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THE COVID STATES PROJECT: A 50-STATE COVID-19 SURVEY REPORT #69: STUDENT ATTITUDES ABOUT UNIVERSITY COVID-19 POLICIES

USA, November 2021

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Report of November 15, 2021, v.1

The COVID States Project

From: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States

A joint project of:

Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University

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Northeastern University
Network Science Institute

COVER MEMO

Summary Memo — November 15, 2021

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From April 2020 through September 2021, we conducted multiple waves of a large, 50-state survey, some results of which are presented here. You can find previous reports online at covidstates.org.

Note on methods:

Between August 26 and September 27, 2021, we surveyed 21,079 individuals across all 50 states plus the District of Columbia. The survey was conducted by PureSpectrum via an online, nonprobability sample, with state-level representative quotas for race/ethnicity, age, and gender (for methodological details on the other waves, see covidstates.org). In addition to balancing on these dimensions, we reweighted our data using demographic characteristics to match the U.S. population with respect to race/ethnicity, age, gender, education, and living in urban, suburban, or rural areas. This was the latest in a series of surveys we have been conducting since April 2020, examining attitudes and behaviors regarding COVID-19 in the United States.

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Student Attitudes About University COVID-19 Policies

Introduction

With the return of students to U.S. colleges and universities this September, more than [1,000 institutions](#) of higher education have implemented COVID-19 vaccine mandates to keep COVID-19 cases low. The majority of students have [complied](#) with these mandates, and according to our recent survey data, nearly three-fourths of university students report having received at least one COVID-19 vaccine (Figure 1). Also according to our data, university students in the U.S. are getting vaccinated at around the same rate as the full survey sample. University students therefore may have slightly higher vaccination rates than others in their age group; according to our survey data, 67% of Americans aged 18-24 have received at least one vaccine.

COVID-19 Vaccination Status

Percent saying they received no COVID-19 vaccine versus at least one COVID-19 vaccine.

National sample, N = 21079; University student sample, N = 1290, Time period: 08/26/2021-09/27/2021

Source: Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 1: *COVID-19 Vaccination Status, for University Students Only versus the Full Sample.*

However, the contentiousness of COVID-19 vaccine mandates on university campuses echoes the broader societal divide on this issue. Many campuses have [struggled](#) with COVID-19 vaccine policy implementation and exemption requests, with some students even [withdrawing](#) in protest of the vaccine mandates.

Given this trend, we take a closer look at university mandates on college campuses, including whether students can accurately say whether their institutions have COVID-19 vaccine policies.¹ We also examine college students' attitudes toward mandates on campus and in general, as well as student approval of their university administration's handling of COVID-19 vaccination.

¹We match our survey data with data from [College Crisis](#) and the [National Center for Education Statistics](#).

Key Takeaways

- Approximately half of all enrolled university students attend institutions with some type of COVID-19 vaccine mandate.
- Students with Democratic state governors, students at private institutions, and students at medium- to larger- sized institutions are more likely to report having vaccine mandates at their university.
- A little over two-thirds of students stated that they knew their university's COVID-19 vaccine policy, and around two-thirds of these students accurately characterized their institution's policy. In other words, only around half of all university student respondents surveyed accurately knew their university's policy.
- University mask and student/faculty/staff vaccination mandates garnered the highest student approval rate for their school administration's handling of COVID-19 vaccinations.
- College students who were required to attend any in-person classes were less likely to approve of their school's handling of COVID-19 vaccinations.
- Republican college students and unvaccinated college students were less likely to approve of their institution's handling of COVID-19 vaccinations. Hispanic students and White students were generally less approving than Black students and Asian students, and approval did not vary by gender.

Part I: University Policies

Overall, 35% of university students surveyed said their institution's policy is to mandate that students be vaccinated, while 39% said that their institution does not have this policy. The remaining 26% were not sure whether their institution had a student vaccine mandate in place. Among students who said they knew their institution's policy on vaccine mandates, about half said that there was a mandate in place and half said there was not.

