2025 FALL TERM PULSE POINT SURVEY

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The American Council on Education's (ACE) Pulse Point surveys seek to capture senior leaders' perspectives on key issues facing higher education. In our most recent survey—fielded in July 2025—517 senior leaders* across institutions and systems, national associations, and other higher education organizations shared insights on their most pressing concerns as they look to the 2025–2026 academic year. The survey also included several questions focused on the impact of executive actions and legislative proposals as well as the use of artificial intelligence (AI) for student learning.

These survey findings make clear that many of the most pressing concerns for senior leaders heading into the new academic year stem from actions taken or proposed by the current administration. Ongoing efforts to undermine research, restrict global engagement, and reshape policies that threaten the sector's foundations of public funding draw focus away from the core mission of postsecondary education. While the long-term effects on students and institutions remain uncertain, these findings highlight leaders' perceptions of immediate impact.

Senior leaders includes several position types at institutions, systems, and national/regional associations and other higher education nonprofits including: associate/assistant provosts; associate/assistant vice presidents; chiefs of department; chiefs of staff; deans; executive directors; general counsel; presidents/chancellors/chief executive officers/rectors; provosts/chief academic officers; trustees; vice presidents/vice chancellors; and vice provosts.

Of the 517 senior leaders who responded, 493 were from institutions or systems (95 percent), 13 were from national associations (3 percent), six were from nonprofit organizations (1 percent), and five were from other organization types (1 percent).

Among senior leaders at institutions or systems, 229 serve at public four-year institutions (46 percent), 199 serve at private four-year institutions (40 percent), 57 serve at public two-year institutions (12 percent), and eight serve at other types of institutions, including for-profit institutions and less-than-two-year colleges (2 percent).

The survey was launched on July 28 and closed on August 8.
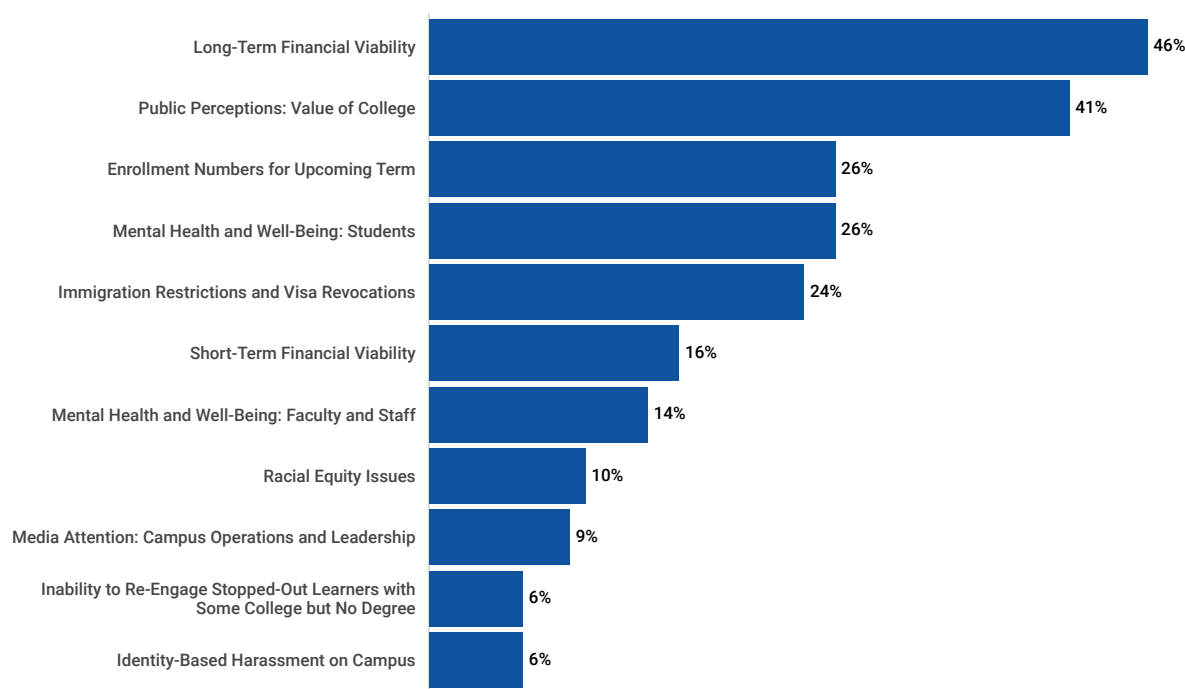
TOP-OF-MIND ISSUES

