



Using News Insights to Prepare Your Campus Communications Strategy

September 2021

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Content Warning:

In this report, we discuss and link to content that may be difficult to read. This includes content on racism, sexual assault, and issues regarding free speech.

Foreword

There are often moments when campus leaders are convinced communicators have a crystal ball after successfully predicting the future. The reality is we're reliant on data and feedback loops and use both to explain and quantify the past, and therefore we can predict outcomes. While our work is rooted in words, our counsel is based in calculations and insights. That's where Campus Sonar comes in.

I've previously worked with Sonarians to help college and university communicators better understand what people say about their campus and how their own intended messages are received. Sonarians can also, as this report shows, pinpoint what messages are picked up by media and predict the tone of the resultant article and the audiences most willing to read and share the coverage. Campus Sonar's work hands you your own crystal ball.

Not surprisingly, the top national media topics from the past year focused on:

- **Diversity, equity, and inclusion**
- **First amendment and free speech discussions**
- **Title IX**

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We'll also examine intercollegiate athletics, a dominant theme within each topic. It's also unremarkable that overall, 67% of these articles trended neutral even though it felt like this past year and this three-month analysis was filled with negativity.

The reality is that these topics and their resultant coverage reflect the conversations we have internally about higher ed. And for the three topics I listed, how we treat each other—good or bad—is shaping the conversation about our industry and is reflected in the media sentiment. This report provides the knowledge we need to identify negative stories that have vulnerabilities with national media and offers a glimmer of hope into the good news we should pitch to top outlets and reporters.

All of us should use this report to determine how the three key topics analyzed would be covered by our local and national media as well as how they would be shared on social media. Then plan accordingly. Use this crystal ball's insights to shape your outreach and inbound responses and consider yourself charged with raising and addressing vulnerabilities within your institutions.

Despite the requests we receive, we don't have silver bullets or magic powers to guide our marcomm efforts. There is, however, the power that comes with data. Join me in building solid communications strategy and responses with this information.

—**Teresa Valerio Parrot**

Principal, TVP Communications

Introduction

Social media mentions are usually the largest portion of a social listening dataset, but they're not the only part of online conversation. Online news, while lower in mention volume than individual social media mentions, has the potential to reach and influence the public in a meaningful way. However, online news sources can be overlooked in higher ed social listening research due to conflicting but important priorities for analyzing key audiences and engagement opportunities on social media. People build their perception of higher ed not only through conversations with their peers but also through engagement with mass media. So we're focusing our social listening research on online news for this report.

News coverage of higher ed has profound positive and negative effects on key audiences and stakeholders, and resultant policies.



FOREWORD

From an internal marketing perspective, a campus's academic or general reputation can be polished—or tarnished—based on the news coverage of their campus, its events, and the individuals who contribute to its success or shortcomings. The individual accomplishments or successes of students, campus alumni, or faculty members can have a strong positive effect on institutional brand, whereas the individual transgressions of influential figures can have a similarly negative impact.

News coverage of higher ed topics is a key priority for public relations professionals based on the impact and reach of earned media placements. In fact, [recent studies show](#) Americans recognize the growing influence media has in our society and that influence extends to higher ed coverage.

Given the impact of journalism on public opinion, we explored how higher ed is covered in the media. What are the bright spots? What are the challenges? How can campus communications professionals increase their chances of positive media coverage or improve resultant strategy to address negative coverage? To answer these questions, Campus Sonar's analysts tackled these questions in the best way we know: social listening analysis.

This report examines the nature of online news coverage in higher ed and explores how to better analyze and report on the most commonly reported news topics.

- **Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)**
- **Title IX**
- **Freedom of speech**

The data used to inform this report consists of online news mentions from 20 top mainstream news outlets in the United States (see the [Methodology](#) for rationale on which sources were selected).

All news mentions in this dataset were collected from January 1 to March 31, 2021, and are related to higher ed in general. Key topics were excluded from consideration, including COVID-19, politics, and select athletics topics (explained in more detail in [Methodology](#)). To be considered in this research, the article needed to have a primary focus on higher ed as opposed to mentioning a campus in a non-topical context. For example, an article about an individual who "attended Harvard University" would not be considered.

