Inside Higher Ed

Under Pressure: What's Keeping Presidents Up at Night in 2026

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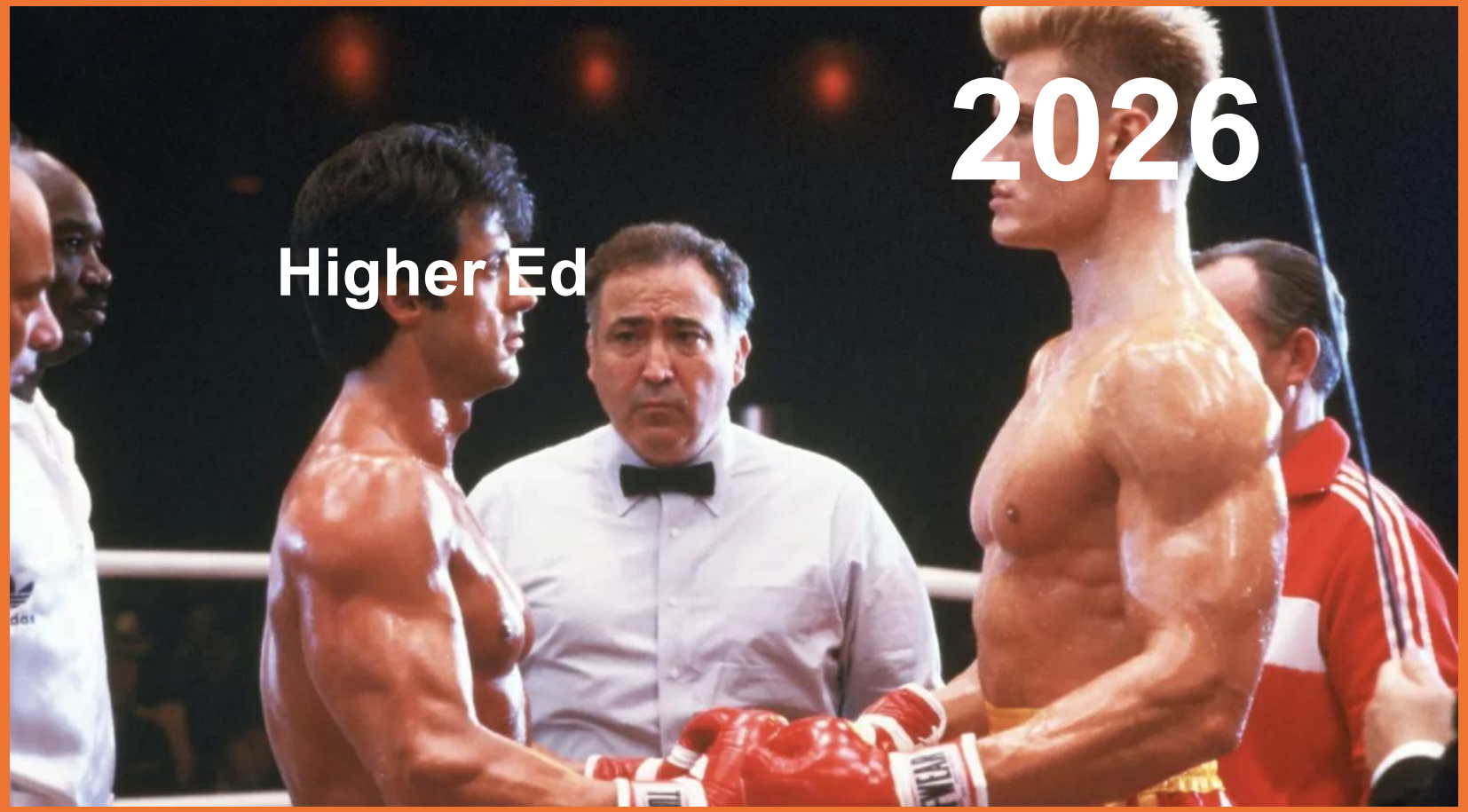
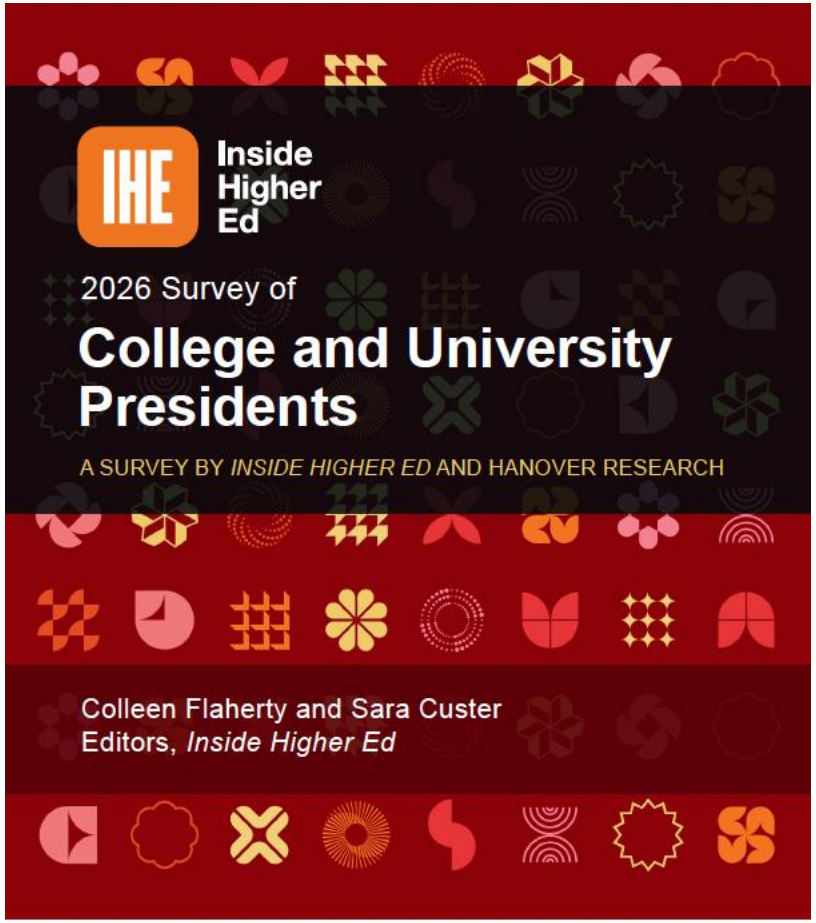


