

Collecting Student Perspectives to Drive Supports

By Melissa Ezarik



COLLEGE PULSE

Student Voice, an Inside Higher Ed and College Pulse collaboration, is presented by:





As higher education slowly emerges from a two-and-a-half-year-long pandemic, it is clear there is no such thing as a “return to normal.” Though this may be a discomfoting or disorienting feeling for many, it also represents a tremendous opportunity to rebuild higher education from the student up.

What would it mean for colleges and universities to be truly student-centric? There are so many exciting possibilities to imagine. But you don’t have to imagine. All you have to do is ask—and listen. That is, all we have to do is ask students how they’re doing and feeling, and what they need and want from their education. Then we need to listen carefully and respond.

For nearly 85 years, Kaplan has been an organization that revolves around the student. That’s why we are proud to sponsor Inside Higher Ed’s Student Voice. This initiative combines the surveying of college students on a monthly basis with rich editorial coverage of the insights. And this particular report summarizes the best insights from the past year.

I hope you read it carefully and think about what your institution can do to respond to what students are telling us—and asking of us.



Sincerely,

Brandon Busteed

Chief Partnership Officer and Global Head,
Learn-Work Innovation, Kaplan



Introduction

Current student needs are many, and the stakes are high in helping to meet those needs through effective supports. Student Voice surveys—conducted by *Inside Higher Ed* and College Pulse with support from Kaplan—capture not just the experiences of U.S. college undergraduates but also what they think their institutions could do to be more supportive. That perspective, along with questions campus officials are asking of their own students, is valuable in determining where to allocate resources and make changes to improve existing efforts.

Answering the question of who is struggling the most is an important decision-making piece.

One Student Voice survey, which explored how “understood” students feel in classes and across campus, found that nearly one in four students doesn’t believe their colleges make an effort to understand their current experiences and challenges. That’s especially true for students who have experienced certain childhood traumas. For example, nearly one in three students who experienced food insecurity or physical abuse prior to college don’t believe their colleges make an effort to understand what they’re experiencing now.

Findings like this support the introduction of coaching-based models, where students are paired with a person or a team to check in regularly, ask about current challenges and help connect individuals to needed supports—whatever they may be.

Another survey, on connections with faculty members, found that students at public colleges are more likely than those at private institutions to never visit professors during office hours. In the full sample, just 13 percent of students estimate using office hours five or more times in a semester. Drilling down, it becomes clearer that certain students are most likely to take advantage of office hours at least once.

Those who rate professors as excellent in terms of academic rigor are nearly 20 percentage points more likely than those who rate professors as fair or poor in this area to be making office hours visits. Also, three-quarters of students who rate professors as excellent in terms of building relationships with students are taking advantage of office hours, compared to about two-thirds of those who rate professors as fair or poor with relationship-building.

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In other words, if professors are encouraged to ensure their courseware is rigorous, and if they are deliberate about making connections with students in class, students will be more likely to spend extra time with their professors outside of class.

What do students want from their professors? Aside from the obvious—being taught the course material—more than half of respondents to the survey want introductions to people working in fields of interest and/or advice on choosing a career direction. Nearly half hope professors will be willing to listen about personal issues and consider accommodations requested because of those challenges. All of these desires point to the need for more connection building through conversations outside of class time.

This report delves into several key findings from 2022 Student Voice surveys, including why and how colleges and universities can strengthen approaches and programming related to students:

- opening up about current and past challenges
- making stronger connections with professors
- needing assistance in a financial crisis
- struggling with their mental health
- feeling safe on campus
- interacting with non-academic offices across campus
- securing and succeeding in internships

As higher education leaders share in the following pages, Student Voice and other national survey data can help point them toward data they need about their own students. With that fuller picture, administrators are making informed decisions related to expanding or otherwise changing existing programs and supports as well as to launching new efforts aimed at setting students up for success. ■





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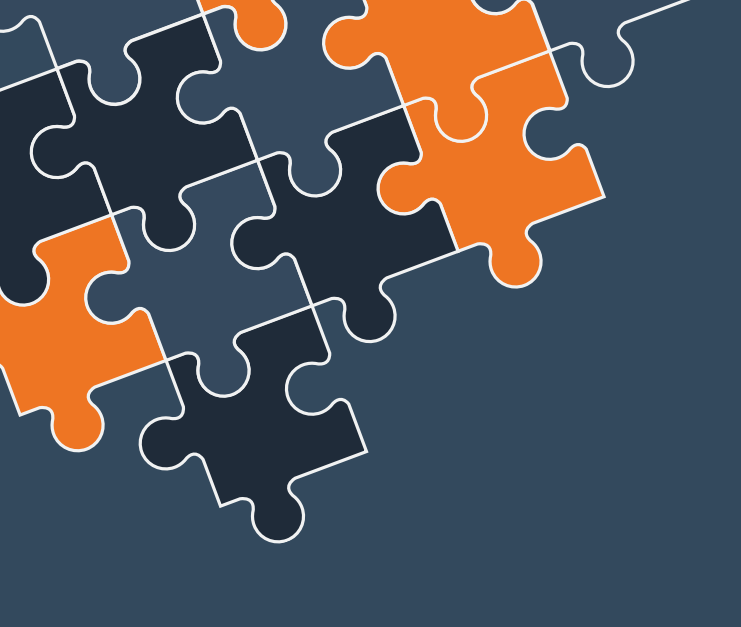
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Collecting Student Perspectives to Drive Supports

Using everything from national student survey data and campus survey findings to feedback from focus groups and one-on-one conversations, institutional leaders gather student perspectives to make decisions about expanding existing and developing new approaches and programs to help students succeed.