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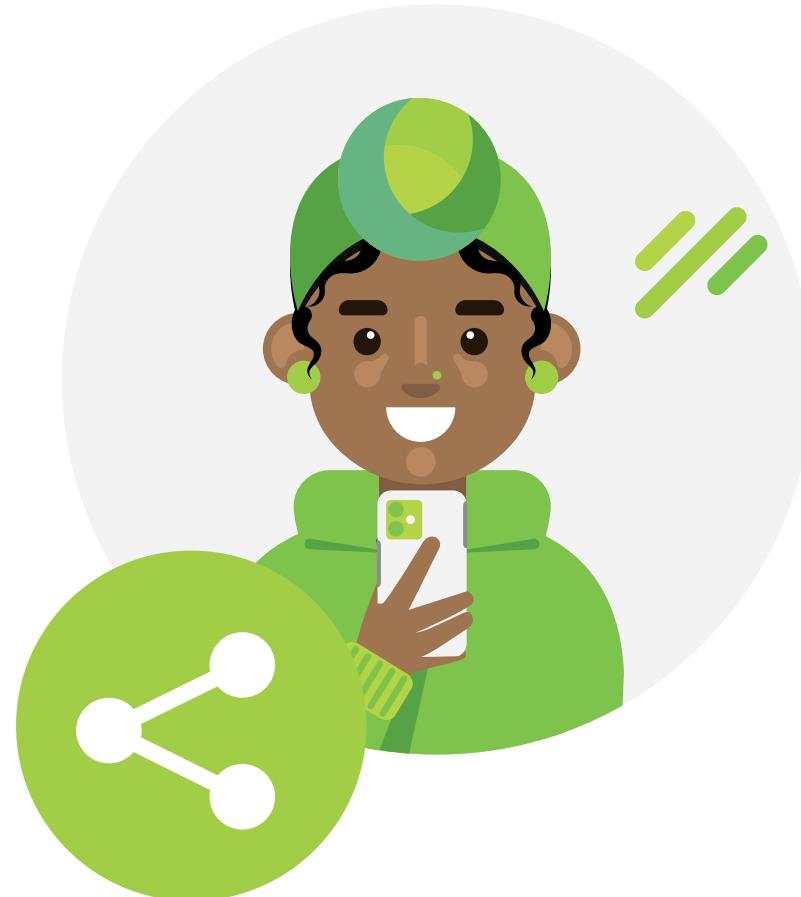
Why National News Matters for Your Campus

Higher ed news coverage often focuses on specific campuses to illustrate larger trends and each mention has cascading implications for the industry. It's essential for a campus to have the ability and motivation to monitor trend articles, pay attention to industry headlines, and track reputational impact even if their campus isn't named. For example:

- **Conversations about inequality among how the NCAA treats student athletes in major tournaments is seen as extending to include every college athletic program and competition.**
- **Conversations about Harvard's use of race in admissions policy is seen as a systemic issue across the industry.**
- **Concerns over freedom of speech on a single campus are seen as limitations or restrictions of personal freedoms at any campus.**

And the same can be said about positive coverage of higher ed topics in the news.

Personal success stories, strong alumni support, research innovations, and college athletic success all paint a strong picture of higher ed as a source of community and a network of successful individuals.



Although positive news coverage like this often fails to rise to the top of the content shared and amplified online,

social shares of these ideas is essential to reversing negative perception of higher ed.

This work can—and must—be done by campuses to share their good news and provide the opportunities for the audiences closest to them to introduce preferred conversations among their connections and networks.

The toughest higher ed coverage vilifies the industry: out of control costs and spending; admissions scandals; leadership misconduct; criminal allegations; and poor decision-making by students, faculty, staff, and campus leaders. Student-focused stories continue to fare well in the media, which means the concerns shared with journalists are leading to accountability through changes in policy, enrollment, and employment. Even the most critical and negative articles about higher ed fit a similar pattern and pose a similar unwritten goal: to expose inequity among those affected and to continue the conversation and resultant action regarding potential solutions. Negative articles are more likely to be shared on social media and through news channels, gaining the attention of readers and followers.

Overview



Of the 1,561 mentions in this dataset, many relate to key industry issues including DEI, Title IX, and free speech and first amendment rights, among other topics. It's important to recognize the relevance of the analysis period when reading this report.

