-income students*, *students of color*, and *international students*.

Presidents were asked to identify their level of agreement that the COVID-19 pandemic and labor market disruptions changed the demographics of students enrolled at their institution. Responses varied to this question, with 19 percent of respondents indicating “strongly agree,” 36 percent indicating “agree,” 29 percent responding “disagree,” and 9 percent responding “strongly disagree.” Only 7 percent of presidents indicated they were unsure.

1 See the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center’s *publications*, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education’s *Knocking at the College Door* study, and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association’s *State Higher Education Finance (SHEF)* report.

- Presidents at public two-year institutions were most likely to indicate either “strongly agree” (12 percent) or “agree” (65 percent) with this statement, for a total of 77 percent.
- Presidents at public four-year institutions indicated “strongly agree” (22 percent) or “agree” (35 percent), for a total of 57 percent.
- Less than half of presidents of private four-year institutions indicated some level of agreement, with 20 percent indicating “strongly agree” and 27 percent indicating “agree.”
- Seventeen percent of presidents at private four-year institutions indicated they “strongly disagree” that the demographics of their enrollment changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and labor market disruptions. This was the highest share to give this response across all sectors.

Figure 2. Reported Level of Agreement That the COVID-19 Pandemic and Labor Market Disruptions Changed Enrolled Student Demographics

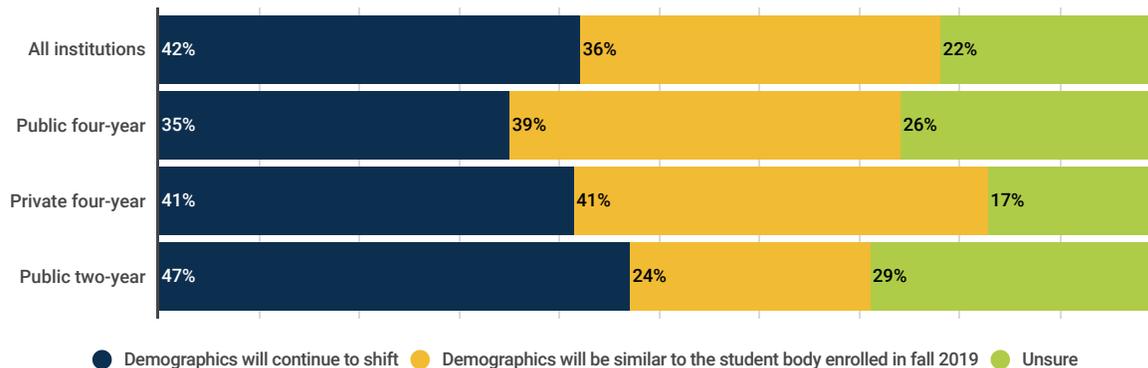


Presidents who indicated they “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statement were asked to describe how the pandemic and labor market disruption have changed the demographic of students enrolled at their institutions. As one president of a public four-year institution acknowledged, “Students are questioning the value of a college degree more than ever. This, along with the uncertainty about what the educational experience will actually look like during the pandemic is negatively impacting students’ decision to enroll.” A majority of presidents reported decreased enrollment among students of color, international students, Pell-eligible students, post-traditional students, low-income students, first-generation students, and male students (especially male students of color). However, a small number of presidents at private four-year institutions reported growth in enrollment among some of these groups. A [report released](#) by the American Association of Colleges and Universities and the Bipartisan Policy Center in September 2021 provides insight into the value of college as students face rising attendance costs and uncertain employment outcomes.

Presidents were then asked to identify how they anticipate student demographics at their institution in the next academic year might compare with those of the past two years. Slightly less than half of presidents (42 percent) indicated that they anticipate student demographics will continue to shift in the next academic year.

- Presidents at public two-year institutions (47 percent) were most likely to report that they believe student demographics will continue to shift, followed by presidents at private four-year (41 percent) and public four-year institutions (35 percent).

Figure 3. Anticipated Demographics of Enrolled Students Next Academic Year Relative to the Past Two Years



Presidents who selected this option were asked how they anticipated demographics will shift and why. Among responses, presidents shared that changing population demographics, financial implications, and workforce needs will contribute to changing demographics in higher education.

