



# 2021 National First-Year Students and Their Motivation to Complete College Report

A study of the challenges and opportunities for completing  
a college degree, based on an analysis of more than  
85,000 first-year college students



## Introduction: the increasing importance of student retention to students, families, and colleges

Although students, families, and college campuses had to deal with unprecedented challenges and a rapid flip to online learning in 2020, things in 2021 appear headed for more of a “normal” state—or at least the new normal of a hybrid higher education environment. However, there are a number of trends that threaten to undermine the ability of students to attend college, families to pay for it, and campuses to maintain sustainable enrollments.

### Enrollment has declined for nine years across all sectors—and the pace of decline increased during the pandemic

A combination of demographic and other factors have led to a long period of college enrollment decline. This has affected all sectors but hit the two-year sector particularly hard according to the latest data from the National Student Clearinghouse (Sedmak, 2021).

#### Spring 2021 enrollment trends compared to previous year:



### Changing demographics seem unlikely to reverse enrollment trends in the coming decade

The number of traditional-age students is declining nationwide, with the vast majority of states expecting to see declines in college-going students (Kline, 2019). While enrollment of nontraditional students may mitigate this somewhat, undergraduate enrollment growth is predicted to remain flat through 2029 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021).

### FAFSA filing rates fell more than 9 percent—a worrying implication for college access

FAFSA filings are a key indicator of future college enrollment because the form is required to obtain financial aid. Usually the filing rate only changes by a point or two year to year, so this year's 9 percent drop is drastic. More alarmingly, this suggests more first-generation students, students with greater financial need, and students of color may not be applying to college (Barshay, 2021).

## College completion rates are flattening

The six-year college completion rate reached 60 percent nationally, an increase of only 0.3 percentage points over the previous year. Even more alarming, completion rates for two-year public colleges declined by 0.5 points after having risen for two consecutive years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020).

## Retention will be more critical than ever for students, families, and institutions

College completion is not only essential to the mission of higher education, it will be increasingly important to the survival of colleges and universities. With the pool of traditional students flattening or even decreasing, campuses cannot afford to lose students. Furthermore, with the expense of attending college and the benefits of obtaining a college degree, more students need to drive toward completing their degrees. For first-generation students and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, completing college is also essential to achieving greater economic success and social mobility.

**Starting strong is crucial to student retention.** When entering students get off to a strong start, they are more likely to persist through the first and second years and then continue to complete their degrees. This *2021 First-Year Student Motivations Report* provides insights into how campuses can do that. This report can provide key insights such as:

- 1 What are the priorities and needs of first-year students?
- 2 How should your institution align resources with the needs of your first- and second-year students?
- 3 How do student motivations and needs differ across different student populations?
- 4 How can you best serve the growing group of adult undergraduate learners?



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## More than 1 in 4 entering students question whether college is worth it

Question: “I often wonder if a college education is worth the time, money and effort that I’m being asked to spend on it.”



### KEY TAKEAWAY

Since the recession began, the number of entering students who have questioned whether college is worth it has risen by 9 points, an increase of more than 50 percent. This shows that for many students, their confidence in the value of a college degree is eroding. The current figure of 26 percent was measured in the midst of the COVID-19, and the full impact of the pandemic on student confidence in college has not been fully realized yet.



### Conveying the value of college is more important than ever

These results coupled with the escalating cost for college and the flattening of the traditional college-bound population could cause major enrollment issues in the coming years. Campuses must take steps to communicate the value of the student experience, the availability of aid, and the worth of a college degree. Consider strategies such as:

- Assessing student satisfaction to improve the student experience.
- Using personalized financial aid awarding videos to clearly explain aid packages and net cost to families.
- Communicating alumni outcomes such as job placement, earnings, and graduate degree attainment.

## 2

# Connections and careers dominate the top priorities of first-year students

TOP 10 PRIORITIES FOR INCOMING FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS	2020	2019
Meet new friends	75%	73%
Help selecting an educational plan to get a good job	70%	69%
Talk about qualifications needed for certain occupations	67%	69%
Find out more about clubs and organizations	66%	57%
Receive help to improve student habits	65%	69%
Receive instruction on how to take college exams	65%	68%
Talk with someone about getting a scholarship	63%	67%
Talk with someone about salaries and future occupations	57%	60%
Meet an experienced student to seek advice	55%	56%
Talk about advantages/ disadvantages of various careers	53%	55%