Strategy Session

About the Survey

2026 Survey of College and University Presidents

- 16th year
- Completed with Hanover Research
- Administered Dec.–Jan.
- N=430 two- + four-year presidents (mostly public and private nonprofit)



LIAISON Jenzabar

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IHE Audience vs. Presidents

Q: Which of the following forces do you expect to have the greatest impact on higher education by 2030?

a. Demographic and enrollment shifts
b. Advances in artificial intelligence or technology
c. State and federal policy changes
d. Declining public trust and political politicization of higher education
e. Workforce and credentialing transformations
f. Cost and financial model pressures
g. Climate and sustainability challenges
h. Other

Credit: Baona/Getty Images

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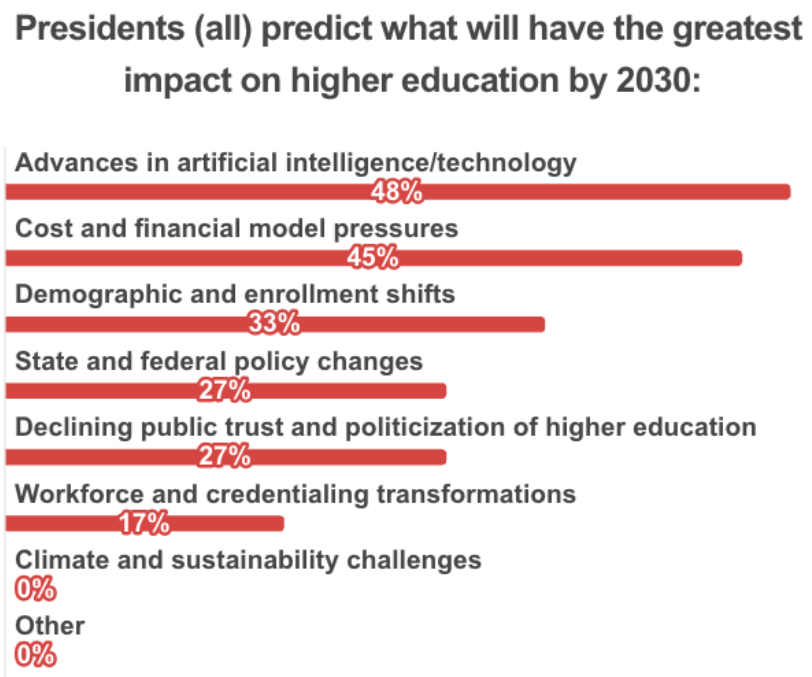
Presidents on: Risks + Opportunities