Broken down by public versus private institutions, 33% of students surveyed at public institutions said that their university required students to get vaccinated (Figure 2). This is lower than students at private institutions, where 45% of students surveyed said their institution had a COVID-19 vaccine requirement for students.

Similarly, 36% of students surveyed at public institutions said their university had a vaccine requirement for faculty or staff, versus 49% of students at private institutions.

COVID-19 University Policies According to the Students, By Institution Type

Surveyed college students responded to the following question:

To the best of your knowledge, which of the following policies, if any, have been adopted by your university for the Fall 2021 semester?

National sample of college students, Time period: 08/26/2021-09/27/2021, Sample size = 1,286-1,290

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 2: COVID-19 University Policies by Institution Type, According to University Students Surveyed.

Mask-wearing requirements appear to be more widespread than vaccine mandates at universities. Two-thirds of students at public universities said masks were required, while 70% at private universities said that there was a mask mandate at their institution.

COVID-19 University Policies According to the Students, By Institution Size

Surveyed college students responded to the following question:

To the best of your knowledge, which of the following policies, if any, have been adopted by your university for the Fall 2021 semester?

National sample of college students, Time period: 08/26/2021-09/27/2021, Sample size = 1,286-1,290

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Figure 3: COVID-19 University Policies by Institution Size, According to University Students Surveyed.

University mandates for vaccinating students, vaccinating faculty/staff, and requiring masks for in-person classes also varied according to institution size, defined here as the number of students enrolled (Figure 3). Generally speaking, smaller institutions were less likely to implement COVID-19 mandates, according to the students surveyed. Students at the smallest institutions (less than 1,000 students) were least likely to say that their university mandated student vaccines (30% of students), faculty/staff vaccines (36%) or mask-wearing (57%), compared to students at larger institutions.

At the other end of the spectrum, 40% of surveyed college students at institutions with over 10,000 students said that their university requires student vaccination, while 49% of students at institutions with 10,000 to 20,000 students said their university requires faculty/staff vaccination. Finally, 70% of students at universities with 10,000 to 20,000 enrolled students, and of students at universities with 20,000 or more students, stated that the university had a mask mandate for in-person classes. The corresponding percentages are quite similar for students at universities with 1,000 to 10,000 students enrolled (between 68% and 69%).

COVID-19 University Policies According to the Students, By Party of Governor

Surveyed college students responded to the following question:

To the best of your knowledge, which of the following policies, if any, have been adopted by your university for the Fall 2021 semester?

National sample of college students, Time period: 08/26/2021-09/27/2021, Sample size = 1,286-1,290

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 4: COVID-19 University Policies by Party of Governor, According to University Students Surveyed.

Finally, much of the difference in university policy is likely related to partisan differences in sentiment and policies relating to COVID-19. Figure 4 shows that, across all three university policies, students with Democratic governors are more likely to say their universities have mandates than students with Republican governors. 42% of students with Democratic governors said their university has mandatory student COVID-19 vaccination, compared to only 28% of students with Republican governors. Similarly, 45% of students with Democratic governors stated that their institution has mandatory faculty/staff COVID-19 vaccination; this is 13 percentage points more than students with Republican governors. Finally, the largest partisan gap is among mandatory mask mandates. Three-fourths of students with Democratic governors said this was in place, compared to 56% of students with Republican governors.

The information in Figures 2, 3, and 4 is based solely on student-reported policies. To compare student responses to administrative data on university mandates, we also examined information from the National Center for Education Statistics and the College Crisis Initiative. According to these data², approximately 50% of students enrolled full time are at institutions with some type of COVID-19 vaccine mandate.

We then merged our survey data with these data according to the respondent's self-reported institution (1,179 out of 1,290 university students provided some sort of response regarding their institution, and 963 of these were identifiable institutions of higher education.³ According to these merged data, 52% of university student respondents attend institutions without a vaccine mandate, while 48% attend institutions with a vaccine mandate. For comparison, recall that 35% of university students who completed the survey said their institutions have some type of vaccine mandate and 39% said their institutions had no vaccine mandate, while another 25% were unsure of their university policy on vaccine requirements.