"It just seems like every moment is a changing moment when you're a young person right now." That's how one Roanoke College student, in a conversation with President Frank Shushok Jr., summed up the challenges of the past few years and how adaptive students have had to be. Between pandemic ups and downs, related mental health and well-being challenges, financial worries, and bigger questions about whether the price of a college education is worth it, students have a lot going on.

"I think the dynamic environment our students live in and the complexity of their backgrounds and demographics make it really difficult to draw conclusions from a particular point in time," says Shushok. That's why he and other higher ed leaders don't rely solely on survey data—national or hyper-local—in making decisions about what students need.

Regular in-person focus groups at the private Virginia

institution allow Shushok and other administrators to ask about trends and survey findings as well as get a sense of how perspectives vary from student to student. "We're wanting students to add their voices to the data and to do that more frequently," he says.

When James Herbert, president of the University of New England, sees student survey data, such as Student Voice data about what supports they need, he's careful to remember that findings are subjective and "may not be accurate, and even if they are accurate they may not be what's really needed."

Looking at one 2022 Student Voice survey data point, he noticed that adding security cameras was a top safety and security funding priority for respondents, polled by *Inside Higher Ed* and College Pulse with support from Kaplan. "I was thinking how students don't actually know how many cameras we have as we intentionally don't advertise them, and a lot of times they're subtle

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and tucked into woodwork in public places,” Herbert says. “If I were to read it as something we must do, that might be misplaced resources.”

When meeting with concerned students, which generally results in a request of some kind, he’ll say “‘Let me look into it and then get back to you.’ And then I make sure I do get back to them. If it’s not something we can do, either it doesn’t make sense or whatever, then we tell them that.”

For example, when he met with a group of students in the aftermath of George Floyd’s death, some of their ideas for racial justice were already being done on campus, some were good ideas worth looking into, and “a few others were either bad ideas or frankly illegal.”

“When I say no, I have an obligation to explain why,” he adds. “If we can’t do it, we explain the rationale. It’s a message I’ve tried to convey to deans and vice presidents, too. You can’t just nod and hope they won’t bring it up again.”

While just one way of gathering information on student experiences and expectations, Student Voice survey highlights from 2022 point toward actions that higher ed leaders can take for strengthening supports in 2023 and beyond. Following is a look at key findings, as well as insights on how officials at a number of institutions are using their own quantitative and qualitative data to get a fuller picture of student needs.

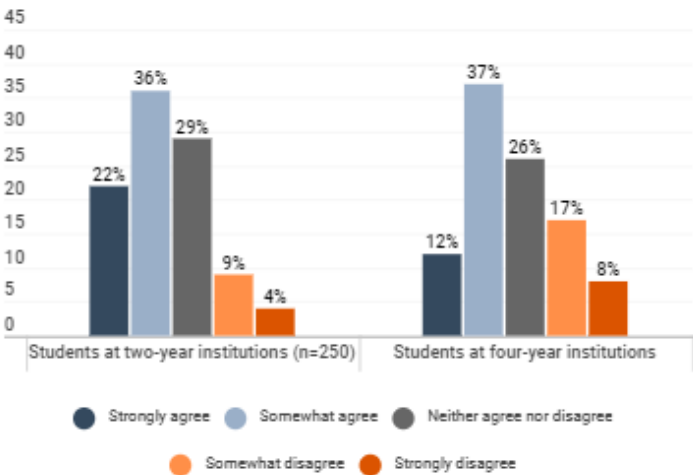
1. Some students don’t feel understood on campus, and may need to be invited to share current and pre-college challenges and experiences.

Standout stats from a January 2022 survey of 2,003 college students:

- One-third disagree at least somewhat that their institution is responsive to the needs of all students; among those with learning disabilities or related challenges, 40 percent disagree.
- One in four disagree at least somewhat that their college understands the connections they have to their families and home communities. Nearly one in four

Efforts by Colleges to Understand Students

How much students agree with the statement “My college or university makes an effort to understand my current experience and challenges”



Source: Inside Higher Ed/College Pulse survey of 2,003 college students; [explore the data here](#)

“

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President,
University of New England

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disagree that their colleges make an effort to understand their current experiences and challenges.

At the institution level, many administrators collect data and perspective on whether students feel they belong. For example, a post-orientation survey at Clarke University, in Iowa, asks students what experiences contributed to their sense of belonging, says Kate Zanger, vice president for student life.

The president of Clarke, which has less than 1,000 students, also has dinner with small groups of first-year and transfer students each semester. Guests fill out a four-question form about how the institution is so far meeting expectations and what pieces of the Clarke experience have been done well or need improvements.

