2026 NEPA Student Poll: Perspectives, Engagement & Future Plans

The Institute
Turning Information into Insight

A partnership among Geisinger Commonwealth School of Medicine, Johnson College, Keystone College, King's College, Lackawanna College, Luzerne County Community College, Maywood University, Misericordia University, Penn State Hazleton, Penn State Scranton, Penn State Wilkes-Barre, The Wright Center for Graduate Medical Education, University of Scranton, Wilkes University, and the business community

Student Polling Project

The Institute launched a polling program in 2014. The Institute regularly polls students at its partnering higher education institutions. These polling and survey research services are part of The Institute's menu of services offered to all types of clients. This report is considered the annual edition of the NEPA College Student Poll and reflects the most current data collected during Fall 2026. In previous years, survey findings were reported separately for spring and fall administrations, resulting in two reporting periods each year. Beginning in 2026, however, the survey transitioned to a single annual administration and reporting cycle. As a result, future polls will be distributed once per year, with findings consolidated into a single annual report.

This 2026 poll assesses students' civic enagement, opinions about the region, and their post graduation plans. A total of 584 students participated in this poll. Students from all class years, a variety of majors, and part-time and graduate students are well- represented in the data. The poll is distributed online through our academic partners, and the data was collected during Fall 2026.

The Institute is an applied research and economic consulting organization that fulfills two related priorities:

(1) customized client solutions and strategies to facilitate decision- making

(2) planning that enhances growth, impact, and sustainability for organizations.

The Institute also serves a public mission to provide data, analytics, and research to the community at large. This empirical, objective information is intended to drive discussion and innovative solutions that enhance regional quality of life and standard of living.

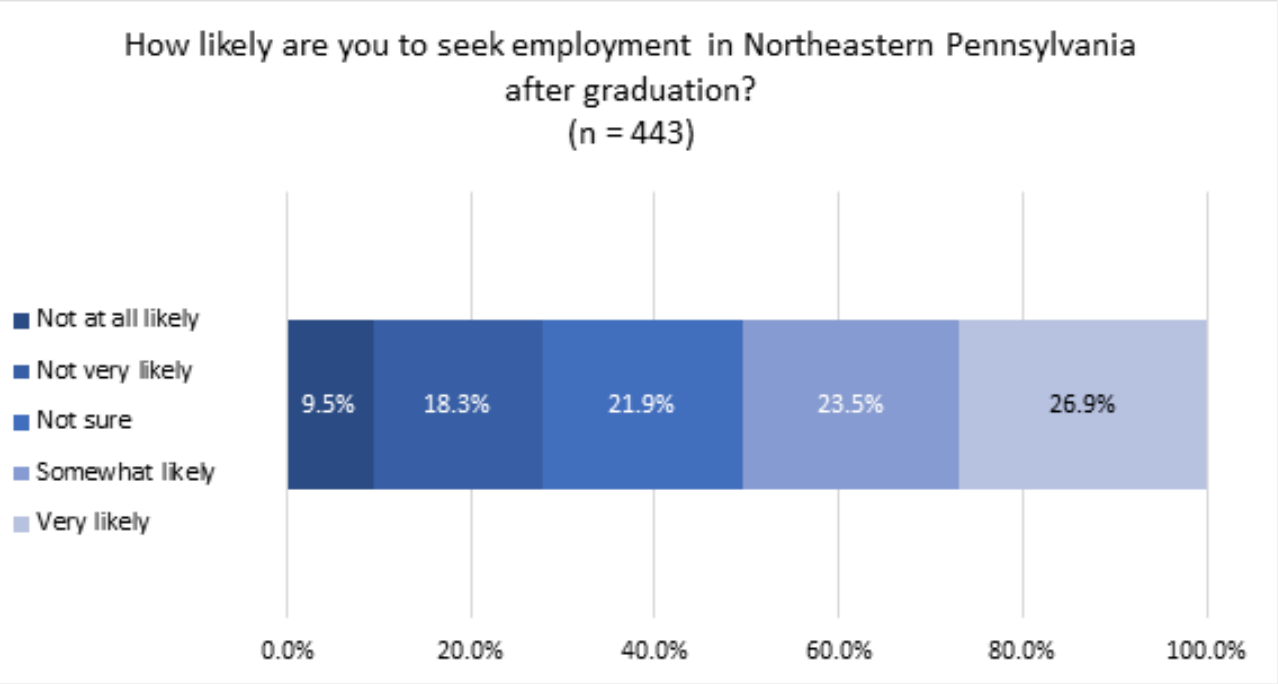
The Institute was formed as a unique collaborative of regional higher education institutions and the business community, and founded on the belief that good decisions are driven by good data.

