

2022

College Student Mental Health Report

Prepared by BestColleges

Exploring college student perceptions of mental health and wellness and the services designed to support mental health on campus.





College Student Mental Health Report

Awareness and Perception of College Student Mental Health and Support Systems

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This report is the result of a collaborative effort of BestColleges and partner contributors. The team included: Whitney Bowers, Jessica Bryant, Rebecca Long, Andrew Rice, Jordan Stewart-Rozema, Liz Zvereva, and Quinn Tomlin.

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Executive Summary

BestColleges' survey research initiative continues with this new report on college student mental health. In April and May 2022, 1,000 college students residing in the U.S. participated in our study. They ranged in age from 18-26 and were enrolled in associate and bachelor's degree programs at the time of the survey. Our findings of their perceptions and concerns are presented in three categories: student mental health and wellness, school-sponsored mental health support services, and the continuing impact of COVID-19.



Key Findings:

Student Mental Health and Wellness

- Forty-six percent of college students said their mental health status was *fair* or *poor*; less than one-quarter (22%) said their mental health was *very good* or *excellent*.
- Many students reported experiencing mental health symptoms most days during the past year, including *stress* (66%), *anxiety* (54%), and *self-doubt* (50%).
- Over half of all students (51%) agreed that their mental health has worsened during their time in college, including 58% of LGBTQ+ students.
- Perceived expense and lack of insurance coverage (37%) and not being comfortable taking the initiative to seek assistance (35%) were the two biggest barriers to receiving mental health support for students who rated their mental health status as *fair* or *poor*.

School-Sponsored Mental Health Support Services

- An overwhelming majority (81%) of college students were aware that their school provides mental health assistance programs and services.
- Of the 46% of students who rated their mental health status as *fair* or *poor*, only 20% have sought assistance through their school.
- Students want their schools to schedule mental health days in the academic calendar (42%), acknowledge student mental health needs (35%), add wellness activities and programming (32%), and provide life skills classes (30%).

Continuing Impact of COVID-19

- Sixty-six percent of college students have had their education impacted or disrupted by the pandemic, including 61% who experienced campus closures.
- Stressors having the biggest negative impact on student mental health were reported to be academic pressure (52%), current events (38%), and financial difficulties (37%).
- About 1 in 5 college students dealt with the death of a loved one in the past year.



Introduction

Project Goals

The complicated years of the pandemic have increased mental health concerns for people of all ages, including college students. In an April 2021 survey, we found that more than 90% of college students reported experiencing pandemic-related mental health symptoms (Dennon, 2021). Even before the pandemic, the most frequent concerns for students visiting campus counseling centers were anxiety (61%), depression (49%), and stress (47%) (LeViness, Gorman, Braun, Koenig, & Bershad, 2019).

This new report is part of BestColleges' [ongoing research initiative](#) to identify and share trends related to higher education, the student experience, and student support services.

Our goal with this project is to update current data and more specifically explore two guiding questions related to college student mental health:

- What are the mental health concerns of today's college students?
- What types of mental health support and assistance do college students use and want?

Our findings provide insights related to how college students perceive their own mental health status, the sources of stress in their lives, and the barriers that might impede their access to assistance. These findings raise awareness of college student mental health and wellness needs and may inform institutional decisions about how these needs could be met.

Methodology

An online survey was conducted between April 28 and May 3, 2022. Respondents included college students currently enrolled in undergraduate degree programs (i.e., associate, bachelor's) in the U.S. The survey was fielded by Lucid LLC, in partnership with GLG Research. Quotas were implemented to ensure the sample included sex/gender and racial/ethnic diversity. All data were self-reported.

Perceptions and Concerns

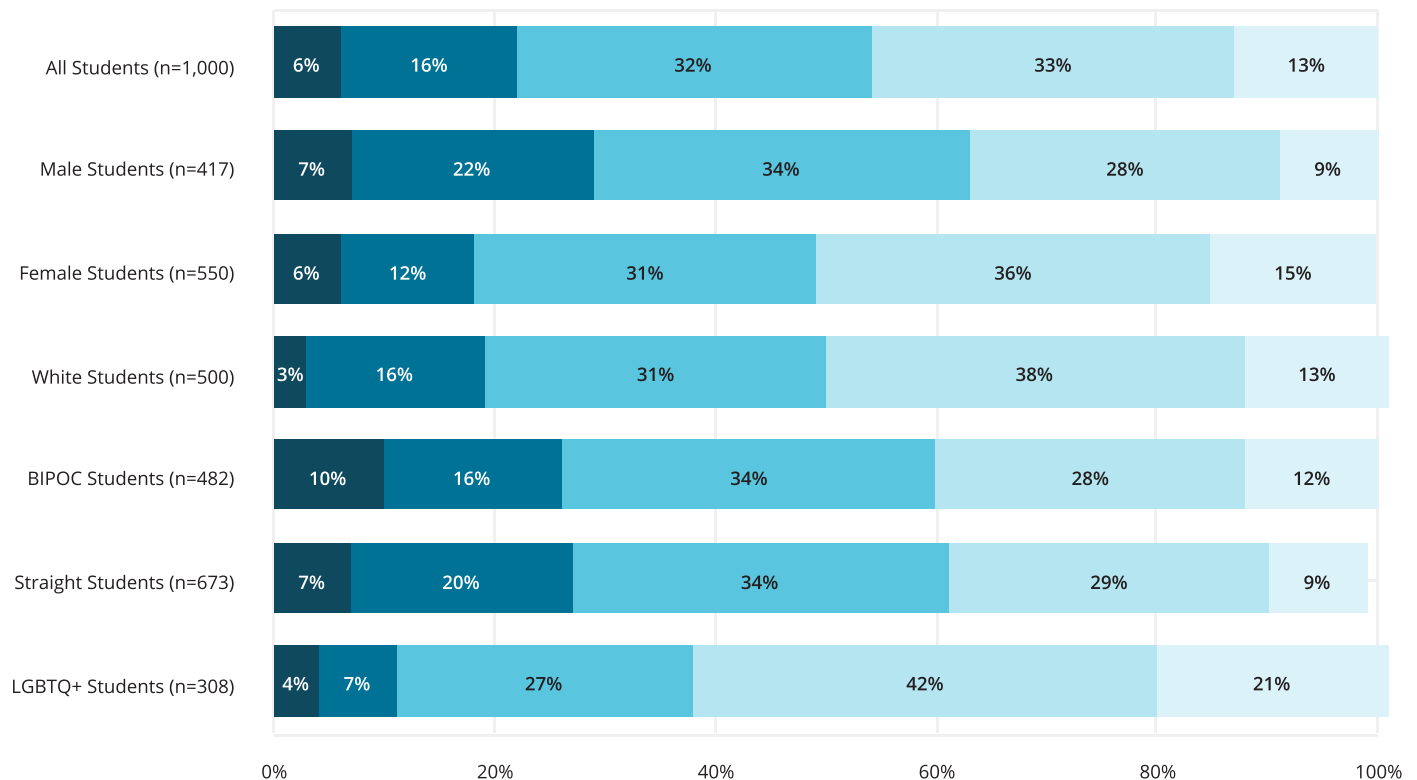
Student Mental Health and Wellness

We asked students to rate their current mental health status on a five-point scale from *poor* to *excellent*. Overall, one-third (33%) said their mental health was *fair*, while 46% said it was *fair* or *poor*. Less than one-quarter (22%) said their mental health was *very good* or *excellent*. There were a few differences when the ratings were viewed by sex/gender and race/ethnicity.

Students identifying as male were less likely than those identifying as female to say their mental health was *poor* or *fair* (37% vs. 51%), and 22% of male students said their mental health status was *very good* compared to 12% of female students. And while the overall number of students reporting *excellent* mental health was low, Black, Indigenous, and students of color (BIPOC) were more likely than white students to say this (10% vs. 3%), and white students were more likely than BIPOC students to report their mental health as *fair* or *poor* (51% vs. 40%). Additionally, LGBTQ+ students were more likely than straight students to report their mental health as *fair* or *poor* (63% vs. 38%).

How Would You Rate Your Current Mental Health?