Senior leaders were given a list of 12 issues that higher education is currently facing and were asked to rate the level of concern they have for each issue (figure 1). Then considering the same list, respondents were asked to indicate up to three issues that were most pressing to them at the time the survey was completed (figure 2).

Figure 1. Distribution of Concern for Top-of-Mind Issues
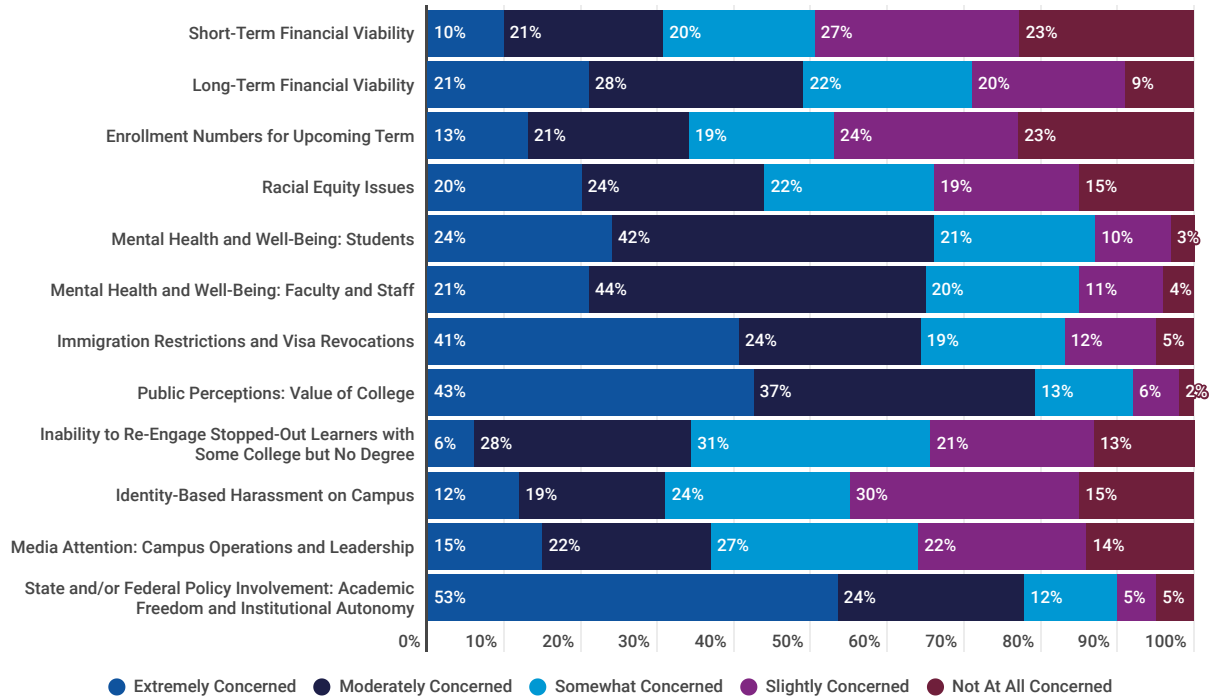
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Figure 2. Distribution of Most Pressing Concerns

