

RESEARCH BRIEF

EFFECTS OF POLITICAL RHETORIC ON COLLEGE-BOUND STUDENTS

About NACAC

NACAC is an organization of professionals from around the world dedicated to serving students as they make choices about pursuing postsecondary education.

NACAC is committed to maintaining high standards that foster ethical and social responsibility among those involved in the transition process.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 2016 presidential campaign season, the increased intensity of political rhetoric has received significant attention from the news media. NACAC included questions on its 2017–18 Counseling Trends Survey (CTS) and Admission Trends Survey (ATS) to hear from school counselors and admission officers about how these changes might be affecting high school students and the college admission process.

The findings, included in the following pages, indicate that the intensity of the current political climate has led to increased activism among students at more than half (52 percent) of secondary schools across the US. At more than one-third of schools (35 percent) counselors reported a sense of disillusionment among students. However, it is also clear that experiences vary across schools, as 27 percent of respondents reported that the political environment had no effect on the students they served.

The most profound effect reported by college admission offices is related to recruitment of international students. Nearly two-thirds of colleges (61 percent) reported increased difficulty over the past two years in recruiting international students due to changes in the political and regulatory environment.

ABOUT THE SURVEYS

Counseling Trends Survey

In May 2018, NACAC distributed the 2017–18 Counseling Trends Survey to a school counseling office staff member at 16,252 secondary schools ending in 12th grade. NACAC preference for respondents at each school started with the school counseling department chair, followed by school counselor, college placement adviser, and college adviser. The list of counselors was purchased from MCH Strategic Data. The survey was administered online using SurveyMonkey. Responses were collected through the middle of June 2018.

NACAC received 2,251 responses to the survey. The following table provides a comparison of the characteristics of NACAC CTS respondents to those of all public and private secondary schools in the US (ending in grade 12). NACAC survey respondents were 68 percent public, 18 percent private non-parochial, and 14 percent private parochial, making the sample under-representative of public schools in favor of private, non-parochial schools. Among public schools, NACAC respondents were similar to the larger population in the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. NACAC survey respondents reported larger enrollments compared to all secondary schools.



National Association for
College Admission Counseling

NACAC 2017–18 Counseling Trends Survey Sample Compared to the National Secondary School Population¹

	NACAC Survey Respondents	All Secondary Schools	NACAC Public School Respondents	All Public Schools	NACAC Private Non-Parochial Respondents	All Private Non-Parochial Schools	NACAC Private Parochial Respondents	All Private Parochial Schools
N	2,251²	32,881	1,510	26,398	403	1,996	300	4,487
% of schools			68.2%	80.3%	18.2%	6.1%	13.6%	13.6%
Mean enrollment	787	570	905	650	514	214	553	286
% of students eligible for FRPL	37.3%	—	49.4	51.5	8.2%	—	12.6%	—

—Not available for private schools.

¹ Includes schools ending in grade 12.

² The number of public and private NACAC respondents does not add to the total because 38 schools did not report school type.

SOURCES: NACAC Counseling Trends Survey, 2017–18.

US Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. (2015–16). The Elementary/Secondary Information System (EISi) web application was used to download data from the Common Core of Data (CCD) and Private School Survey (PSS) for the 2015–16 school year. Calculations performed by authors.

Admission Trends Survey

For the 2017–18 administration of the Admission Trends Survey, the questionnaire was divided into two parts—one set of questions was sent to university admission offices and another sent to institutional research (IR) offices. Both portions were administered online using SurveyMonkey. The IR survey was emailed in February 2018 to 1,266 four-year postsecondary institutions. In August 2018, the admission office survey was sent to all 1,241 four-year postsecondary institutions that were NACAC members. Admission offices also were asked to provide additional data if the IR portion had not been submitted. At the time of the survey, NACAC member institutions represented 70 percent of all degree-granting four-year, not-for-profit, baccalaureate degree-granting, Title-IV participating institutions in the US. NACAC received 493 responses, for an overall response rate of 39 percent. Of the 493 responses, 220 institutions submitted completed surveys (both admission and IR sections) and 273 submitted just the IR portion. All responses were utilized in the analyses.

NACAC 2017–18 ATS respondents had a similar average acceptance rate compared to all colleges, but private college respondents had lower yield rates when compared to the national average. NACAC survey respondents also had larger undergraduate enrollments.