■ Excellent
 ■ Very Good
 ■ Good
 ■ Fair
 ■ Poor



When presented with a list of symptoms related to mental health, many students indicated that they have experienced them extensively in the past year. The symptoms identified by a majority of the students surveyed include *stress* (66%), *anxiety* (54%), and *self-doubt* (50%). Other concerning symptoms were identified by large numbers of students, such as changes in sleep patterns (49%), *burnout* (47%), *decreased motivation* (47%), and *increased procrastination* (46%). One in five (20%) said they have had *thoughts of suicide*.

Have You Experienced Any of the Following Symptoms Most Days (i.e., More Days Than Not) in the Past Year? (n=1,000)

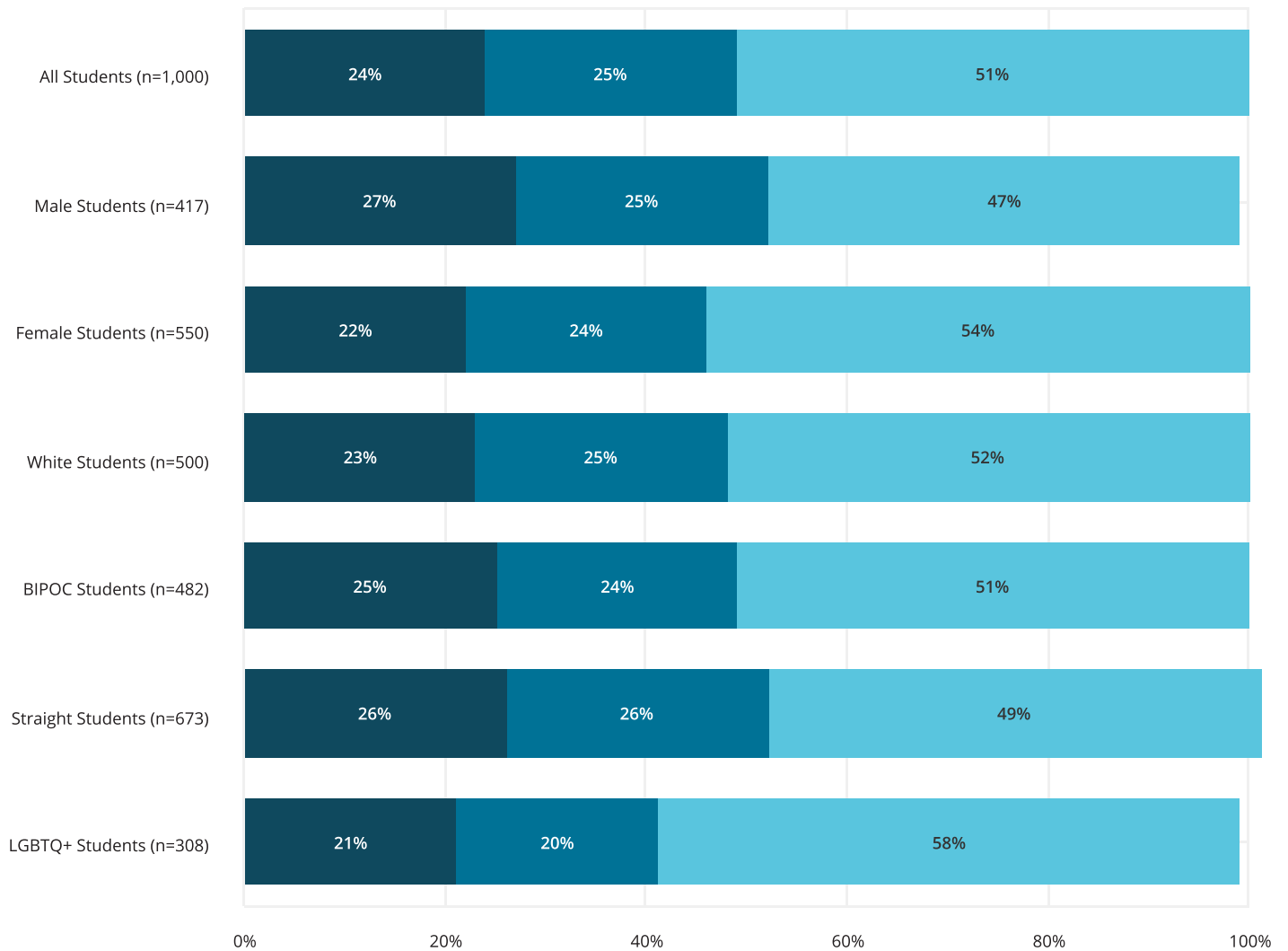
Stress	66%
Anxiety (i.e., feelings of worry, nervousness, or unease that seem uncontrollable or out of proportion to the event or situation and interfere with daily activities)	54%
Self-doubt	50%
Loss of sleep or increased/excessive need for sleep	49%
Decreased motivation/lack of focus/problems concentrating	47%
Burnout (i.e., chronic stress that results in any or all of the following: general negative mood towards school/work, decreased motivation, depleted energy, problems concentrating, procrastination or avoidance of tasks related to work/school)	47%
Increased procrastination	46%
Issues with school-life balance	44%
Disappointment or sadness	43%
Struggles with time management	42%
Problems with food or body image	41%
Social isolation and/or loneliness	40%
Depression (i.e., persistent low, sad, or somber mood and lack of motivation and/or interest in things that were pleasurable and that interferes with daily functioning)	39%
Irritability	37%
Decreased physical activity	37%
Hopelessness	34%
Relationship stressors	29%
Panic attacks	26%
Feelings of grief or loss	22%
Thoughts of suicide (i.e., thoughts of killing yourself that may or may not include a specific plan or intention to act on your thoughts)	20%
Unhealthy substance use	14%
Other	1%
I have not experienced any of these symptoms most days in the past year	8%

LGBTQ+ students were more likely than straight students to report experiencing symptoms in the past year. White students were more likely than BIPOC students to say they experienced many of the mental health symptoms presented in the survey, including *anxiety* (60% vs. 47%), *burnout* (58% vs. 37%), changes in sleep patterns (53% vs. 44%), and *decreased motivation* (52% vs. 42%). Similarly, female students were more likely to report experiencing most symptoms than male students.

When asked if their mental health has worsened since they became college students, a little more than half (51%) of all respondents agreed that it had. The percentages are similar across sex/gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation, although the highest percentage of agreement (58%) was among LGBTQ+ students.

My Mental Health Has Worsened Since I Have Been in School

Disagree
 Neither Agree nor Disagree
 Agree





BestColleges INSIGHT

College students are experiencing a wide variety of mental health symptoms.

