



EAB

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Make-or-Break Year

Four Things We Learned from 1,500 First-Year Community College Students

Students are most likely to drop out during their first year on campus; therefore, ensuring they receive thoughtful support early and often should be a top priority for all college leaders. Starting college can be overwhelming, and common academic, financial, and personal challenges can make it hard to stay on track. Standard best-practice processes such as clear communication, helpful advising, access to financial aid and basic needs, and opportunities to get involved on campus all make a difference in helping students succeed.

This is especially important for community colleges, where about 32% of first-time, full-time students [leave school before their second year](#); the drop-out rate is even higher for part-time students at 55%. Intentional strategy around the first-year experience ensures more students stay enrolled, graduate, and reach their goals.

EAB surveyed more than 1,500 first-year community college students to learn more about their experiences and the challenges they encountered. The findings can help colleges adjust recruitment strategies, strengthen support services, and improve communication to better provide what today's students want and need.

Here are four key things
you need to know about
what your first-year students
are experiencing.

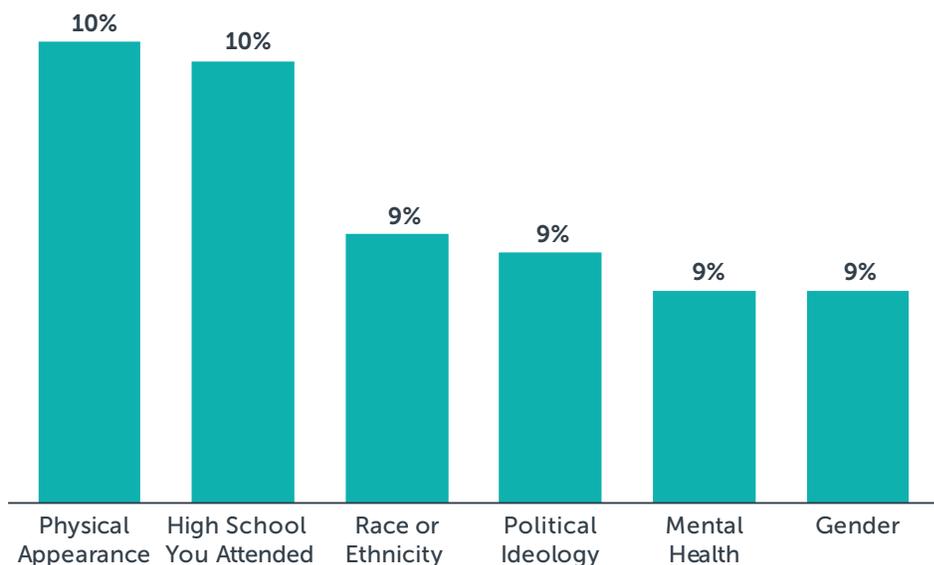
Bias Is a Common Part of the **Student Experience**

1

Students were asked whether they had experienced bias or exclusion on campus. We know that a sense of belonging is an important part of keeping students enrolled, especially for those still adjusting to the new environment. **Thirty-two percent of students said they had experienced bias or exclusion**; with physical appearance and the high school they attended being the most common reasons.

Since starting college, have you ever felt targeted, criticized, or excluded for any of the following reasons?

(n=1,531, Top Six Responses)



How colleges should respond: Create mechanisms that equip a student to report harassment, model a culture that promotes representation, and offer easy ways for students to access mental health support.

How EAB can help: [Navigate360's Hand-Raise feature makes it easy for students to ask for help right from their phones](#)—allowing them to virtually signal when something doesn't feel right. In addition, EAB's survey and polling tools help colleges regularly check in on student belonging across campus and quickly connect students who feel excluded or marginalized with timely support and resources. These tools can also highlight the most common types of bias, helping colleges identify which aspects of campus culture need the most attention.