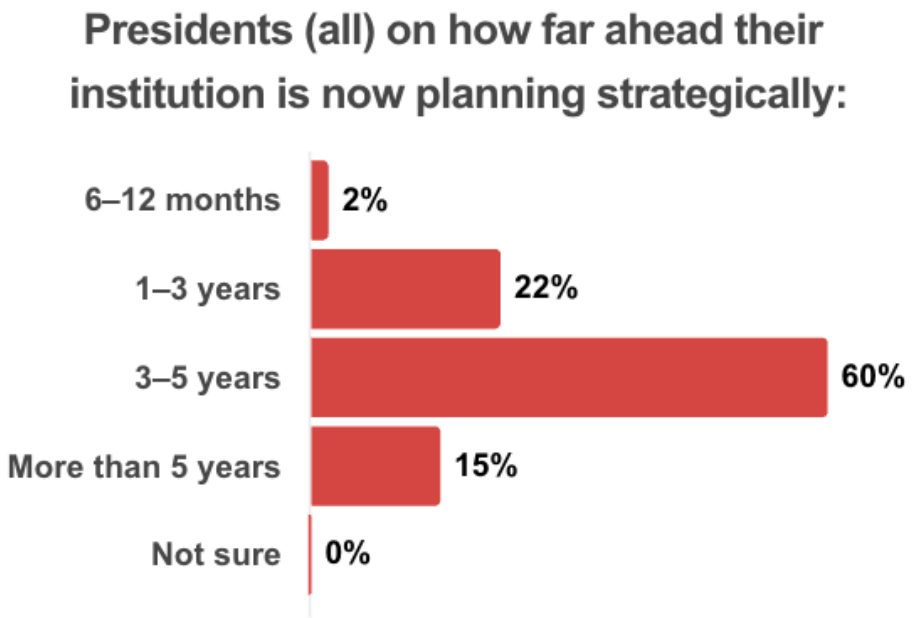
The Takeaway:

Presidents and their institutions are navigating immediate financial, political and enrollment pressures while simultaneously pursuing innovation to ensure long-term relevance.

Numbers to Know:

- By 2030, presidents predict AI (48%) and cost pressures (45%) will have the greatest impact on higher ed, though private nonprofit presidents identify cost pressures as most transformative.
- Presidents rate financial volatility (45%) and political interference (43%) as the fastest-growing risks to their institutions.
- Institutions are embracing employer-aligned models, with 70% looking to add short-term credential programs over the next 3 years, 38% pursuing co-ops and 37% pursuing apprenticeship pathways.
- 37% of all presidents and even 18% of CC leaders express interest in adding 3-year bachelor's degrees.

Presidents on: The Financial Outlook



The Takeaway:
Presidents remain confident in the near-term financial outlook but are increasingly uncertain about the long-term picture.

Numbers to Know:

- 8 in 10 presidents are confident in their institution's 3-year (86%) and 5-year (83%) financial stability, but confidence in the 10-year outlook dropped from 83% last year to 70% this year—with CC and private nonprofit baccalaureate presidents the least confident.

- The 10-year strategic plan is largely a legacy: 60% of institutions are now planning 3 to 5 years out, with an additional 22% planning just 1 to 3 years ahead.

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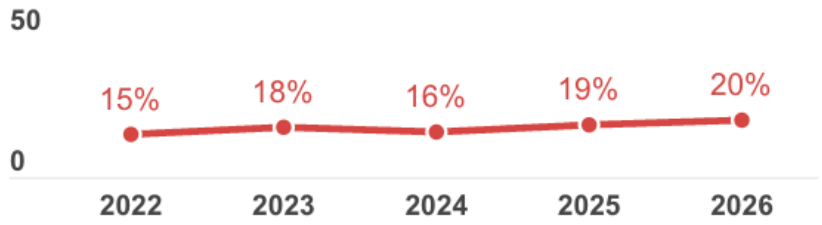
Presidents on: Mergers and Acquisitions

Presidents (all) who report having serious internal discussions about merging with another college or university in the last 12 months, by survey year:



The Takeaway:
Merger discussions continue at a steady pace, driven more by strategic positioning than survival—for now.

Numbers to Know:

- 20% of presidents report serious internal merger talks in the last 12 months, about the same as last year; of those, more cite proactively ensuring financial stability (58%) and optimizing resources (55%) than imminent closure (8%).
- 11% of all presidents say their institution will likely merge into or *be acquired by* another institution in the next 5 years, while 21% say their institution will likely *acquire* another institution—so mergers remain a growth strategy for some.
- A larger share of private nonprofit presidents are engaged in merger talks than public peers (31% vs. 12%).

