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Division, Community + Identity in the United States

In 2017, more than 5,600 participants from 54 top colleges came together at annual PossePlus Retreats (PPR) to discuss division, community and identity in the United States. The Retreats explored students' perspectives on the current polarities in the country and touched on topics from politics and race relations to class and gender dynamics. The following captures some of the notable findings from a survey of PPR attendees.[1]

What's a PossePlus Retreat?

PPRs are weekend-long events intended to spark dialogue among college students, faculty and administrators on a topic of current national significance.

Among numerous divisive topics, race and politics top the list

Name one way the people of the U.S. are...

Greatly United		Greatly Divided	
Patriotism/Nationalism	429	996	Race
Sports	361	959	Politics
Freedom/Democracy	307	485	Class/Status
Nothing/Not Sure	205	201	Trump/Election
Money/Capitalism	166	181	Religion

When you hear the words "us vs. them" what top three pairs come to mind? (% of students who mentioned)

- **21.9%** Race-based (e.g., black-white)
- **19.6%** Politically based (e.g., liberal-conservative)
- **9.4%** Class-based (e.g., rich-poor)

Students said they've felt alienated at some point in their lives

Have you ever felt alienated by another group?

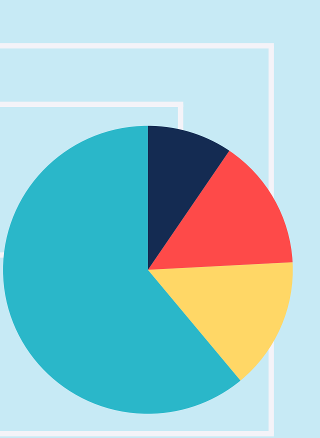
All: Yes 82.8%

By Race: Other 89.6% | Bi/Multi-racial 89.2% | Latinx 85.7% | Asian 84.9% | Black 84.5% | White 72.9%

By SES*: Lower class 89.0% | Lower-middle class 83.6% | Middle class 80.9% | Upper-middle class 78.7% | Upper class 69.4%

* Socioeconomic status

Personal examples (% of students who mentioned)



Gender 10.5%
Religion 6.8%
Race 43.7%
Class 10.6%

Voices

"Native Spanish speakers think I'm not Spanish enough because I don't speak the language well."
Latinx female, liberal

"Rich people talking about expensive resorts/vacations."
Asian male, moderate

"Talking about low-income, students of color as 'diversity bonuses' that others benefit from in class."
Bi/Multi-racial female, moderate

"Liberal students often make comments about conservatives without thinking about the fact that there may be some students around them that feel differently."
Bi/Multi-racial female, conservative

"Being a Muslim in a Christian space. Not being considered when issues such as food are being handled."
Black male, very liberal

"All throughout elementary school and most of middle school I was the only one who had two moms. Many of my fellow classmates made fun of me for that."
Latinx male, liberal

Political Opinions + The 2016 Presidential Election

Following an election that divided the nation, students grapple with the future

The majority of students voted in line with most college-educated Americans[2]

92.7% of students voted for Hillary Clinton

SIDEBAR

What prevented eligible students from voting?

- **35.1%** Absentee ballot or voter registration problems
- **16.9%** Apathy
- **8.1%** Out of town/country
- **6.5%** Didn't think vote would matter
- **6.3%** Didn't like either candidate
- **1.8%** Not informed

Post-election reverberations[3]

What, if anything, changed in how you perceived your future after the election?
Response sentiment: 47.9% Negative; 0.9% Positive

- **13.2%** Heightened awareness of the country's political views
- **12.3%** Newfound safety concerns
- **10.6%** Fear of restricted freedoms or opportunities
- **9.7%** Concerns about normalization of discrimination or oppression

Voices

"Uncertainty. Does this young boy belong in America?"
Latinx male, liberal

"I see it as a less tolerant and less diverse place."
White female, conservative

"Before this election I believed that we had come a long way and that racism existed, but not as much as I thought."
Black female, moderate

"[I'm] concerned that I will face discrimination, racism, and sexism in areas [that have] greatly different political views."
Asian female, moderate

"I became a lot more compelled to personally invest in working toward understanding people with different political views and...working toward helping others do the same."
Bi/Multi-racial male, liberal

SIDEBAR

Who or what has most influenced your political views? (% who ranked each as the most influential)

- **37.8%** Parents + Family
- **30.1%** Education + Schools
- **19.0%** Friends + Peers
- **13.1%** Other**

**Other (in order of most to least influential): Media, Identity, Personal inquiry, Religion, Other people, Society/culture

If you could give the U.S. president one piece of advice, what would it be?

(% of students who mentioned)

Resign (22.7%)
"Give the job to someone more qualified." White male, moderate
"Stop." Bi/Multi-racial female, liberal

Listen & Learn (21.3%)
"Admit when you need help." Black female, liberal
"Read the constitution, learn what living as a poor person in America is like." Latinx male, moderate

Be Inclusive (10.6%)
"America was never 'great' but what makes it unique and vibrant is the people we have here. Take a look around. Our differences make us stronger." White female, very liberal
"Do what is best for ALL Americans and be respectful of different opinions." Asian male, liberal

Actions & Words Have Consequences (10.6%)
"Remember that the entire world now listens to what you say; you have the biggest platform in the world, and you can't retract your words or hope people missed what you said."
White female, very conservative

Student Attitudes Toward Divisions

Tomorrow's leaders demonstrate resilience and a willingness to listen, learn and broaden their perspectives.

