

## 2015-16 National Research Report

# National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report

### The current state of college student satisfaction at four-year institutions, two-year public colleges, and career and private institutions

This national report examines the satisfaction and priorities of more than 578,000 college students across the United States. The report details what students identified as their biggest issues with their college experience, as well as positive trends in student satisfaction. Topics include:

- Trends in overall student satisfaction and likelihood to re-enroll
- Factors that influenced student enrollment
- The value of college tuition
- Student satisfaction with financial aid and billing
- The importance of academic advising services
- Perceptions of campus climate

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## How campuses can use this report to improve the student experience

Every day, college students make value judgments not just about their overall educational experience, but the elements that contribute to it. Financial aid policies, academic advising, the ability to register for classes, faculty interaction, campus culture and climate—these and many other factors contribute to overall student satisfaction.

Student satisfaction is a key component of college persistence and educational completion. Students who are satisfied are more likely to continue their educational path. Furthermore, recent research from Ruffalo Noel Levitz suggests that institutions with higher graduation levels also have higher student satisfaction levels (Bryant & Bodfish, 2014). And even more recently, a link has been established between institutions with higher student satisfaction and higher alumni giving rates (Bryant, Bodfish & Stever, 2015).

This report examines the national student satisfaction levels of students across all institution types: four-year privates, four-year publics, two-year publics, and career and private institutions. The findings on the following pages cover a number of key areas of the college experience, highlighting challenges for campuses as well as positive results.

Campuses can use this report to understand the current frustrations of college students and identify ways to address perception issues among students. This report identifies the top concerns of students by educational sector, while also offering recommendations for addressing those concerns.

If your campus regularly assesses student satisfaction with a standardized instrument, the report also provides a national benchmark for comparison against your own internal satisfaction assessment data. By using a combination of national benchmarks and individual assessment data, campuses can focus their resources and initiatives more precisely, improving student life and learning as well as fulfilling institutional missions.

## About the study and the survey instrument

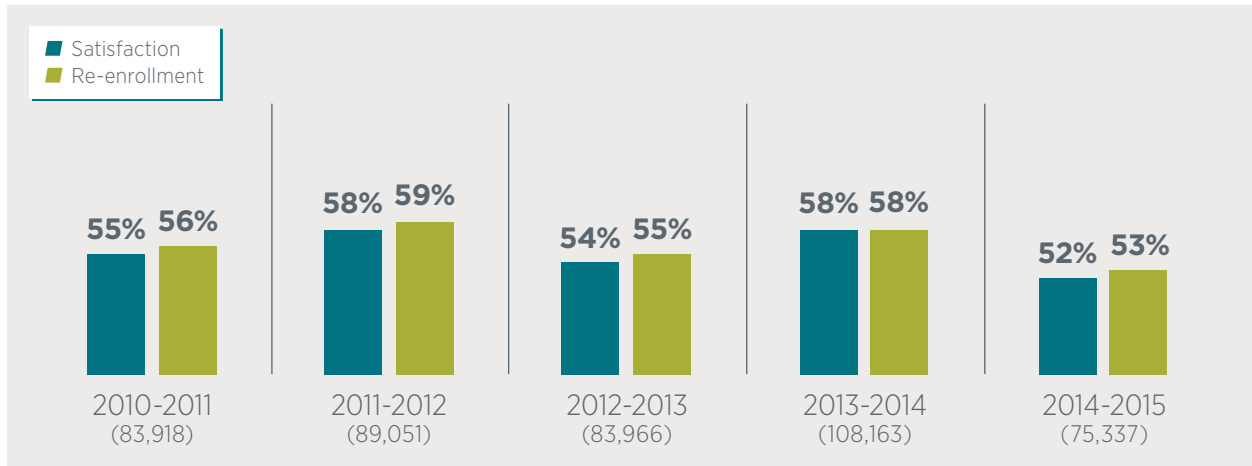
This study features data from more than 578,000 students nationwide who completed the Student Satisfaction Inventory™ (SSI) from Ruffalo Noel Levitz between the fall of 2012 and the spring of 2015:

- Four-year private: 256,206 students from 355 institutions
- Four-year public: 91,255 students from 93 institutions
- Community colleges: 192,106 students from 206 institutions
- Career schools: 39,071 from 57 institutions
- Total: 578,638 students from 711 institutions

The SSI measures the satisfaction and priorities of students across a wide range of issues related to college life and learning. The results allow campuses to identify areas of strength, where students report high satisfaction in areas of high priority, and campus challenges, where students indicate low satisfaction in areas of high priority. The instrument has high reliability and validity, and more than 2,600 campuses have administered the SSI since its release in 1994. The SSI is part of the Satisfaction-Priorities Survey Suite, which includes surveys for campus personnel, adult students, online learners, and parents of currently enrolled students.