Learn how to boost student engagement
with easy polling and survey tools

Students Are Seeking Friendships and a Place to Belong

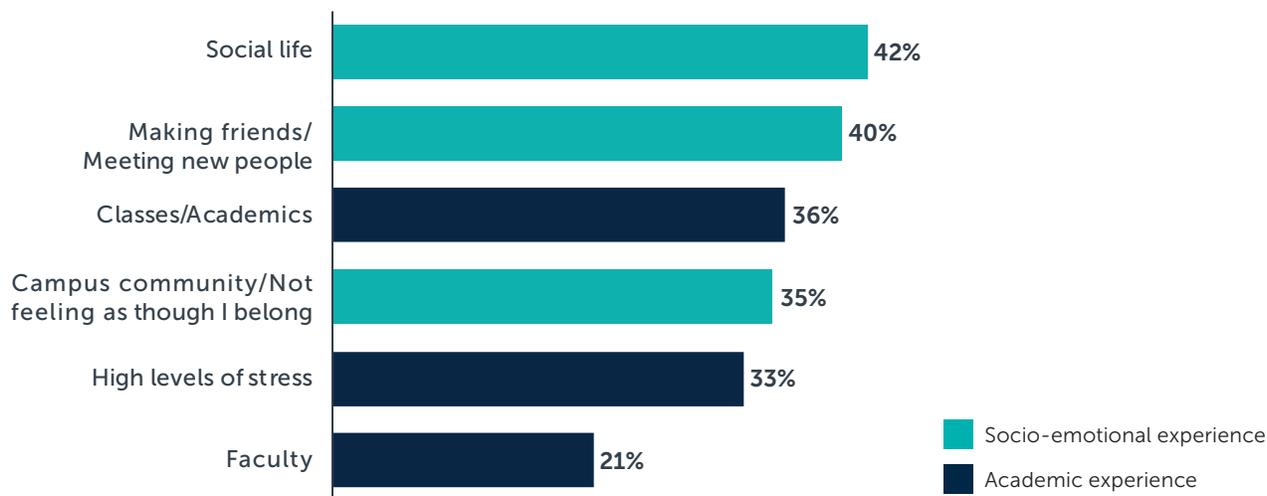
2

Many students felt let down by their social experience in their first year. **Forty percent said not making friends was one of their biggest disappointments, 42% were unhappy with their social life, and 35% said they didn't feel like they belonged.**

But when students did form strong connections, it made a big difference. One-third said making new friends was one of the most satisfying parts of their first year—ranking even higher than meeting with faculty or advisors. Other highly ranked responses included not feeling too stressed out and finding their coursework manageable. These results show that friendships, stress management, and a sense of belonging matter a lot to students, and colleges need to create more ways for them to build those connections.

What has been most disappointing about your college experience to date? (Select all that apply.)

n=1,531, Top Six Responses



How colleges should respond: Help students who are struggling to make friends by creating more casual, small-scale ways for them to meet people, including drop-in events, hobby groups, or peer mentorship programs. Colleges can also make clubs easier to join by offering flexible meeting times, sharing clear details in their student mobile app, and offering virtual meetings if possible.

How EAB can help: Navigate360 makes it easy to track in-person event attendance and send event communications at scale. The [AI content creation agent](#) makes it easy to personalize invitations to clubs and activities at scale, increasing the likelihood that students attend and benefit from events, extracurriculars, and other social opportunities.