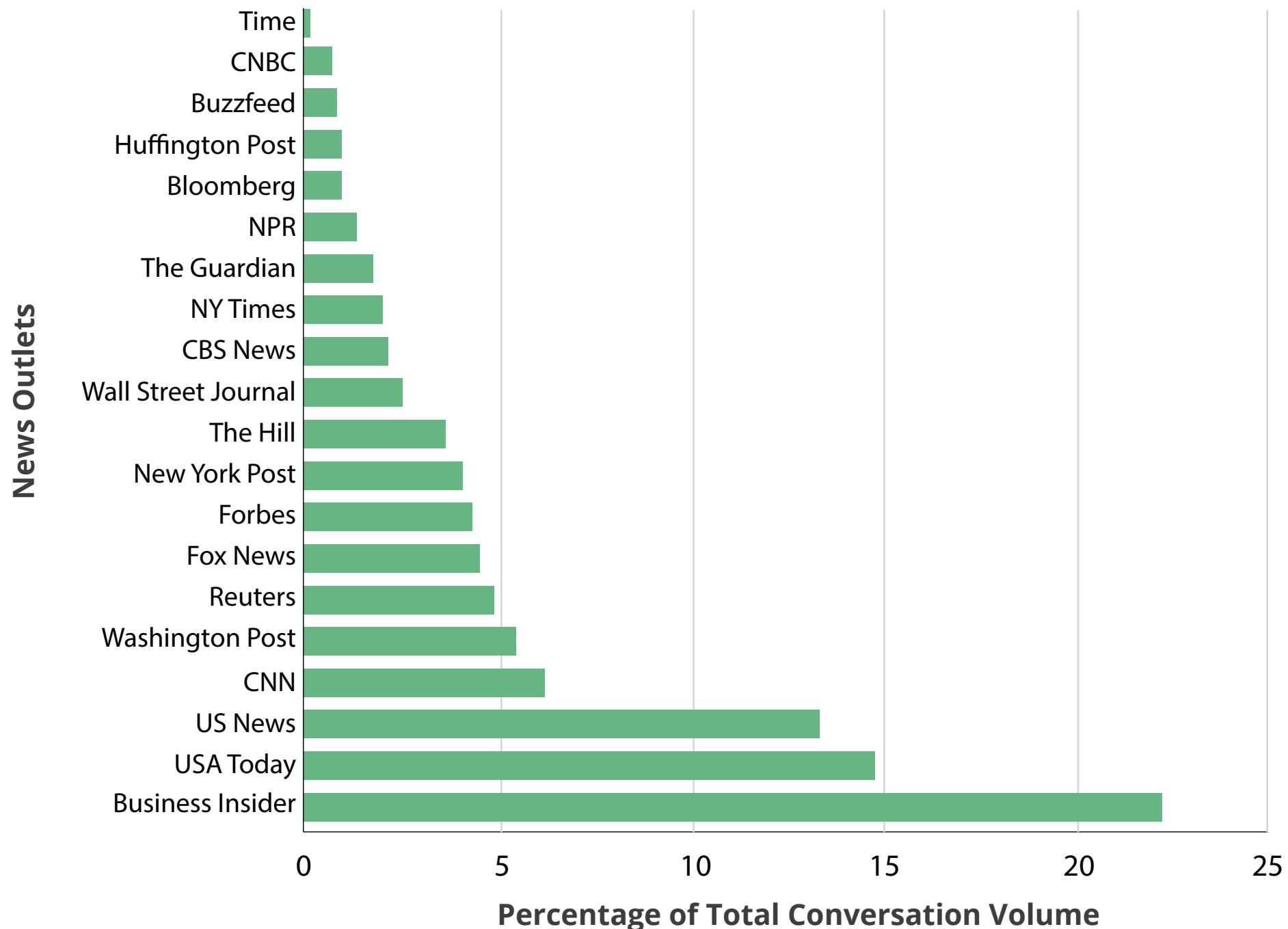
January to March 2021 was filled with notable historical, political, and societal events, including coverage of the United States' general election and transfer of power, Capitol riots, and impacts of COVID-19, which were intentionally excluded from analysis. See the [Methodology](#) for a full explanation of topical exclusions.

Volume and Sentiment Analysis

This report collected data from 25 top online news sites and analyzed mentions from 20 of those sites—five news sites reported exclusively on topics we excluded from analysis. Of the 20 analyzed, the top news sites by volume included Business Insider, USA Today, US News & World Report (US News), and CNN. News site volume reflects frequency of the news cycle and/or general higher ed relevance of total news offerings.

It's important to make the distinction between these different news sites because the reputation and name of a news site plays an essential role in determining a reader's trust and affinity toward a topic. [Pew Research](#) reports 88% of American adults claim it's at least somewhat important to consider the news organization itself when evaluating if an article is trustworthy. Likewise, this analysis must include context—particularly how sentiment varies within industry coverage and from specific outlets.

Conversation Volume of Top Online News Sites



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National News Is More Negative Overall

Some of the most significant higher ed news articles in this period inspired the three primary topical areas of analysis, including conversations around payment of [NCAA athletes](#), relevant athletics-based protests, and allegations of covering up misconduct leveled against campus administrators.

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While the data certainly indicates that higher ed news coverage skews negative, this could be a consequence of the nature of national news coverage and reflects that local and regional media is the market for more positive coverage. Many of the successes of higher ed can be attributed to campus departments, individuals, and students, all of which may not be significant enough to warrant national reporting or coverage or may be captured by one article rather than a series of escalating articles as a storyline progresses. The most significant national stories paint a clear picture that higher ed's shortcomings and scapegoats make click-worthy headlines far more often than its success stories and innovations.

Although news outlets reported more widely on negative stories, not all [top articles](#) in higher ed were negative. Among this small segment of positive mentions, some news coverage focused on admissions topics, scholarship opportunities, education-based philanthropy, and the advancement of certain marginalized or under-represented people. Positive news articles also tend to be promoted or released by the campus or organization behind the headlines.

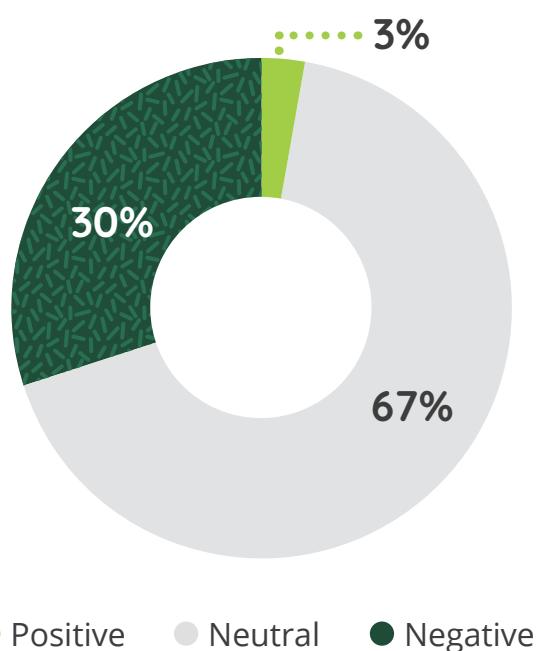
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Although positive articles were low in volume, they still hold the potential to reach a wide audience online if shared on proper channels. News stories shared on social media have a profound effect on the nature of online news consumption through increased content discovery by previously unreachable audiences, and [campus channels provide a great opportunity](#) to amplify these stories and reach more individuals.