Student perceptions of Northeastern Pennsylvania remain mixed, particularly regarding future employment and long-term career opportunities after graduation. About 32.2 percent of students view the Northeastern Pennsylvania's economy as "about the same" as the United States average, while 18.5 percent of respondents view it as worse. Similarly, 34.5 percent of respondents believe the region's quality of life is better than average, while 17.6 percent believe it is worse. A large segment of respondents remains neutral or unsure. on their perceptions of the region.

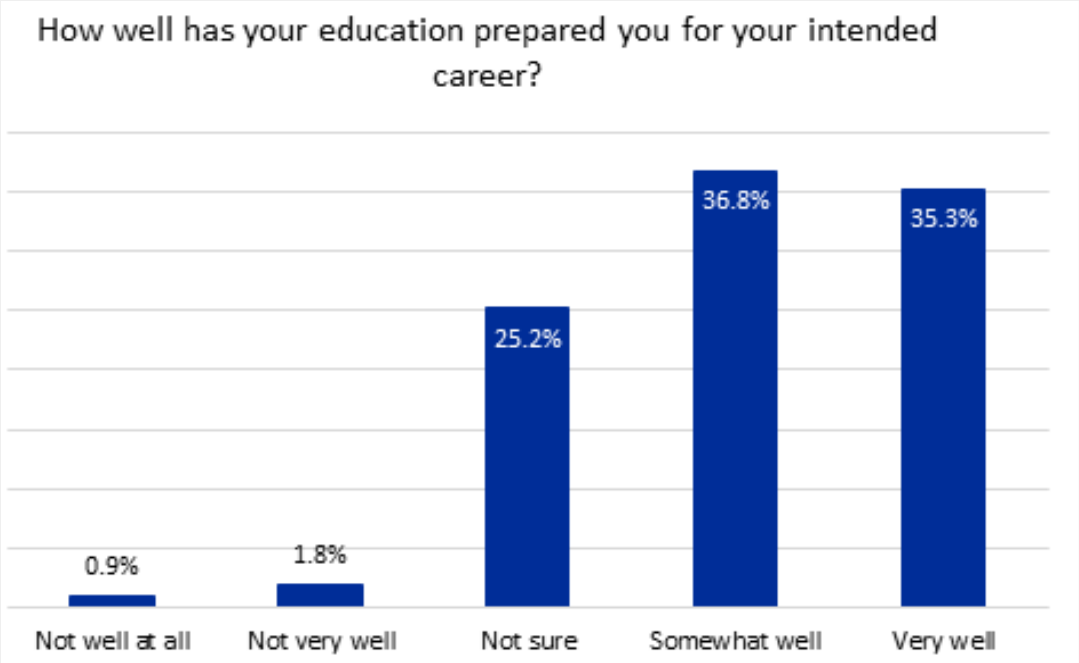
When deciding where to launch their careers, students prioritize availability of jobs in their desired fields, along with cost of living and housing availability. Among seven options to consider when deciding where they will seek employment after graduation, 61.8 percent ranked availability of jobs in their desired fields either first or second. Nearly 47.9 percent placed cost of living either first or second on their lists.

Students also prioritize opportunities in their desired fields (along with fringe benefits and starting salary) when evaluating job options. When asked to rank six possible factors to consider when evaluating job opportunities, students placed opportunities in their desired fields higher than any other option, with 53.5 percent placing the category first or second on their lists. A plurality of 39.1 and 34.8 percent placed fringe benefits and starting salary first or second on their lists, respectively.

Students were asked how likely they were to seek employment in Northeastern Pennsylvania after graduation. Just over half of respondents indicated that they were at least somewhat likely to seek employment in the region, including 26.9 percent who were very likely and 23.5 percent who were somewhat likely. Conversely, 18.3 percent were not very likely, and 9.5 percent were not at all likely to pursue regional employment. Another 21.9 percent were unsure. The results indicate that Northeastern Pennsylvania remains a potential post-graduation employment destination for many students, although considerable uncertainty remains regarding their eventual employment locations.



