

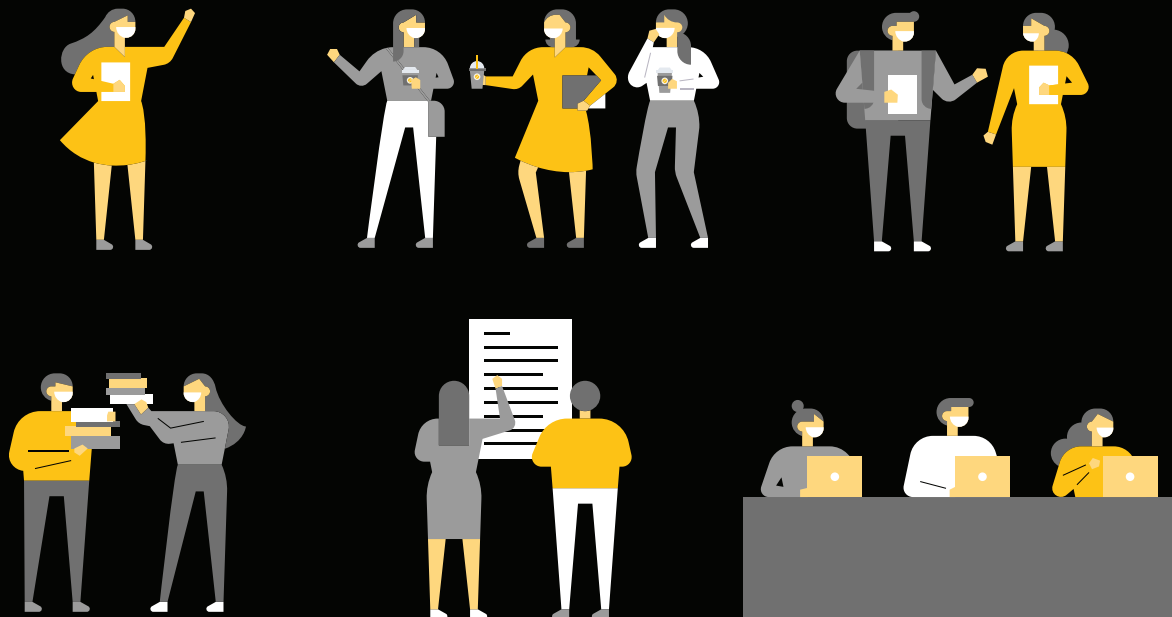
The Pandemic College Student Experience: Implications for Student Success and Retention

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The goal of this study was to provide additional context around the sentiment of college students during the pandemic as it relates to their academic and co-curricular experience and to identify elements for institutions to be aware of as planning continues for the spring term. Highlighted below are the key findings to help inform strategies.

Respondent Population

Total Respondents: 1,143

INSTITUTION TYPE

Public: 67%
 Private: 29%
 Other: 3%

Four-year institution: 78%
 Two-year institution: 22%

ENROLLMENT STATUS

Full-time: 69%
 Part-time: 22%

CLASS STANDING

First-year: 20%
 Sophomore: 21%
 Junior: 22%
 Senior: 18%
 Graduate student: 17%

RACE/ETHNICITY

Respondents were able to select more than one option.

African-American or Black: 16%
 American Indian, Alaska Native, Indigenous, or First Nations: 4%
 Arab or Middle Eastern: 2%
 Asian or Asian-American: 10%
 Hispanic, Latino/a/x, or of Spanish origin: 15%
 Multiracial/Biracial: 3%
 Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander: 1%
 White or European American: 47%
 Some other race, ethnicity or origin: 2%
 Other: 1%
 Prefer not to answer: 4%
 Unknown: 9%