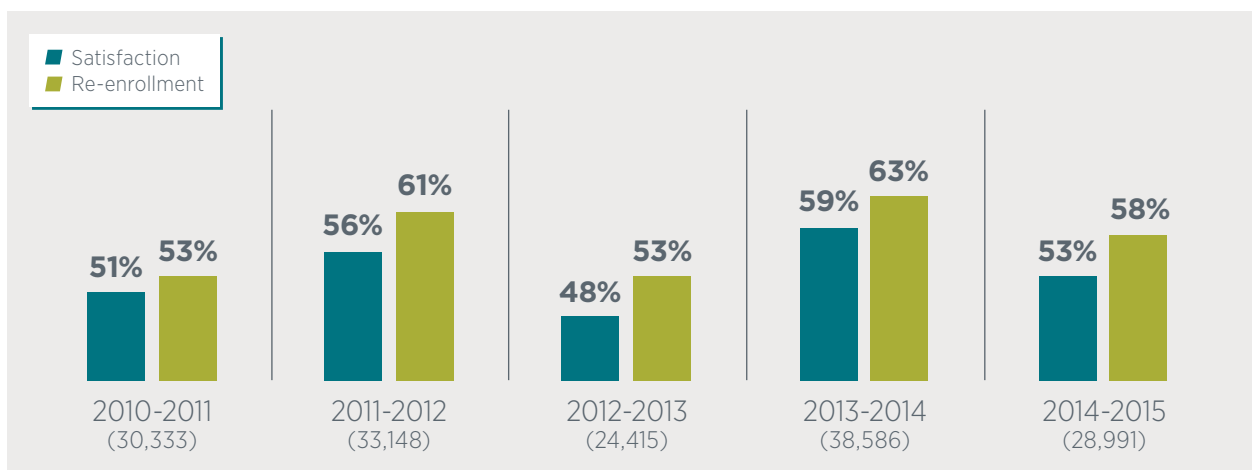
**Trend review of satisfaction and re-enrollment scores by institution type**

**Figure 1: Four-year private institution satisfaction and re-enrollment (number of students surveyed is in parentheses)**



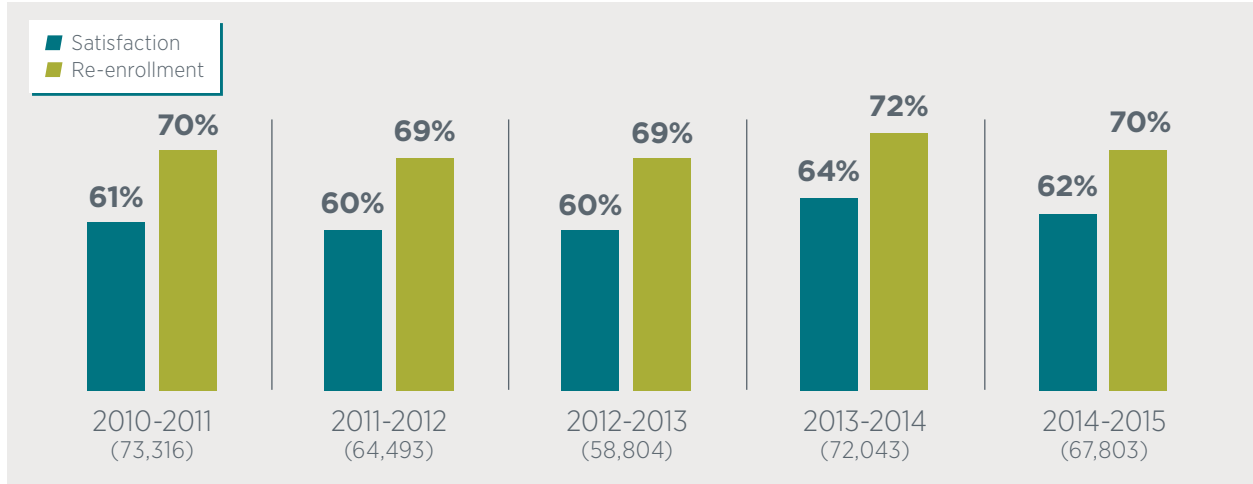
The perceptions of satisfaction and likelihood to re-enroll are closely aligned at four-year private institutions. The increases in 2011-12 and 2013-14 are attributable to institutions surveying every other year. Satisfaction and likelihood to re-enroll took a slight dip in the most recent academic year.