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Provide multiple ways to meet students and make friends—in person and online.** Meeting new friends has been the rapidly rising top priority of incoming students for the last several years. Given the disruptions of COVID-19, students not only need multiple ways to connect with their peers (face-to-face and online), they may also expect it in the years to come if hybrid educational options continue to grow in popularity.
- **Make “career services” a professional development ecosystem that engages students as frequently as possible.** Nothing can show the worth of a college degree like helping students see how their studies will pave the way to a promising career. Connecting students to career services is a great first step, but also make career planning a part of students’ daily lives through class lectures, alumni meet and-greets, career fairs, field trips, and internships. Mix in virtual activities if it allows you to connect students to more alumni, professionals, and resources.
- **Help students help themselves persist through strong study skills.** Make sure incoming freshmen can connect early with resources for academic support so they start strong during the first term. Consider developing a completion grant program that ties improved scholastic performance to additional scholarship funding.

### 3

## Students are all dedicated to finishing college, but perception of value and amount of support vary by ethnicity

One constant over the years of this study is that students enter college dedicated to finishing it, regardless of background. That did not change in the past year.

DESIRE TO FINISH COLLEGE	ASIAN	HISPANIC	NATIVE	BLACK	WHITE	OVERALL
I am strongly dedicated to finishing college.	95%	95%	94%	95%	95%	95%

However, how students view the value of college does change based on ethnicity.

DESIRE TO FINISH COLLEGE	ASIAN	HISPANIC	NATIVE	BLACK	WHITE	OVERALL
Of all the things I could do now, going to college is most satisfying.	77%	78%	78%	81%	75%	77%
I wonder if college is worth the time, money, and effort.	30%	29%	22%	34%	20%	25%

The amount of family support and financial security also varies by ethnicity.

FAMILY EMOTIONAL SUPPORT	ASIAN	HISPANIC	NATIVE	BLACK	WHITE	OVERALL
As child, parents respected and understood me.	71%	72%	70%	72%	79%	75%
My parents and I communicated well as a child.	71%	74%	73%	71%	78%	75%
Family had one-sided way of looking at me as a child.	22%	22%	24%	24%	15%	19%
As a child, family members often said hurtful things towards me.	19%	16%	19%	18%	12%	15%

<b>SENSE OF FINANCIAL SECURITY</b>	<b>ASIAN</b>	<b>HISPANIC</b>	<b>NATIVE</b>	<b>BLACK</b>	<b>WHITE</b>	<b>OVERALL</b>
I have the financial resources needed to finish college.	51%	39%	45%	40%	54%	49%
I don't have financial problems that interfere with schoolwork.	42%	31%	35%	35%	49%	42%
I have financial problems that are distracting.	34%	39%	36%	36%	25%	30%
I am in a bad financial position and pressure to earn extra money will interfere with school.	27%	31%	29%	26%	19%	23%

At the same time, students of color are more receptive to academic assistance and career counseling. These are the top to areas where students are most receptive to support, and students of color were significantly more open to assistance.

<b>RECEPTIVITY TO ACADEMIC ASSISTANCE</b>	<b>ASIAN</b>	<b>HISPANIC</b>	<b>NATIVE</b>	<b>BLACK</b>	<b>WHITE</b>	<b>OVERALL</b>
I would like to receive help to improve study habits.	74%	80%	74%	83%	61%	69%
I would like instruction on how to take college exams.	75%	73%	68%	79%	62%	68%
I would like to receive help on improving my writing skills.	60%	63%	54%	66%	39%	50%
I would like to receive individual help to improve math skills.	52%	64%	57%	68%	41%	51%
I would like to receive tutoring for one or more of my courses.	51%	56%	53%	64%	38%	47%
I would like to receive training to improve my reading skills.	51%	53%	40%	52%	28%	38%

RECEPTIVITY TO CAREER COUNSELING	ASIAN	HISPANIC	NATIVE	BLACK	WHITE	OVERALL
I would like help selecting education plan to get good job.	81%	79%	67%	80%	67%	73%
I would like to talk about qualifications needed for certain occupations.	80%	76%	66%	80%	63%	69%
I would like to talk with someone about salaries and future for occupation.	68%	65%	53%	71%	54%	60%
I would like help selecting occupation suited to my interests.	68%	63%	53%	63%	50%	56%
I would like to talk about advantages and disadvantages of certain occupations.	66%	61%	50%	66%	49%	55%

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Identify risk factors early with incoming first-year students.** Financial pressures and lack of support structures can put students at greater risk of stopping out. The economic, emotional, and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may also have exacerbated this with students starting in fall 2021. Using early-alert solutions such as the RNL College Student Inventory can identify students who will need extra support to persist and succeed.
- Devote resources specifically for first-generation students.** Students who are the first to attend college often do not have the same level of insight into the college process as students whose parents are college graduates. First-generation students are also more likely to have economic challenges, parents who may not be native speakers, or other challenges. Be sure to provide these students with extra resources they need so that they can complete what will likely be a life-changing college education.