GENDER

Female: 71%
 Male: 26%
 Genderqueer: 1%
 Non-binary/third gender: 2%

AGE

18–25: 71%
 26–30: 10%
 31–40: 7%
 41 or older: 13%

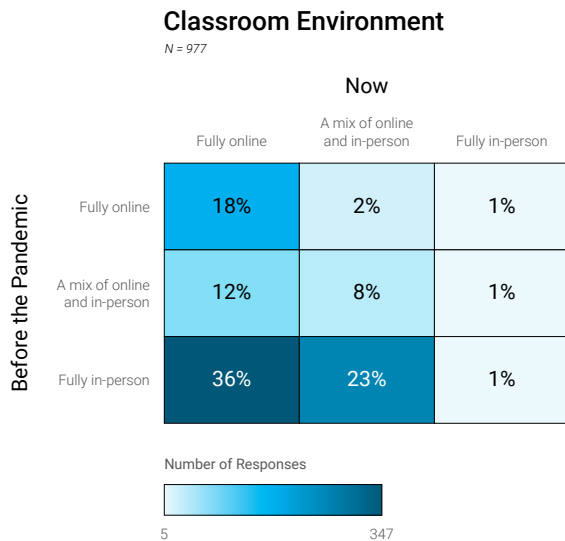
FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT STATUS

First-generation: 35%
 Continuing-generation: 62%
 Unsure: 3%

Current Educational Experience

The way students are now taking courses has changed from before the pandemic for most who responded. Before the pandemic, more than half of respondents took courses fully in person, while only fewer than one in five students took courses fully online. Currently, only 3 percent of respondents report having courses fully in-person, whereas nearly two-thirds state that they are taking classes fully online. One third are taking a mix of online and in-person courses currently. Furthermore, for more than half of respondents, the environment in which they are primarily taking courses has changed during this

semester—indicating that they started the semester, for example, in-person and have moved to entirely online or hybrid, or a similar change.



*Percentages do not add up to 100% because of rounding.

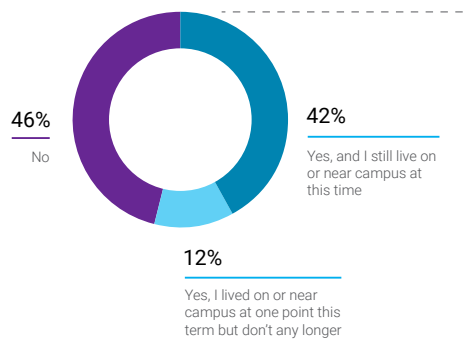
Has your college classroom environment changed at any point this term?



The living environment is also different for students. Over half of respondents lived on or near campus at one point this semester, with over one in 10 no longer living near campus, likely due to a change in how courses were being offered. Of those living on or near campus, slightly over one-third live alone or with friends, while just under one-third live in residence halls on campus. Nearly one in four respondents live at home with family near campus.

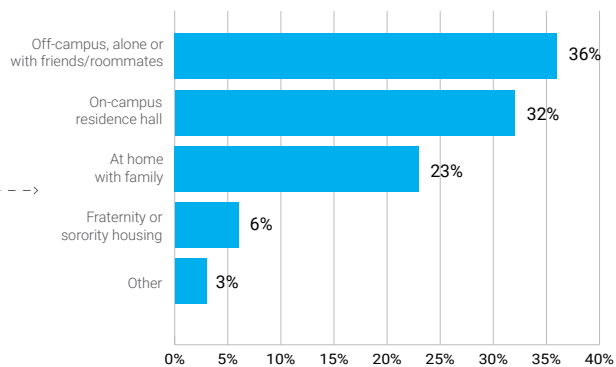
During this term, have you lived on or near your campus community?

N = 1086



Which best describes your housing on or near campus?