Overall Sentiment of Higher Ed News Stories



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Specific Sites Vary in Sentiment

Various news sites differed in terms of their overall sentiment and, therefore, intended audiences. These differences ranged from Time, which was neutral, to sites like Buzzfeed that shared 72% negative content. These proportions of positive, negative, and neutral mentions shed light on the type of content posted from different sites and about different topics.

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Campuses practicing social listening can use sentiment analysis to identify the sites with positive or neutral articles about topics aligned with strategic priorities and identify reporters of interest and relevant approaches for future pitches and outreach. In this dataset, Buzzfeed has both the greatest percentage of positive and negative sentiment, which aligns with the stereotype of Buzzfeed content—clickbait headlines that link to measured coverage.

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Sites such as NPR and Business Insider have a high degree of neutral content for differing reasons. Business Insider's content is highly neutral due to a lack of critical or investigative topics and consists of data-based coverage, press releases, and objective updates about higher ed programs. NPR, on the other hand, does not shy away from key controversial topics; however, [many of its articles](#) still register as neutral based on the reporter's measured tone and multiple perspectives.

Despite differences in reporting style and content sentiment, there was significant overlap in the types of content covered on each site. Although some sites were clearly more selective or intentional with the articles they posted, the same key topics and articles were featured on numerous online news sources. These topics are reflective of the industry as a whole as opposed to being reflective of the sites that post content about higher ed.

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Sentiment Analysis by Online News Site

Due to low/no volume or lack of sentiment categorization, ABC News, MSN, MSNBC, NBC, Politico, Vox, and Yahoo are not represented within the sentiment analysis.

News Outlet	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Bloomberg	0%	38%	63%
Business Insider	5%	91%	4%
Buzzfeed	14%	14%	72%
CBS News	6%	66%	29%
CNBC	0%	58%	42%
CNN	5%	53%	42%
Forbes	3%	64%	33%
Fox News	0%	55%	45%
Huffington Post	0%	38%	63%
New York Post	0%	48%	52%

News Outlet	Positive	Neutral	Negative
NPR	5%	82%	14%
NY Times	9%	45%	45%
Reuters	0%	61%	39%
The Guardian	0%	45%	55%
The Hill	3%	61%	36%
Time	0%	100%	0%
US News	1%	73%	26%
USA Today	3%	65%	32%
Wall Street Journal	0%	61%	39%
Washington Post	3%	51%	45%



Questions to Consider

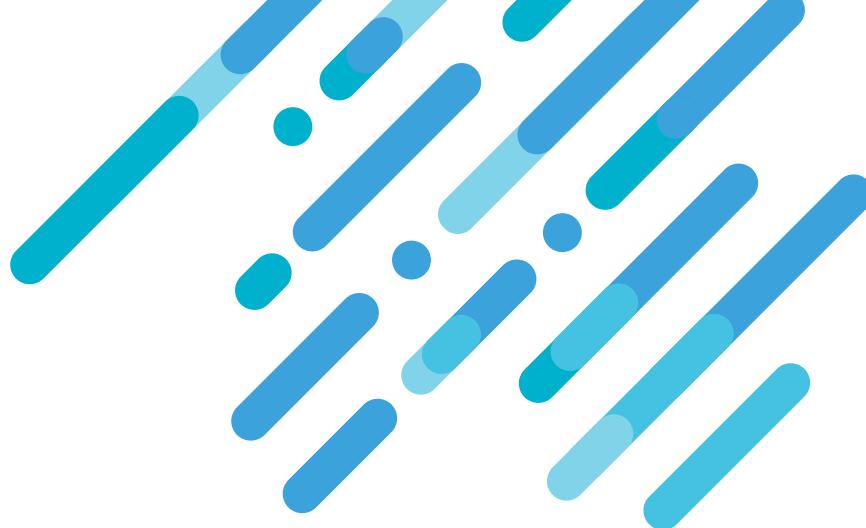
- Are you collecting and analyzing local and regional news coverage about your campus community? How does it compare in terms of sentiment and subject matter to national coverage you have received?
- Does your community respond differently to local/regional versus national coverage? How can you capitalize on this knowledge?

- Do you have evidence of the impact of local and regional news coverage on the perception of your campus?
- Are you considering how national news coverage about the industry (negative or positive sentiment) impacts the perception of your campus?

- How can campus-specific articles, perspectives, or experts be leveraged to contribute positively to the national narrative about higher ed?