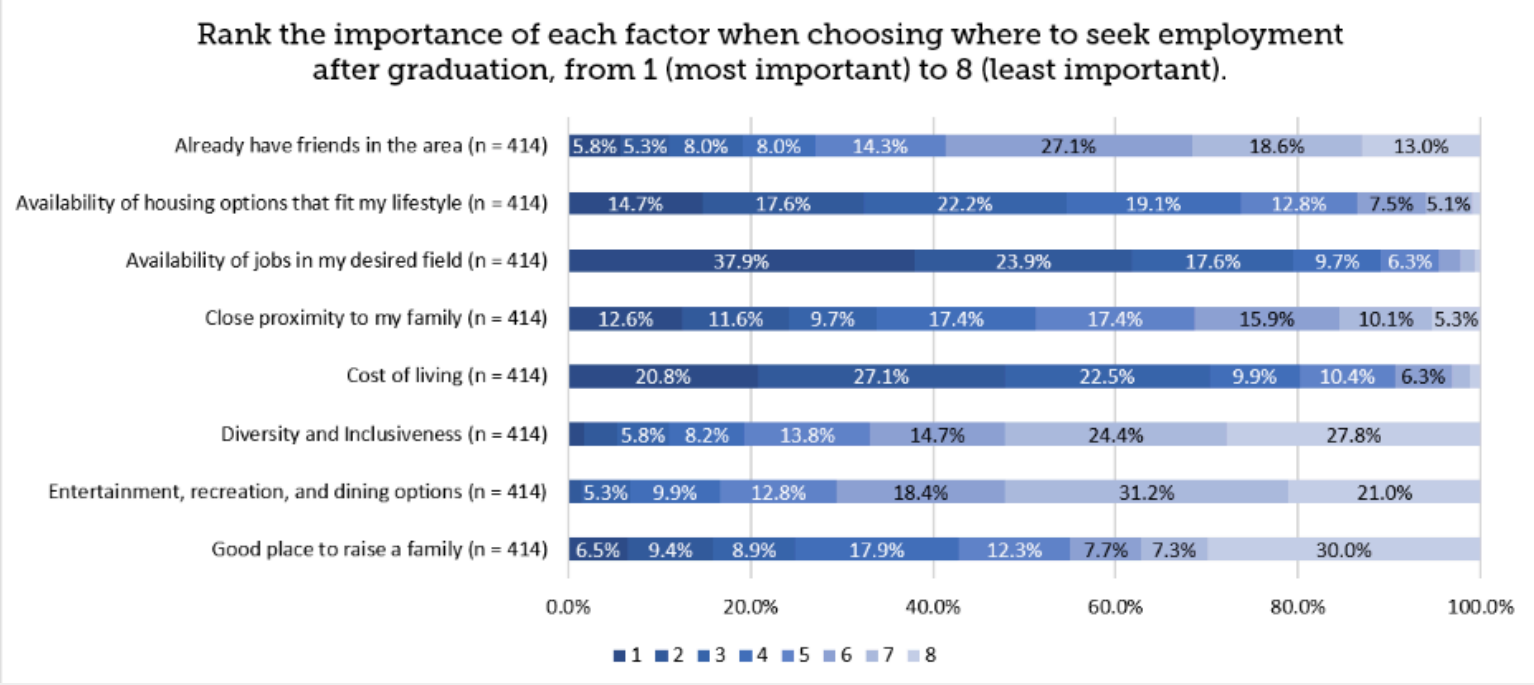
The completion of a regional internship is strongly connected to post-graduate relocation. Notably, 78.9 percent of the students who are likely to stay completed internships within the region. In contrast, 32.3 percent of those who are unlikely to remain had participated in regional internships. It is important to note that it remains unclear whether regional internships encourage undecided students to start their careers locally, or if students who already plan to stay in the region are more inclined to secure local internships to strengthen their prospects in the local job market.



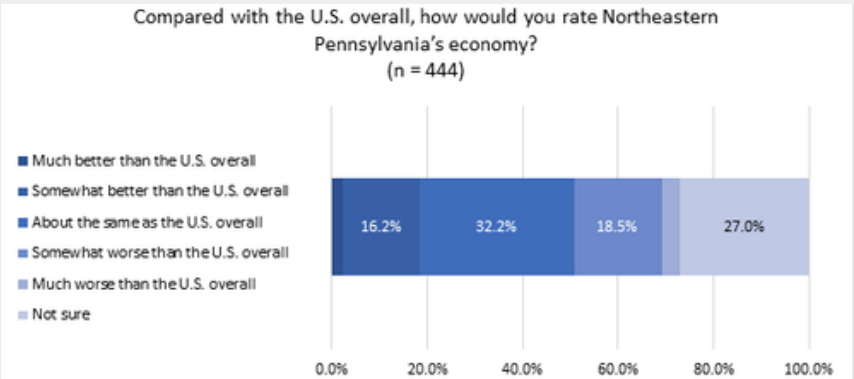
Students feel their education has prepared them for their careers. The most recent poll showed that the majority of respondents feel prepared for their intended careers. In 2026, 69.1 percent of students felt that their college education prepared them either very well or somewhat well for their intended career paths. Only 2.7 percent reported that they felt unprepared for their intended career. About 25.2 percent felt unsure about being adequately prepared for their intended careers.