N = 601

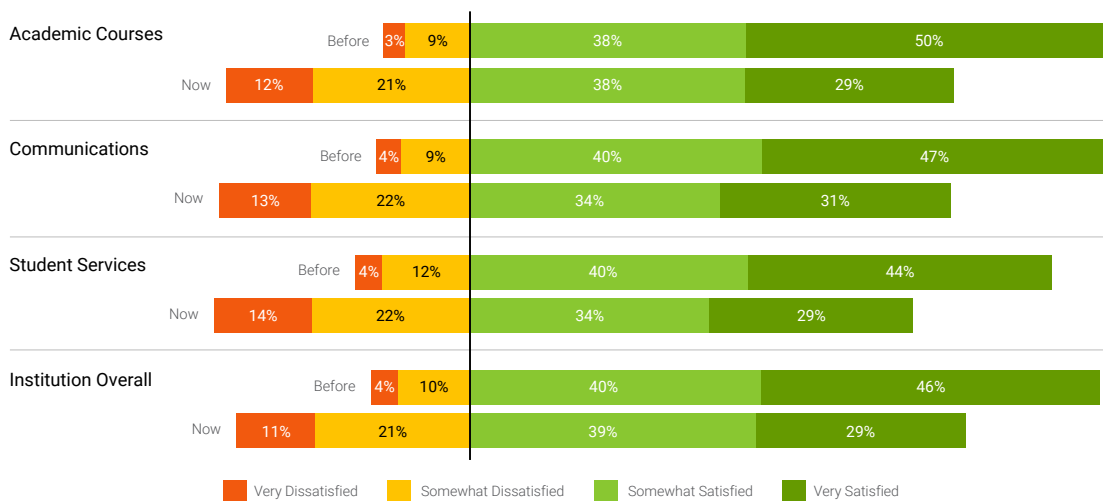


Student Satisfaction: Pre-Pandemic and Today

The pandemic educational experience has impacted student satisfaction, as satisfaction is lower currently than how respondents rated their satisfaction prior to the start of the pandemic across three areas (academic courses, communications, and student services), as well as for the institution overall. About one-third of students expressed being dissatisfied currently in each of these four areas, compared to between 12 percent and 16 percent before the pandemic, indicating a roughly 20 percent decrease in satisfaction.

Student Satisfaction

N = 924–969, varying by item



Above dataset only includes respondents who responded to both questions (Before Pandemic, and Now), which means that first-year students are not represented in this visualization.

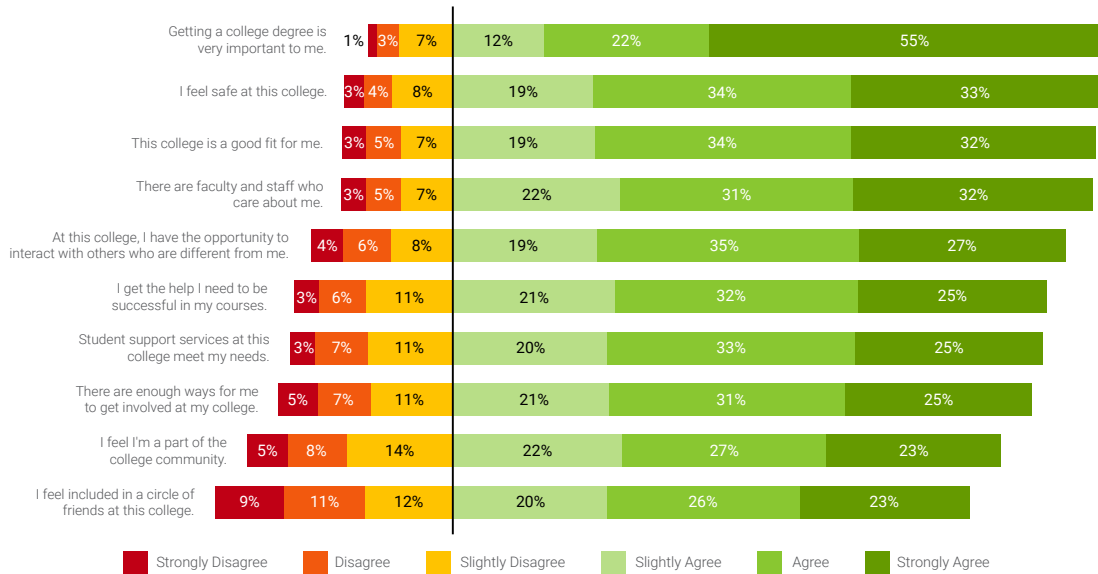
Although over one in 10 students were dissatisfied in at least one area before the pandemic, there has been a notable shift during the pandemic. Currently, the highest percentage of students expressed satisfaction with the institution overall, while academic courses received the highest percentage of satisfaction prior to the pandemic. Overall, however, the decreases in satisfaction were similar across the four areas. Institutions can use this information to identify areas to focus on during the spring semester to enhance the student experience.

When looking at current levels of satisfaction across class standing, first-year students indicate the highest satisfaction across all four areas, including over three-quarters of freshman who are somewhat or very satisfied with the institution overall. Groups that express higher dissatisfaction are juniors and seniors, with 40 percent of seniors expressing dissatisfaction with the institution and a slightly higher percentage who are dissatisfied with student services. On the other hand, over one-third of juniors are the most dissatisfied with academic courses. This indicates opportunities for institutions to evaluate each cohort’s experience and seek adjustments, especially for the junior and senior experience.