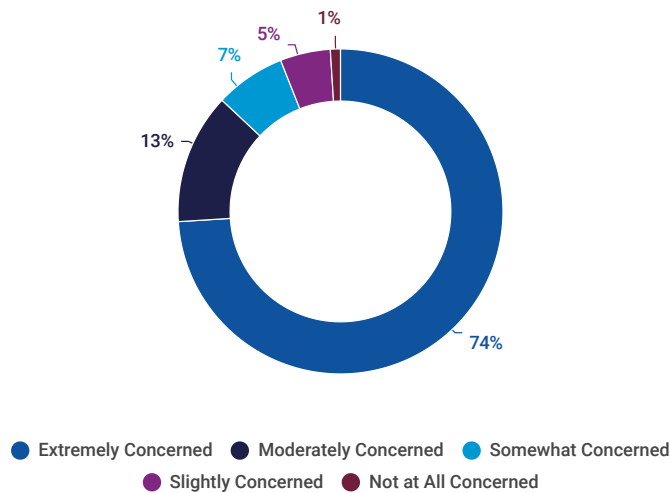| Concern	Percentage
Long-Term Financial Viability	46%
Public Perceptions: Value of College	41%
Enrollment Numbers for Upcoming Term	26%
Mental Health and Well-Being: Students	26%
Immigration Restrictions and Visa Revocations	24%
Short-Term Financial Viability	16%
Mental Health and Well-Being: Faculty and Staff	14%
Racial Equity Issues	10%
Media Attention: Campus Operations and Leadership	9%
Inability to Re-Engage Stopped-Out Learners with Some College but No Degree	6%
Identity-Based Harassment on Campus	6%

- **Public perceptions of the value of college** was the issue with the highest average response in terms of the level of concern among senior leaders, while it was the third most frequently selected pressing issue. When considering the overall level of concern for public perceptions of the value of college, nearly eight in 10 respondents reported moderate (37 percent) or extreme (43 percent) concern—the highest distribution of concern across all issues presented. Senior leaders at public four-year institutions (47 percent) more frequently indicated this as a top-of-mind concern compared to senior leaders at private not-for-profit four-year institutions (38 percent) or public two-year colleges (8 percent).

- More than half of respondents (54 percent) indicated that **state and/or federal policy involvement in academic freedom and institutional autonomy** was a pressing concern. Among senior leaders, 53 percent were extremely concerned about this issue, while 24 percent were moderately concerned.

- Among senior leaders, **immigration restrictions and visa revocations** represented the second highest response in terms of level of concern, with nearly two in three (65 percent) respondents indicating moderate (24 percent) or extreme (43 percent) concern for this issue. About one-fourth of respondents (24 percent) also indicated this as one of their most pressing concerns. Frequency of this as a top concern among respondents was highest among those serving at public four-year (50 percent) and private not-for-profit four-year (38 percent) institutions.

- **Long-term financial viability** continues to be a pressing concern among senior leaders, with 46 percent indicating this as top of mind. This issue was most frequently selected as a pressing concern by senior leaders serving at public four-year institutions (43 percent), followed by private not-for-profit four-year institutions (40 percent) and public two-year colleges (13 percent).

- Two-thirds of respondents (66 percent) reported moderate (42 percent) or extreme (24 percent) concern for the **mental health and well-being of students**. Over one-fourth (26 percent) of senior leaders also selected this issue as one of their most pressing concerns, representing continued urgency in responsiveness to the mental health and well-being of students across campuses in the upcoming academic year. There was similar concern for mental health of faculty and staff, with 65 percent reporting moderate (44 percent) or extreme concern (21 percent) for the issue, but it was reported with less frequency as a pressing concern (14 percent).

Beyond the list provided, **student financial aid, college affordability**, and **enrollment numbers in the long-term** were also among the most pressing concerns for senior leaders.

IMPACT OF EXECUTIVE ACTIONS AND LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

Institution and system presidents were given a series of questions to gauge perspectives on federal government intervention and action as it relates to higher education. The questions below highlight areas of concern for college presidents among the current administration and recent legislation (figure 3).

Figure 3. Concern for Impact of Executive Actions and Legislative Changes

- Extremely Concerned
- Moderately Concerned
- Somewhat Concerned
- Slightly Concerned
- Not at All Concerned

Presidents who responded were also asked about the impact of executive actions and legislative changes. Recent actions are a prevalent concern among higher education leaders, with nearly three-quarters of college presidents surveyed (74 percent) indicating that they are extremely concerned about the current administration's impact on higher education and an additional 13 percent who are moderately concerned.