**Figure 2: Four-year public institution satisfaction and re-enrollment (number of students surveyed is in parentheses)**



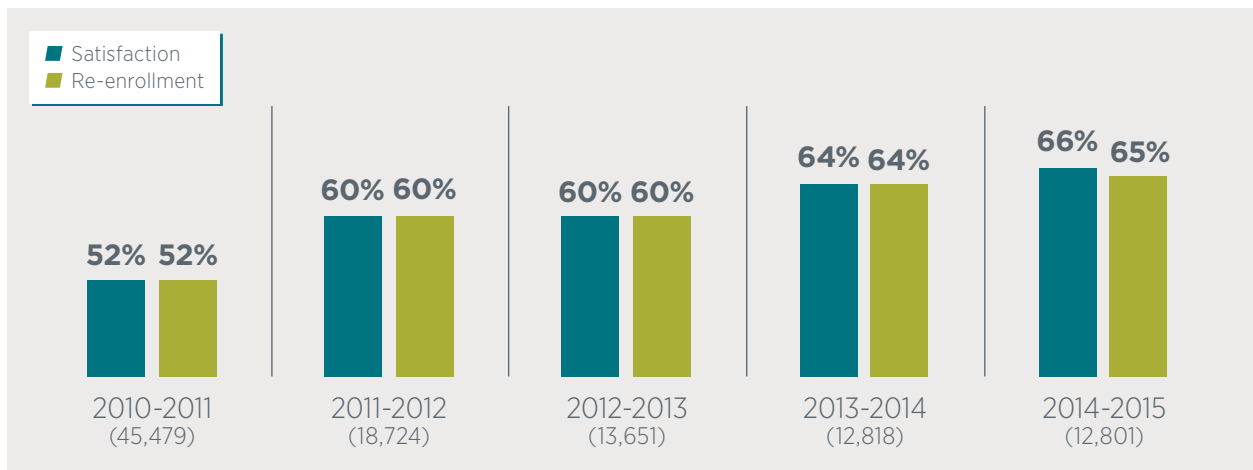
There is also a pattern of satisfaction and re-enrollment scores based on surveying cycles at four-year publics, with those currently surveying in academic years that start with odd numbers reflecting higher satisfaction. As compared with students at four-year private institutions, there is a greater discrepancy at four-year public institutions between satisfaction perceptions and likelihood to re-enroll. Students are more critical (with lower satisfaction scores) while still indicating that they would re-enroll if they had to do it all over again.

**Figure 3: Community college satisfaction and re-enrollment (number of students surveyed is in parentheses)**



Students at community colleges are generally more satisfied and more likely to indicate that they would re-enroll as compared with students at four-year private and public institutions. Community colleges also reflect a greater discrepancy between satisfaction scores and likelihood to re-enroll. Both the satisfaction and re-enrollment scores are relatively consistent from one year to the next in this five-year view, with a slight decline in 2014-15 after a peak in 2013-14.

**Figure 4: Career and private school satisfaction and re-enrollment (number of students surveyed is in parentheses)**



Similar to four-year privates, the satisfaction and re-enrollment scores at career and private schools are more closely aligned. This five-year view reflects a large increase in scores between the 2010-11 and 2011-12 academic years, with continued growth over the next four years. It should also be noted that the number of students in each academic year has dropped from the highest year of 2010-11, when satisfaction scores were at their lowest. While career schools have taken a hit nationally in the perceptions of the quality of their academic experience, students actually enrolled at those institutions are generally satisfied.

## Enrollment factors and influences on college choice

Why did students choose to enroll at an institution? Students noted which factors influenced their enrollment; the top factor for each institution is in **bold**.

**Table 1: Factors that contribute to student enrollment**

Enrollment factor	Four-year privates	Four-year publics	Community colleges	Career schools
Financial aid	<b>81%</b>	78%	79%	84%
Academic reputation	78%	75%	72%	82%
Cost	77%	<b>83%</b>	<b>85%</b>	79%
Personalized attention prior to enrollment	66%	58%	60%	78%
Geographic setting	60%	63%	63%	67%
Campus appearance	60%	57%	54%	70%
Size of institution	59%	55%	52%	65%
Recommendations from family/friends	46%	46%	48%	63%
Opportunity to play sports	32%	28%	26%	---
Future employment opportunities (Career school only)	---	---	---	<b>88%</b>

The factors in the decision to enroll have stayed consistent year over year, with the same priority areas reflected as in previous years. The top three factors of financial aid, cost, and academic reputation at four-year private and public institutions and two-year community colleges, with the addition of future employment opportunities as a unique option at career schools, have been at the top of the national results in recent years. This continues to confirm that these are the reasons that motivate students to enroll at each institution type. However, institutions should be sensitive to the fact that financial aid continues to reflect higher percentages than academic reputation as a driving enrollment factor for students. Do institutions want financial aid to be more important than the academic experience?