Student Success Outcomes

Twenty-five percent or more of students disagreed with statements that we would consider imperative to a good college experience (feeling safe, having faculty or staff who care about them, etc.). This means at least one in four students have an unmet need. But is this different than pre-pandemic?

Student Success Outcomes



N= 1051 to 1054, varying by item
 *Percentages sometimes do not add up to exactly 100% because of rounding.

The lowest scores were in the co-curricular areas of student life, including meaningful ways to be involved on campus, feeling part of the college community, and having a circle of friends at the institution. This means that typical factors of mattering and belonging that lead to increased retention (Dixon & Kurpius, 2008; Hart, 2018; Schlossberg, 1981; Rayle & Chung, 2007; Strayhorn, 2012) are currently low.

Institutions need to find ways to increase and improve social support, particularly in the virtual environment. Students’ open-ended statements indicate that offerings like free virtual counseling, academic and social support services and mentoring, personal and individual time with faculty, and meaningful social activities and leadership opportunities “where students can relax and have fun” would improve the student experience. Students also indicate that they want to continue to receive current and planned information related to COVID policies, practices, safety and current cases.



The best thing they can do is realize that students are struggling right now and need all the extra support they can get. I think the state of the world and the anxiety I feel [every day] due to the pandemic is making my college experience slightly stressful. I have been feeling more and more depressed and feel bleak about the future.*



The most meaningful thing my college can do is host events in which students can relax or have fun.*

The Impact of the Virtual College Experience

The 42 percent of respondents who lived near campus (e.g., in a residence hall, in a nearby apartment with friends, or in their home in the campus community) experienced marked positive outcomes - they were more likely to feel included in a circle of friends, and slightly more likely to feel a part of the campus community (See Table A in Appendix). This finding is illustrated by some of the comments below, which might suggest that friendship and social experiences between peers are suffering in the virtual environment:



I'm not getting a full college experience. There aren't many ways for me to get out and meet new people. I feel like my college experience is being robbed, yet I'm still having to pay the same amount as always.*



My greatest concern is not making those memories with others that people get from college. All I see [every day] is just individuals on a computer screen.*

**Student quotes from open-ended questions.*

However, those who lived away from campus (46 percent of respondents) reported consistently higher satisfaction rates and slightly better student success outcomes, such as those related to academic support, connection to faculty and staff, and feelings of safety. However, the most concerning responses came from the group of respondents who had lived on or near campus at some point this term but did not anymore (12 percent). (Reasons for this transition might have included a student’s own choice to move away from campus or an institution’s change in policy about residential housing.) This population of students had the poorest student success outcomes, lowest satisfaction, and were also less likely to re-enroll.

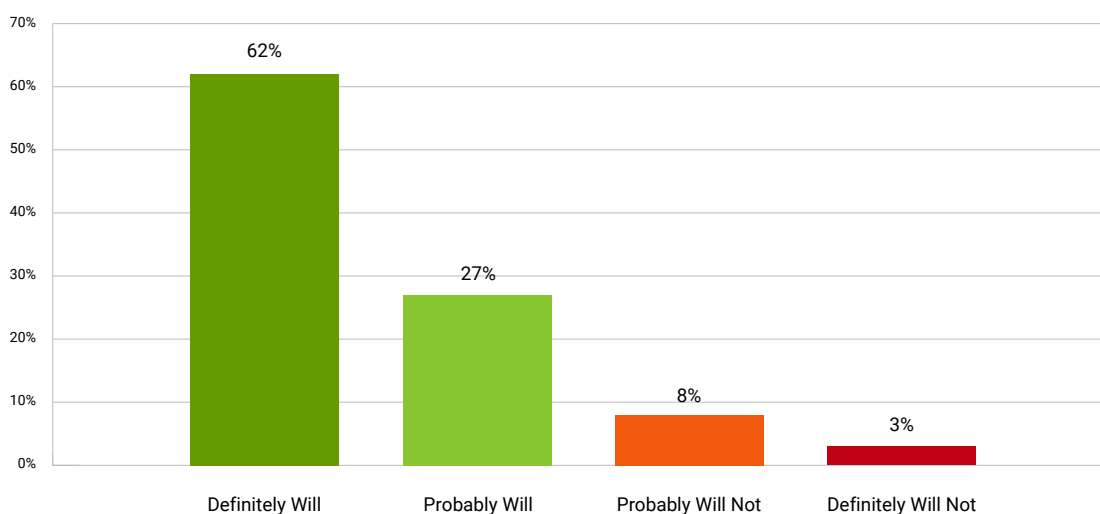
While the sample size of those with a fully in-person classroom experience was too small to disaggregate, a comparison of results for those in a hybrid classroom experience to those in a fully online classroom show minimal to no differences. However, a closer look at the 54 percent of students who experienced a change in their educational environment during the term (e.g., shifting from in-person to online classes) shows both lower satisfaction rates and lower student success outcomes. (See Table B in Appendix). One overall consideration noted here is the potential negative impact of change—whether in the educational environment or the living environment—on the student experience.