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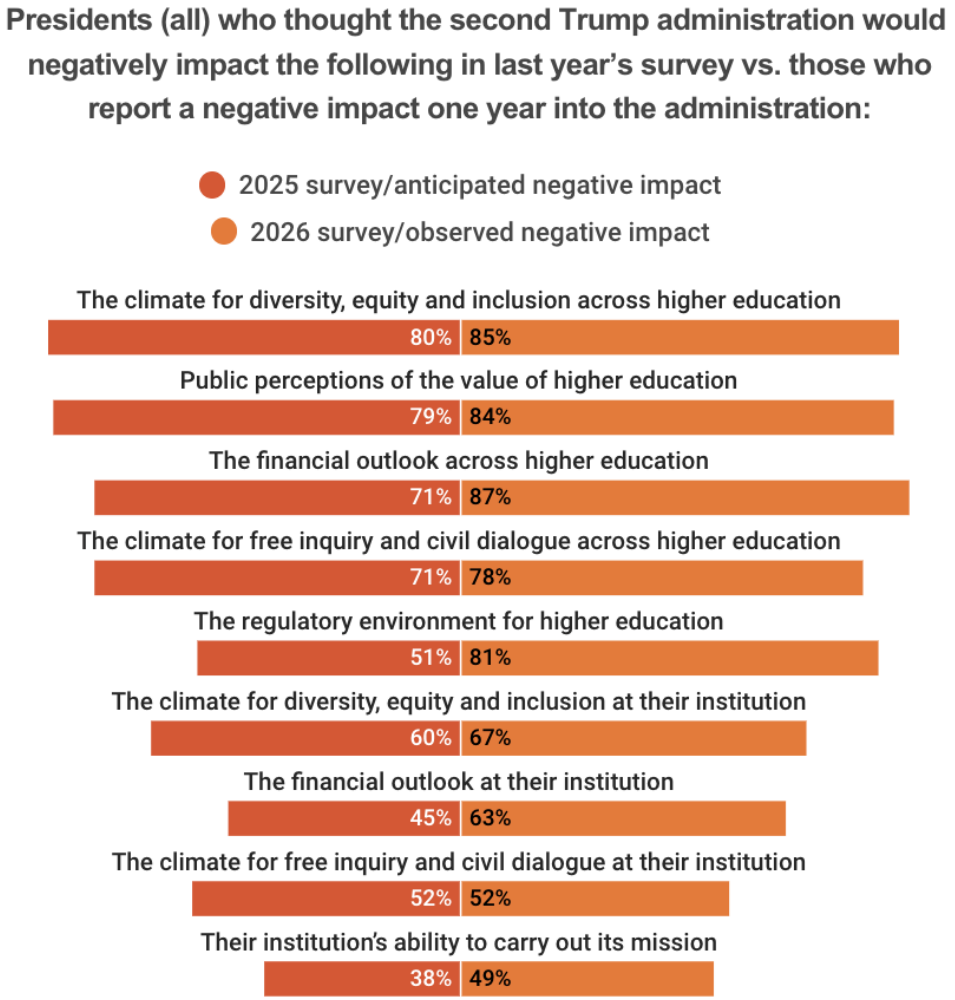
Presidents on: Trump 2.0



The Takeaway:

The second Trump administration's impact on higher ed has exceeded presidents' already-negative expectations.

Numbers to Know:

- Last year, 71% of respondents predicted a negative impact on the financial outlook across higher ed; this year, 87% describe the actual impact as negative. 51% predicted a negative impact on the regulatory environment and 81% now describe it as negative.

- 25% say OBBBA will have a significant impact on financial aid/enrollment/compliance requirements and 25% report major negative impacts to international student enrollment, with graduate-level institutions most affected.

- Most institutions have experienced some reduction in federal funding; many of these have made operational changes and pursued alternative sources of funding. 39% of all presidents report changes to terminology in departmental names or descriptions; 12% report curriculum changes in politically sensitive areas.

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IHE Audience vs. Presidents

Q: To what extent do you agree with the following: "The current federal policy environment for higher education is forcing change that may benefit colleges and universities in the long run."

a. Strongly disagree
b. Somewhat disagree
c. Neither agree nor disagree
d. Somewhat agree
e. Strongly agree