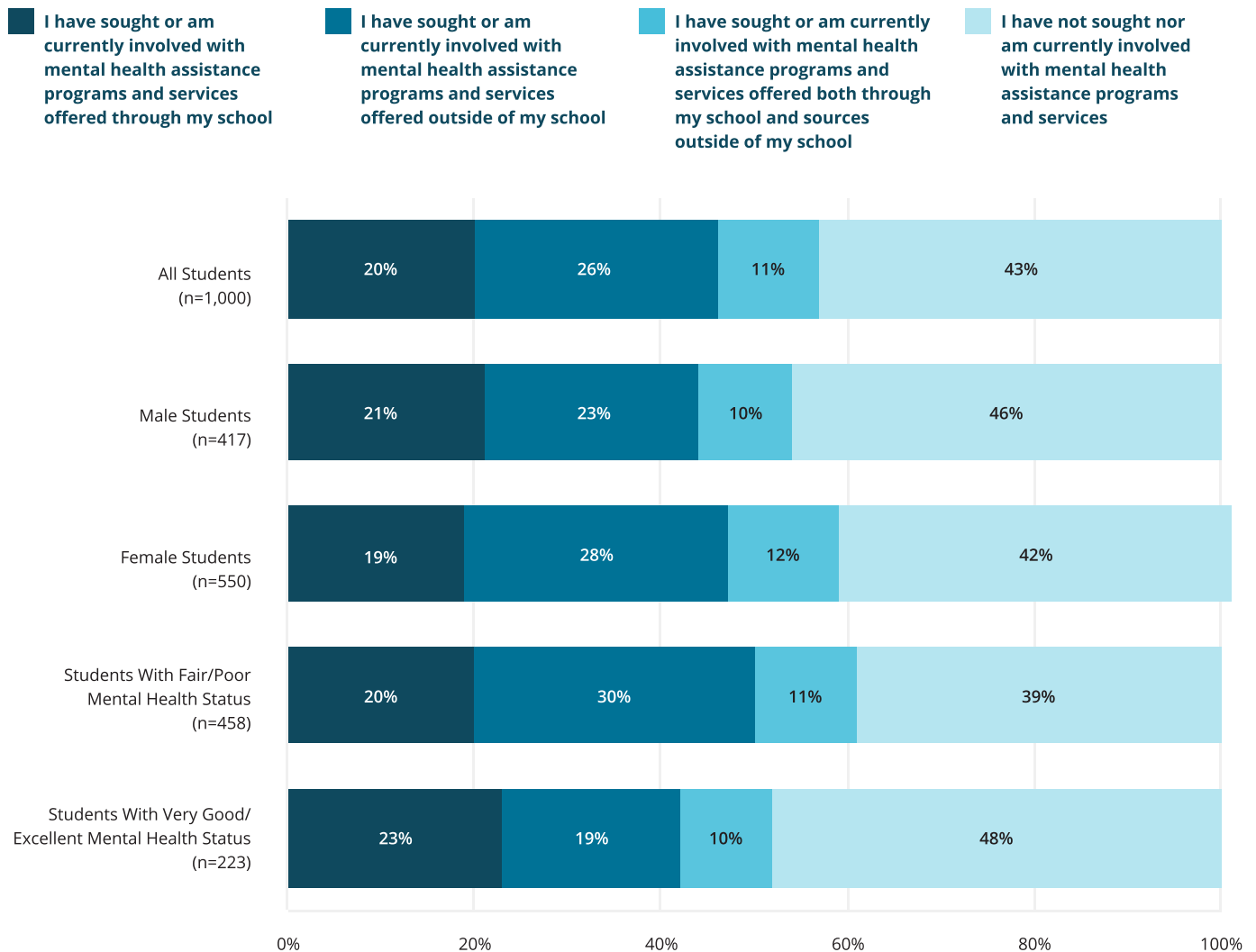
While some student demographics are more likely to identify specific symptoms, all student categories have indicated concerns. Colleges, universities, and other organizations that support college students should take a proactive stance in connecting students with support systems while also identifying and addressing the unique concerns of specific populations (e.g., LGBTQ+ students).

History of Mental Health Assistance

While many college students labeled their mental health status as *fair* or *poor*, the percentage of students who have sought or are currently involved with mental health assistance programs and services is low. Another recent BestColleges report shared that while 60% of college students felt comfortable assisting others with their mental health, only 42% were comfortable seeking help for themselves (Bryant, 2022).

Less than half (43%) of all students surveyed have not engaged in mental health assistance programs and services of any kind, and only one in five (20%) have engaged with mental health assistance programs and services offered through their school. Of those students rating their mental health status as *fair* or *poor*, only 20% have sought assistance through their school.

Student History of Receiving Mental Health Assistance





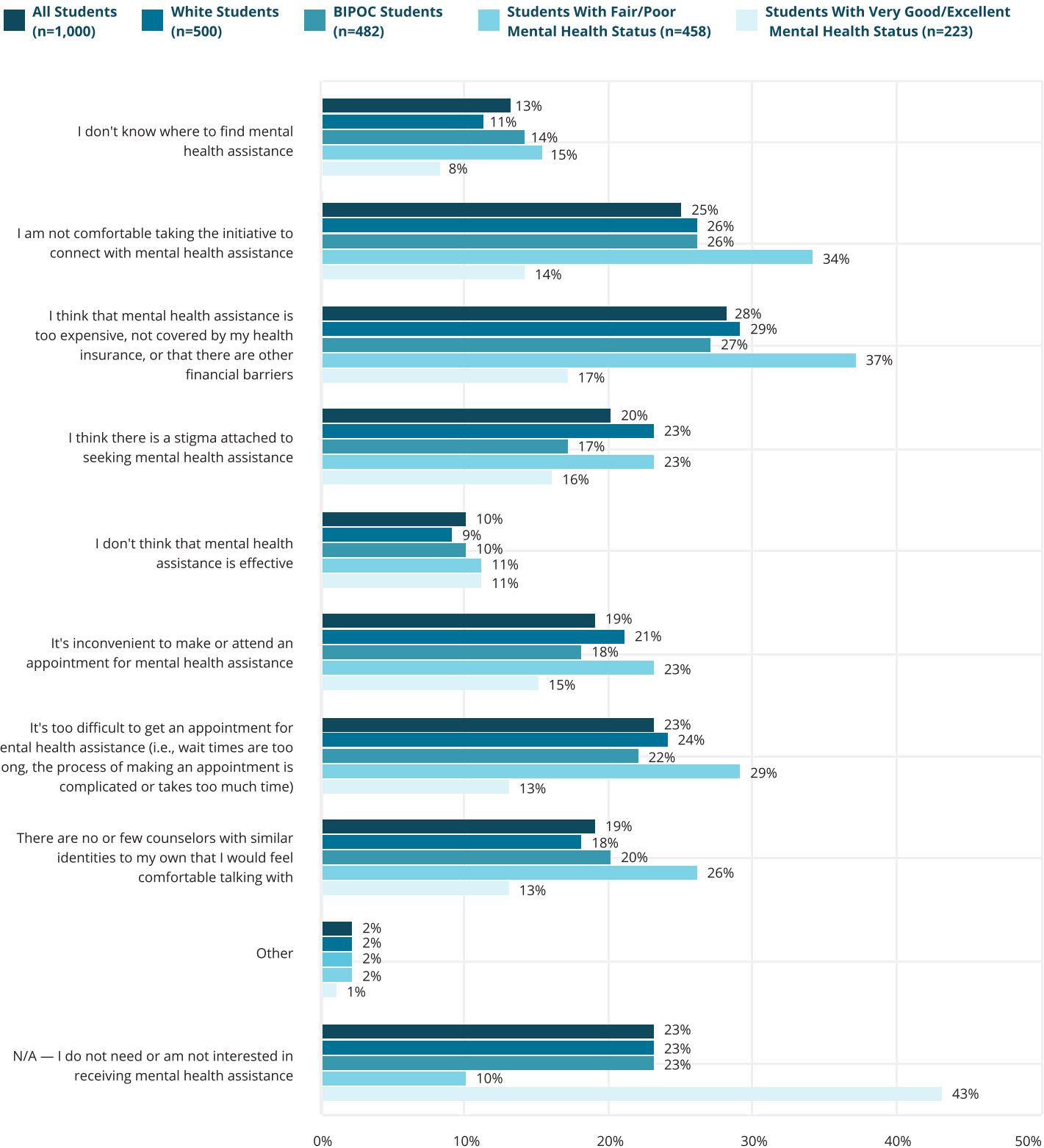
Barriers to Seeking Assistance

Students identified the biggest barriers to getting mental health assistance as finances (28%), discomfort with taking the initiative to find support (25%), and difficulty making an appointment (23%). One in five (20%) also reported stigma attached to seeking mental health assistance as a barrier for them. Almost a quarter (23%) of college students said they do not need or are not interested in receiving mental health assistance.

There were no significant differences in perceived barriers according to the sex/gender of respondents. However, when we review the results by race/ethnicity, more white students than BIPOC students said there was a stigma attached to seeking mental health assistance (23% vs. 17%).

Of those students rating their mental health status as *fair* or *poor*, 37% thought that *mental health assistance is too expensive, not covered by health insurance, or that there are other financial barriers* to seeking help. Thirty-four percent were *not comfortable taking the initiative to connect with mental health assistance*. Other barriers for these students were related to difficulty of making an appointment (29%) and lack of representation among counselors (26%). Only 10% of students rating their mental health as *fair* or *poor* said they didn't need or were not interested in receiving assistance.