Presidents reported a variety of institutional impacts following recent cuts to federal research funding (figure 4). More than a quarter of surveyed presidents (29 percent) indicated their institutions experienced decreases in revenues, and just under a quarter (24 percent) report slowed research output due to funding cuts. Cuts to research funding also appear to have a marginal impact on the availability of program positions available, with 15 percent of presidents reporting decreases in available slots within academic programs as a result.

Figure 4. Impact of Cuts to Research Funding
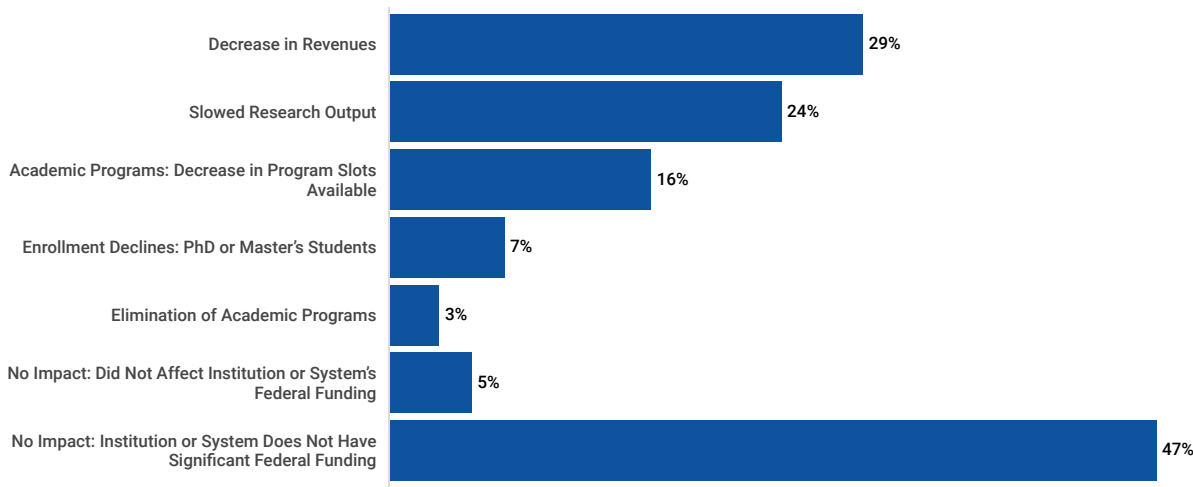
Note: "No Impact" options were exclusive and could not be chosen with the rest of the select-all-that-apply options.

Presidents were also asked to describe their level of concern about complying with the One Big Beautiful Bill (OBBB) Act that was recently passed by Congress. Responses varied to this question, with 21 percent of respondents indicating extreme concern, 31 percent responding with moderate concern, 21 percent who were somewhat concerned, and 16 percent slightly concerned. Only 11 percent of presidents surveyed said they had no concerns complying with provisions in OBBB.

Leaders were asked to share their main concerns around the implementation of the OBBB and any specific challenges they could foresee with complying with the new law. Beyond the content of the provisions—namely, the termination of Grad PLUS loans, annual and aggregate loan borrowing caps, change to Pell, and the new accountability framework—a primary concern among presidents is the current lack of information on how these policies will be implemented. Presidents also raised concerns around the implications of implementation amidst decreased federal staffing at the Department of Education and increased accountability for data collection. Included below are quotes from presidents that capture overall sentiments around compliance and implementation.