Credit: Cagcansayin/Getty Images

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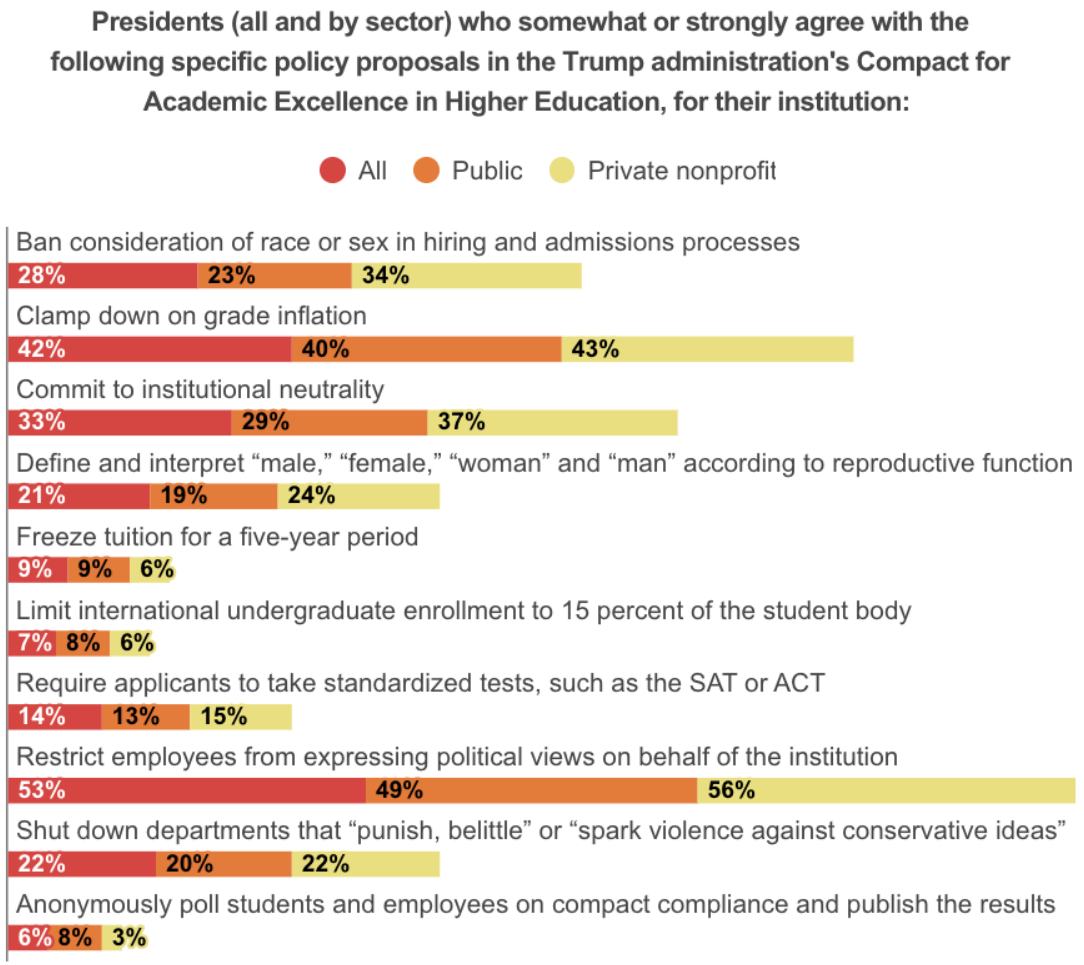
Presidents on: Trump 2.0 (cont.)



The Takeaway:

Even as presidents largely oppose the White House agenda for higher ed, some see alignment or opportunity.

Numbers to Know:

- 21% of all presidents somewhat/strongly agree that the current federal policy environment for higher ed is forcing change that may benefit colleges and universities in the long run.
- Just 6% of presidents support the proposed Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education overall, but some are much more open to certain provisions, e.g. restricting employees from expressing political beliefs on behalf of their institutions (53% agree) and clamping down on grade inflation (42%).
- The most common overall response posture to Trump 2.0 is "strategic compliance," or making only the necessary changes to remain compliant while protecting institutional values (56%).

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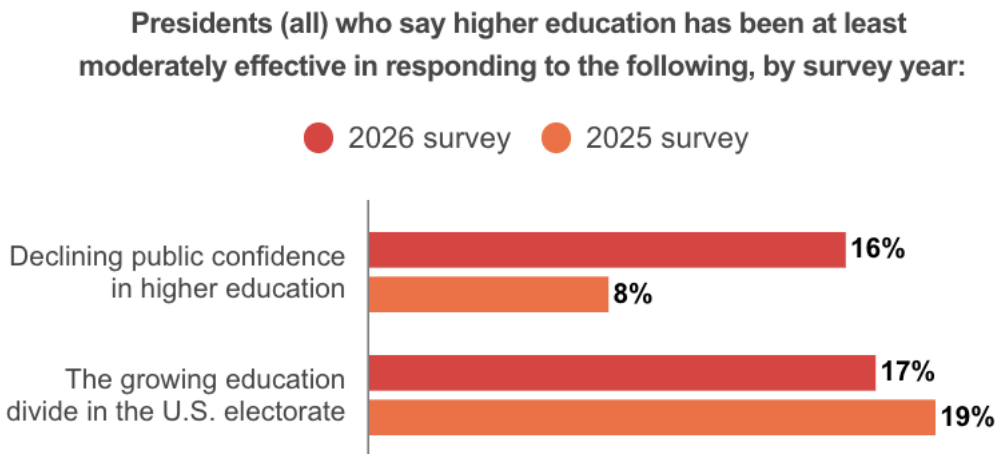
Presidents on: (Re)Building Public Trust



The Takeaway:

Institutions are launching trust-building initiatives but presidents continue to doubt higher ed's effectiveness in responding to declining public confidence.