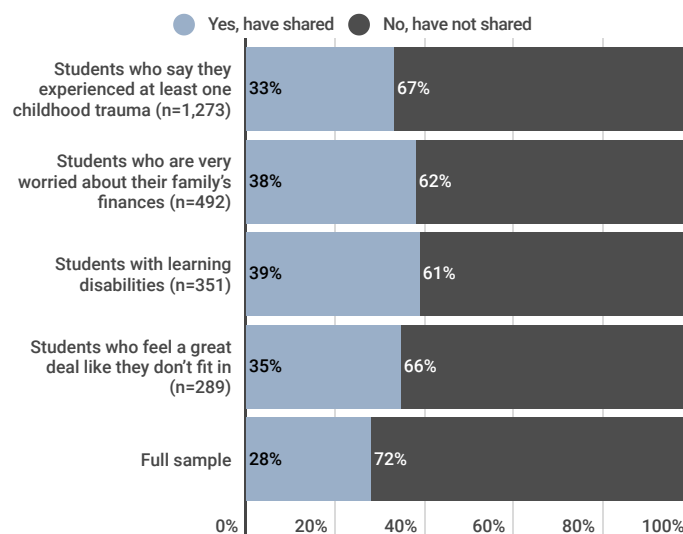
The College of William & Mary uses the W&M&You climate app, which about 700 or 800 of the student body of 9,500 have registered for, to frequently take a pulse of student experiences—such as what activities they're involved in and what excites them most about being on campus, says Provost Peggy Agouris. Results are posted on her department's webpage. She also meets regularly with a student advisory council, which students apply to be part of, to discuss perspectives, experiences and issues of interest.

Arizona State University's EdPlus unit, focused on the design and delivery of digital teaching and learning models to promote student success, uses success coaches to build one-on-one relationships with ASU Online students and get a handle on student experiences and reach out when students are struggling to create a plan, explains Nicolette Miller, senior director of student success for EdPlus. New students, meanwhile, are asked to complete surveys to share what they might be nervous about or what resources they anticipate needing prior to taking their first course, with that feedback used to send targeted messaging.

2. The majority of students aren't opening up to professors about their struggles, and although they want connections with professors, they may not feel comfortable initiating them.

Are Students Sharing the Challenges They Face?

Regarding struggles with time management, anxiety or depression, financial insecurity, or poor physical health, many students have not shared with professors or other professionals at their college or university.



Source: *Inside Higher Ed*/College Pulse survey of 2,003 college students; [explore the data here](#)

Standout stats from the January 2022 survey and an April 2022 survey of 2,000 college students:

- Only 28 percent of students who identified recent struggles with time management, anxiety, physical health or financial insecurity said they have shared their struggles with professors or other professionals at their colleges.
- One in three students at public colleges, and one in five at private colleges, do not typically visit professors during office hours at all during a semester.
- More than half of students want their professors to introduce them to people working in fields of interest and/or to provide advice on choosing a career direction. Nearly half want professors to help them land an internship or first job, and/or to listen about personal issues and consider accommodations requested.

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At the University of New England, Jennifer DeBurro has been hearing from faculty that “students are being more forthcoming with the challenges they’re experiencing. They’re getting more of those stories and we have had to walk into that very carefully,” says DeBurro, vice president of student affairs and dean of students at the institution, which enrolls about 2,300 on-campus undergraduates. “We don’t want faculty to feel responsible for mental and physical well-being of students. It’s walking a fine line.”

“We encourage people to find their voice and really listen to other people,” says Herbert, adding that conservative-leaning students “tend to be very quiet. They’ve gotten the message that their perspective is not welcome.” All students, no matter their viewpoint, should be able to safely speak up in class or on campus, he adds.

He hopes students can build resilience in experiencing “psychological discomfort that exposes an idea or that challenges a fundamental belief” in classrooms or in campus discussion.

Roanoke leaders have worked on equipping faculty members to “feel comfortable sending signals to students that they’re open to hearing [about their challenges],” says Shushok, who acknowledges that “students in certain demographic groups are less likely to disclose certain things to certain people. It’s another reason to have a diverse faculty.”

In conversations about holistic well-being, he adds, students must be involved “because so often the solutions we think are solutions may not resonate with students.”

At William & Mary, an academic stress initiative is helping to address causes of stress for students and employees, as well as responses to it, Agouris says.

The work involves investigating W&M’s culture of stress glorification and whether unnecessary academic and workplace stressors are being enabled at the institution—and it will lead to changes in services, programs, policies and procedures that increase the health of the

What Students Want From Professors

Assistance/guidance that students say they desire, aside from course content delivery



- Students at public colleges (n=1,428) are *less likely* to want each type of assistance from professors, compared to those at private colleges (n=562).
- Students with a current GPA of less than 3.0 (n=370) are *less likely* than the overall sample to want connections to academic-related resources, or to want opportunities to be involved in academic research.
- Students with a learning disability (n=445) are *more likely* than the overall sample to want professors to be willing to listen about personal issues and consider accommodations.