[Read more](#) about how to tackle the growing student loneliness epidemic

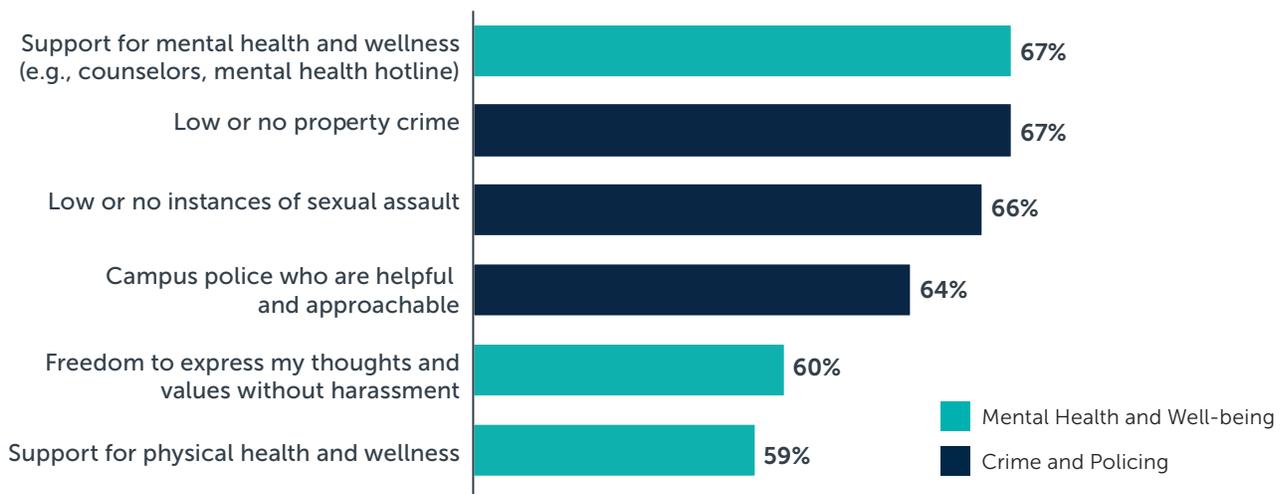
Mental Health Tops Students' Safety Priorities

3

Creating a safe campus environment is essential to helping students feel secure, supported, and able to focus on their goals. When students think about their expectations for campus safety, mental health support tops the list—even outranking concerns about past incidents of gun violence or the presence of approachable campus police. Two-thirds of students include access to mental health supports, such as counselors, in their definition of a “safe” campus.

What does a safe campus environment mean to you?

(n=1,531, Top Six Responses)



How colleges should respond: To support the rising mental health needs of students, colleges can take a more proactive and flexible approach. This includes using a [stepped care model that connects students to the right level of help based on their needs](#), along with tools such as early alerts, check-in surveys, and coordinated care systems to spot concerns early and quickly provide support for students.

How EAB can help: [Navigate360 early alerts](#) help colleges identify students who may be facing challenges, including mental health concerns. When faculty or staff notice issues such as missed classes or changes in behavior, they can flag them so that support teams can be automatically assigned to follow up early and connect students with the appropriate resources.

[Blog: 4 ways to bridge the gap in your student mental health services](#)

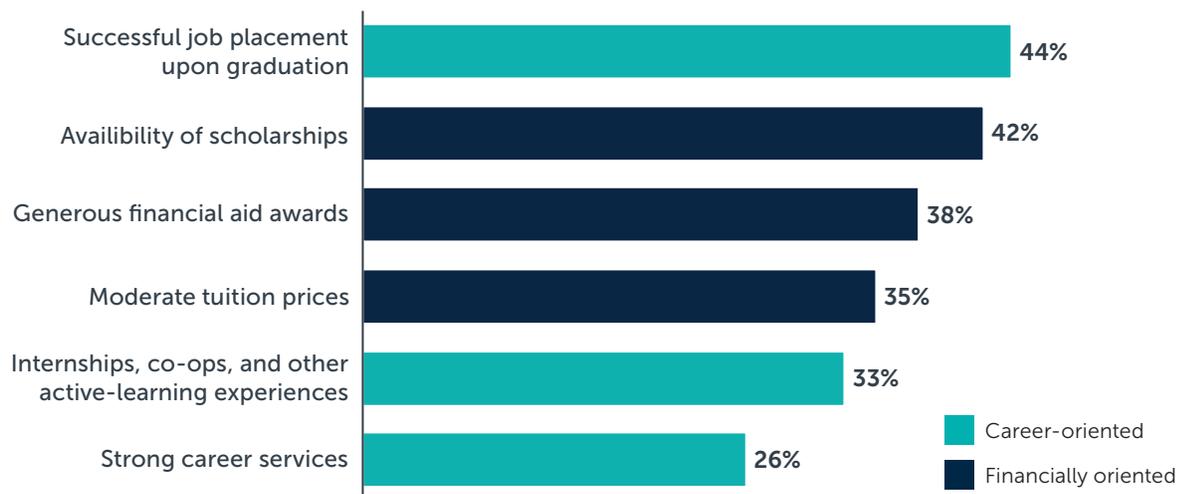
Students Are More **Career-Driven** than You Might Realize

4

When first-year students were asked what they saw as the greatest value their education could offer, and what benefits colleges could provide, their answers focused on future careers just as much as affordability. Forty-four percent said successful job placement represented strong value, placing it ahead of affordable tuition and generous financial aid. Another 33% of students pointed to active learning opportunities such as internships and co-ops.