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## Adult learners are highly motivated and interested in academic support

Adult learners are critical to the future of higher education. There are 36 million adults who have some college and no degree, and as the population of traditional-aged college students flattens, nontraditional students will become increasingly important to the enrollment stability of institutions.

But how do adult learners differ in their motivations and needs than traditional students? These results show that adult learners have a strong desire to achieve their educational goals and less doubt about the value of a college degree.

ITEM	ADULT	TRADITIONAL
Prepared to make the sacrifices needed to reach goals	96%	89%
Have found an occupation that interests them	90%	83%
Greater family understanding and support	85%	76%
Perceive educators more positively	84%	77%
Have developed a solid system of self discipline	73%	60%
See the benefits of tutoring in one or more of their classes	67%	59%
Have a career action plan that guides their studies	61%	52%
Greater pleasure from reading	60%	37%
Ability to manage finances without having to work more hours	55%	45%
Less doubt about the value of earning a college degree	19%	36%

Taken from results of 3,458 adults and 5,604 traditional students

## TOP 10 AREAS OF ASSISTANCE FOR ADULT LEARNERS

1	Get information about qualifications for various careers.....	81%
2	Tutoring would benefit me in one or more of my classes.....	67%
3	Help improving my writing skills.....	63%
4	Help improving my math skills.....	60%
5	Help improving my test-taking skills.....	58%
6	Learn more about salaries/opportunities for various careers.....	50%
7	Talk with a counselor about additional financial assistance.....	49%
8	Help improving my study skills.....	48%
9	Help improving my reading skills.....	44%
10	Weigh the advantages/disadvantages of various careers.....	36%

Regarding their top areas of desired assistance, adult students prioritize items that support their career aspirations as well as the skills that will help them complete college.

## KEY TAKEAWAY

- **Create outreach and support that meets the specific needs of adult learners.** The experiences, life circumstances, resources, and motivations of adult learners give them a different perspective on college than traditional-aged college students. Be sure you have retention strategies and resources that will provide these students with the kind of support they need so more adult learners persist and complete their educational goals.



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## More than 1 in 4 first-year students have financial problems that distract them from their educations

Financial challenges are one of the leading risk factors for student attrition, and this year more than a quarter of first-year students reported having significant financial problems.

ITEM	2020	2019
Have financial problems that are distracting	27%	30%
Bad financial position and pressure to earn extra money will interfere with school	23%	21%

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Consider offering completion grants.** These are secondary grants to their financial packages.
- **Award financial aid to support a student’s entire college career.** Make sure that your institution’s financial aid awards provide students with the financial support they need for the duration of their college careers—particularly the first two critical years.
- **Many students in need may have given up on attending college.** There are a number of findings such as a decrease in FAFSA filings this past year that suggest many students in need may be forgoing college, at least for the time being. With the economic impact of the pandemic still uncertain, campuses will need to be vigilant to make sure they enable students with greater need to attend college.



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## What can we understand about the impact of COVID on first and second-year students?

Data collected from the Mid-Year Student Assessment (MYSA) in 2019 and 2020 from over 10,000 students midway through their first year of college reveal some changes that suggest the impact of COVID-19.

While the desire to earn a college degree remains strong, there was a noticeable decline in the students' satisfaction with the college experience.

**“Of all the things I could be doing at this point in my life, going to college is definitely the most satisfying.”**

POPULATION	2019 MYSA	2020 MYSA	DIFFERENCE
White students	78%	72%	-6%
Students of color	75%	71%	-4%

We know from our research on the impact of student satisfaction that there is a relationship between higher levels of satisfaction and higher retention/graduation rates and levels of alumni engagement. (See why student satisfaction assessment matters at [RNL.com/Assessment](https://www.rnl.com/Assessment).)

There is good news in the MYSA comparison data, particularly on the higher percentage of students of color reporting getting help with academic assistance.

STUDENTS OF COLOR	2019 MYSA	2020 MYSA	DIFFERENCE
Assistance with math	42%	45%	+3%
Tutoring	44%	46.5%	+2.5%
Assistance with reading	33%	36%	+3%

With many institutions delivering their academic support services online, these results suggest more students of color may have been reached virtually.

When students were asked about the assistance they wanted next, they overwhelmingly expressed interest in career development. Students of color showed a significant increase in their requests for career development assistance as they completed their first semester and moved into their second semester of college.