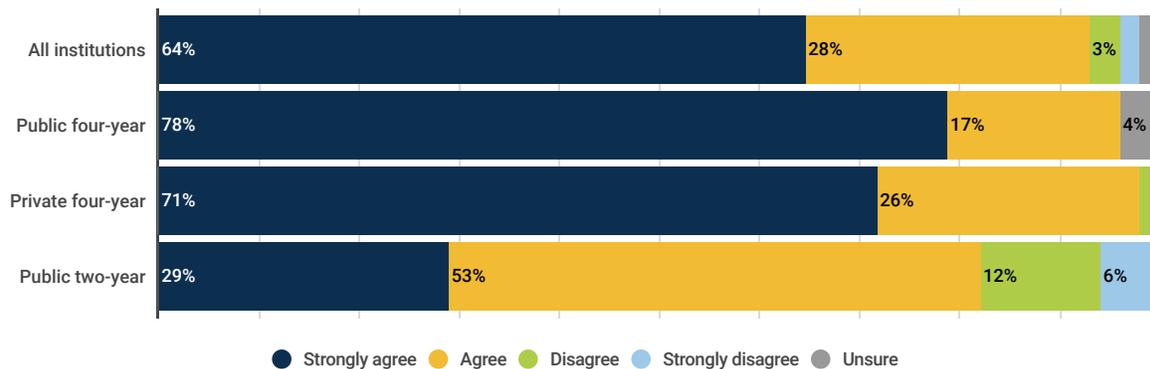
In the same question related to student demographics in the next academic year, 36 percent of presidents indicated that they anticipate student demographics to look similar to those of fall 2019. By sector, 41 percent of presidents at private four-year institutions, 39 percent of presidents at public four-year institutions, and 24 percent of presidents at public two-year institutions indicated that they believe student demographics in the next academic year will be similar to those of the student body enrolled in fall 2019. Presidents who indicated uncertainty when they responded to this question were asked what factors are making it difficult for them to predict what student demographics will look like on campus. Besides uncertainty driven by the ongoing pandemic, several presidents reported changes to programs and enrollment strategies—the effectiveness of which take time to measure—as factors making it difficult to predict shifts in student demographics.

THE POWER OF PELL GRANTS FOR STUDENTS AND INSTITUTIONS

Pell Grants help nearly 7 million students attend and complete college annually. However, the power of Pell has decreased substantially over the years, with the maximum Pell Grant now covering less than one-third of the cost of attending a public four-year institution. ACE, along with other organizations, has been advocating for Congress to double the maximum Pell Grant.

We wanted to further understand how changes to the Pell Grant program may impact enrollment of low- and moderate-income students in higher education. Approximately nine out of 10 presidents (92 percent) either strongly agreed (64 percent) or agreed (28 percent) that doubling the maximum Pell Grant would increase the enrollment of low- and moderate-income students at their institution. By sector, 97 percent of presidents at private four-year institutions, 95 percent of presidents at public four-year institutions, and 82 percent of presidents at public two-year institutions reported that doubling the Pell Grant would increase enrollment of low- and moderate-income students at their institution.

Figure 4. Reported Level of Agreement That Doubling the Maximum Pell Grant Would Increase Enrollment of Low- and Moderate-Income Students at Their Institution

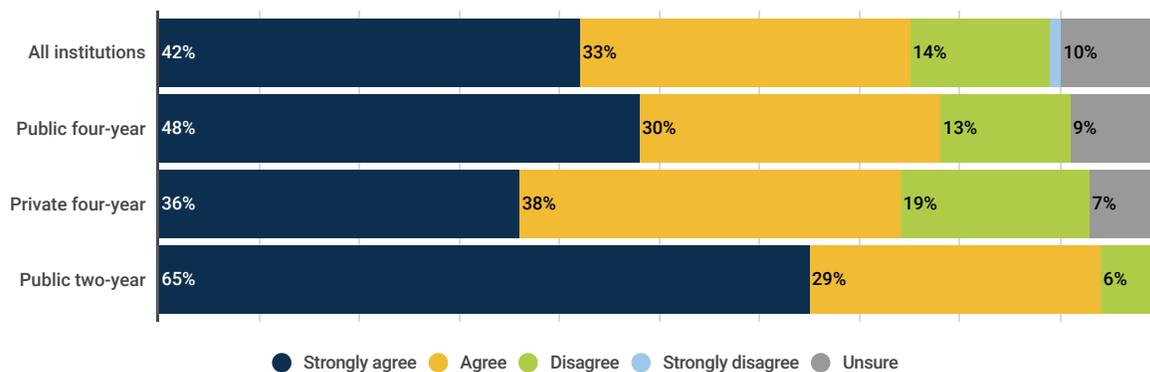


We then asked presidents if the current federal student aid system creates unnecessary barriers for students on their campus to receive Pell Grants. Overall, responses indicate the presence of some barriers at the federal level, with 75 percent of presidents responding “strongly agree” or “agree” that the current system creates unnecessary barriers in receiving Pell Grants.