² The data set includes vaccine mandate information from [College Crisis](#) and [Best Colleges](#), paired with institution information from [College Crisis](#) and the [NCES](#). The 50% figure was based on two different calculations: 1) Of the NCES data, 1,149 identified higher education schools had any COVID-19 vaccine requirements out of 6,430 schools. There are 5,936,661 enrolled students at the 1,149 schools, and 12,414,217 enrolled students at all schools. This is $5,936,661 / 12,414,217 = 47.8\%$ of full-time enrollment at schools with mandates. 2) Of the College Crisis data, 1,007 higher education institutions had some type of COVID-19 vaccine mandate out of 2,762 total institutions included in the College Crisis dataset. This is $5,804,332$ students at institutions with mandates / $11,086,224$ students at all institutions listed in the data, or 52.3% of full-time enrollment for those schools.

³ Missing data included responses with ambiguous abbreviations or names, nonsensical responses, institutions not listed in the administrative data, blank responses, or responses indicating that the respondent was not comfortable sharing their institution. Despite the high missing data rate (26%), percent response on key variables are similar. For example, for all college students, 35% said their university has a student vaccine mandate and 38% said their university did not have a student vaccine mandate.

Both the national data and the survey data show an approximate 50:50 split. This indicates that a quarter of university students incorrectly identified their institution's policy concerning vaccine mandates, while an additional 25% said they did not know their institution's policy. That said, it is possible institutional policies changed between the survey collection time period and the time period of the administrative data. In addition, it is also possible that the policy database is incomplete.

We also found that 69% of the students who said their institutions had a vaccine mandate on the survey indeed attended institutions with a vaccine mandate, while 31% attended institutions that do not have such a mandate. Of the students who said that their institutions did *not* have a vaccine mandate, 66% attended institutions that in fact did not have a mandate, while 34% attended an institution with such a mandate. Finally, of those 25% of student respondents who were unsure of their institution's vaccine policy, 61% attended institutions without a vaccine mandate and 39% attended institutions with a mandate. (See appendix for the accompanying table.)

Finally, we look at vaccination rates of students by university mandate policy. Of those institutions that had a vaccine mandate according to administrative data, 19% of students at those institutions said they did not get vaccinated. For comparison, 28% of students reported not getting the COVID-19 vaccine at institutions without a vaccine mandate. Similarly, 13% of students who said there was a vaccine mandate at their university have not gotten vaccinated, compared to 33% of students being unvaccinated at institutions not reported by survey-takers as having a vaccine mandate.

It is unclear why some students said they were unvaccinated despite being at an institution that mandates vaccines. Sizeable proportions of the unvaccinated at schools with vaccine mandates went to some in-person classes. One likely reason stems from issues with mandate implementation or enforcement at universities; many places with vaccine mandates [do not require students to submit proof](#) of vaccination, while some students have sought exemptions or have taken advantage of vague language or legal challenges. In addition, this percent is likely higher in the merged administrative data because the measure here includes both universal and non-universal mandates. For instance, an institution could have a student vaccination requirement for those working or training in clinical settings, but not for the entire student population. This example institution would have been coded as having a vaccination mandate.

Part II: Student Approval of University Vaccination Policy

More than half of university student respondents approved of their school's vaccination policy (Figure 5). Those who attended private universities were slightly more likely to agree with their school's handling of COVID-19 vaccinations (60% approved), relative to students at public universities (54% approved).

Respondent-Reported COVID-19 Vaccination Handling Approval, by University Characteristics

Percent of college students who "approve" or "strongly approve" of the following:

Do you approve or disapprove of the way your school administration is handling COVID-19 vaccinations?

University Student Sample, N = 1205 - 1309, Time period: 08/26/2021-09/27/2021

Source: Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 5: Respondent-Reported COVID-19 Vaccination Handling Approval, by University Characteristics.

To determine whether related policies to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 on campus were related to approval of the university's handling of COVID-19 vaccination, we also investigated if the university had a mask-wearing mandate or not. Whether or not a university mandated mask-wearing corresponded with a 14 percentage point difference in rates of approval of that university's vaccination policy: 42% approval for those that did not require masks, compared to 66% approval for those that did require masks.