Numbers to Know:

- 51% of institutions have launched public trust initiatives in the last year—mostly PR/marketing efforts emphasizing institutional value and student ROI. Few describe affordability, workforce alignment or career readiness efforts.
- 2% of presidents believe higher ed has been *highly* effective in responding to declining public trust, the same as last year. (*Chart shows moderate effectiveness or better.)
- 84% of presidents think their institutions are doing well on cost transparency and 70% report taking steps in the last year to improve cost transparency, e.g. standardized financial aid letters or online cost calculators.

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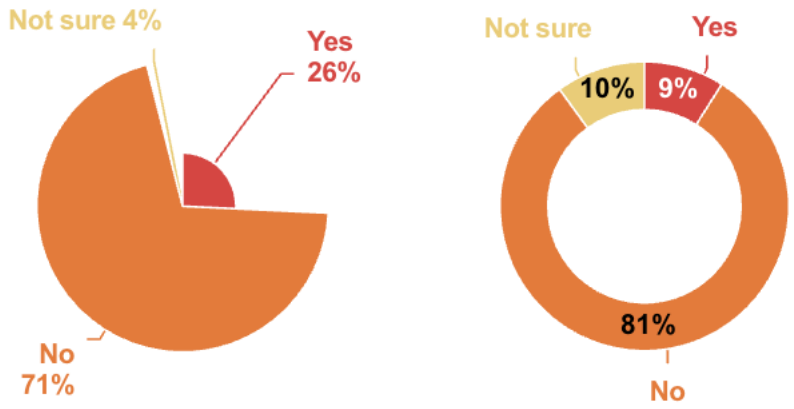
Presidents on: Campus Speech

Left: Presidents (all) on whether their institution has adopted an institutional neutrality policy. Right: Presidents whose institution does not have a neutrality policy (n=270) on whether it's considering adopting one:



The Takeaway:

Institutions continue to promote civil dialogue, but presidents don't see the climate for campus speech as improving.

Numbers to Know:

- 76% of presidents rate their own campus speech climate as good or excellent, versus 85% in 2025; just 29% rate the climate across higher ed highly, down from 39%.
- 75% of institutions have taken steps to educate campus groups about civil discourse in the last year, though voluntary initiatives such as offering faculty training in facilitating difficult dialogues (46%) far outpace embedded or required education efforts, such as mandatory faculty training (5%).
- 26% of institutions have adopted institutional neutrality policies, unchanged from last year; most of the remainder are not considering doing so.

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Presidents on: Diversity, Equity + Inclusion

Presidents (all) on the how their institution modified its approach to DEI initiatives in the last year, selecting all that apply:

Response	All
Significantly reduced or eliminated DEI offices, staff roles or programs	11%
Somewhat reduced DEI offices, staff roles or programs	8%
Restructured/rebranded DEI efforts under alternate frameworks (e.g., “belonging,” “access” or “inclusive excellence”)	43%
Shifted DEI resources toward broader student or institutional priorities (e.g., wellness, academic success, affordability)	23%
Maintained its current DEI initiatives without major changes.	29%
Expanded or strengthened its DEI commitments and programming	7%
Not sure/not applicable	14%

The Takeaway:

Most institutions report maintaining student diversity levels post-affirmative action, but many have restructured or scaled back DEI efforts in response to political pressure.

Numbers to Know:

- 79% of institutions report maintaining or increasing student diversity since 2023, falling to 59% among the 8% of colleges that previously considered race in admissions.
- Within the last year, 43% of institutions have restructured DEI efforts under alternative frameworks such as "belonging”; 19% report reducing DEI offices, staff or roles, with public and Southern institutions most affected.
- For institutions explicitly making DEI cuts (n=71), scholarships and financial aid (45%) are most impacted.