- What specific strategies and tactics are you using to amplify (i.e., get more people to read and share) positive news and public interest stories about your campus community, particularly those that aren't likely to garner national media attention?
- Are there any national trends your campus leaders want you to localize/any they want you to avoid? How are you planning to meet those expectations?
- Are you using social listening to spot positive news coverage of students, faculty, staff, and alumni that you can translate to personal outreach to support recruitment, retention, or alumni engagement?

Topical Analysis



The topics analyzed within higher ed news coverage are a combination of those that rose to the forefront of online conversation as well as recent issues prominent in other aspects of higher ed. The three topics included positive and negative stories, resulting in opportunities as well as potential threats or negative consequences. Topics like these have reputational implications for the specific individuals and campuses profiled and for higher ed as a whole.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Topics related to DEI made front page headlines over the past year, and the same can be said for related higher ed coverage. These topics consist of 254 mentions from nearly every news site included in this report. The news sites that covered DEI topics in higher ed most frequently were USA Today, The Washington Post, Fox News, CNN, and US News. Other sites with high volume in the dataset overall, such as Buzzfeed and Business Insider, were absent from this topic.

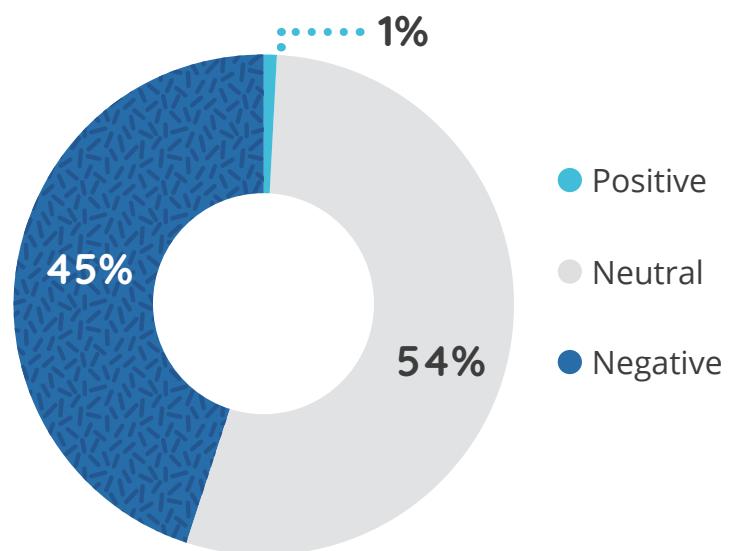
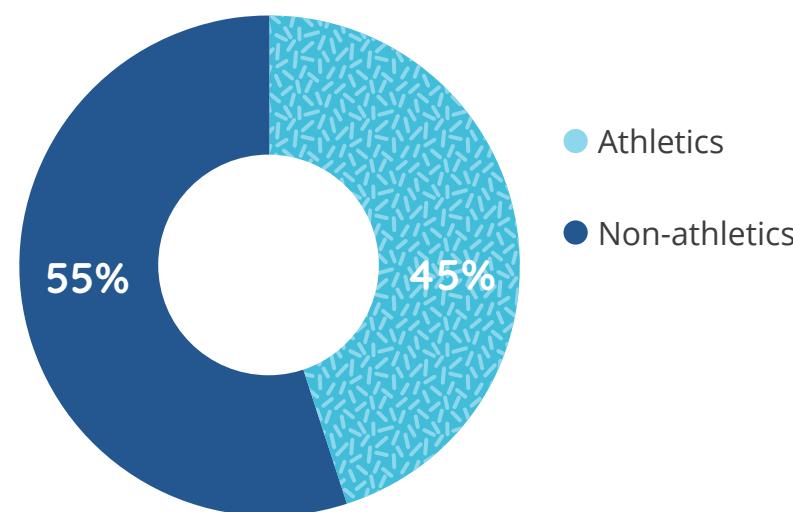
Majority of DEI Conversation Is Negative and Athletic Related

The movement toward equity in higher ed has manifested itself in several ways across campuses. However, the coverage of DEI topics in online news is primarily negative—focused on violations, aggressions, or missteps.

While campuses pitch stories related to the development and implementation of principles and efforts to support diverse populations, the majority of news coverage is not focused on these positive angles. Readers of national news are more likely to see your DEI challenges than your DEI efforts.

- **45% of mentions were negative**
- **1% of mentions were positive**

This topic was also heavily influenced by athletic conversations, which made up 45% of DEI topical conversation volume. Athletic-focused DEI topics were especially prevalent around the college basketball season in early March due to several diversity-related incidents on and off the court.

Sentiment Analysis: DEI**Conversation Volume: DEI****DEI-Related Athletic Incidents Are Under National Scrutiny**

Coverage of DEI topics within higher ed news can be easily divided into athletic and non-athletic subtopics. Within the realm of college athletics, key news articles focused on specific conversations, incidents, and violations related to race-based issues.