Perspectives, Engagement & Future Plans 2026

Participants were asked to rank eight factors they might consider when deciding where to seek employment after graduation, from first, or most important, to eighth, or least important. The availability of jobs in a respondent's desired field received the highest average, with 37.9 percent ranking it as most important, followed by cost of living at 20.8 percent. The availability of housing options that fit the respondent's lifestyle ranked third, with 14.7 percent ranking it first, while proximity to family received a first ranking with 12.6 percent of respondents. A good place to raise a family, already having friends in the area, diversity and inclusiveness, and entertainment, recreation, and dining options received lower weighted averages. These results suggest that students' location decisions were driven primarily by employment opportunities and affordability, while social and recreational considerations generally played a less prominent role.



Students were asked to compare Northeastern Pennsylvania's economy with that of the United States overall. The largest share, 32.2 percent, believed that the regional economy was about the same as the national economy. Another 27 percent were unsure. Approximately 18.5 percent viewed Northeastern Pennsylvania's economy as somewhat or much better than the U.S. economy. Conversely, 22.3 percent believed the regional economy was somewhat or much worse. Overall, the responses reflect substantial neutrality and uncertainty, with comparatively similar shares holding moderately positive and moderately negative views of the regional economy.

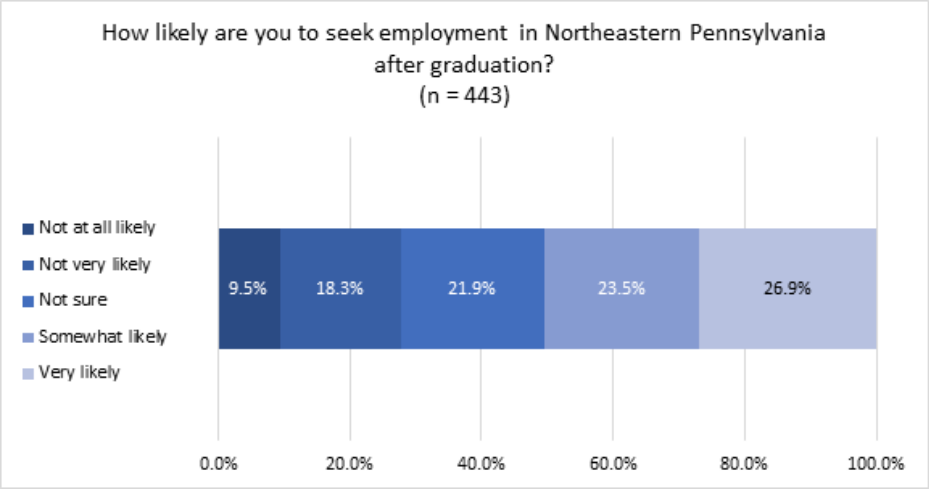


"It is heartening to see that more than two-thirds of students in Northeastern Pennsylvania are registered to vote. Like many schools, the University runs a non-partisan voter engagement initiative, and I am proud of the many ways our "Royals Vote" helps empower students to participate in the democratic process, an opportunity they will have again next Tuesday."

