

# PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES AND STUDENT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

## The **INSTITUTE** for

Public Policy & Economic Development  
at Wilkes University

*A partnership among King's College, Keystone College, Lackawanna College, Luzerne County Community College, Marywood University, Misericordia University, Penn State/Wilkes-Barre, The Commonwealth Medical College, University of Scranton, and Wilkes University*

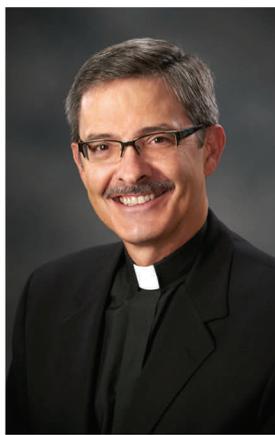
**The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development (The Institute)** launched a polling program in 2014 beginning with post-graduation plans for students at its 10 higher education institution partners. This fall 2015 poll assesses students' opinions about the importance of certain public policy issues and their level of civic engagement. A total of 2,771 students participated in this poll. The most frequent majors among students in the sample were healthcare (40 percent), business (21 percent), and science/mathematics (21 percent). Sixteen percent of respondents indicated that they were social science majors. All other major categories were represented by less than ten percent each.



**Students acquire information about current events from television, news websites or blogs, social media or word of mouth.**

Many students strive to stay informed on current events - 85 percent say they are at least somewhat informed. Many do so by watching television (79 percent), reading news websites and blogs (76 percent), social media (71 percent), or word of mouth (66 percent). Additional sources include newspapers, radios, and other internet sources. Those who got their information from newspapers were the most likely to consider themselves very

informed, and the most likely to consider themselves not very informed got their news from word of mouth.



*"The University of Scranton values its participation in this study so as to learn more about students' perspectives and participation in matters of public policy and civic engagement. The University remains a committed partner in educating and*

*challenging students to be active and informed members of their communities."* Kevin P. Quinn, S.J., J.D., Ph.D., President, University of Scranton

**Students believe that the U.S. and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania are not moving in the right direction.**



In both instances where students were asked about the directionality of movement for the country and the state. For the U.S., only 12 percent of students believed it to be moving in the right direction. Ultimately though, 42 percent of students believe the country as a whole is moving in the wrong direction. About 27 percent believe it is moving in neither the right nor wrong direction, and almost 19 percent were unsure.

As for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 23 percent of students feel that it is moving in the wrong direction, and only 14 percent say it is moving in the right direction. About 29 percent say it is moving in neither the right or wrong direction, and 34 percent (the plurality of respondents) stated that they were unsure.



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*“Not surprisingly, the report indicates a concern by our students about the cost of education as well as the concern over the direction both our Nation and Commonwealth are taking. Reflective of the National dialogue, especially given the media coverage related to the upcoming elections, we must be attuned to those concerns and provide opportunities for our students to express*



*their thoughts and help them to participate in the election process with knowledge and understanding. I am especially encouraged by the number of students who plan to vote in the elections as well as by the commitment of our students to volunteer service with non-profit organizations. Both trends bode well for our area and our Nation.” Mark Volk, President, Lackawanna College*

**The cost of education and other issues related to education are deemed the most important national and state public policy issues by the students, and policies related to marijuana were rated the least important.**

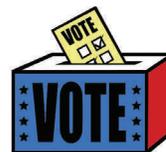
There is a degree of separation between the topics stated, where the top tier of policy issues included the cost of college education and other related issues, jobs and economy, health care, terrorism and homeland security, and the efficiency of government and the bottom tier included social security, environmental issues, taxes, energy, illegal immigration, and policies related to marijuana.

*“While our students are concerned about the high costs of post-secondary education, issues relating to jobs and the economy, healthcare, and the efficiencies of government ranked comparatively,” said Wilkes University President, Patrick Leahy, Ed.D. “The thoughtfulness of their responses demonstrates that we are likely to see renewed civic engagement, innovative ideas, and advocacy on these issues as these young minds enter the workforce.”*



**Two-thirds of the students are currently registered to vote and say they are very likely to vote in the 2016 Presidential Election.**

Many students voted during the 2014 General Election, and most students who did not vote were not registered to vote at that time. Even



more students are intent on voting during the 2016 Presidential Election. A large portion (69 percent) of the students also stated that they were very likely to vote in 2016, and another 16 percent stated they were somewhat likely.

The majority of students also indicated they were at least somewhat likely to vote in the November 2015 general election, which consisted mainly of local races in most areas.



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**Students who are more likely to vote in the 2016 Presidential election were more likely to report that they were somewhat well informed or very well informed about current events.**

90 percent of students who were very likely to vote in the 2016 election consider themselves at least somewhat informed, compared with 77 percent of those who are somewhat likely to vote and only 69 percent of those not at all likely to vote.

**Many students have never volunteered their time for a political cause or candidate, but many have participated in off-campus non-profit organizations volunteer activities.**

Almost 85 percent of students who responded to the survey have, on at least one occasion, volunteered their time for an off-campus, non-profit organization. Two-thirds have done this on multiple occasions, and 18 percent of students report doing so regularly. On the other hand, almost 85 percent of students have never volunteered for a political cause or candidate. The majority of students (54 percent) also reported never having attending a local public meeting.

Among those who volunteer regularly, 88 percent reported that they are at least somewhat informed about current events, compared with 86 percent among those who volunteer occasionally, 84 percent of those who volunteered at least once, and only 79 percent of those who have never volunteered.

*“The fact that Northeast Pennsylvania’s college students report spending significant time volunteering for non-profit organizations in our community is an extremely positive indicator,” says Thomas J. Botzman, Ph.D., president, Misericordia University. “It means that institutions such as Misericordia University and our neighboring colleges are fostering the desire of today’s students to serve others and improve the quality of life in the region.”*



**Those who disagree on what direction the country is heading in believe different issues to be most important.**

Students who believe that the U.S. is heading in the right direction were more likely than their counterparts who believe it’s heading in the wrong direction to name cost of college education, health care, environmental issues and marijuana issues as important issues. Those who believe that the U.S. is heading in the wrong direction were more likely to mark jobs and the economy, terrorism and homeland security, policies related to immigration, social security, taxes and efficiency of government as important issues.