Future Enrollment

About nine in 10 students indicated a likelihood to reenroll at the same college for the next term, with a majority (62 percent) indicating that they “definitely will” re-enroll. These encouraging findings echo those reported in student surveys conducted by others in the late spring and summer months and show a continuing commitment to completing their education.

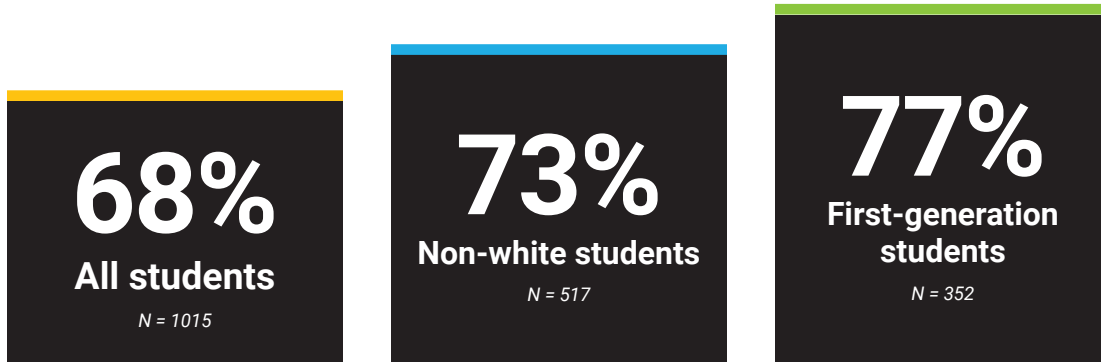
How likely is it that you will be enrolled at this college next term?

N = 980, excluded those graduating this term



However, more than half (68 percent) of students indicated they were concerned with their ability to pay for their education, with that concern more often reported by first-generation students and non-white students:

Students concerned with their ability to pay for their education



Right now, the most meaningful thing would be to not raise the tuition. I work 5 jobs right now to pay for school and am [barely] able to cover the cost.*



The most meaningful would be, to help me with paying for school. Being a first generation, low-income student, it's hard to pay for school.*



Help me obtain grants right now to pay for school, books, and any extra stuff I need like rent, food and stuff my kids need.*

Impact of Institutional Pandemic Plans

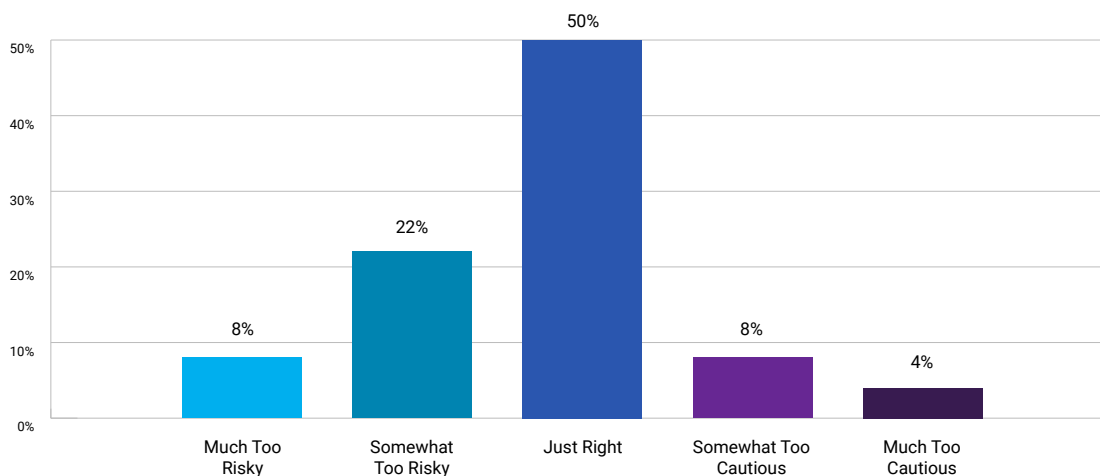
Overall, half of the student respondents indicated that the level of risk in their college's current pandemic plan was "just right." However, more students indicated it was too risky as compared to too cautious. The students who found the plan to be "just right" reported higher satisfaction, were more likely to re-enroll and were more likely to report feelings of safety.