How do students spend their time?

Average amount of time spent with people who...

- **72.8%** Are like-minded
- **30.4%** Have very different views

Should the breakdown in how you spend your time be different? (% who said yes)

- Of all students: **50.1%**
- Of students who spend most of their time with like-minded individuals: **62.0%**
- Of students who spend most of their time with differently minded individuals: **41.6%**

Students' reasons for wanting a shakeup in how they spend their time clustered around three themes:

Growth, learning + development 55.9%

"At [my school], I'm surrounded by like-minded people and sometimes it feels like we're talking in circles. Having another perspective can really open up the conversation and challenge what you think."
White female, liberal

"I think it would be better for me to reduce judgement and bias/assumptions."
Asian male, liberal

General sense that diversity + openness are worthwhile 28.4%

"I feel like it's always better to engage in diversity in all kinds of branches, whether it be political, religious, ethnicity, etc."
Latinx male, liberal

"I am working towards having a 50/50 ratio."
Black female, very liberal

Comfort + safety can prevent engaging across difference 25.9%

"At times it would be nice to have a constructive conversation with someone else, so long as they aren't threatening my existence."
Bi/Multi-racial male, very liberal

"You want to be exposed to everything but not in uncomfortable situations often."
Latinx male, liberal

Students have very significant, close friendships with people of different...

Genders	95.0%
Sexualities	84.8%
Races	91.2%
Religions	92.1%
Political Beliefs	55.7%

SIDEBAR

For those attitudes and views to which you are vehemently opposed, do you ever let them slide for... (% who said yes)

- **53.6%** Family
- **39.2%** Friends
- **38.9%** Strangers
- **14.8%** Politicians

Voices

"If it isn't hurting anyone, I am tolerant. If they are being verbally, psychologically or physically abusive, I'll step up and try to help change their actions or opinions...or at least mitigate the effects."
White male, liberal

"It's difficult to challenge family and strangers and remain civil; I hold politicians to a different standard and I'm very selective about my friends, so very comfortable challenging them."
Black female, very liberal

"Politicians definitely don't get passes. They're the ones who put laws into place and if they explicitly violate human rights, there is no shred of leeway I would give to them."
Black male, liberal

"[I] often don't want to hurt relationships."
Asian female, liberal

PPR Respondent Group Demographics[4]

Average Age: 19.9 Posse Scholars: 46.5%

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Looking Toward the Future

PPR attendees came together to explore their differences through workshops that emphasized listening and primed understanding. Survey responses revealed a population of students sensitive to the deepening fractures in American society and eager to bridge the gulf. When asked, What unites us?, many participants identified the core American values of freedom and democracy. Their focus on these national ideals and expressed willingness to listen to opposing views may offer a glimmer of hope, a potential corrective for the many manifestations of "us vs. them."

Participating University Partners

Agnes Scott College
Babson College
Bard College
Boston University
Brandeis University
Bryn Mawr College
Bucknell University
Carleton College
Centre College
Colby College
The College of Wooster
Connecticut College
Cornell University
Dartmouth College
Davidson College
Denison University
DePauw University
Dickinson College
Franklin & Marshall College
The George Washington University
Grinnell College
Hamilton College
Hobart and William Smith Colleges
Kalamazoo College
Lafayette College
Lawrence University
Middlebury College
Mount Holyoke College
Northwestern University
Oberlin College
Pepperdine University
Pomona College
University of Puget Sound
Sewanee: The University of the South
Smith College
St. Olaf College
Syracuse University
Texas A&M University
Trinity College
Tulane University
Union College
University of California, Berkeley
University of California, Los Angeles
University of Michigan
University of Notre Dame
University of Rochester
University of Southern California
University of Texas at Austin
University of Virginia
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Vanderbilt University
Vassar College
Wesleyan University
Wheaton College

Notes

1 Regarding race and socioeconomic class, PPR attendees differ from typical students at the elite colleges and universities with which Posse partners. According to 2015 data from the National Center for Educational Statistics, 58% of American college students are White, 14% are Black, 17% are Latinx, and 7% are Asian. As for socioeconomic status, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation reports that students from families in the bottom economic quartile comprise only 3% of enrollment in America's most competitive schools, while those from the top economic quartile comprise 72%. National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). Postsecondary Education Enrollment. Digest of Education Statistics: 2016. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/; Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. (2016, January). True Merit: Ensuring Our Brightest Students Have Access to Our Best Colleges and Universities. Retrieved from https://www.jkcf.org/research/true-merit-ensuring-our-brightest-students-have-access-to-our-best-colleges-and-universities/

2 Yglesias, M. (2017, September 18). What Really Happened in 2016, in 7 Charts. Vox. Retrieved from https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/9/18/16305486/what-really-happened-in-2016

3 2017 PPRs took place from January 19 through April 9, 2017. Nearly 70% were in February 2017, far enough along in Trump's presidency for students to provide advice in light of both political rhetoric and concrete policy decisions.

4 A total of 4,559 participants, including 3,905 students and 508 faculty members/administrators, completed the survey for a response rate of 80.1%.

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