STUDENTS OF COLOR	2019 MYSA	2020 MYSA	DIFFERENCE
Discuss qualifications for careers	50%	60.5%	+10.5%
Help developing an educational plan to get a good job	52%	62%	+5%
Discuss salaries and future outlook for various occupations	51%	63%	+12%
Discuss advantages/disadvantages of various careers	49%	61%	+11%
Get help selecting a career that matches my interests	45%	55.5%	+10.5%
Assistance with reading	33%	36%	+3%

Two other areas also saw significant increases in students of color asking for assistance: personal counseling and financial guidance.

STUDENTS OF COLOR	2019 MYSA	2020 MYSA	DIFFERENCE
Talk with a counselor about my attitude toward school	20%	28%	+8%
Talk with a counselor about feelings of discouragement	20%	26%	+6%
Talk with someone about managing my personal finances	37%	49%	+12%
Get information about holiday or summer job opportunities	38%	52%	+14%

Similar patterns emerge from the data collected from the Second-Year Student Assessment (SYSA). For these students, three out of four of their semesters in college have been disrupted by COVID. The impact on students of color is more significant than on white students.

These are the priorities identified by second-year students of color and the increases in the numbers of students making these requests between 2019 and 2020:

STUDENTS OF COLOR	2019 SYSA	2020 SYSA	DIFFERENCE
Identify work experiences/internships related to my major	77%	79%	+2%
Explore advantages/disadvantages of my career choice	67%	70%	+3%
Define goals suited to my major/career interests	66%	69.5%	+3.5%
Discuss options for financing my education	60%	65%	+5%
Prepare a written plan for graduation	59%	64.5%	+5.5%

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Understand the impact of the pandemic.** It clearly had an impact on students as they entered college and continued to influence the actual college experiences. While the data suggest that most students were impacted, students of color may have experienced the impact more significantly.
- **Assess student satisfaction to pinpoint post-pandemic priorities.** Because student satisfaction with the college experience has declined during the pandemic, institutions will have to be even more attentive to what matters to students and address their concerns in a timely manner.
- **Connect students to the resources they need throughout the first two years.** The impact of COVID on students of color is greater than on white students. Continuing to connect all students to the resources they are seeking will be necessary throughout the first year (not just in summer bridge programs before school starts).
- **Create “care teams” to address student needs.** The significant growth in interest by students of color in career development, personal counseling, and financial guidance should be addressed in a coordinated, collaborative way that makes use of “care teams” to work together to support the needs of students.
- **Align resources with student needs.** Using data to align institutional resources with student needs is more critical than ever. Institutions need to extend strong structures of support through the second year in order to fully address the growing needs of students, particularly students of color.

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## About the instruments used in this report

Campuses cannot maximize their retention potential without intervention and initiative. As this study shows, students are eager to complete college, open to assistance, and also have many challenges that could undermine their success. To retain them, you need actionable data to inform interventions, assistance, and planning.

This study uses data from 85,900 students who completed the RNL College Student Inventory™ (CSI Form B), a college completion risk survey and self-assessment administered during orientation or in the first weeks of classes, including:



### These data and reports provided by the CSI help institutions:

- Increase persistence, retention, and completion rates overall and for specific populations.
- Identify each incoming student's noncognitive, motivational risks to completion and requests for assistance.
- Prioritize academic support services and student success interventions early in the term.
- Equip advisors and student success professionals to engage students in timely conversations and to proactively connect them with relevant support services.
- Develop each institution's first- and second-year programming with a focus on student engagement.

### This study also uses the data from:



## ABOUT RNL

RNL is the leading provider of higher education enrollment, student success, and fundraising solutions. More than 1,900 colleges, universities, and nonprofit organizations rely on RNL for advanced analytics, personalized engagement, and industry-leading insights to achieve their missions. The firm is distinguished by its powerful portfolio of solutions focused on the entire lifecycle of enrollment and fundraising, assuring students find the right college or university, graduate on time, secure their first job, and give back to support the next generation. RNL conferences, research reports, papers, and articles help clients stay on top of current trends.

## INCREASE STUDENT SUCCESS BY ASSESSING YOUR FIRST- AND SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS

See samples of the RNL College Student Inventory and Mid-Year Student Assessment at [RuffaloNL.com/RMS](https://RuffaloNL.com/RMS)

## LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR SOLUTIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

RNL offers a full suite of solutions to increase student outcomes, including:

- Early-alert assessment instruments
- Student retention planning
- Student satisfaction and priorities assessments
- Yield and engagement to prevent stop-outs
- Resources for career services
- Predictive analytics for student retention



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