Barriers Preventing College Students From Seeking Mental Health Assistance





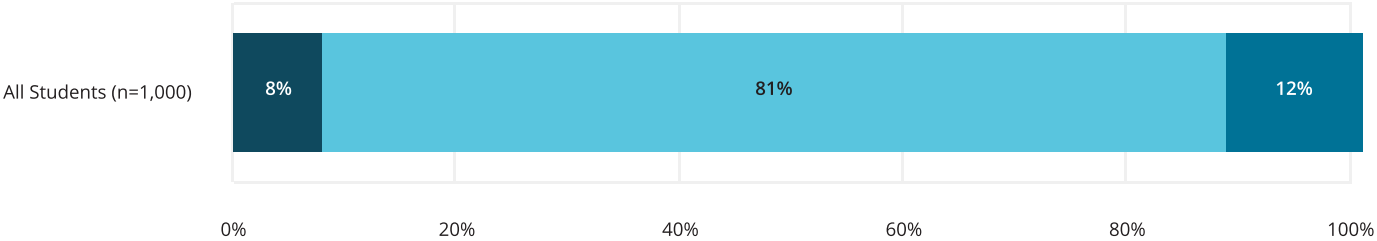
School-Sponsored Mental Health Support Services

Awareness of School Support

The vast majority (81%) of students responding to this study said they were aware that their college or university provides mental health assistance programs and services. Twelve percent of student respondents weren't sure.

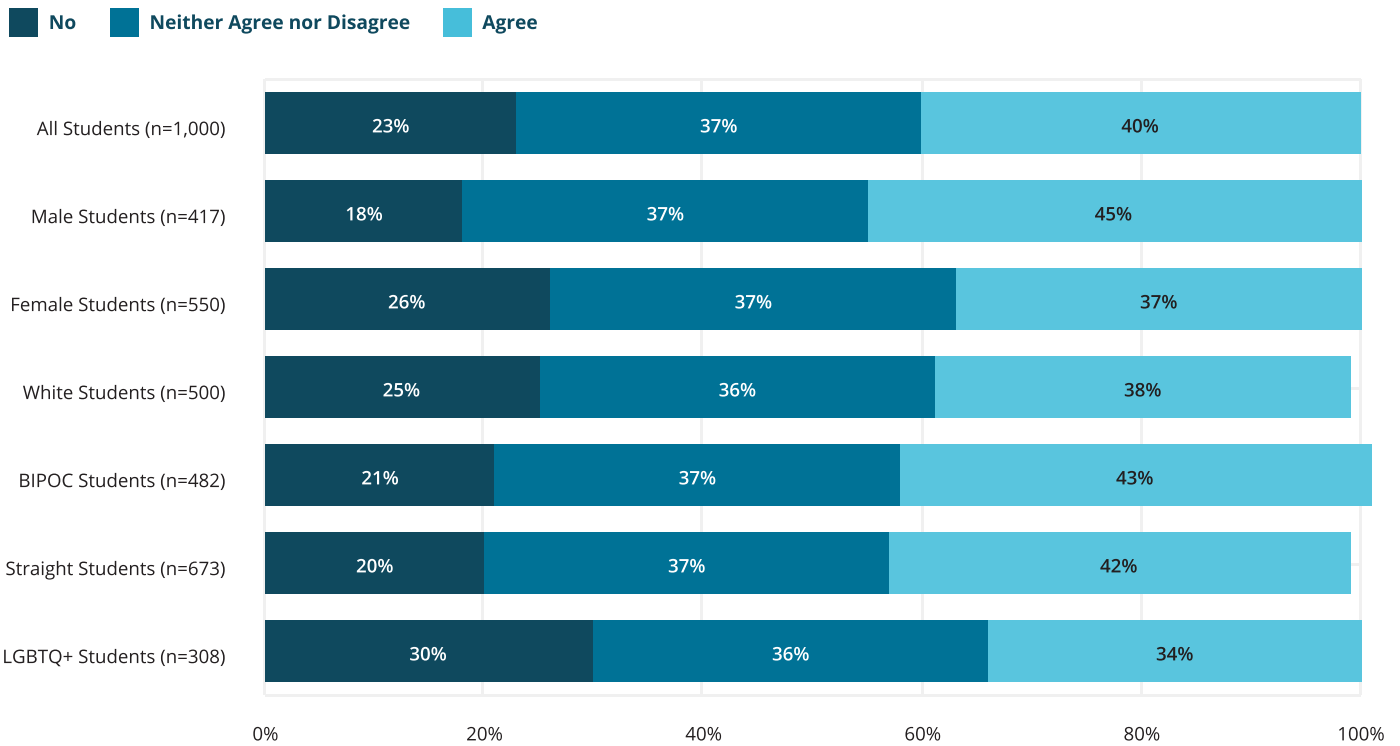
Does Your School Provide Mental Health Assistance Programs and Services?

■ No ■ Yes ■ Not Sure



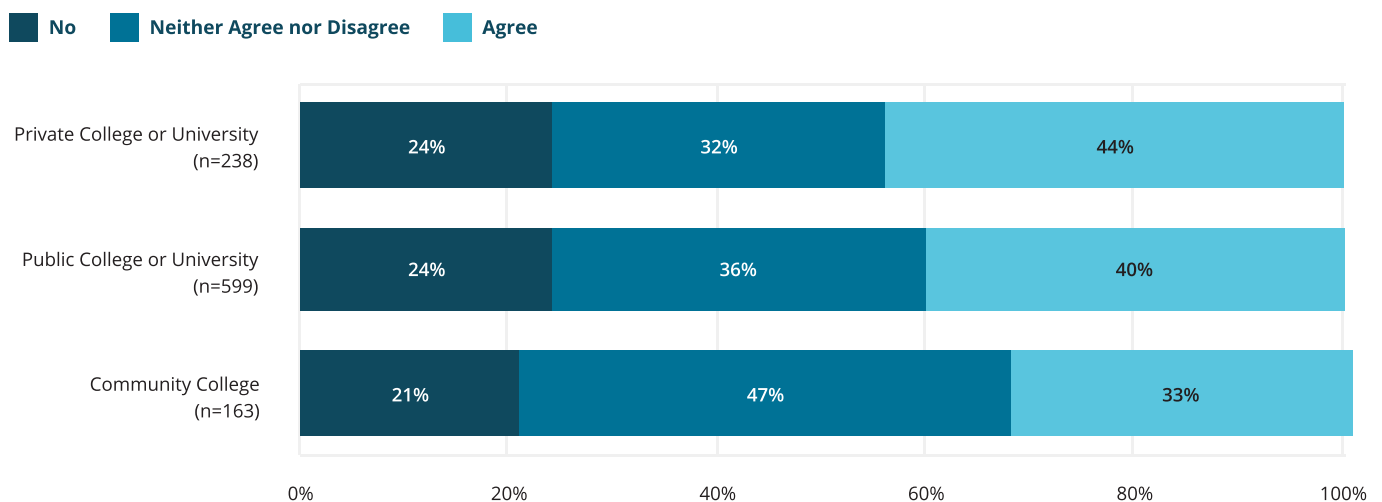
There's not a clear consensus on whether these students think their schools are doing enough to support their mental health needs. Male students were the group most likely to agree (45%) that their school is doing enough, while LGBTQ+ students were the least likely to agree (34%).

My School/Institution Is Doing Enough to Support Student Mental Health



Respondents who attended private colleges and universities (44%) were more likely than those enrolled at public institutions (40%) or community colleges (33%) to say their school is doing enough to support student mental health.

My School/Institution Is Doing Enough to Support Student Mental Health





BestColleges INSIGHT

There is a role for mental health services and assistance in wellness as well as in crisis.

Most students seem to see value in seeking this kind of assistance if it's needed, with only 10% of all respondents indicating that they don't think mental health assistance is effective. Those reporting their mental health status as *very good* or *excellent* are least likely to report barriers to seeking mental health assistance, but they also state that they don't need the services. And those that seem to need the most support are not accessing the help available to them. Services and programs supporting student mental health should address perceived barriers in their outreach efforts to students.