- One topic that made national news focused on a review of the background and context of the University of Texas school song, the Eyes of Texas, which was said to have racial undertones and a questionable history. The university released an extensive report supporting the use of this song in school athletic events.
- A separate situation involved a locker room speech given by Creighton University's basketball coach Greg McDermott, during which he urged team unity by using a racist metaphor. Coach McDermott was issued a three-day suspension and offered an apology.
- In another, a basketball player at William Peace University described her encounter with racist fans after being called a slur during a game.



Although these three well-profiled examples represent coverage of DEI topics in college athletics that is highly negative in tone and high in volume, some positive stories emerged as well. One included a historic moment when two [Black female head coaches](#)—from the University of South Carolina and the University of Arizona—appeared in the NCAA women's final four for the first time.

Non-Athletic Related DEI Incidents Are More Broad

Coverage of non-athletic DEI topics was broader with regards to specific and systemic issues in higher ed. Specific instances of allegations or violations included [three professors at the University of South Alabama](#) who were placed on leave after photos surfaced of them with racist symbols, and another example involving a [Georgetown Law professor](#) who left his position following a colleague's racist rant on Zoom about Black students.

Unlike athletic mentions, some articles covered more significant systemic issues within higher ed. This coverage included a report of [white people in academia passing as people of color](#) and [Columbia University students protesting](#) policies that disproportionately affect marginalized student groups.



Progress in DEI Is Evident

DEI topics represent an extremely complex set of ongoing issues in our society.

With the popularity of on-line news coverage of these topics and the amplification of them on social media, DEI topics will continue to trend in the coming year.

In response to public scrutiny and calls for change, progress toward a more equitable future can be found in news coverage, such as the [renaming of campus buildings](#) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, students at [Brown University voting for reparations](#) within the admissions process, and Georgetown's investment to recruit diverse [student populations](#).

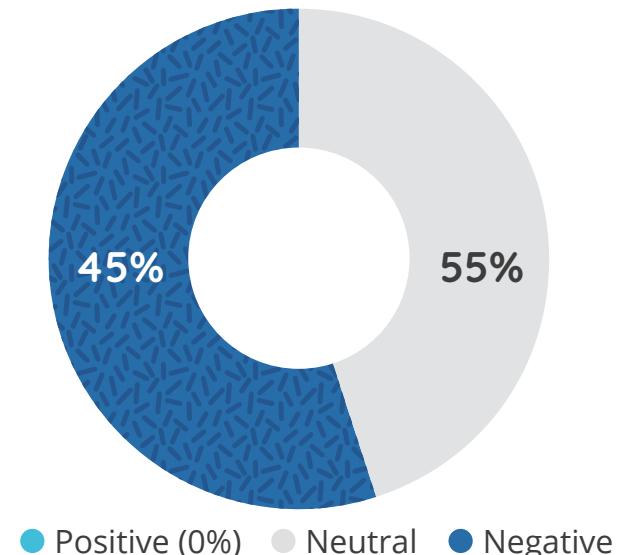
Title IX

Higher ed news coverage of Title IX and related issues during the analysis period was dominated by allegations of misconduct and/or a lack of reporting by key figures, with lesser general topical reporting. Title IX protects people from discrimination based on sex in education programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance, and is often applied to situations in which gender inequity and sexual violence and misconduct are alleged.

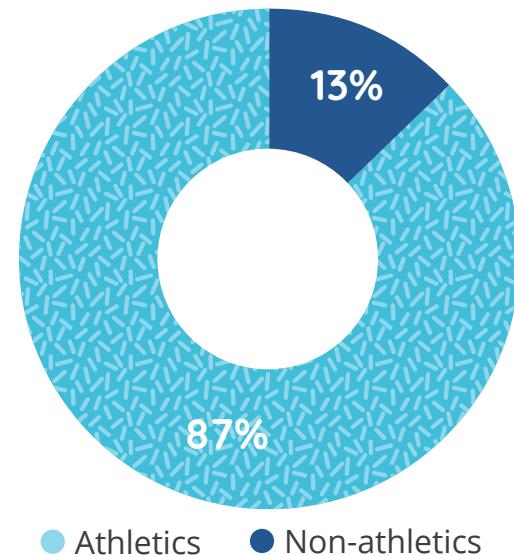
Of the 119 news mentions in this topic, 87% were related to athletics and coverage was highly negative.

- 55% of mentions were negative
- 0 mentions were positive

**Sentiment Analysis:
Title IX**



**Conversation Volume:
Title IX**



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USA Today's [extensive reporting on Les Miles' coaching history](#) at Louisiana State University and Oregon State University accounted for approximately 60% of the Title IX athletics coverage in our sample.

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- The most far-reaching news article within this topic was a complex story related to [Louisiana State University, the University of Kansas, and Oregon State University](#), all with ties to cover-ups of sexual misconduct from football coach Les Miles and campus executive F. King Alexander.
- Allegations were also levied against [Louisiana State University's Associate Dean of Students and Director of Student Advocacy and Accountability Jonathan Sanders](#) for failing to impose proper punishments in more than half of the campus's Title IX cases.
- Another article about a former [Northwestern University cheerleader](#) made headlines following a lawsuit against the university with allegations of sexual harassment while on the squad.