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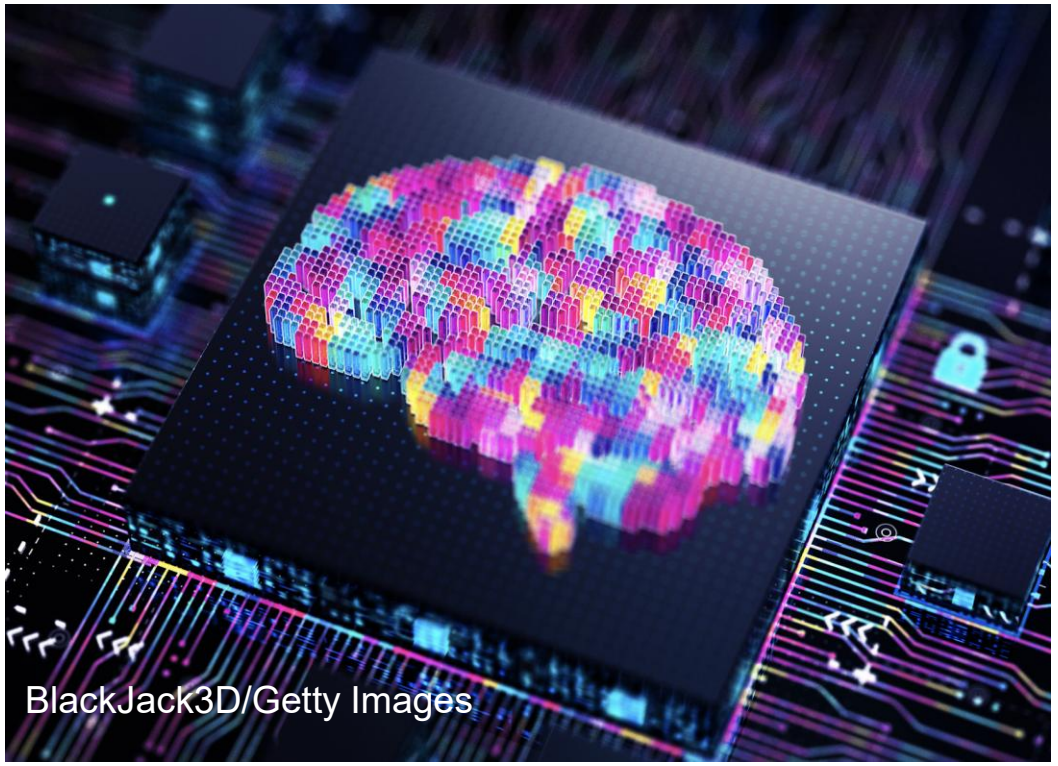
IHE Audience vs. Presidents

Q: How effective has higher education been in shaping national conversations about AI policy and ethics?

a. Not at all effective
b. Slightly effective
c. Moderately effective
d. Very effective
e. Extremely effective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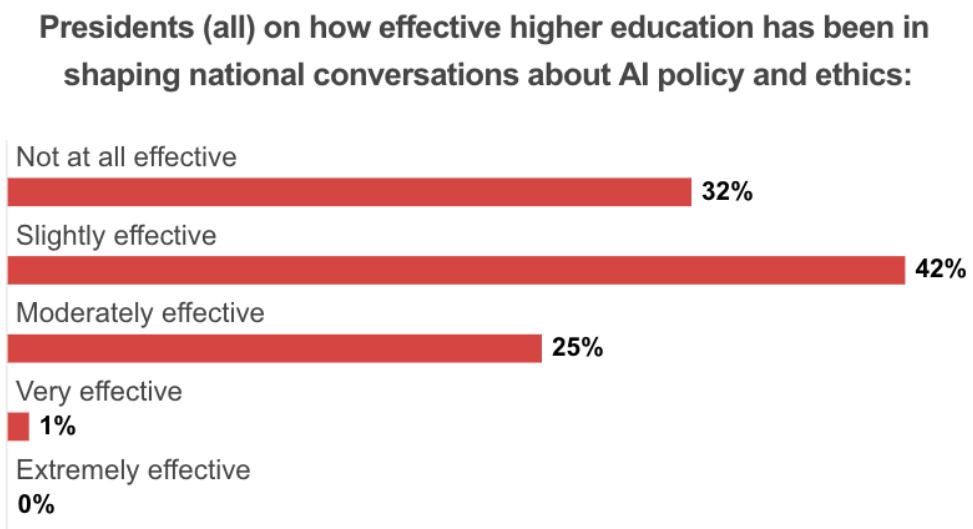
Presidents on: Artificial Intelligence



The Takeaway:

Most institutions now have AI strategies or task forces, with use cases shifting beyond student-facing applications to core business functions—even as presidents think higher education is failing to lead on key conversations about AI.

Numbers to Know:

- 1% of presidents think higher education has been a very/extremely effective voice in important national conversations about AI.
- 71% percent of presidents report establishing an institutionwide AI task force or strategy—up from 52% last year and just 18% in 2024. An additional 24% of presidents say strategies are in development.
- Use of AI for administrative processes such as scheduling and resource allocation jumped from 28% to 47% year-over-year, and use for institutional planning and decision-making rose from 18% to 32%, signaling more enterprise-level adoption. Chatbots remain the No. 1 use case (58%).