Joseph G. Marina, S.J., President, The University of Scranton

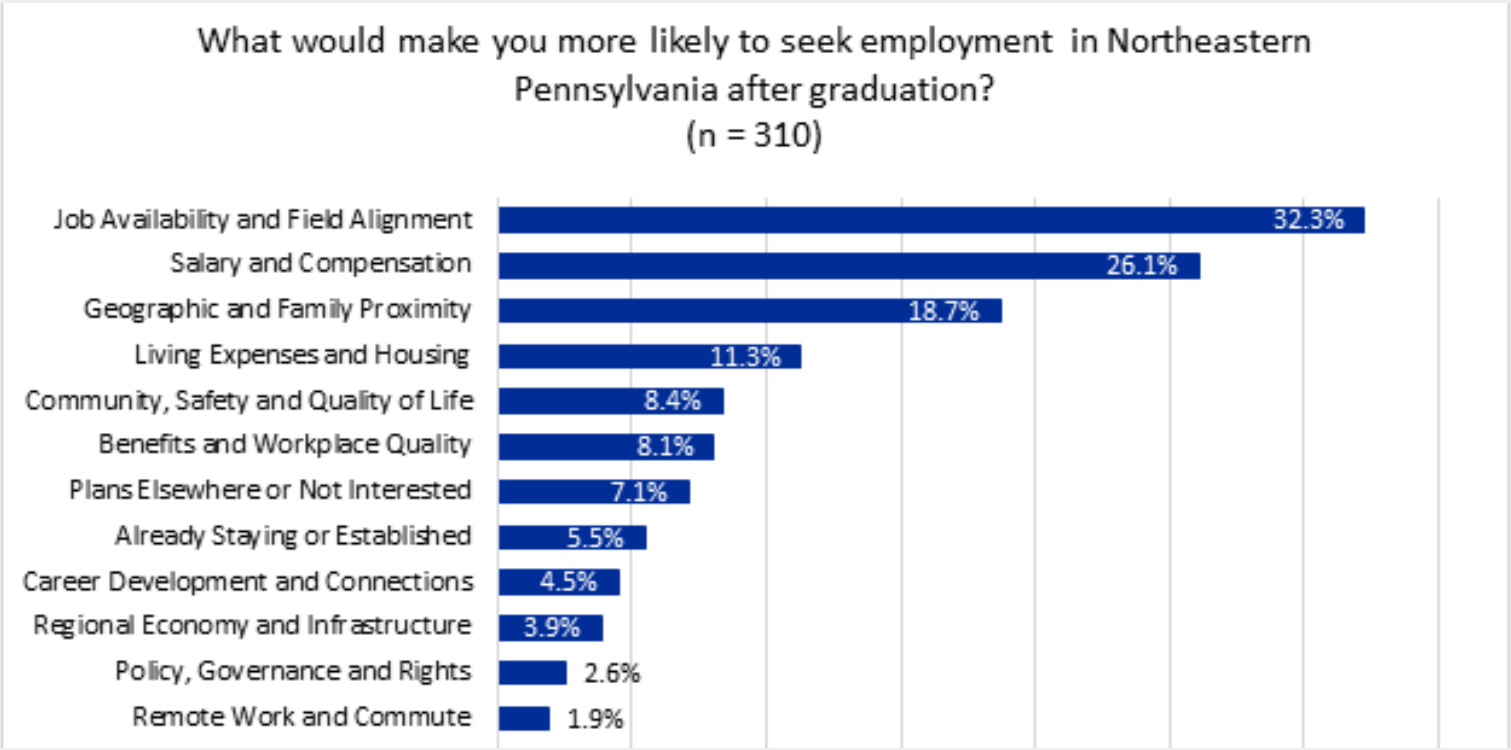
Participants were also asked to compare Northeastern Pennsylvania's quality of life with that of the United States overall. Of the students who answered, the largest share, 30.4 percent, believed the region's quality of life was about the same as that of the country as a whole. A combined 34.5 percent viewed the region favorably, including 29.5 percent who considered its quality of life somewhat better and 5.0 percent who considered it much better. In comparison, 14.4 percent rated the region's quality of life as somewhat worse, and 3.2 percent rated it as much worse. Another 17.6 percent were unsure. These findings suggest that students held generally neutral or moderately favorable views of the region's quality of life, with positive assessments exceeding negative assessments.





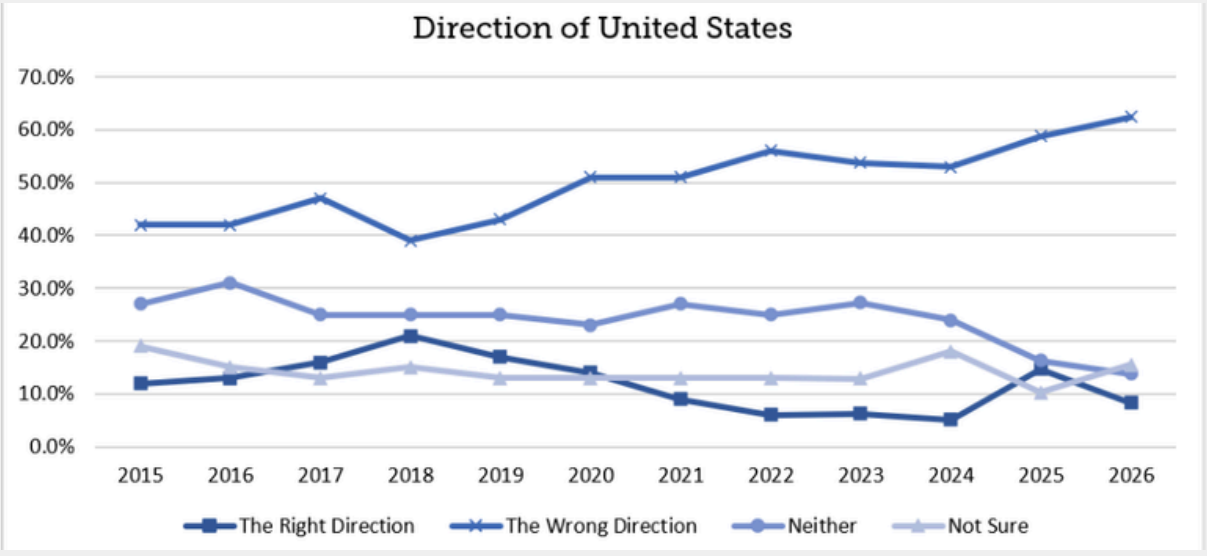
Students were asked how likely they were to seek employment in Northeastern Pennsylvania after graduation. Just over half of respondents indicated that they were at least somewhat likely to seek employment in the region, including 26.9 percent who were very likely and 23.5 percent who were somewhat likely. Conversely, 18.3 percent were not very likely, and 9.5 percent were not at all likely to pursue regional employment. Another 21.9 percent were unsure. The results indicate that Northeastern Pennsylvania remains a potential post-graduation employment destination for many students, although considerable uncertainty remains regarding their eventual employment locations.