Source: *Inside Higher Ed*/College Pulse survey of 2,000 college students; [explore the data here](#)

environment. An Academic Stress Town Hall, held over Zoom in April 2022, gave students an opportunity to share their concerns about academic stress on campus with peers and professors.

Some initial changes, notes Agouris, include not holding classes on Election Day this fall and injecting more flexibility into the college’s pass/fail policy.

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3. Students tend to think their colleges should help them during a financial crisis.

Standout stats from a January/February 2022 survey of 2,000 college students:

- Seven in 10 agree that their colleges “should be responsible” for helping students going through a financial crisis, either strongly (36 percent) or somewhat (34 percent); only 9 percent disagree.
- Just three in 10 students agree (strongly or somewhat) that their university has adequate support in place for students facing a financial crisis.

Not surprisingly, student emergency funds have gotten a lot of attention in higher ed in recent years. At Clarke, Zanger has seen employee donations get earmarked for its fund and has opened up potential uses for Emergency Need Grants. For example, in the past two years they have been awarded to students struggling to pay for course materials as well as a host of other needs. A campus climate survey pointed to the need to address food insecurity, and now mini food pantries are available in more than one location on campus, in addition to off campus. When that survey is administered again, officials hope to see less students being left hungry, Zanger says.

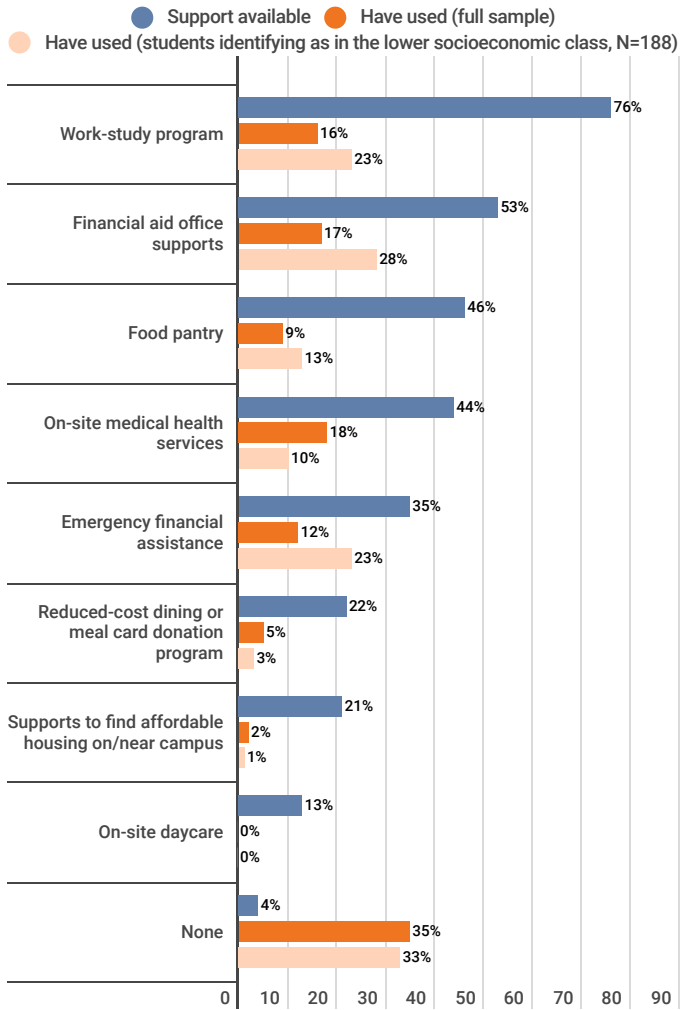
Shushok has also seen growing interest in contributions to his institution’s emergency aid fund, particularly from alumni. And similar to Clarke, Roanoke has “become less rigid about meeting certain qualifications. We’re just listening carefully to what students need. ... If COVID did anything positive, it did bolster our empathy and awareness. It uncovered a lot of the nuances that impacted students’ ability to be successful”—including the diversity of experiences at home that became obvious during periods of remote learning.

4. Students don’t always know where on campus they can go if they’re struggling with mental health. Their top related wish is for more on-campus counseling staff.

Standout stats from a March 2022 survey of 2,000 college students:

Supports Offered, Supports Needed

Resources related to saving money or offering help that students say are available at their college—and which they have personally used



Source: Inside Higher Ed/College Pulse survey of 2,000 college students; [explore the data here](#)

- Nearly one in four students disagrees that they know where to seek help on campus for mental health struggles.
- The biggest student priorities for expansion of mental health supports include more on-campus counseling staff, the addition of a psychiatrist or nurse who can prescribe mental health medication and a 24-hour emergency mental health line—with between one quarter and one third of students prioritizing each.

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Shushok will share Healthy Minds Study data with students in focus groups, asking if their experiences are similar and where they have felt supported when their own well-being is compromised (such as if they took advantage of telecounseling and if it was effective).

While he asks that all his colleagues in leadership roles spend time with students in focus groups, he intentionally does them himself, too. “I need to hear directly from students,” he says, adding that when interacting with students throughout his day, he nearly always asks about their well-being and if they’ve had an internship or career-related work experience.