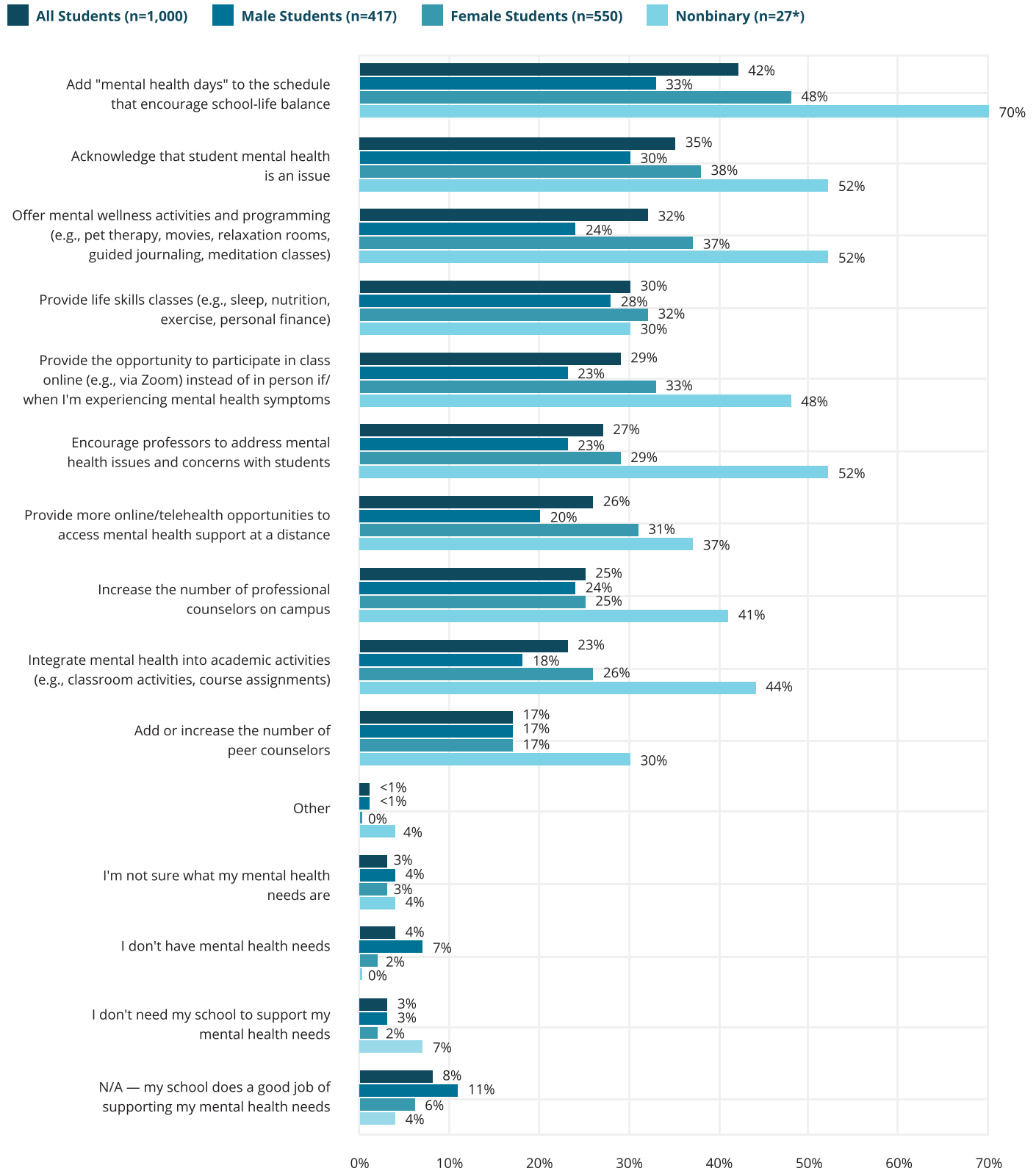


Student Needs and Preferences

Students want their schools to support their mental health. When asked, *What can your school do to better support your mental health needs?* respondents identified *adding mental health days to the schedule that encourage school-life balance* (42%), *communicating institutional acknowledgment of student mental health needs* (35%), *offering mental wellness activities and programming* (32%), and *providing life skills classes* (30%) as their top suggestions. Additionally, 29% said they would like the option to attend class online when they are experiencing mental health symptoms. Only 3% of students said, *I don't need my school to support my mental health needs.*

Female students were more likely than male students to select many of the program and service options presented in the survey. While the number of nonbinary students participating in the survey is too small to make generalizations, this population should be the subject of further research as they indicated a desire for support options in greater percentages than other demographics.

Support That Students Want From Their Institutions



*Small sample size.



BestColleges INSIGHT

Meet students where they are with mental health assistance.

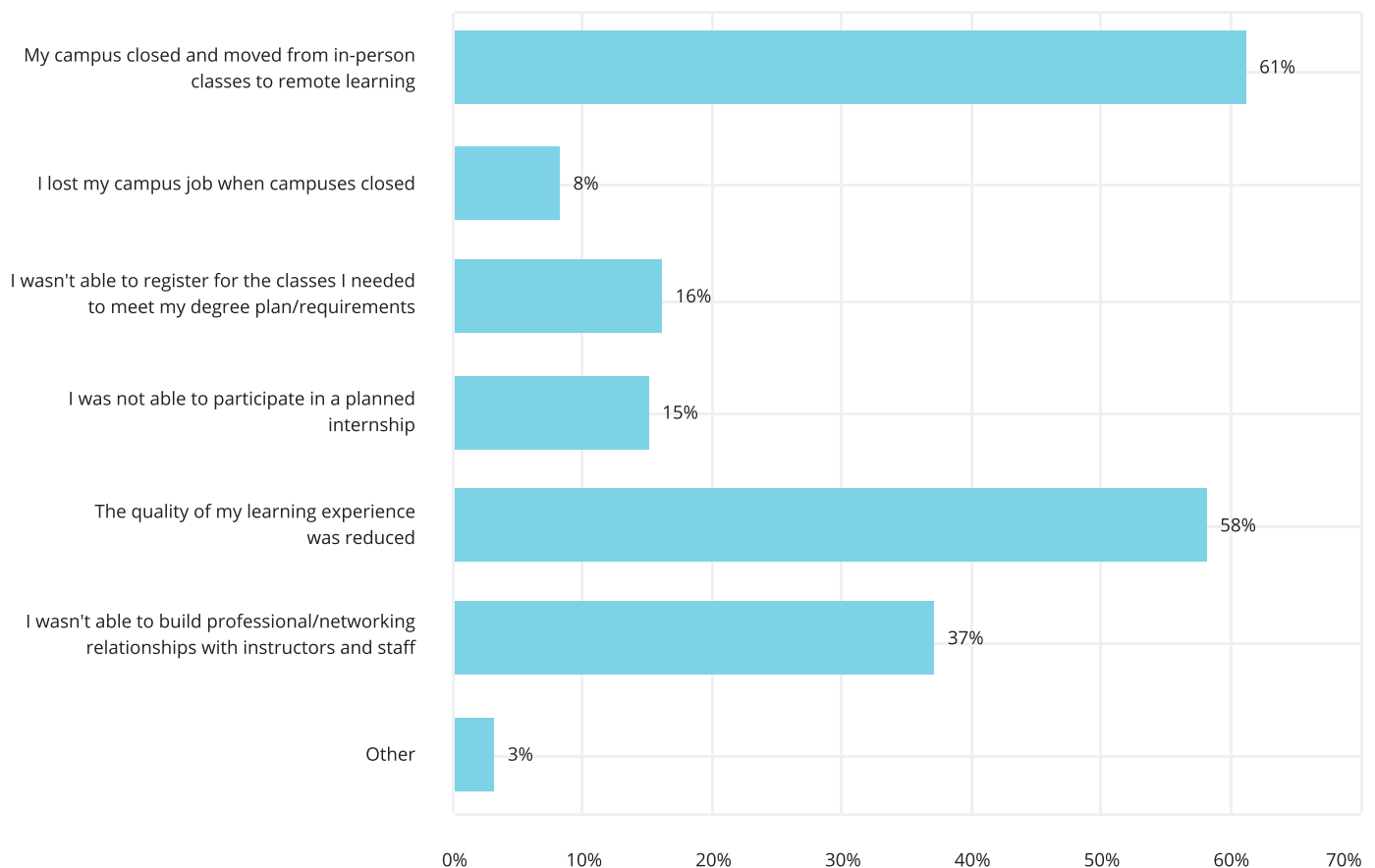
This report presents a call to action for schools and other organizations working with college students to take a proactive stance in the prevention and treatment of mental health symptoms. Support could include taking an active role in providing services, removing barriers to those services, and encouraging students to advocate for their own mental health needs. College students are open to the integration of wellness programs and activities with their academic and student life activities. Institutional acknowledgement of the importance of student mental health, changes to the academic schedule that allow for flexibility, and expanded programs options that reach students not only in class but also in social and student life contexts are all opportunities to support their mental health.