**Student quotes from open-ended questions.*

Institutions should assess their plans and survey their student body about pandemic plans. Students who felt plans were too cautious or too risky expressed lower satisfaction and a lower likelihood to re-enroll. Those who indicated that plans were too cautious express the lowest satisfaction and likelihood to re-enroll, although this is a smaller group of students. In looking at satisfaction of academic courses, communications, and student services, the largest gap for students who feel plans are too risky compared to those feeling plans are “just right” was related to communications. This highlights an opportunity for institutions to continue to communicate proactively with students about steps being taken related to the pandemic. Additionally, institutions should provide alternative options for students who feel that plans are too risky where possible, reducing the need for those students to come to campus.

What do you think of the level of risk in your college’s pandemic plan?

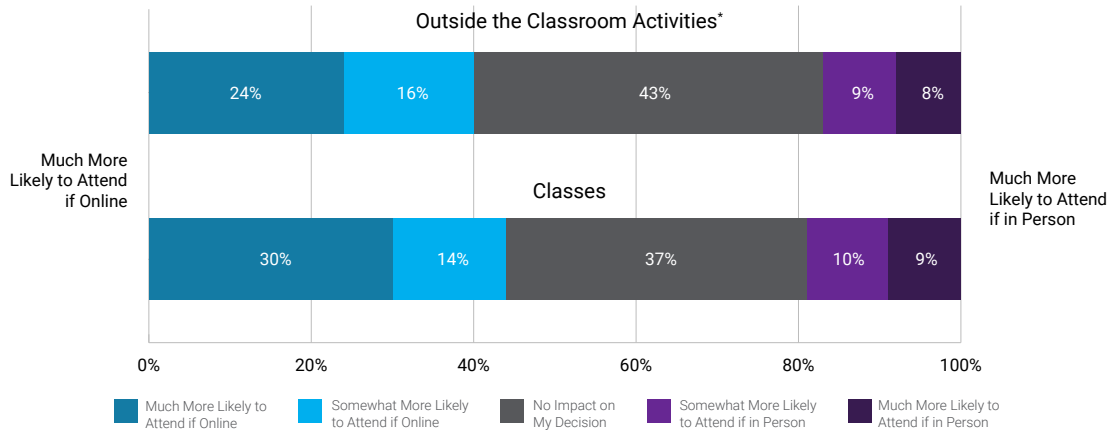
N = 991



When asked about whether the college’s decisions about how to offer classes and other educational experiences (e.g., co-curricular activities, events, internships) would impact their decision to re-enroll, of students who expressed a preference, the majority preferred an online experience over an in-person one.

How would your college's decision about how each were offered impact your choice to re-enroll next term?

N = 973



*Outside the classroom activities were defined as 'co-curricular programs, social events, internships, workshops, etc.'

Comments from students echoed the importance of transparency and communication in regard to the institution's choices and plans:



Be transparent, and make the correct choices of safety procedures. Please prioritize students' health over money.*



I already have all the resources and information I have for this fall semester. I could use a little more communication or information regarding next spring semester.*



Continue to provide us with helpful information and keeping us updated.*

*Student quotes from open-ended questions.

Recommendations

The results of this survey can help institutions identify opportunities to adjust strategies as the fall semester ends with an eye toward continuing to enhance the student experience in the spring.