Rick Muma, president of Wichita State University, in Kansas, also has his favorite questions—“What is going well?” and “What are things we need to change?”—which often get asked over lunch. He’ll host about 25 different student groups for lunch at his on-campus residence during fall semester and bring the same groups back in the spring. “You’d be surprised how enlightening that experience is for students,” Muma says. While everyone is eating, he, along with the vice president of student affairs, get feedback and ideas. He finds students to be very open, although some who haven’t had much interaction with administrators before tend to be shy initially—opening up more either after they’ve eaten and gotten a tour of the house or when they’re invited back the following semester.

University of New England, like many other institutions

Investments in Mental Health Services Students Want Colleges to Prioritize

Survey respondents could select up to three options



Source: *Inside Higher Ed*/College Pulse survey of 2,000 college students; [explore the data here](#)

continued

during the pandemic, has expanded mental health counseling services—though, as Herbert points out, it’s important that such action be only part of the solution. A new student outreach manager position will serve as a connecting point between professionals on campus when a student is struggling.

“Think of a train depot with units connecting with students, but may be working in a siloed way,” says DeBurro. This person can help to ensure students follow up on resource suggestions and tip off staff in a particular department that they’ll be hearing from someone in need. The hope is to assist students before they reach a point of crisis, she explains.

At Clarke the past two years, such coordination is being done through CU Link, in which students pursuing a degree in social work have regular hours in the library available for students who can drop in for support—such as if they feel something is getting in the way of their academic success, says Zanger. “We’re not billing it as counseling, but just saying ‘come speak to us if there’s something we can help with.’”

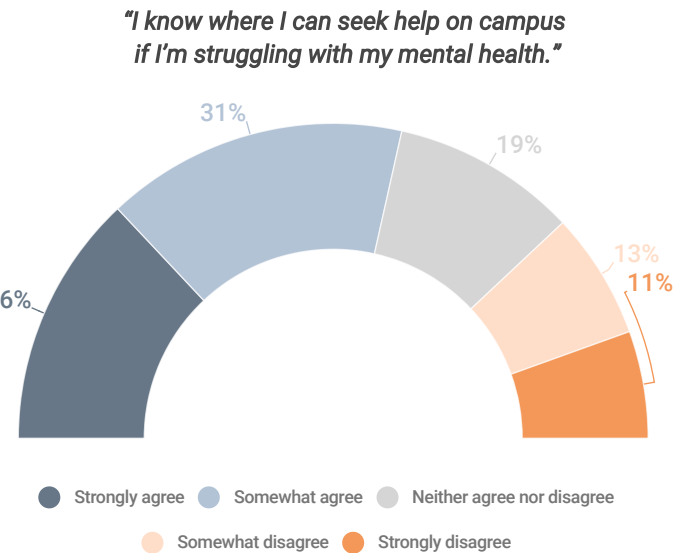
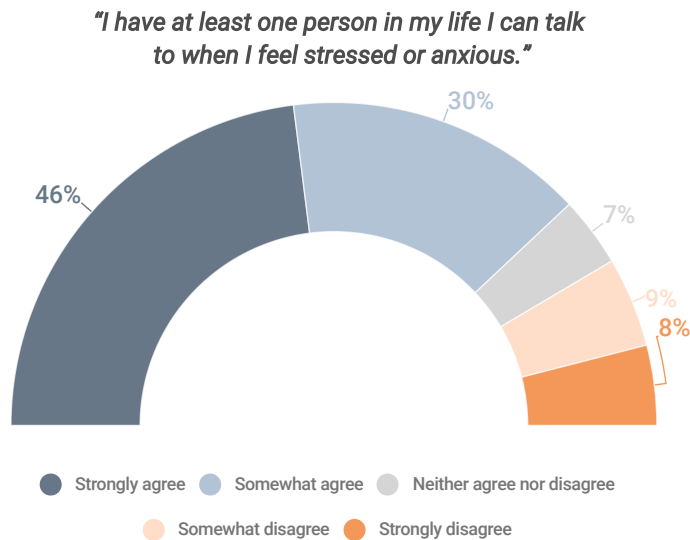
5. Students prioritize mental health supports to prevent crimes over more direct safety and security measures.

Standout stats from a May 2022 survey of 2,004 college students:

- Expanding mental health supports to help prevent incidents scored highest on a list of 12 possible safety and security funding priorities, with nearly four in 10 selecting it as a top-three priority. Improved lighting on sidewalks was the next highest priority, with 34 percent choosing it.
- About one-third of LGBTQIA+ students feel very safe on campus, compared to about half of straight students, and this group is also less likely to rate interactions with campus security as very positive.
- Black students are the least likely racial group to say campus police officers make them feel safer, 37 percent compared to 46 percent of all students.

Do Struggling Students Have Someone to Turn To?

How much students agree or disagree with each statement



Source: Inside Higher Ed/College Pulse survey of 2,000 college students; [explore the data here](#)

Muma’s student lunches have revealed student concerns over safety and the need for more lighting on campus. “We’ll take note and follow up on it. We want to make sure they know we’ve done something about that or understand what the issue is,” he says.