### How to read the results on the following tables

Students answered more than 70 items about their college experience, providing two ratings:

- **Important to students** shows the percentage of students who said the item was important or very important with a rating of a six or seven on the SSI's seven-point scale for importance.
- **Student satisfaction** shows the percentage of students who said they were satisfied or very satisfied with a rating of a six or seven on the SSI's seven-point scale for satisfaction.
- **Gap** is the difference between the importance score and the satisfaction score.

### Strengths and challenges are also highlighted in the tables

- **Strengths** are items with high importance, high satisfaction, and a low gap. Specifically, these are items in top half of importance and the top quartile of satisfaction, relative to the data set. These are items in **green**.
- **Challenges** are items with high importance, low satisfaction, and a high gap. They are items in the top half of importance and the bottom quartile of satisfaction or the top quartile of the performance gaps for the data set. These are items in **red**.

Items between a strength and challenge are in black. *Note that strengths and challenges are relative to the institution type.* What may be a challenge or strength for one campus type may not be a strength or challenge for another, even if the importance, satisfaction, and gap scores are identical.

**Priority issues for college students**

**1. Many students at four-year institutions do not think tuition paid was a worthwhile investment.**

**Table 2: Tuition and student satisfaction**

Survey item / student ratings	Four-year privates	Four-year publics	Community colleges	Career schools
<b>Tuition paid is a worthwhile investment.</b>				
Importance to students	88%	86%	90%	91%
Student satisfaction	45%	52%	69%	67%
Gap	43%	34%	21%	24%

*\* Note: this item for two-year and career institutions was taken from the shorter SSI Form B, which had a different number of participating students and institutions. All other results in this report are from the SSI Form A.*

Similar to the findings in last year’s report, students at four-year publics and privates as well as career institutions continue to remain significantly unsatisfied with the value of their tuition. This perception could jeopardize how students value their overall education. The exception is the smaller gap for the perception of value at community colleges, where students are generally satisfied.

**Takeaway: Convey the value of your educational offerings systematically.**

Campuses need to be more aware than ever of the “sticker shock” their costs may pose to students, as well as the growing concern of student debt to attend college. Campuses need to get in front of these concerns, not only with prospective students, but also to promote persistence among current students. Consider strategies such as:

- Tracking and publishing employment outcomes for graduates.
- Tracking and publishing graduate/professional school placement rates for undergraduates at four-year institutions or transfer rates for two-year college students to four-year institutions.
- Inviting alumni on campus to share their successes in person.
- Using social media to highlight student successes, educational quality, and other value.
- Conducting price sensitivity research to assess how students feel about the cost to attend.
- Responding to and improving “little” annoyances to students like Wi-Fi availability, printer access, and sidewalk repair, which may be distractions for students.

**2. Students express significant dissatisfaction with the financial aid awarding process and tuition payment options.**

**Table 3: Financial aid and billing policies and student satisfaction**

Survey item / student ratings	Four-year privates	Four-year publics	Community colleges	Career schools
<b>Adequate financial aid is available for most students.</b>				
Importance to students	85%	84%	83%	87%
Student satisfaction	46%	46%	59%	63%
Gap	39%	38%	24%	24%
<b>Financial aid awards are announced in time to be helpful in college planning.</b>				
Importance to students	82%	82%	80%	80%
Student satisfaction	49%	46%	51%	51%
Gap	33%	36%	29%	29%
<b>Financial aid counselors are helpful.</b>				
Importance to students	81%	80%	81%	87%
Student satisfaction	50%	45%	53%	63%
Gap	31%	35%	28%	24%
<b>Billing polices are reasonable.</b>				
Importance to students	78%	78%	79%	82%
Student satisfaction	39%	42%	60%	58%
Gap	39%	36%	19%	24%

As indicated earlier, financial aid was one of the top factors in influencing student enrollment according to respondents. It can also be a significant factor in a student’s decision to continue their education and persist at a campus. As in previous years, in the eyes of the student respondents, campuses are not doing enough to convince students that they are awarding financial aid effectively. While there may never be enough financial aid in the minds of students, the policies and procedures around the delivery of financial aid can greatly influence their satisfaction. Dissatisfaction over billing procedures can also impact student enrollment, especially if they perceive the process to be a hassle.