- "I'm concerned about access to higher education being limited further and how institutional accountability will be measured for entry-level or short-term program outcomes, even when they can lead to programs that yield higher economic outcomes." – *President, public two-year college*
- "Program-level earnings data: we can't access it independently, so we can't get ahead of it. And there's not a lot we can do to control it except eliminate programs that may be vital to community service but don't lead to strong earnings." – *President, private not-for-profit four-year institution*
- "Still learning what the compliance issues will be. Concerned about Pell grants and very concerned about the impact of other provisions of the OBBB on our state's budget and ability to adequately fund public higher education and financial aid for students." – *President, public four-year institution*

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN STUDENT LEARNING

Presidents, provosts, vice provosts, and deans were presented with a set of questions to gauge perceptions on artificial intelligence (AI) within student learning. Across the board, senior leaders surveyed recognize emergent AI technologies within postsecondary education and largely have plans to utilize resources within their campuses.
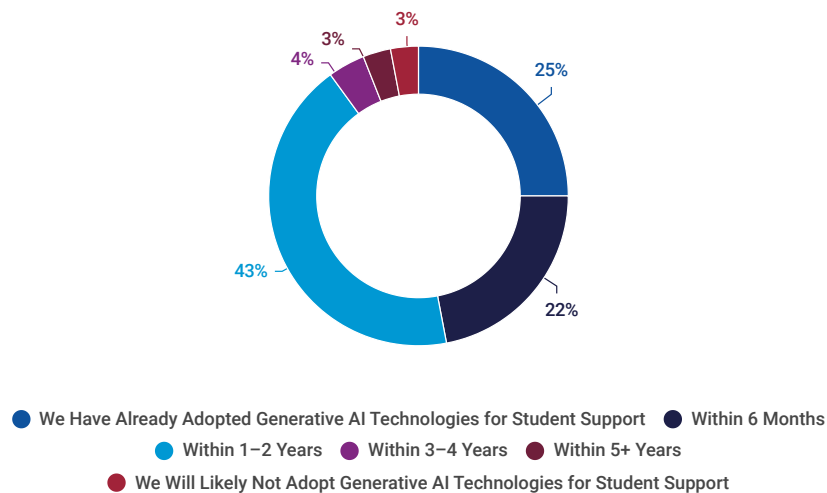
Among provosts, vice provosts, and deans, nine in 10 respondents believe educator visibility—or the extent to which instructors can identify, understand, and evaluate use of students' use of generative AI tools in the learning process—is extremely (28 percent), very (44 percent), or moderately (19 percent) important. Less than 2 percent of those surveyed believe it has no importance.

Academically rigorous evidence on learning outcomes is heavily influential among senior leaders in higher education when considering the adoption of AI technologies, with a majority (91 percent) of respondents reporting it is either extremely (20 percent), very (44 percent), or moderately (27 percent) influential.

Senior leadership had varying perspectives on the immediate use of "productivity oriented" generative AI—such as open-access large language models (LLMs) to increase efficiency and task completion—as suitable for student learning, with few respondents falling on either extreme. Only about 12 percent of senior leaders believe AI is extremely suitable for immediate use, while just 3 percent believe it is not at all suitable for student learning. About one-third (31 percent) of respondents reported this technology was very suitable for immediate use in higher education, and 35 percent of respondents said it was moderately suitable.

Students' learning and academic integrity are influential when higher education institutions are considering adopting AI services. Nearly nine in 10 senior leaders surveyed found ethics to be extremely (25 percent), very (42 percent), or moderately (36 percent) influential when deciding to adopt AI technologies.

Figure 5. Timeframe for Implementing Generative AI Technologies

Legend:
- ● We Have Already Adopted Generative AI Technologies for Student Support
- ● Within 6 Months
- ● Within 1–2 Years
- ● Within 3–4 Years
- ● Within 5+ Years
- ● We Will Likely Not Adopt Generative AI Technologies for Student Support

The higher education field appears to be in the process of or moving toward adopting generative AI technologies for student support, with one quarter (25 percent) of respondents having already adopted the technology at their institution or system (figure 5). Additionally, about another quarter (22 percent) plan to adopt AI technologies within the next six months, and 43 percent within the next one to two years. Among the senior leaders surveyed, only 3 percent do not plan to adopt any form of generative AI technology at their institutions or systems.

When asked what the biggest barriers are to implement and scale AI tools, senior leaders indicated that the knowledge, skills, and training needs for implementation—along with the need for faculty and staff buy-in—and the speed of technological change were most frequently reported. Senior leaders also identified capacity constraints, including time, resources, and finances, as barriers to implement and scale AI technologies across their campuses.