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Lighting has also come up as a student concern at Clarke. Two FEMA grants through the Iowa Department of Home Security (to the tune of more than half a million dollars) are allowing the university to prioritize the purchase of more lighting and surveillance cameras, particularly to cover parking lots and building entrances, as students requested, Zanger says.

But as she has learned, sometimes a fix doesn't require a purchase. One residence hall where occupants mentioned the need for more outdoor lights didn't actually need them. "We had a few trees that died and now that they're down, it's all bright now," explains Zanger.

6. Students are more likely to identify non-academic departments as providing good service than as providing bad service.

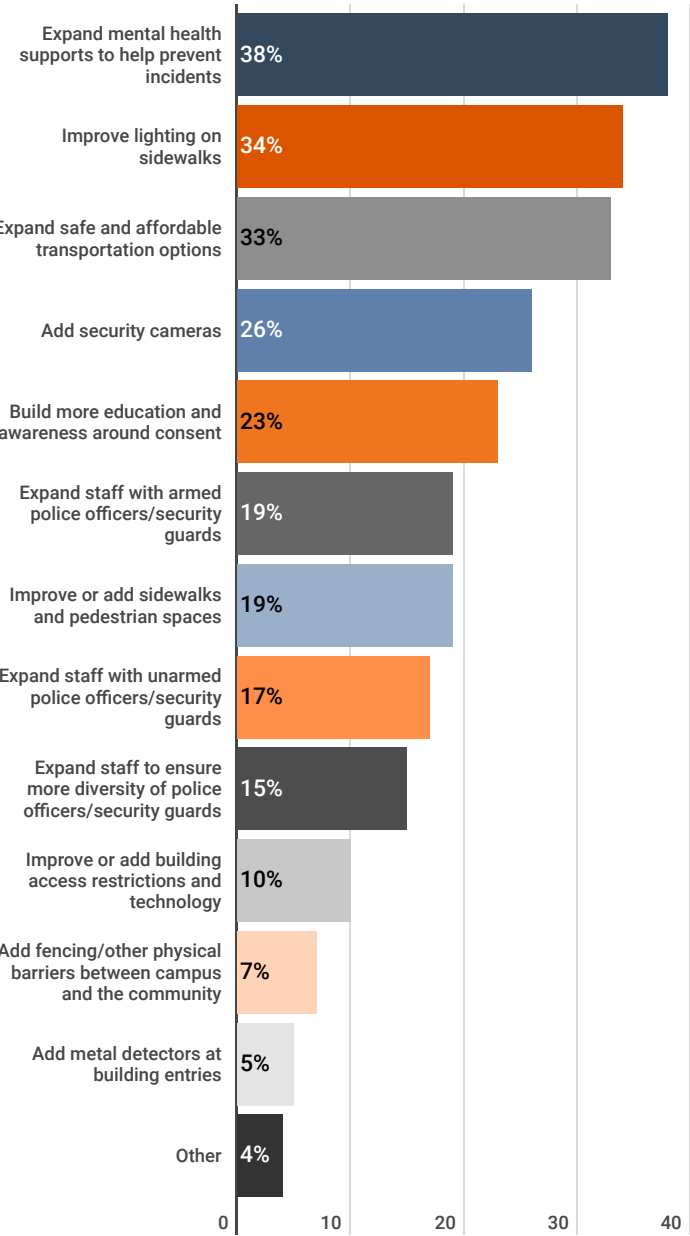
Standout stats from a July 2022 survey of 2,239 college students:

- Out of a list of 18 departments, students are most likely to say they've gotten good service from financial aid (57 percent), the library (43 percent), the campus store (34 percent) and the registrar (28 percent). Financial aid and the registrar are also the departments most likely to have provided negative service experiences.
- The top wishes for customer service-related technology include expanding or better providing chat bots, both on department webpages to answer questions after hours (36 percent) and as pop-ups for deadline reminders (30 percent). Three in 10 would also like to see greater availability of digital documents/e-signing.

The Student Voice survey's write-in comments uncovered a strong dislike for being sent on a "campus shuffle" when initially approaching the wrong department with a request. Roanoke is making strides in "creating a culture that is a web of support, where everybody feels the ability to pick up on signals and respond holistically to students," says Shushok. "It's not on one person so absorb the needs of students."

Students' Safety and Security Funding Priorities

What investments students would want to see if more funding were available; survey respondents could select up to three items



Source: *Inside Higher Ed*/College Pulse survey of 2,004 college students; [explore the data here](#)

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While faculty members play a critical role in supporting those needs, higher ed tends to “underestimate how important people in roles like housekeeper, maintenance work, administrative assistant or dining employee are in creating conditions of feeling seen and known,” he adds.