Continuing Impact of COVID-19

The effects of the coronavirus pandemic on college students continue. It's likely that many of our survey respondents entered college during the pandemic. Sixty-six percent shared that their education has been impacted or disrupted by the pandemic, including 61% who experienced campus closures. These impacts could exacerbate mental health conditions. Students reported specific impacts related to a reduced quality of learning (58%) and difficulty connecting with college faculty and staff (37%).

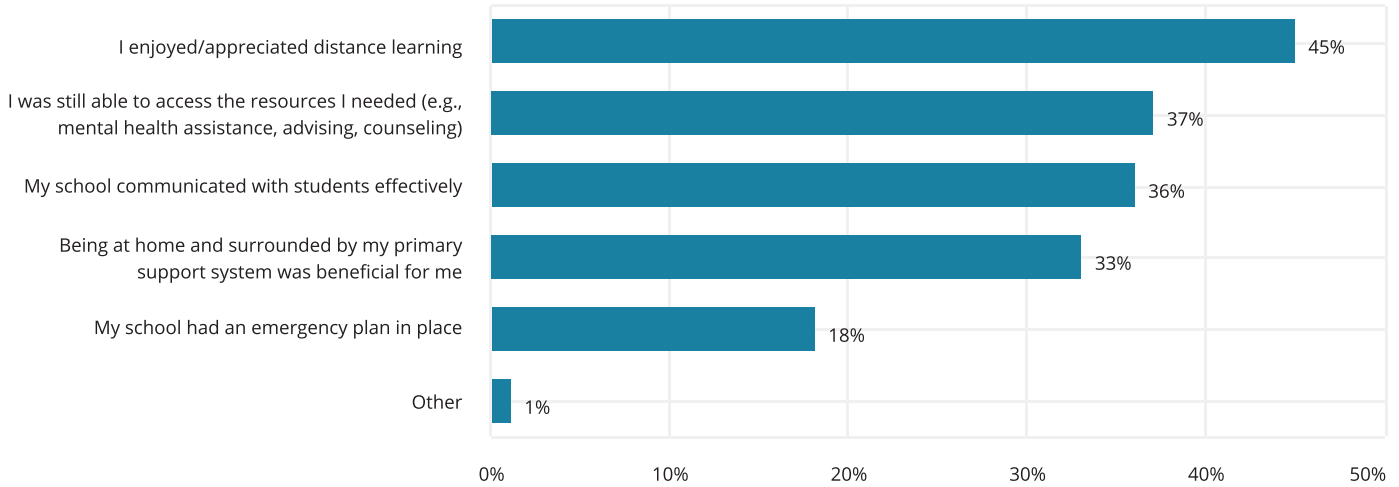
How Has Your Education Been Impacted or Disrupted by the Coronavirus Pandemic?

All Students (n=664)



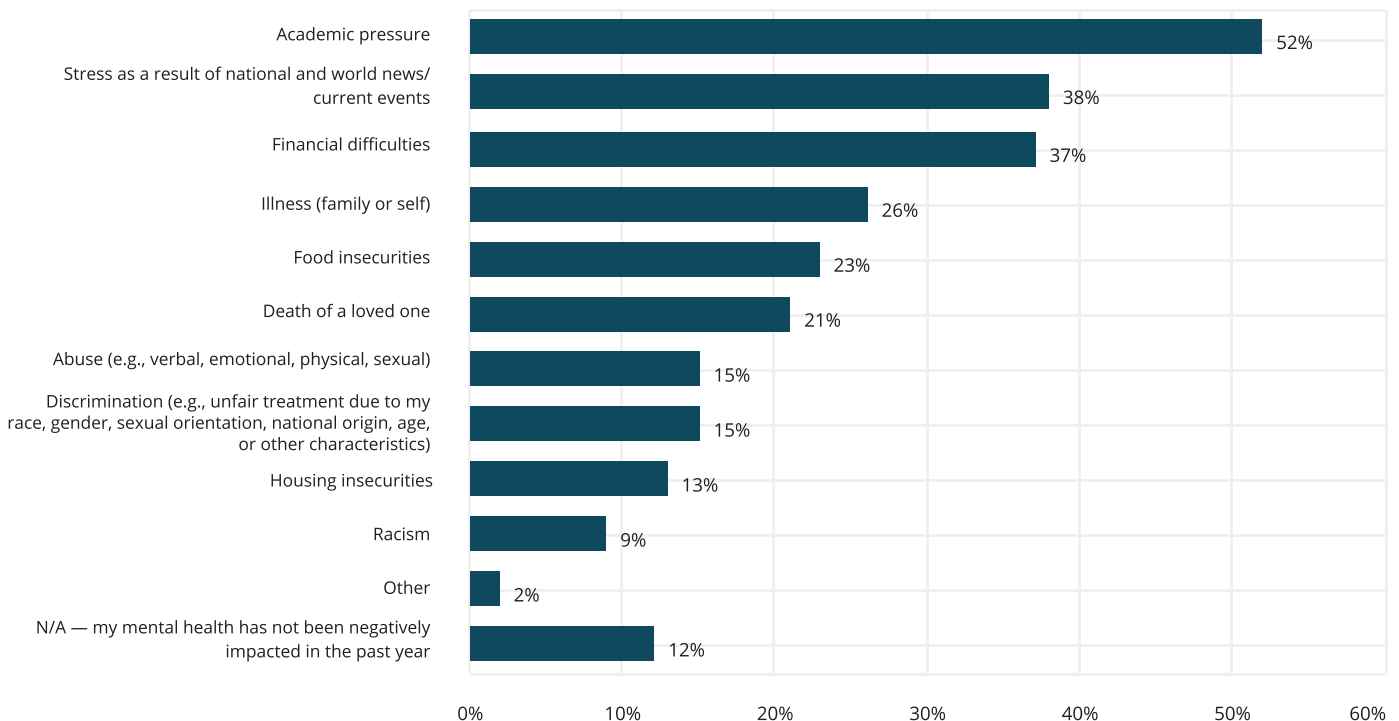
Only 27% of respondents said that their college experience had not been impacted by the pandemic. This group also shared that they enjoyed or appreciated the opportunity to learn at a distance (45%), were able to access the resources they needed during this period of disruption (37%), and that their institutions communicated with them effectively (36%).

What Factors Do You Think Contributed to Your Education Not Being Impacted or Disrupted by the Coronavirus Pandemic? All Students (n=272)



College students are also experiencing many life events and stressors while they are managing coursework and other school-related responsibilities. The biggest stressor negatively impacting student mental health was reported to be academic pressure (52%), followed by current events (38%) and financial difficulties (37%). In addition, more than 1 in 5 college students (21%) dealt with the death of a loved one in the past year.

Events and Concerns College Students Experienced in the Past Year That Negatively Impacted Their Mental Health All Students (n=1,000)



Conclusion and Recommendations

College students between the ages of 18-26 are likely to experience a lot of stress and uncertainty as they come of age and make big decisions about their lives and careers in a setting that includes pressure to succeed academically. For today's students, these concerns have been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Groups and individuals supporting these students should initiate conversations that encourage open discussions about mental health and normalize seeking assistance.

Insights from this study provide a starting point for institutional leaders as they plan for the future.

College students are experiencing a wide variety of mental health symptoms.

While some student demographics are more likely to identify specific symptoms, all student categories have indicated concerns. Colleges, universities, and other organizations that support college students should take a proactive stance in connecting students with support systems while also identifying and addressing the unique concerns of specific populations (e.g., LGBTQ+ students).