The mode of instruction offered by universities in the Fall 2021 semester (i.e. whether the student was able to attend in-person classes, online classes or hybrid classes) also affected approval of COVID-19 vaccination policies. Those who were only able to attend remote classes were 11 percentage points more likely to approve of their school's handling of COVID-19 vaccinations than those who were only able to attend in person (54% and 43%, respectively). Perhaps students who had no option but to attend in person felt uneasy about COVID-19 transmission in classrooms, or were unhappy about vaccination requirements for travelling to/being on campus.

Respondents who were able to engage in hybrid learning opportunities were grouped into three categories: "mostly remote", "mostly in-person", and "both remote and in-person", with each having approximately the same approval rating (57%-59%).

Both student vaccination mandates and faculty/staff vaccination mandates are also strongly associated with students' approval or disapproval of the way their school administration handled COVID-19 vaccinations. Universities that required students to be vaccinated had an 80% approval rate among our respondents attending those universities, 33 percentage points higher than those without such a requirement (47%). Similarly, those that required faculty and staff to be vaccinated had a 78% approval rate (again, among our respondents attending those universities), 28 percentage points higher than those without this mandate (50%).

Additionally, Figure 6 shows student approval of the university's handling of COVID-19 vaccination by student demographics. Once again, there are sizable partisan and vaccination status gaps, echoing broader societal attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccination.

Independents and Republicans tend to be less approving (at 43% and 44% of students surveyed, respectively), while Democrats tend to be more approving (61%). Regarding vaccination status, there is a 17 percentage point gap between students who are unvaccinated (41%) versus those who have received at least one vaccine (58%).

Student approval was roughly the same across genders (52% of female respondents and 56% of male respondents approved of their school's handling of COVID-19 vaccinations).

Respondent-Reported COVID-19 Vaccination Handling Approval, by Student Characteristics

Percent of college students who "approve" or "strongly approve" of the following:

Do you approve or disapprove of the way your school administration is handling COVID-19 vaccinations?

National sample, N = 1290, Time period: 08/26/2021-09/27/2021

Source: Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 6: Respondent-Reported COVID-19 Vaccination Handling Approval, by Student Characteristics.

When reviewed in terms of racial and ethnic groups, student support for university vaccine policies diverges from the general public's attitudes toward vaccination mandates broadly (see [Report #64](#)). Still, in both this and Report #64, Asians had the highest approval for vaccines (here: 65%). Black students, similar to this demographic in the general public, had the second highest approval rating (here: 62%). Hispanic and White students, however, had much lower levels of support for university vaccination handling (49% and 52%, respectively).

Part III: Additional Context on University Student Vaccination Rates

Given the range of universities' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the associated [stress and mental health challenges](#) faced by college students, we sought to establish baseline student attitudes to questions regarding coronavirus vaccination in general. We found that university student respondents broadly aligned (within 5 percentage points) with the general population on the following issues (see Appendix):

1. Support for mandatory COVID-19 vaccination to get on an airplane;
2. Support for mandatory indoors mask-wearing among the unvaccinated and double-vaccinated);
3. Support for mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations for everyone among both single- and double-vaccinated students (although unvaccinated students were 9 percentage points more likely to support this than unvaccinated people in general);
4. Support for mandatory COVID-19 vaccination in universities among unvaccinated and single-vaccinated students (although students who received two doses of the vaccine were 9 percentage points more likely to support this than double-vaccinated people in general).

Summary

Approximately half of all enrolled university students across the United States attend institutions with some type of Fall 2021 COVID-19 vaccine mandate, with private institutions and medium- to larger- sized institutions being more likely to have vaccine mandates. Yet, we determined that only around half of students surveyed were able to accurately describe their university's COVID-19 vaccination policies. Still, school administrations that had mandated mask-wearing and vaccines for students, staff, and faculty had a higher student approval rating than universities without such policies. This could signify student concern about transmissibility of COVID-19 on campus.