- Presidents at public-two year institutions were most likely to strongly agree that these barriers exist (65 percent), followed by presidents at public four-year institutions (48 percent) and presidents at private four-year institutions (36 percent).
- Thirty-eight percent of presidents at private four-year institutions indicated agreement with this statement, followed by presidents at public four-year (30 percent) and presidents at public two-year (29 percent) institutions.
- Notably, a few presidents disagreed with this statement. Presidents at private four-year institutions were the most likely to indicate disagreement (19 percent), followed by presidents at public four-year institutions (13 percent) and presidents of public two-year institutions (6 percent).

Research shows that the FAFSA verification process creates burdens for students filing for financial aid, particularly for Pell-eligible students and students of color—groups that are more likely to be selected for the verification process.

Figure 5. Reported Level of Agreement That the Current Federal Student Aid System Creates Unnecessary Barriers for Students at Their Institution to Receive Pell Grants

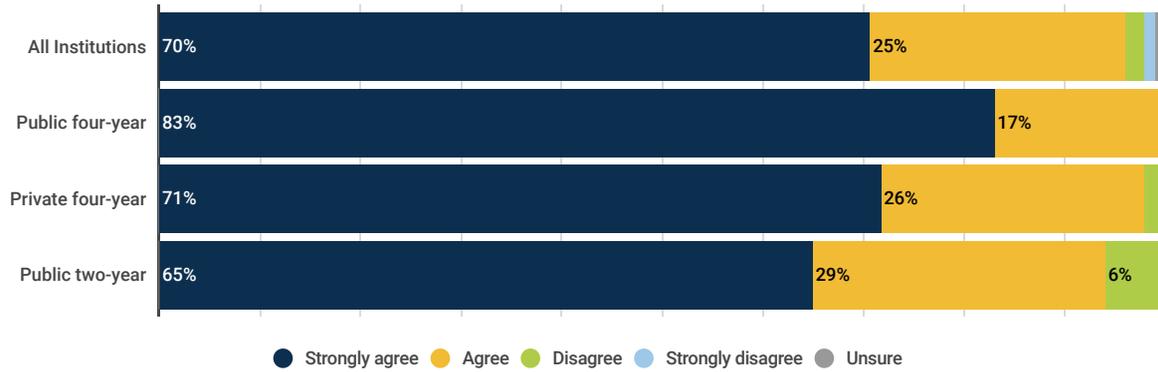


Pell Grants not only benefit students, but also serve as a critical component of institutional strategy to enroll more low- and moderate-income students. We asked presidents whether their institution perceives Pell Grants as a means of institutional strategy in the enrollment-to-completion pipeline for these students. A vast majority of presidents (95 percent) indicated that they “strongly agree” (70 percent) or “agree” (25 percent) with this statement.

- By sector, 83 percent of presidents at public four-year institutions reported that they “strongly agree” with this statement, followed by 71 percent of presidents at private four-year institutions and 65 percent of presidents at public two-year institutions.

- For those presidents responding “agree,” presidents at public two-year institutions led with 29 percent, followed by 26 percent of presidents at private four-year institutions and 17 percent of presidents at public four-year institutions.

Figure 6. Reported Level of Agreement That Their Institution Views Pell Grants as a Critical Component in Their Ability to Enroll More Low- and Moderate-Income Students and Help Them Successfully Earn Their Degrees



Through this Pulse Point survey, we sought to understand how presidents conceptualize the changing demographics of their student body in light of a decrease in public demand for higher education and continued shifts in the labor market due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, we sought to understand how presidents view the Pell Grant, particularly as it continues to be an access tool for many students in higher education. While there are many uncertainties with how the pandemic will continue to affect higher education and our economy, it is clear COVID-19 will continue to negatively impact student enrollment, particularly among low- to moderate-income students, students of color, and international students, resulting in a continued call for accessibility, affordability, and access in postsecondary education.

The brief was prepared by Benjamin G. Cecil and Danielle Melidona under the direction of Hironao Okahana and Morgan Taylor. Cecil contributed to the design of the instrument, data cleaning and analysis, and development of the written brief. Melidona contributed to the design and distribution of the instrument, data cleaning, the development of the written brief, and prepared the figures. Taylor contributed to the design and distribution of the instrument and managed the project.

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