There is a role for mental health services and assistance in wellness as well as in crisis.

Most students seem to see value in seeking this kind of assistance if it's needed, with only 10% of all respondents indicating that they don't think mental health assistance is effective. Those reporting their mental health status as *very good* or *excellent* are least likely to report barriers to seeking mental health assistance, but they also state that they don't need the services. And those that seem to need the most support are not accessing the help available to them. Services and programs supporting student mental health should address perceived barriers in their outreach efforts to students.

Meet students where they are with mental health assistance.

This report presents a call to action for schools and other organizations working with college students to take a proactive stance in the prevention and treatment of mental health symptoms. Support could include taking an active role in providing services, removing barriers to those services, and encouraging students to advocate for their own mental health needs. College students are open to the integration of wellness programs and activities with their academic and student life activities. Institutional acknowledgement of the importance of student mental health, changes to the academic schedule that allow for flexibility, and expanded programs options that reach students not only in class but also in social and student life contexts are all opportunities to support their mental health.

Contributors

About Melissa Venable

Melissa A. Venable, Ph.D., is an education advisor for BestColleges. In this role, she leads this annual survey research project reporting higher education trends found through student and school administrator feedback. Melissa is an adjunct faculty member and online course designer at Saint Leo University and a certified career coach with a background in career development services. She earned her doctorate in instructional technology at the University of South Florida where her research interests focused on distance education and support services for online students.

About Megan Pietrucha

Megan Pietrucha, Psy.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist who currently practices in the Chicago area. She holds a bachelor's in psychology from Illinois Wesleyan University and a master's and doctorate in clinical psychology from the Illinois School of Professional Psychology at Argosy University. Her clinical interests include the treatment of eating and body image concerns, college student and student-athlete mental health, mood disorders, health and wellness, mindfulness, sport and performance psychology, and consultation.

In addition to her clinical work, Dr. Pietrucha has served as the training director for an APA-accredited internship program and has taught undergraduate and graduate courses in psychology. She has also worked with high school and college athletes and teams, as well as recreational fitness programs, to provide mental skills training for athletic performance and fitness adherence.

About BestColleges

BestColleges empowers students to make smarter educational decisions and find schools that best fit their needs through proprietary research, user-friendly guides, and hundreds of unique college rankings. As a trusted education advisor, BestColleges also provides a wide array of college planning, financial aid, and career resources to help students realize life goals and overcome educational challenges as they prepare for careers after college.



Data Notes

1. Percentages reported in this document have been rounded, resulting in some totals adding up to just under or over 100%.
2. Several charts and descriptions present results for questions in which survey respondents could select more than one response.
3. Data were self-reported.

References

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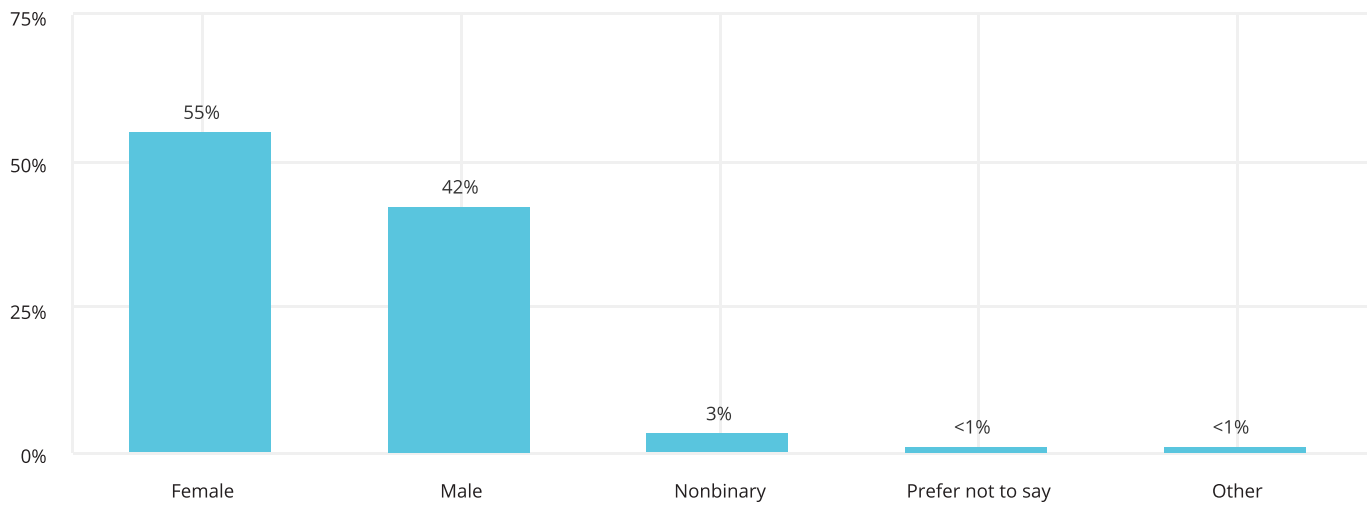
Appendix