What characteristics would you say best represent the value of higher education?

(Select up to five, n=1,531, Top Six Responses)



How colleges should respond: Community colleges can help career-focused students by clearly showing how their classes connect to real jobs and by offering hands-on experiences such as internships or job shadowing. Working with local employers and using career tools can help students find opportunities and get the experience they need to start their careers.

How EAB can help: Navigate360's communication campaigns can [help promote career preparation activities](#), while tools such as [Forge](#) offer virtual job simulations that students can access from home to explore the day-to-day tasks of different careers.

[Read more](#) about how community colleges can deliver on career readiness

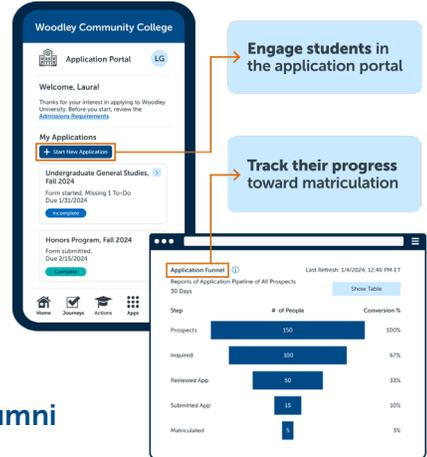
Navigate360 Advantage for Community Colleges



The Only CRM with Built-In Research, Insights, and Leads

Navigate360 Advantage for Community Colleges is a **comprehensive enrollment growth solution** built on a decade of best-practice research and **trusted by more than 450 community and technical colleges nationwide**. It integrates the leading higher education CRM, Navigate360, with expert guidance, access to a collaborative network of peer institutions, and high-intent student leads on day one.

More than a CRM: A Partnership Designed Specifically for Community Colleges



Navigate360 CRM: Recruit, Retain, and Engage Students and Alumni

- A suite of built-in AI agents saves your staff time and supports students 24/7
- Automated workflows as well as templated and custom reports
- Communication tools and mobile apps to engage students



Ready-for-Outreach Prospects

- Navigate360 Advantage comes equipped with Appily Leads, specific to your institution and region
- Backed by predictive AI, making them more likely to convert from inquiry to enrolled
- Robust information about students' goals and interests, helping you tailor communications



Enrollment Insights

- Strategic enrollment planning, guided by your EAB team
- "Secret Shopper" audit to understand barriers in the enrollment process
- Gain clarity on market forces shaping enrollment with the EAB Enrollment Outlook report and peer benchmarks



Expert Guidance and Research

- Dedicated EAB team to guide you through your biggest challenges
- Best-practice templates, campaigns, surveys, and more



Nationwide Collaborative

- Learn and share best practices, research insights, and actionable strategies
- Annual CONNECTED conference and ongoing community forums

\$728K

Additional tuition revenue generated from a Navigate360 reenrollment campaign

PORTLAND
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

14.5%

Increase in applicant-to-enrollee conversion rate after launching Navigate360

GERMANNA
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

\$8.8M

Tuition revenue from 1,680 students enrolled via Navigate360 in two years

CENTRAL VIRGINIA
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

To learn more about Navigate360 for Community Colleges and [request a demo](#), visit our website.

Bibliography

1. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2025, June 26). Persistence and retention: Fall 2023 beginning postsecondary student cohort. Retrieved September 2, 2025, from <https://nscresearchcenter.org/persistence-retention/>.

Methodology note:

EAB surveyed more than 12,000 first-year college students to understand their satisfaction, opt-out reasons, and behaviors and preferences across different demographics during their first college term. Of those students surveyed, 1,531 attended a two-year college. The full report, “Adapting Your Enrollment Experience for Today’s Students: Insights from EAB’s Survey of 12,500+ First-Year College Students,” is available at eab.com/resources/whitepaper/adapt-your-enrollment-experience-todays-students/.