Students were asked what would make them more likely to seek employment in Northeastern Pennsylvania after graduation. Job availability and alignment with a student's desired field was the most frequently identified theme, appearing in 32.3 percent of responses. Salary and compensation followed at 26.1 percent, while geographic location and proximity to family were mentioned in 18.7 percent. Other recurring considerations included living expenses and housing, community safety and quality of life, employee benefits and workplace quality, career-development opportunities, and regional economic conditions and infrastructure. Overall, the responses indicate that students' willingness to remain in the region depends principally on access to relevant employment, competitive compensation, and the ability to maintain personal or family connections



Respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of a wide range of national issues to them, including: (1) climate change; (2) the cost of college education; (3) corruption of government or public officials; (4) criminal justice or police issues; (5) efficiency of government; (6) energy; (7) equality or civil rights issues; (8) health care; (9) immigration; (10) international affairs and/or foreign policy; (11) other issues related to college education; (12) jobs and the economy; (13) public health; (14) social security; (15) taxes; (16) terrorism and homeland security; and (17) the national debt. While students assigned varying levels of importance to the issues presented, several topics emerged as clear priorities, issues that students felt were of greatest importance included health care (61.9 percent), the cost of college education (56.3 percent), jobs and the economy (53.4 percent), corruption of government or public officials (51.2 percent), and public health (50.9 percent). The issues receiving the fewest 'Very important' designations included international affairs and/or foreign policy (23.5 percent), the national debt (24.0 percent), and immigration (24.8 percent).

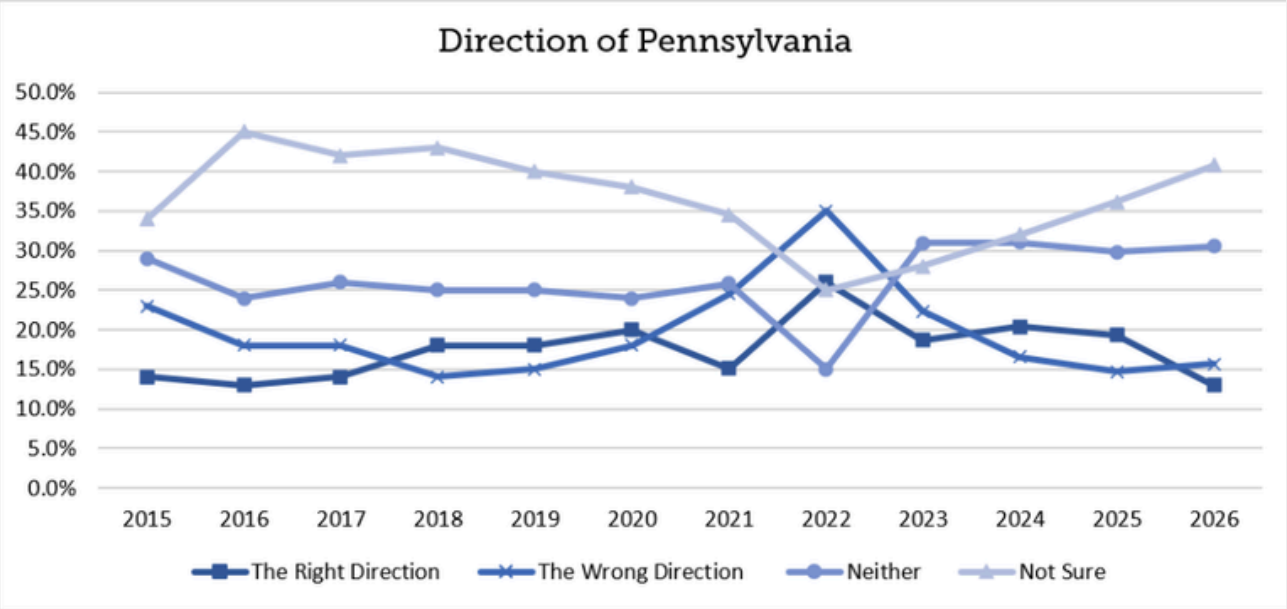
Please rate how important each issue is to you personally.					
	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
Answer Choices					
Climate Change	7.4%	13.4%	24.7%	27.5%	27.0%
Cost of college education	0.9%	2.1%	9.8%	31.0%	56.3%
Corruption of government or public officials	1.7%	5.2%	14.8%	27.1%	51.2%
Criminal justice or police issues	1.9%	8.8%	19.4%	34.7%	35.2%
Efficiency of government	1.2%	5.8%	20.9%	32.8%	39.3%
Energy	2.1%	9.0%	29.8%	34.1%	25.1%
Equality or civil rights issues	2.8%	8.4%	14.3%	25.3%	49.3%
Health care	1.4%	3.3%	6.7%	26.8%	61.9%
Immigration	4.3%	10.3%	27.4%	24.8%	33.1%
International affairs and/or Foreign policy	5.2%	13.6%	33.5%	23.5%	24.2%
Issues related to education, other than the cost of college education	2.1%	5.8%	20.8%	26.8%	44.5%
Jobs and the economy	0.5%	2.8%	12.0%	31.3%	53.4%
Public health	1.0%	4.7%	14.7%	28.8%	50.9%
Social security	3.8%	9.4%	26.9%	29.3%	30.5%
Taxes	4.1%	8.4%	27.4%	31.2%	28.9%
Terrorism/homeland security	4.8%	8.9%	23.4%	26.1%	36.8%
The national debt	6.9%	13.8%	25.3%	24.0%	30.0%