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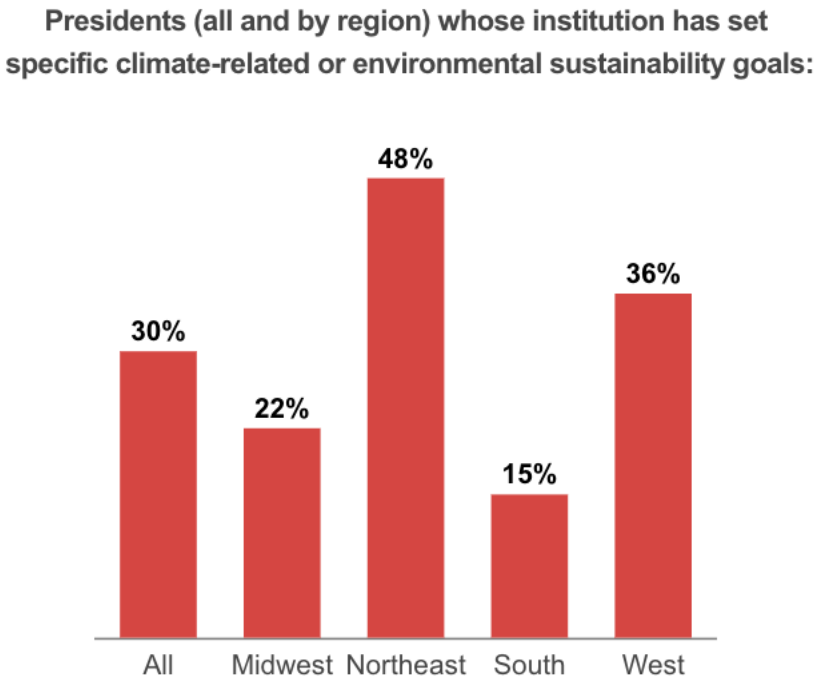
Presidents on: Environmental Sustainability



The Takeaway:
Climate action is flat and largely focused on upgrades rather than grand commitments.

Numbers to Know:

- 30% of institutions have set environmental sustainability-related goals—unchanged from last year, perhaps unsurprisingly, with presidents' focus drawn elsewhere.

- The most common sustainability action taken by institutions is renovating campus buildings (60%). Actions such as fossil fuel divestment (6%) and carbon offsets for travel (3%) remain rare.

Presidents on: Campus Health + Wellness

Presidents (all) describe student mental health trends at their institution, compared with last year:

The Takeaway:
Wellness initiatives are widespread, but student mental health remains a complex problem.

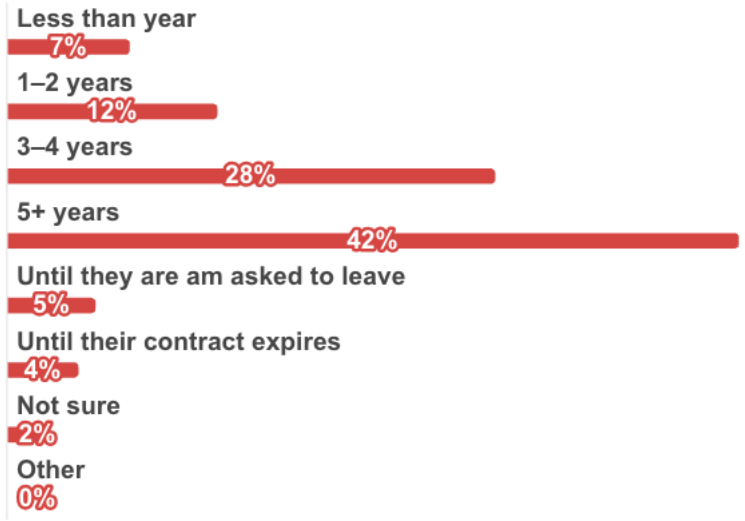
Numbers to Know:

- 94% of institutions have taken nonclinical steps to promote campus wellness in the last 12 months—most commonly emphasizing social connection (71%) and investing in wellness facilities (63%).

- Just 14% of presidents think student mental health on their campus is improving; 60% describe it as stable and 23% say it's worsening.

Presidents on: Management, Governance + Being a President

Presidents (all) on how long they expect to remain in their job:



The Takeaway:
Presidents enjoy their jobs and want to stay on in their roles, despite the mounting pressures.

Numbers to Know:

- 92% percent of presidents enjoy being a president (compared to 89% last year), and 42% plan to stay on the job 5 or more years—pushing back on reports that the presidency is becoming a job nobody wants.

- Still, just 55% of presidents agree that the modern presidency is a job one person can reasonably handle. Presidents' views on the single hardest part of the job vary widely.

- 36% of all leaders think their institution would be better off without faculty tenure, and 68% say that shared governance at their institution works well.

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Panel Discussion

Audience Q&A

Thank you!

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