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Talking about Student Experience and Belonging with Right-of-Center Audiences



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This memo summarizes findings and offers messaging guidance from a two-part project with GS Strategy Group in summer and fall 2023. The goals of this project were: (1) to investigate attitudes of right-of-center voters toward concepts of student experience and belonging, and (2) to test specific ideas and framing around this work to determine how best to describe it to a conservative audience. This project consisted of:

- An online QualBoard with in-depth journaling interviews of 25 right-of-center opinion leaders nationally and inside the Beltway, conducted August 1–August 3, 2023.
- A survey of 616 right-of-center national opinion leaders (24% text/76% online), conducted from October 3–October 12, 2023.

Key Findings

- Right-of-center opinion leaders believe in the value of a college education (86%) and agree that students who feel supported and like they belong on campus are more likely to persevere through challenges and complete their degree (91%). These opinion leaders also recognize that helping students complete college and get good paying jobs is important to addressing issues with student loan repayment (81%).
- There is a baseline understanding that some students face difficulties transitioning to college (56%) or drop out prior to completion (72%). These opinion leaders believe that colleges and universities should make sure students know that many students struggle and there are resources to help them succeed (81%).
- With this contextual foundation, there is soft support for the concepts of student experience and belonging among this audience. After hearing more information about student experience and belonging, the support grows 36 percentage points, with notable gains among self-identified “very conservative” opinion leaders, men, and those older than 55. While these gains are solid and present clear opportunities for continued engagement on this topic, the additional knowledge needed for this growth is substantial.

- Although faculty face negative perceptions among some on the right, opinion leaders also recognize the role that faculty play in helping students succeed. Conservative opinion leaders support the idea that faculty should both provide instruction *and* play a proactive role in identifying students who are struggling academically and engage them individually to support their success (75%).¹
- The “bootstraps mentality” for student success is prevalent. There is a strong belief that students bear more responsibility for whether they succeed academically than the university they attend. Yet opinion leaders recognize that universities also play a part in student success—particularly for students who want to help themselves. When asked how much responsibility the university has compared to the student when it comes to graduating, 49% of opinion leaders indicated a 25% institution/75% student split. Emphasizing student experience and belonging should not be portrayed as relieving students of their personal responsibilities for their own success in messaging to this audience.
- Efforts to support student experience and belonging are viewed as bipartisan and common sense as opposed to being characterized as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); 51% of opinion leaders view it as bipartisan and 62% call it common sense. In the same vein, discussing this concept as a priority for *all* students as opposed to narrowing in on specific identities or student subgroups keeps it popular among right-leaning opinion leaders.

Messaging Guidance

Do:

- **Simplify the message.** Much of this audience is persuadable on the topic if approached strategically. Consider how to talk about this topic to those unfamiliar with higher education while emphasizing connections to student completion and graduation—concepts with higher salience and greater familiarity among conservatives.
- **Tie the importance of student experience and belonging directly to academic success and post-college outcomes.** Right-of-center opinion leaders understand the value of higher education and connecting student experience and belonging to academic success resonates with their values. There's a straight line in their minds from a positive student experience and sense of belonging to completion and post-graduate opportunity—additional points, however valid, divert the message off-course.
- **Talk about the concepts of student experience and belonging as a shared responsibility among students, faculty, and the institution—with students taking the lead.** Conservative opinion leaders understand that students face challenges to success at colleges and universities, but they widely believe that it is the student's responsibility to act and overcome them. Still, they recognize the significant role that faculty play in helping students succeed and view students feeling that their professors believe they can be successful *if they put in the work* as a crucial factor in belonging. Starting messaging from a place of shared responsibility between students and institutions can provide openings for persuasion while creating a counternarrative to combat negative perceptions of faculty among right-of-center opinion leaders.

- **Highlight interventions that identify (all) students who may be struggling early on.** Around a third of opinion leaders believe training professors to help students overcome setbacks (38%) and implementing early alert systems based on classroom grades, attendance, and participation (31%) are “very effective” to promote student resiliency and sense of belonging. However, targeting interventions by identity or student demographics is unpopular with this audience—over three-quarters (76%) of opinion leaders believe any interventions should be targeted to *all*
- **Emphasize the key tenets of this work as common sense and bipartisan.** The foundations of student experience and belonging and their respective outcomes—academic success, college completion, and getting a good job—are all common sense and viewed as bipartisan. Keep the conversation on the big picture to prevent partisan messaging distractions.

Don't:

- **Lose the connection between student experience and academic success.** Connecting the message directly to academics minimizes routes for misinterpretation or misunderstanding, reducing the risk of inadvertently tying these concepts to more politically controversial themes like DEI work or interpersonal challenges. Student experience and belonging are not in and of themselves enough for these opinion leaders—they must be tied to academic outcomes.
- **Focus on specific groups of students based on identity or demographics.** Although research shows that certain student groups struggle more or would benefit more from student experience and belonging interventions, singling out specific groups is a non-starter for this audience—even when exposed to proof points to the contrary. These opinion leaders believe students of all backgrounds may need these kinds of interventions and want those who access these resources to be determined by individual academic need and not by demographic groups.

- **Get too deep in the weeds for non-expert audiences.** There's a lot to talk about with student experience and belonging from the research and existing body of interventions and programs. However, keeping talking points high-level and avoiding research or academic jargon is necessary for maintaining and growing support.

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ENDNOTES

- 1.** Responses were collected prior to October 7, 2023.