Respondent Demographics

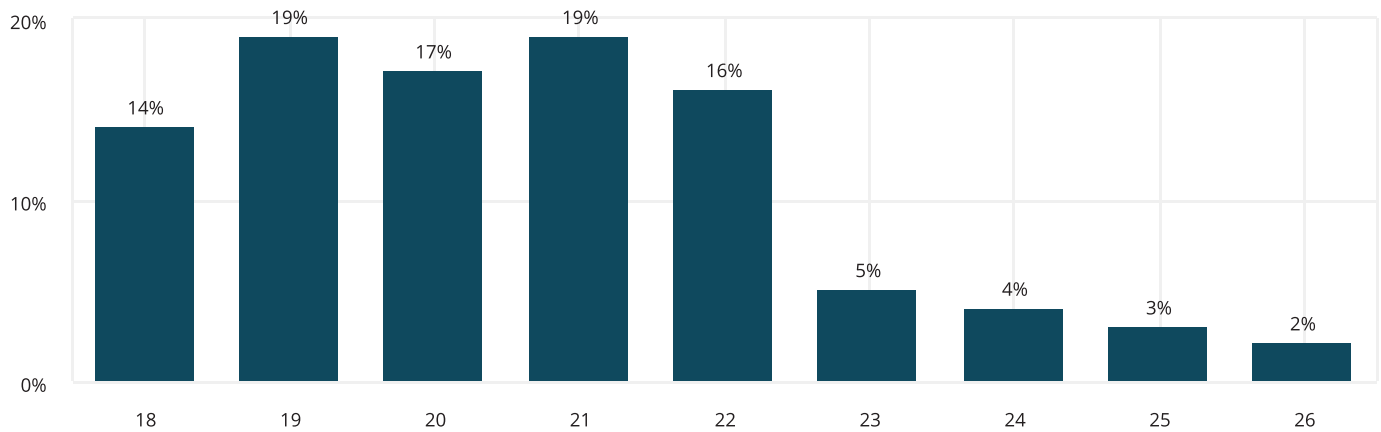
Data Collection — GLG/Lucid LLC

n=1,000

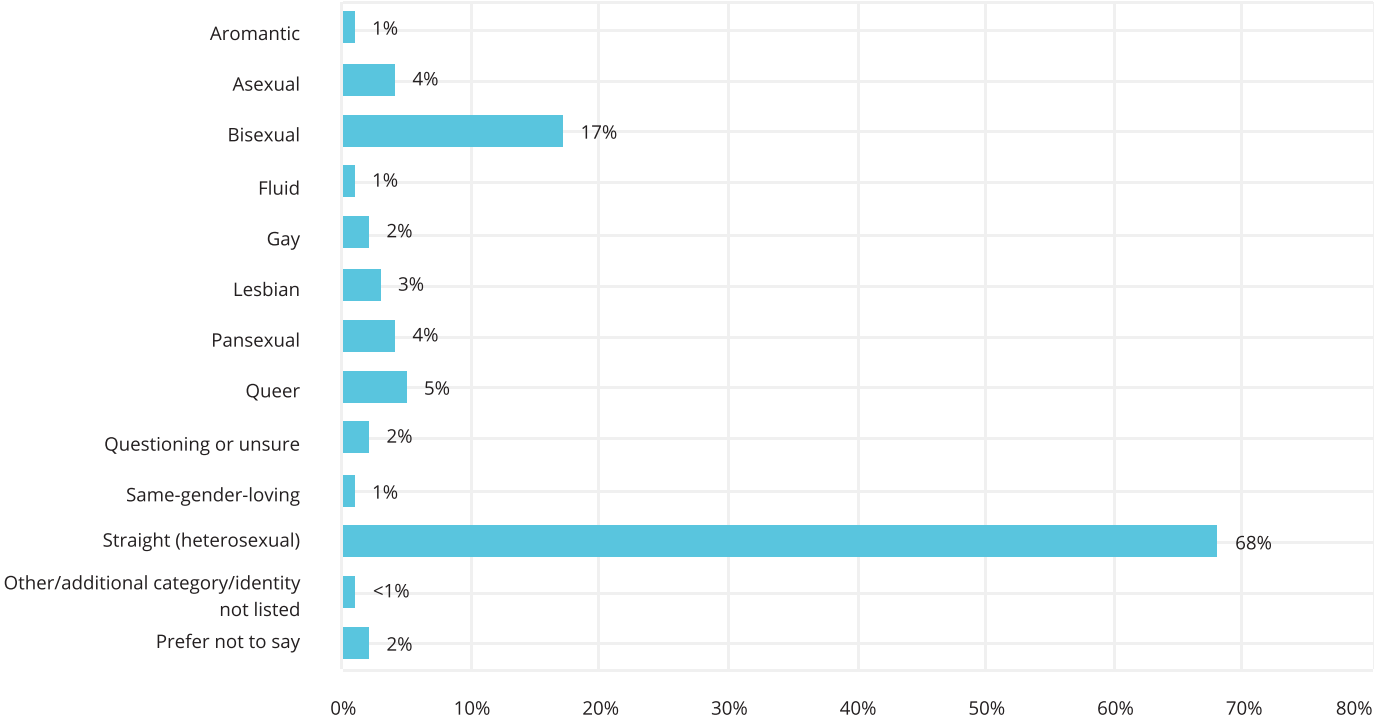
Sex/Gender Identification (n=1,000)



Age (n=1,000)

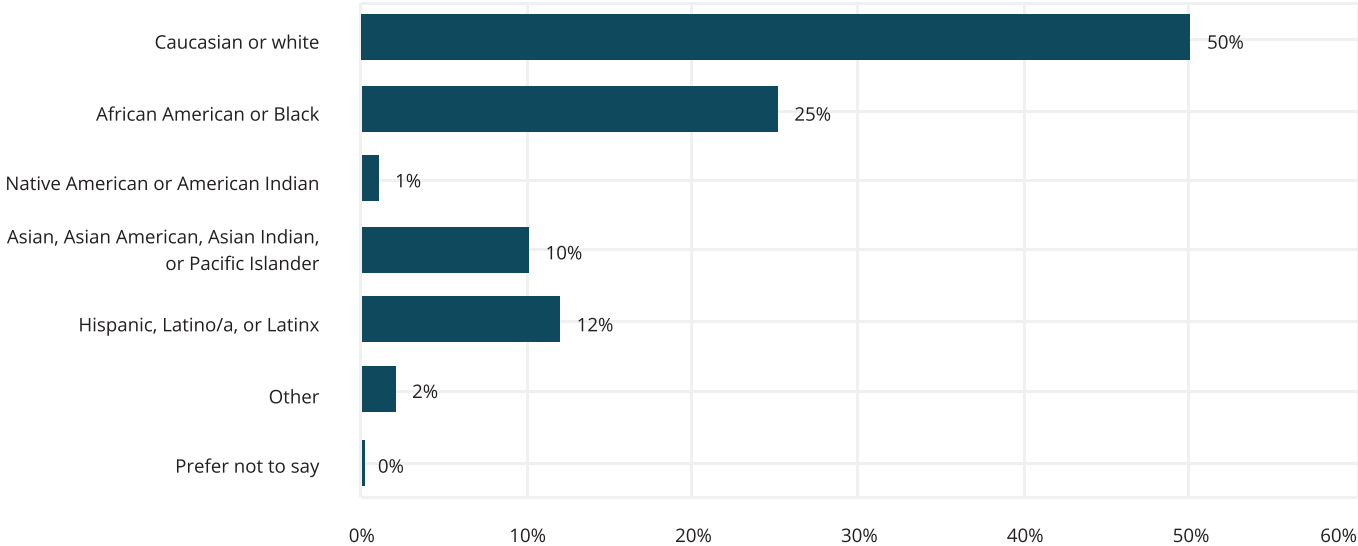


Sexual Orientation (n=1,000)*

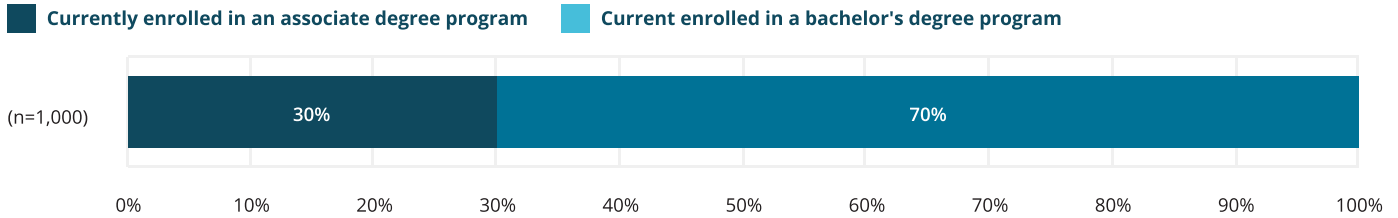


*Respondents were allowed to select more than one response.

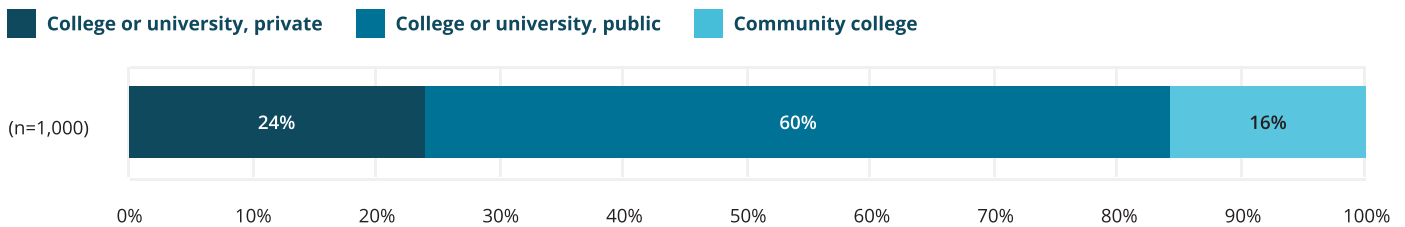
Racial or Ethnic Background (n=1,000)



Enrollment Status



Type of Institution



Additional Mental Health Resources

Speak Out: A New Era of Student Mental Health Equity and Support. BestColleges.com.

<https://www.bestcolleges.com/resources/mental-health/>

Mental Health in College. National Alliance on Mental Illness.

<https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Kids-Teens-and-Young-Adults/Young-Adults/Mental-Health-in-College>

Find a Support Group. American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

<https://afsp.org/find-a-support-group/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

1-800-273-8255

Mental Health Resource Center. The Jed Foundation.

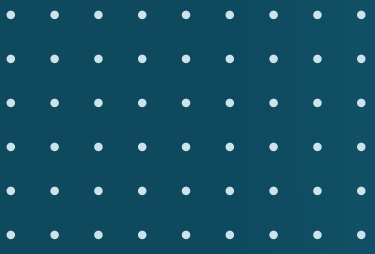
<https://jedfoundation.org/mental-health-resource-center/>

Change the Conversation About Mental Health. Active Minds.

<https://www.activeminds.org/>





ULifeline.

<http://www.ulifeline.org/>



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<https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/college-student-mental-health/>