NACAC 2017–18 Admission Trends Survey Sample Compared to National College Population

	NACAC Respondents	All Colleges	NACAC Public Respondents	All Public Colleges	NACAC Private Respondents	All Private Colleges
N (%)	493	1,817	184 (37%)	579 (32%)	309 (70%)	1,238 (68%)
Mean Enrollment (Full-Time Undergrad)	6,204	3,947	12,716	8,602	2,557	1,768
Mean Selectivity	64.4	65.4	67.9	69.3	62.3	63.5
Mean Yield	27.9	33.6	32.0	34.0	25.3	33.4

NOTE: Data for all colleges was drawn from the 2016–17 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) using the following criteria: US location, four-year, not-for-profit, baccalaureate degree-granting, and Title IV-participating. Of the 1,817 total institutions, approximately 1,567 (86 percent) provided both selectivity and yield data for fall 2016.

SOURCES: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2017–18.

US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2016–17). Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Data Center. Washington, DC: NCES.

SURVEY RESULTS

Secondary School Students

School counselors at secondary schools were asked to indicate how the current intensity of political rhetoric has affected students in their schools.

	Increased Activism	Expressions of Disillusionment	Improved Attention to Civility	Reduced Civility	Increased Consideration of Colleges' Political Leanings	Increased Interest in Colleges Outside the US	None of the Above
All Survey Respondents	51.9%	34.8%	20.8%	18.3%	21.1%	8.0%	27.4%
By School Type							
Public	49.3	33.4	16.9	17.7	11.4	5.0	31.5
Private	57.8	37.7	29.6	19.8	42.5	14.6	18.7

Correlations (Spearman's Rho) for private school status with: increased activism (.080), improved attention to civility (.146), increased consideration of colleges' political leanings (.354), increased interest in colleges outside the US (.165), none of the above (-.133), $p < .01$.

School Enrollment

- Counselors at larger schools were more likely to indicate two of the possible student effects—increased activism among students and reduced civility. Seventy-one percent of counselors at schools with enrollments of 2,000 or more reported increased activism compared to 43 percent at schools with enrollments lower than 500 students.
- Smaller schools were more likely to indicate that the intensity of political rhetoric had none of the effects included on the survey.¹

Students per Counselor

- Counselors at schools with higher student caseloads were less likely to report increased consideration of colleges' political leanings and increased interest in colleges outside the US.²

College Recruitment

College admission survey respondents were asked to indicate if any of the following had increased over the past two years.

Number of Essays Addressing Political Activism

	Yes	No	Not Applicable
All Survey Respondents	36.9%	38.9%	24.2%
By Institution Type			
Public	28.6	30.4	41.1
Private	41.6	43.6	14.9
By Selectivity			
Accept fewer than 50% of applicants	58.3	29.2	12.5
50% to 70%	41.9	33.9	24.2
71% to 85%	23.5	51.0	25.5
More than 85%	18.2	54.5	27.3

Chi-squared test for institution type ($\chi^2 (2) = 13.5, V = .293$), $p < .001$.

Correlation (Spearman's Rho) with selectivity (.314), $p < .01$.

¹ Correlations (Spearman's Rho) for enrollment with: increased activism (.200), reduced civility (.090), none of the above (-.149), $p < .01$.

² Correlations (Spearman's Rho) for students per counselor with: increased consideration of colleges' political leanings (-.130), increased interest in colleges outside the US (-.137), $p < .01$.

Student Interest in Colleges' Political Leanings

	Yes	No	Not Applicable
All Survey Respondents	37.8%	52.6%	9.6%
By Institution Type			
Public	27.3	56.4	16.4
Private	43.6	50.5	5.9

Chi-squared test for institution type ($X^2(2) = 6.8, V = .208$), $p < .05$.

Difficulty Recruiting International Students Due to Political and Regulatory Environment

	Yes	No	Not Applicable
All Survey Respondents	61.1%	30.6%	8.3%
By Enrollment			
Fewer than 3,000 students	52.0	37.3	10.7
3,000 to 9,999	73.3	22.2	4.4
10,000 or more	69.0	24.1	6.9

Correlation (Spearman's Rho) with enrollment (-.244), $p < .01$.