Highlighted below are key recommendations:

- » Continue to invest in co-curricular engagement and peer connections (such as student organization involvement, and other ways for students to engage with their peers), especially in virtual settings.
- » When planning for spring, consider the potential negative impact of a mid-term change in plans on students.
- » Consider that while students may have once feared the unknown of a virtual experience, this data indicates that very few students are averse to an online educational experience.
- » When developing policies and practice, acknowledge students' financial concerns, in particular among certain student populations.
- » Ensure student communications about institutional pandemic plans are clear, consistent and transparent.
- » Continue to enhance online student services, which will benefit the institution post-pandemic as well.
- » Build on strengths where they exist – emphasize the good (such as educational commitment, students feeling connected to faculty and staff, likelihood to re-enroll) in the face of other challenges that are harder to overcome.
- » Look for similar data at your own institution, such as student engagement tracking data, course evaluation results, student survey data and more, and look for differences by class standing to identify opportunities.

Thoughts for Reflection

These findings bring to mind a number of important issues for discussion in higher education during the pandemic related to retention, student success and student satisfaction, especially in the context of varying educational environments as well as disparities in equity. Some questions for consideration are included here for dialogue among colleagues:

- » The data suggest potentially concerning results related to important aspects of student life: a feeling of connection to campus, getting involved, and, in particular—having a circle of friends. What can institutions do to increase peer interaction and a sense of inclusion and belonging with peers? What about in a virtual environment?

- » Why might students who experienced a change in their classroom or living environments see poorer student success outcomes and lower satisfaction? What impact should that have on a college's plans for the future?
- » Nine out of 10 students say they intend to re-enroll next term. Will institutions see retention rates of 90 percent or better?
- » Student satisfaction rates have suffered, but students' intentions to re-enroll are still high. Why does student satisfaction matter, and how can it be improved?
- » Most students say the institution's decision about whether to offer classes and activities online or in-person won't impact their decision to re-enroll. Still some indicate a preference for one experience over the other. Should students' preferences impact institutional decisions?
- » There were minimal to no differences found in responses for students who had online vs. hybrid classroom experiences. Is this what you expected? What impact should these findings, if any, on decisions about students' classroom experiences?
- » Student satisfaction with institutions' communication has dropped, and students' comments call for better communication and transparency from institutions. How might institutions improve their communication with students, particularly about their plans for the spring term?
- » One trend noted here is the potential negative impact of change—whether in the educational environment or the living environment—on the student experience. How should this impact institutions' plans for the spring? How can institutions incorporate students as a key stakeholder group in their change management practices?
- » Do you have data available at your institution to shed similar insights for your students? For example, do course evaluation results reflect students' experiences in the classroom? Have you conducted any surveys of the student population throughout the term? How do national benchmarking studies compare this year to the past?

Methodology

Data was collected through a nationwide survey conducted in October 2020 utilizing a national survey platform. To qualify for the survey, respondents had to indicate that they are currently enrolled in a college or university. 1,143 responses were considered valid and used for the analysis. For each data point referenced above, null values and unable to judge values were excluded.

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Appendix

TABLE A: Comparison of Means Based on Living Environment

	Live Away from Campus	Live On or Near Campus	Lived On or Near, but Left
Likelihood of Re-Enrollment (4-point scale)			
How likely is it that you will be enrolled at this college next term?	3.53	3.54	2.97

Student Satisfaction (4-point satisfaction scale)			
How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your college this term? (Academic Courses)	3.06	2.70	2.54
How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your college this term? (Communication)	2.98	2.74	2.78
How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your college this term? (Student Services)	2.92	2.70	2.69
How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your college this term? (Your institution overall)	3.04	2.75	2.68
How satisfied were you with the following aspects of your college before the pandemic? (Academic Courses)	3.48	3.30	2.98
How satisfied were you with the following aspects of your college before the pandemic? (Communication)	3.41	3.25	3.08
How satisfied were you with the following aspects of your college before the pandemic? (Student Services)	3.34	3.19	2.96
How satisfied were you with the following aspects of your college before the pandemic? (Your institution overall)	3.40	3.25	2.94

Student Success Outcomes (6-point agreement scale)			
At this college, I have the opportunity to interact with others who are different from me.	4.74	4.54	3.99
Getting a college degree is very important to me.	5.28	5.18	4.56
I feel I'm a part of the college community.	4.29	4.34	3.99
I feel included in a circle of friends at this college.	3.96	4.31	3.86
I feel safe at this college.	4.94	4.71	4.39
I get the help I need to be successful in my courses.	4.67	4.37	4.20
Student support services at this college meet my needs.	4.57	4.40	4.35
There are enough ways for me to get involved at my college.	4.53	4.36	4.08
There are faculty and staff who care about me.	4.87	4.62	4.23
This college is a good fit for me.	4.92	4.66	4.25

N ranges from 962 to 1086, depending on survey question.