Every Public Policy and Civic Engagement poll conducted thus far has asked respondents to indicate in what direction (if any) both the United States and Pennsylvania were heading. The percentages of students selecting any given option have fluctuated over time, yet broad patterns have emerged. Among students polled about the direction of the United States, the share who feel the country is headed in the right direction decreased since 2018 before rising to 14.6 percent in 2025. In 2026, however, this percentage declined again to 8.3 percent. The percentage of students who feel the country is headed in the wrong direction also increased in 2026, reaching 62.5 percent, the highest level recorded during the survey period.

Among students polling about the direction of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, long-term trends are more easily observable. In every poll conducted since 2015, the plurality of students has been uncertain about the trajectory of Pennsylvania's direction, suggesting possible disengagement from state-level politics as opposed to national developments. During 2022 and 2023, however, the percentages of those unsure about Pennsylvania's direction did not constitute pluralities, with data showing 25 percent in 2022 and 28 percent in 2023. As of 2026, 40.8 percent of students were uncertain about Pennsylvania's direction, the highest percentage recorded during the survey period.

Other observable trends emerge among responses from students who have more fully formed opinions of current events in Pennsylvania. For example, the number of students claiming Pennsylvania is heading in the wrong direction steadily increased from 2018 to 2022 before declining in subsequent years. In 2026, 15.6 percent of students indicated that Pennsylvania is moving in the wrong direction, a slight increase from 14.7 percent in 2025 but well below the 35 percent peak recorded in 2022. The percentage of students who were more optimistic about Pennsylvania's direction increased from 14 percent to 20 percent between 2015 and 2020 before dropping to 15.1 percent in 2021. It has since fluctuated, reaching 13 percent in 2026. Lastly, despite a drop to 15 percent in 2022, the percentage of students who feel that Pennsylvania's direction remains unchanged rebounded to 31 percent in 2023, 31.1 percent in 2024, 29.8 percent in 2025, and 30.6 percent in 2026.



Students were asked about personal voter registration and likelihood of voting in future. The majority of respondents, 75.5 percent, are registered to vote in any location in the United States. This indicates slight decreases in voter registration compared to 2024 (80.2 percent), 2025 (76.4 percent), and 2023 (75.8 percent). The remaining share of the respondents are either not registered to vote or are not sure (18.5 percent and six percent, respectively). The share of students who are not registered to vote slightly decreased from 2025 (18.8 percent).
In addition, students were asked about their likelihood of voting in the November 2026 election for various offices. Exactly 49.1 percent of students confirmed that they are very likely to vote. This is an increase from November 2025, when 44.8 percent indicated that they were very likely to vote for various offices. Additionally, 8.6 percent of students believe that they are not at all likely to vote in the 2026 election, which is up from 7.9 percent reported in 2025.

How likely are you to vote in the November 2026 general election?		
	Frequency	Percent
Answer Choices		
Not at all likely	50	8.6%
Not very likely	48	8.2%
Not sure	91	15.6%
Somewhat likely	108	18.5%
Very likely	286	49.1%

Are you registered to vote in the United States?		
	Frequency	Percent
Answer Choices		
Yes	440	75.5%
No	108	18.5%
Not sure	35	6.0%

Respondents also reported which news or current-event sources they had used in the past month and then indicated their levels of trust in each current source on a five-point scale. Overall, respondents most commonly indicated that they somewhat trust or trust a little the news sources they used in the last month – though notable shares of students find that they do not trust late night television shows and podcasts at all.
The highest levels of trust were reported for television broadcasts of local news (26.6 percent), local newspapers (22.2 percent), national or international newspapers (22.1 percent), television broadcasts of national news (21.0 percent), and internet websites of newspapers (19.5 percent), with students indicating that they 'Trust a lot' or 'Trust completely' these sources.