These articles included powerful testimonies from survivors, with the words of their treatment having a strong reputational impact on the campuses and individuals named.

The Title IX articles with the most negative sentiment and significant impact by coverage received were those placing pressure on the NCAA to review the business practices that reflect upon student-athletes' experiences. At the onset of the NCAA men's and women's basketball tournaments, photos were shared online showing the [discrepancy between the men's and women's training facilities](#), dining options, and overall athlete appreciation. The reactions from the media and prominent sports figures led to improvements in equipment, a public apology from NCAA administration, and a formal review of the differences in student-athlete support.

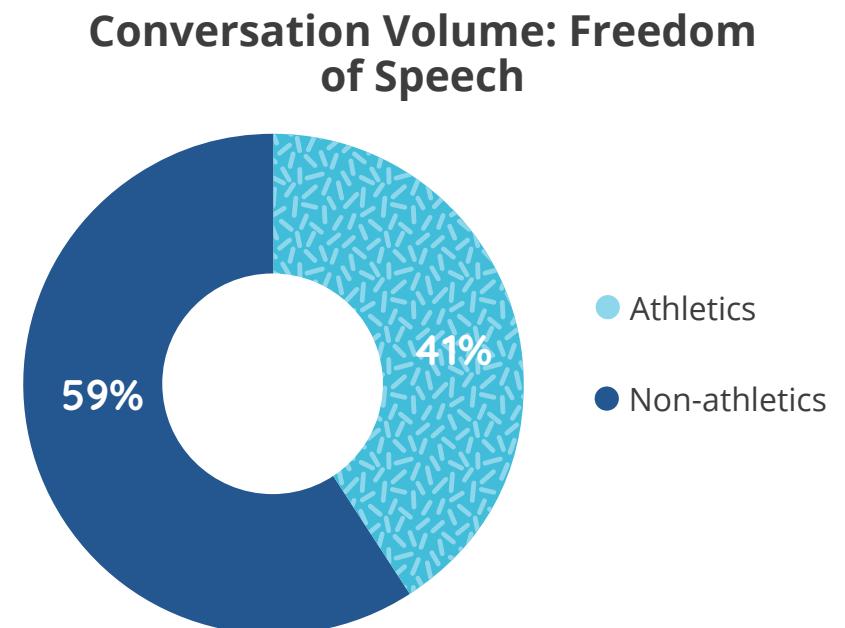
Freedom of Speech

Another common topic in higher ed news was the conversation about freedom of speech, which extends to include conversations about protests and assembly. This topic consists of 109 news mentions, 41% of which were related to athletics.

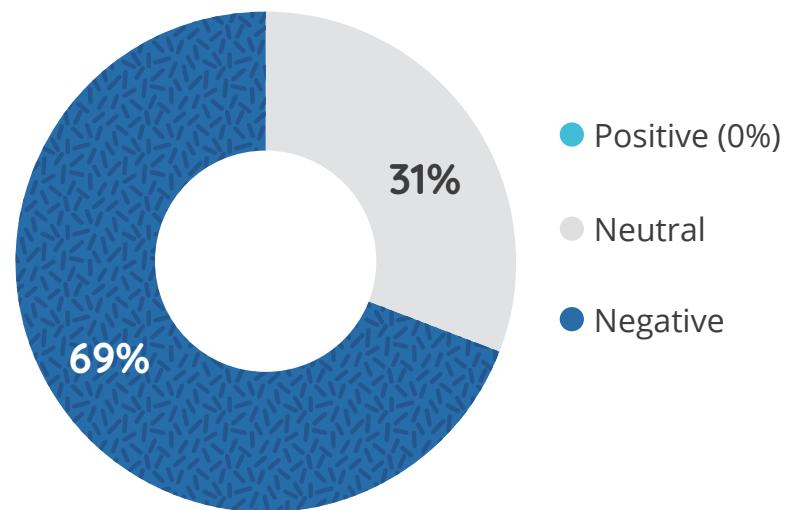
- 52% of mentions were negative

However, there was a discrepancy between athletic and non-athletic sentiment.

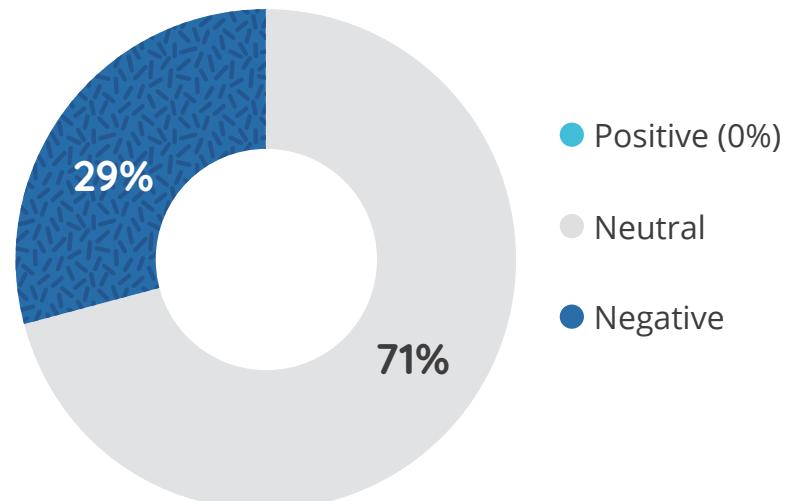
- 69% of non-athletic mentions were negative
- 29% of athletic mentions were negative