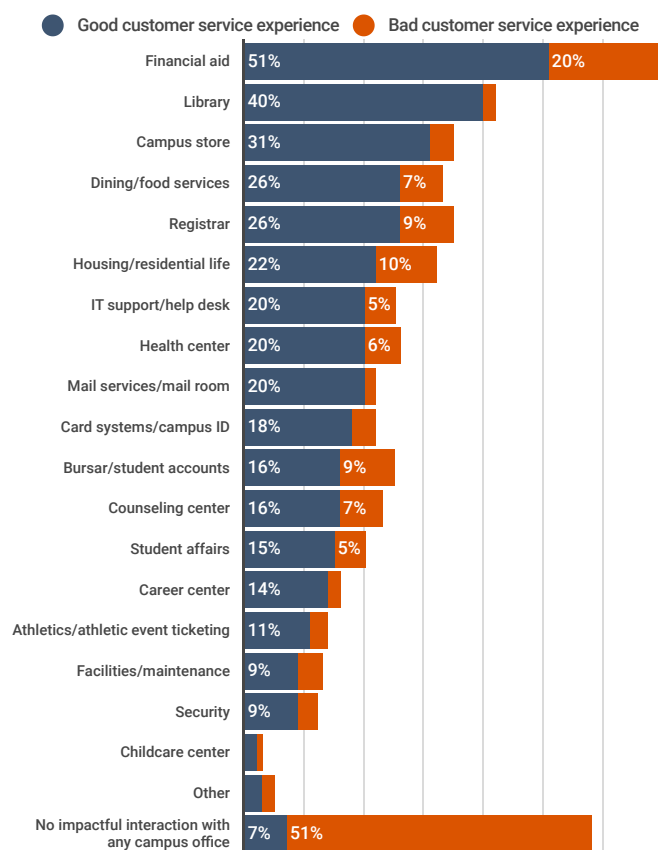
Often models for providing positive service experiences to students can be found in online education entities. Staff at ASU Online, for example, conduct surveys and track net promoter and customer satisfaction scores, as other industries do for consumers.

Also, a new tool on the homepage allows prospective students to personalize their browsing experiences based on factors such as military or international student status, as well as program of interest. “We’ve created pathways where they can be guided through what they need to move forward to enrollment,” says Amanda Gulley, chief of user experience design for EdPlus at ASU. “This tool is for someone who wants a quick and easy way to get a checklist.” User testing, including by student department employees, has helped in building out new technologies that can improve the experience of taking care of business online, she adds.

For those who hesitate to pick up the phone, website personalization options are especially appreciated. “In terms of how we communicate with students, we try to meet them where they’re at,” says Miller. “We don’t force a phone or Zoom call. We ask them what they want.” That may mean communicating by email or text.

Student Experiences With Customer Service From Campus Offices

Departments with which students say they’ve had positive or negative customer service* interactions



Source: *Inside Higher Ed*/College Pulse survey of 2,239 college students; [explore the data here](#)

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MIKAEL KRISTENSON/UNSPLASH

Wichita State, meanwhile, is upping its game in serving students, in person or online, with construction of the Shocker Success Center that began this fall. The university already had a one-stop shop where students could stop in or call to get help from a variety of departments, but data collection from thousands of encounters revealed a need for even more services in one place. While the one-stop helped in eliminating the need for office-to-office travels, students might be meeting with staff and realizing they need something else.

The new center will house 17 student services that are currently scattered throughout 10 different campus buildings. “We don’t want them to have to hunt for things,” Muma says.

7. Students’ greatest internship support desires include more partnerships between colleges and companies to offer these experiences and financial assistance for unpaid internships.

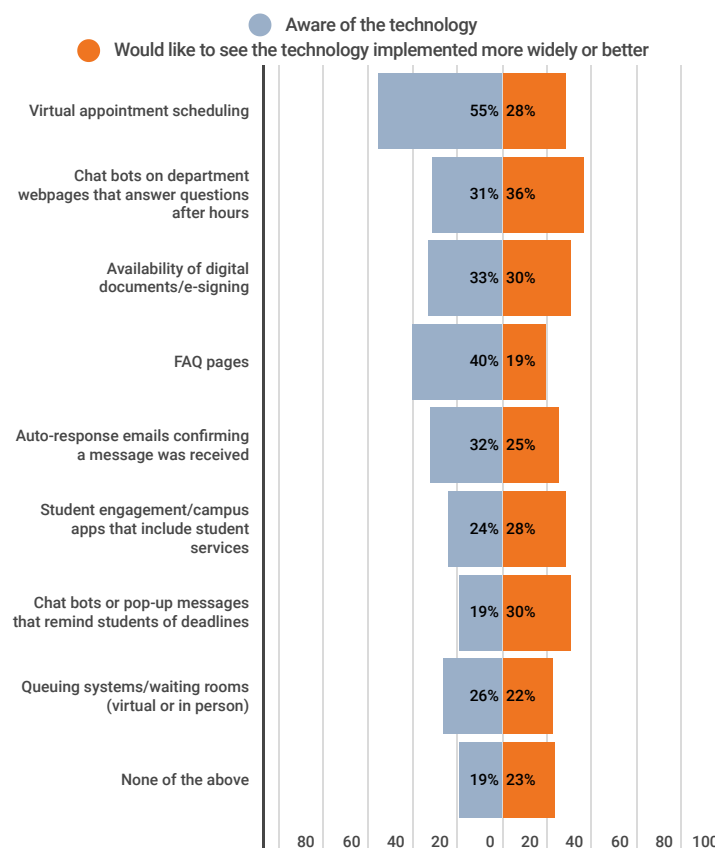
Standout stats from an August 2022 survey of 2,116 college students:

- About four in 10 students did not receive pay for their most recent internship, and nearly one in five earned neither money nor college credit.
- Nearly four in 10 have not had an internship nor an experiential learning opportunity outside of the classroom during college.