Which news or current-event sources have you used in the last month, and how much do you trust each selected source? Select all that apply; then rate trust on a 5-point scale.

	Do not trust at all	Trust a little	Trust somewhat	Trust a lot	Trust completely
Answer Choices					
Internet (social media)	18.6%	31.5%	43.3%	5.7%	0.9%
Word of Mouth	22.8%	41.5%	32.2%	2.8%	0.7%
Television (national news)	15.7%	24.7%	38.7%	18.8%	2.1%
Television (local news)	11.1%	21.9%	40.4%	23.3%	3.4%
Internet (television network)	15.6%	30.1%	42.8%	10.2%	1.4%
Internet (newspaper)	11.5%	26.2%	42.8%	16.9%	2.7%
Television (cable news)	17.7%	26.5%	41.1%	12.9%	1.8%
Internet (other)	15.2%	36.8%	39.3%	7.7%	1.1%
Newspaper (local)	9.8%	26.4%	41.6%	19.5%	2.7%
Podcasts	26.8%	36.3%	30.5%	5.5%	0.9%
Newspaper (national or international)	10.5%	27.3%	40.1%	19.2%	2.9%
Radio	15.4%	38.2%	38.7%	6.2%	1.6%
Smartphone apps (television networks)	22.0%	34.4%	36.9%	6.1%	0.5%
Smartphone apps (other)	24.4%	39.2%	31.1%	4.3%	1.1%
Television (late night shows)	29.2%	36.0%	29.6%	4.6%	0.5%
Smartphone apps (newspaper)	19.1%	35.6%	35.2%	8.8%	1.3%

Close to 60.0 percent of students who believe the United States is moving in the wrong direction cite the cost of college education as an extremely important concern, whereas 52.1 percent of students who feel that the United States is headed in the right direction feel similarly. More students who believe Pennsylvania is moving in the right direction (65.3 percent) cite the cost of college education as an extremely important concern, compared to 58.9 percent of students who believe the state is moving on the wrong track feel similarly.

Direction of Pennsylvania by Issue Importance: Cost of college education

	Not sure	Wrong direction	Neither	Right direction
Answer Choices				
Not at all important	1.7%	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%
Slightly important	2.1%	4.4%	0.6%	2.7%
Moderately important	10.7%	7.8%	8.0%	13.3%
Very important	35.9%	28.9%	31.0%	18.7%
Extremely important	49.6%	58.9%	59.8%	65.3%
Total	**234**	**90**	**174**	**75**

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King's College

Keystone College
La Plume, PA

Luzerne County Community College

Marywood University

Misericordia University

PennState Scranton

Wilkes University

The University of Scranton
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PennState Hazleton

The Wright Center for Community Health

The Wright Center for Graduate Medical Education

PennState Wilkes-Barre

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What We Believe

At The Institute, we believe that empowering leaders with the research-based strategies and solutions they need to make informed decisions will lead to a stronger economy and a better quality of life for regional residents. For over a decade, The Institute has worked behind the scenes to support initiatives that advance regional competitiveness and revitalize communities.

2026 Institute Underwriters

Signature Underwriters

Luzerne County
PPL ElectricUtilities
Sordoni FamilyFoundation

Contributing Underwriters

Geisinger HealthSystem
The Greater Scranton Chamber of Commerce
(Scranton Plan 3.0 Strategy)
KMLA Group
The LuzerneFoundation

Supporting Underwriters

Andrew J. Sordoni Foundation
BlackOut Design
Greater Hazleton CANDO
Highmark
M&T Bank
People Security Bank & Trust
PNC
Rosenn Jenkins & Greenwald LLC
UGI Utilities

Academic Partners

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Maywood University
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Penn State Hazleton
Penn State Scranton
Penn State Wilkes-Barre
The Wright Center for Graduate Medical Education
University of Scranton
Wilkes University

Survey Disclaimer

This survey was offered to all 23,000 students across all majors and class years, and 586 students responded (a response rate of nearly 3%). Because participation was voluntary and respondents were not randomly selected, the results reflect the views of those who chose to respond and may not fully represent the entire student population. The margin of error of ±5.0 percentage points at the 95% confidence level is provided as a general reference only; it assumes a random sample and does not account for potential nonresponse or self-selection bias. Results are reported in aggregate only and are not broken out by major, class year, or other subgroups, as smaller subgroup samples would not support reliable conclusions. Findings should be interpreted as indicative of student perspectives rather than as precise estimates for the full student body.