Sentiment Analysis: Freedom of Speech (Non-athletics)



Sentiment Analysis: Freedom of Speech (Athletics)



On the non-athletic side, the issue of free speech on campus is hotly debated with national coverage extending to include Supreme Court cases, as in the instance of a [George Gwinnett student](#) who said his speech was limited by the college for handing out religious materials on campus.

In another free speech lawsuit, a [Shawnee State University professor](#) sued the university after being disciplined for failing to use a student's preferred pronouns, claiming it violated his religious beliefs.

The phrase "cancel culture" was used abundantly in recent media coverage, including in coverage of a [student at Skidmore College](#) who felt she was "cancelled" for attempting to start a conservative Young Americans for Liberty chapter at the upstate New York campus.

Regardless of the specific issue or outcome related to rights to campus free speech, there is potential reputational harm to the higher ed industry as a whole when personal rights are challenged.

The NCAA and student athletes made headlines in the beginning of 2021 following a series of [protests from student athletes](#) and college athlete organizations. These protests were intended to gain individual and financial rights for student athletes related to their name, image, and likeness ownership. The Supreme Court agreeing to hear [Alston vs. NCAA](#) legitimized the cause and rallied support for players, leading to [speculation on reputational effects](#) and potential protests and related events.

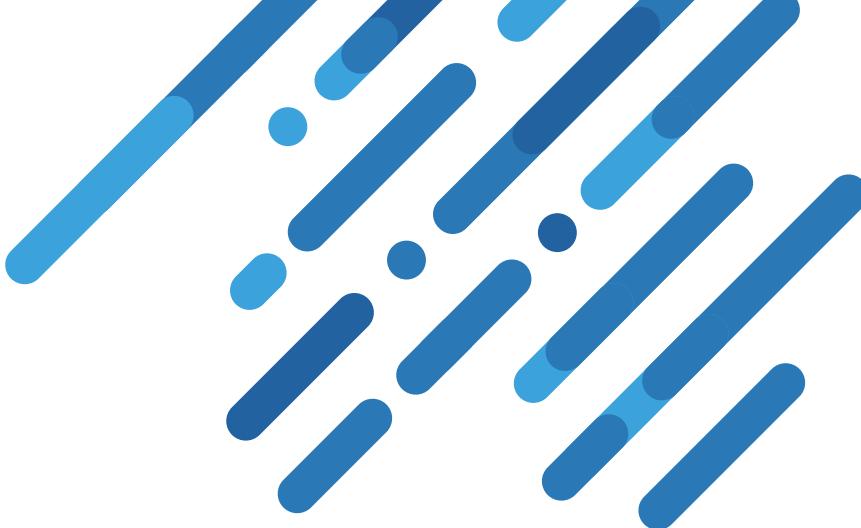
Although the outcomes could be positive for student athletes, the conflict and litigation introduces scrutiny and doubt of the underlying intent of the NCAA and institutions. Although the NCAA operates independently from colleges and universities, they serve as a higher ed member organization—an affiliation that directly affects the reputation of campus athletic programs.



Questions to Consider

- How prepared are you for media coverage of your DEI, Title IX, free speech, and intercollegiate athletics efforts? Do you have designated experts or media contacts and prepared talking points?
- If you have known vulnerabilities in these areas, what can you do now to raise and address these issues?
- What can the coverage trends in this report tell you about your university's strengths and weaknesses?
- Based on what you know of your institution's efforts in these areas, are you queued up for a positive or a negative take in the media?

Conclusion



National media often draw from local coverage to identify trends, and hometown media often localize national stories. This means having a social listening ear to the ground is a necessity to help you plan for increasingly popular topics and what coverage may be headed your way. Use this report to talk to senior leaders about what the coming year may hold for higher ed across these three evergreen topics (including the role athletics plays in all of them) and your audiences' appetite for positive and negative coverage of your campus on these issues.

While national media is often seen as more critical of higher ed than local and regional coverage, the reality is that all reporters and outlets are looking for good stories and people who can tell them. This analysis of media coverage shows that the majority of the overall reporting during the three-month period was neutral, which means reporters did their jobs and the onus is on all of us to supply them with information that shifts some of the negative coverage to neutral and the neutral to positive.

How?

This report should spur communications and marketing leaders to convene strategy sessions with their team. You should plan for the localization of the four key issues and also the potential for the media to reach out to you on each topic. In the absence of a lightning rod situation, you have the ability to decide if your campus will be featured as a success story or a cautionary tale. Work through the Questions to Consider in this report until you have answers. Plausible deniability is never a good look for campus leaders especially on polarizing topics, which means you will benefit from talking about tough topics and identifying solutions before the media calls for comment.