Appendix: Additional Figures and Tables

Percent Support for Mandatory COVID-19 Vaccination in Universities

Percent of respondents who "somewhat approve" or "strongly approve" of the following:

Do you approve or disapprove of the following measures which federal, state, and local governments could take to prevent the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) in the next 30 days? - Requiring college students to get a COVID-19 vaccine in order to go back to university

National Sample, N = 21079; University Student sample, N = 1302, Time period: 08/26/2021-09/27/2021

Source: Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 7: Support for University COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate for University Students versus the Full Sample, by Vaccination Status.

Percent Support for Mandatory COVID-19 Vaccination to Get On An Airplane

Percent of respondents who "somewhat approve" or "strongly approve" of the following:

Do you approve or disapprove of the following measures which federal, state, and local governments could take to prevent the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) in the next 30 days? - Requiring a COVID-19 vaccine to get on an airplane

National Sample, N = 21079; University Student sample, N = 1304, Time period: 08/26/2021-09/27/2021

Source: Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 8: Support for COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate to Get on an Airplane for University Students versus the Full Sample, by Vaccination Status.

Percent Support for Mandatory COVID-19 Vaccination

Percent of respondents who "somewhat approve" or "strongly approve" of the following:

Do you approve or disapprove of the following measures which federal, state, and local governments could take to prevent the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) in the next 30 days? - Requiring everyone to get a COVID-19 vaccine

National Sample, N = 21079; University Student sample, N = 1305, Time period: 08/26/2021-09/27/2021

Source: Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 9: Support for COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate for University Students versus the Full Sample, by Vaccination Status.

Percent Support for Mandatory Mask-Wearing Indoors

Percent of respondents who "somewhat approve" or "strongly approve" of the following:

Do you approve or disapprove of the following measures which federal, state, and local governments could take to prevent the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) in the next 30 days? - Requiring people to wear face masks indoors

National Sample, N = 21079; University Student sample, N = 1304, Time period: 08/26/2021-09/27/2021

Source: Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 10: *Support for Mandatory Mask-Wearing Indoors for University Students versus the Full Sample, by Vaccination Status.*

COVID-19 Vaccination Status by Gender

Percent of respondents saying they received no COVID-19 vaccine versus at least one vaccine.

National sample, N = 21079; University student sample, N = 1290, Time period: 08/26/2021-09/27/2021

Source: Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 11: COVID-19 Vaccination Status for University Students versus the Full Sample, by Gender.

COVID-19 Vaccination Status by Race

Percent of respondents saying they received no COVID-19 vaccine versus at least one vaccine.

National sample, N = 21079; University student sample, N = 1285, Time period: 08/26/2021-09/27/2021

Source: Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 12: COVID-19 Vaccination Status for University Students versus the Full Sample, by Race.

Race	No Vaccine	At Least One Vaccine
White	<i>132</i>	<i>452</i>
Hispanic	<i>50</i>	<i>181</i>
Black	<i>90</i>	<i>118</i>
Asian	<i>21</i>	<i>160</i>
Other	<i>21</i>	<i>59</i>

Table 1: *Number of University Students in Sample by Race and Vaccination Status*

COVID-19 Vaccination Status by Income Level

Percent of respondents saying they received no COVID-19 vaccines versus at least one vaccine.

National sample, N = 21079; University student sample, N = 1290, Time period: 08/26/2021-09/27/2021

Source: Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 13: COVID-19 Vaccination Status for University Students versus the Full Sample, by Income Level.

COVID-19 Vaccination Status by Party Identity

Percent of respondents saying they received no COVID-19 vaccines versus at least one vaccine.

National sample, N = 21079; University student sample, N = 1307, Time period: 08/26/2021-09/27/2021

Source: Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 14: COVID-19 Vaccination Status for University Students versus the Full Sample, by Partisanship.

	Student survey - Not sure if there's a mandate	Student Survey - university has a vaccine mandate	Student survey - university does not have a vaccine mandate
NCES/College Crisis data - NO vaccine mandate	61%	31%	66%
NCES/College Crisis data - Vaccine mandate	39%	69%	34%

Note: N = 963

Table 2: *Student-Reported University COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate versus National Data on University Vaccine Mandate, based on Student-Reported Home Institution.*