About seven years ago, Wichita State “pivoted in a

Customer Service–Related Technology in Place on College Campuses

Students asked if they are aware of one or more campus offices implementing each technology, and which they’d like to see implemented more



Source: *Inside Higher Ed*/College Pulse survey of 2,239 college students; [explore the data here](#)

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major way to be a very career-focused institution,” says Muma.

Applied learning is now required, with such opportunities built into every major at the urban public research institution. Fifty companies have a headquarters or other presence on the university’s Innovation Campus. “The requirement is that they work with our students and faculty,” says Muma. Students—currently about 6,000—are hired and paid through the university but assigned to companies. “The whole goal is to make sure the moment students show up on campus that they have access to these experiences.”

To help ensure success, students must use LinkedIn Learning resources and, if they choose, the Career Accelerator Office services, to learn soft skills needed in professional settings.

When one company, in the aviation industry, was in need of internal tech support, Wichita State leaders set up the Help Hangar staffed by students, who serve employees in person or virtually. The effort benefitted students and saved the company a million dollars, says Muma.

Data for Change

No matter what area a higher ed institution is focused on improving for students, leaders tend to have no shortage of data to consider, whether it’s from national surveys like Student Voice, from comprehensive or pulse surveys at the institution level or from somewhere in between.

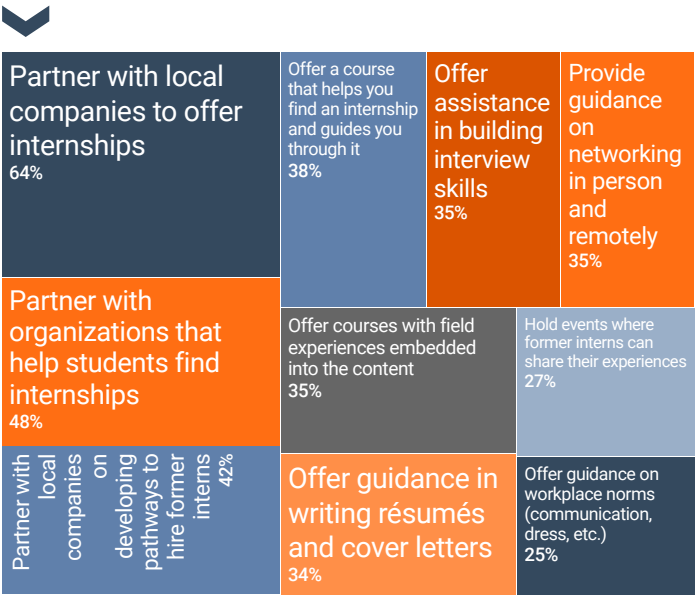
“We’ve been told for years how important it is to collect data, but many of us have struggled to use that data to make change,” says DeBurro from University of New England.

And with situations and experiences changing so frequently during the pandemic, leaders may find themselves scrambling more than ever to keep up.

DeBurro advises not waiting for even more data, or research that follows up on other findings, before

Internship Support Wishes

What students would like to see their college do, do more of, or do a better job on



Desired actions related to helping students succeed in internships



Source: Inside Higher Ed/College Pulse survey of 2,116 college students; [explore the data here](#)

continued

taking action. It's a missed opportunity "when folks are stymied. You need a good solid question, not 30 questions," she says.

"We've all got to start somewhere. Maybe we don't have information on our individual campuses. But there is so much research out there and we've got to pick our heads up out of the minutiae of the day to day. We have a chance to make a really important impact." ■



'We've Got That': 2 Tips for Ensuring Students Are Aware of Resources

Use a multimodal communication approach.

Any survey asking students about desired supports must take into account that they may not be aware of what already exists. And, as most higher ed professionals have learned from experience, students retain little from the orientation presentation whirlwind. Besides regular reminders of what is available to anyone who is struggling—academically, emotionally, financially or otherwise—institutions can ensure that the information is posted online, emailed and (for those who opt in) texted.

Educate parents.

Many in higher ed have noted that pandemic-era students (of traditional college age) are even closer to their parents than those in college just five years ago, so it shouldn't be surprising that some students' first call for help will be a call home. With parent orientation sessions and targeted outreach, colleges can equip parents with information about supports they can encourage their children reach out for when there's a problem.

About the Author

Melissa Ezarik, contributing editor at *Inside Higher Ed*, writes and manages content for the Student Voice news hub, launched in February 2021 and covering monthly surveys of undergraduate students. Melissa has been covering education since 2001 and higher education since 2005, with extensive experience writing and editing about student wellness issues and efforts, student career development, management and operation of student-facing departments on campus, and effective design of campus facilities.

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