TABLE B: Comparison of Means Based on Change in Classroom Environment

Likelihood of Re-Enrollment (4-point scale)		
How likely is it that you will be enrolled at this college next term?	3.40	3.54

Student Satisfaction (4-point satisfaction scale)		
How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your college this term? (Academic Courses)	2.71	3.00
How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your college this term? (Communication)	2.73	2.99
How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your college this term? (Student Services)	2.67	2.96
How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your college this term? (Your institution overall)	2.74	3.03
How satisfied were you with the following aspects of your college before the pandemic? (Academic Courses)	3.28	3.41
How satisfied were you with the following aspects of your college before the pandemic? (Communication)	3.26	3.36
How satisfied were you with the following aspects of your college before the pandemic? (Student Services)	3.19	3.28
How satisfied were you with the following aspects of your college before the pandemic? (Your institution overall)	3.21	3.37

Student Success Outcomes (6-point agreement scale)		
At this college, I have the opportunity to interact with others who are different from me.	4.43	4.72
Getting a college degree is very important to me.	5.04	5.27
I feel I'm a part of the college community.	4.20	4.37
I feel included in a circle of friends at this college.	4.09	4.13
I feel safe at this college.	4.56	5.02
I get the help I need to be successful in my courses.	4.26	4.74
Student support services at this college meet my needs.	4.36	4.61
There are enough ways for me to get involved at my college.	4.28	4.55
There are faculty and staff who care about me.	4.55	4.85
This college is a good fit for me.	4.52	4.98

N ranges from 975 to 1086, depending on survey question.

About the Authors

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Anne E. Lundquist, Ph.D., (she/her/hers), is a third-generation educated researcher, poet, yogi, and social justice advocate who draws on her 30-year career in higher education to help campuses use data for change. Previously, Anne served as Director of Strategic Planning and Assessment for the Division of Student Affairs at Western Michigan University as well as senior student affairs officer at four liberal arts colleges. She has taught diverse subject matter, including educational leadership, institutional effectiveness, higher education law, writing, and literature. Anne's areas of scholarship and interest include strategic planning, enterprise risk management, student success, and equity-minded assessment. She holds a master's in creative writing and a Ph.D. in educational leadership, higher education, from Western Michigan University. She earned her bachelor's in religious studies and English from Albion College.

Annemieke Rice

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Annemieke Rice, (she/her/hers), has spent the last decade at Campus Labs (now Anthology) guiding member campuses in their journey to use data more effectively. In doing so, she has consulted with hundreds of higher education institutions seeking to accelerate practice in areas including student success, learning assessment, and institutional effectiveness. She arrived at Campus Labs via early member campus Northeastern University, which provided her first-hand experience in strategic planning, retention initiatives, strategic enrollment management, academic advising, educational technology strategy and accreditation. As Vice President of Campus Strategy, she is tasked with bringing that holistic experience to bear in order to accelerate the efforts of Campus Labs' members, partners, and colleagues to drive meaningful change in higher education. Annemieke earned a bachelor of arts in behavioral neuroscience and journalism from Lehigh University and a master of science in applied educational psychology from Northeastern University.

Mirko Widenhorn, Ed.D.

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Mirko Widenhorn, Ed.D., joined the Anthology team in 2013, bringing more than 11 years of higher education experience to the organization. Prior to Anthology, he was the Director of Alumni Relations and Annual Giving at Wilkes University. Now serving as the Senior Director of Engagement Strategy, he works closely with customers on engagement scoring and strategic planning projects. Mirko is a Drew University graduate and completed his Ed.D. in higher education administration at Wilkes University, focusing on whether giving differs based on participation in different types of alumni programming.