**Takeaway: Make sure financial aid and bill payments are efficient and transparent.**

Campuses can take a number of steps to make financial aid and billing processes more accessible and understandable to students and their families, such as:

- Be transparent and clear in your financial aid communications. Break down complex information into easier sections (for example, using bullets instead of bulky paragraphs of text and avoiding technical jargon or confusing abbreviations).
- Have adequate staff and systems to handle financial aid queries at key times in the term.
- Offer a variety of payment plans and communicate their availability throughout the year.
- Focus on customer service training of front-line staff and remind them of the important role they play regarding initial and continued student enrollment. An attitude of cooperation can go a long way toward satisfying students even when they are stressed over finances.

**3. Academic advising is a challenge area for community colleges but an area of strength at four-year and career institutions.**

Community colleges continue to have opportunities for academic advising for students. Advising services have long been identified as a way to connect with students, build relationships, and keep students on the path to completion. Institutions that effectively advise students may be more likely to have students who stay enrolled and make progress toward graduation. Recent research also shows a positive connection between student satisfaction with advising and higher alumni giving at the institutional level (Bryant, Bodfish & Stever 2015).

**Table 4: Academic advising and student satisfaction**

Survey item / student ratings	Four-year privates	Four-year publics	Community colleges	Career schools
<b>My academic advisor is knowledgeable about requirements in my major.</b>				
Importance to students	89%	88%	85%	87%
Student satisfaction	68%	64%	62%	70%
Gap	21%	24%	23%	17%
<b>My academic advisor is approachable.</b>				
Importance to students	86%	86%	83%	86%
Student satisfaction	68%	62%	62%	72%
Gap	18%	24%	21%	14%
<b>My academic advisor is concerned about my success as an individual.</b>				
Importance to students	84%	83%	80%	84%
Student satisfaction	62%	55%	53%	61%
Gap	22%	28%	27%	23%
<b>My academic advisor is knowledgeable about transfer requirements.</b>				
Importance to students	---	---	81%	79%
Student satisfaction	---	---	55%	54%
Gap	---	---	26%	25%

**Takeaway: Review advising services to be sure they are student-centered and adequately supporting the needs of students.**

Campuses can review their academic advising services and make adjustments, such as:

- Connecting students with faculty advisors early in a student’s academic experience.
- Keeping advisors up-to-date regarding program or major requirements.
- Providing appropriate resources with accurate information on transfer requirements with the institutions where you have articulation agreements.
- Encouraging advisors to develop advisee relationships beyond signing a registration form.
- Posting and maintaining office hours for students to meet with advisors, especially during peak service periods.
- Offering triage services to answer basic advising questions during high-demand time periods.
- Celebrating when advising is identified as an institutional strength and providing positive feedback to advisors about the value of their relationship with students.



**4. Campus climate items reflect a mix of strengths and challenges across institution types.**

Campus climate, or how students feel at the institution, is a key reason why students may choose to stay or leave. Research indicates a strong link between campus climate, overall student satisfaction, and institutional retention and graduation rates (Bryant, & Bodfish 2014). All institution types have areas to celebrate and areas to improve upon within the campus climate cluster.

A few observations on the table below: It is especially interesting, in light of the media attention on school violence, to note that the sense of being safe and secure on campus is identified as a strength at all institution types. The perception of institutions caring about students as individuals is identified as a challenge across all institution types and is a priority to students. Students at four-year privates have high expectations and lower satisfaction when it comes to an enjoyable experience as a student. Campus “run-around” has been a challenge area in the past but currently is neither a strength nor a challenge for any of the institution types.

**Table 5: Campus climate and student satisfaction**

Survey item / student ratings	Four-year privates	Four-year publics	Community colleges	Career schools
<b>The campus is safe and secure for all students.</b>				
Importance to students	86%	87%	86%	87%
Student satisfaction	68%	61%	69%	69%
Gap	18%	26%	17%	18%
<b>It is an enjoyable experience to be a student on this campus.</b>				
Importance to students	87%	82%	80%	87%
Student satisfaction	59%	55%	63%	67%
Gap	28%	27%	17%	20%
<b>Students are made to feel welcome at this institution.</b>				
Importance to students	84%	81%	81%	87%
Student satisfaction	63%	57%	66%	72%
Gap	21%	24%	15%	15%
<b>This institution shows concern for students as individuals.</b>				
Importance to students	85%	82%	79%	86%
Student satisfaction	57%	49%	52%	62%
Gap	28%	33%	27%	24%
<b>The campus staff are caring and helpful.</b>				
Importance to students	85%	82%	79%	86%
Student satisfaction	63%	52%	62%	67%
Gap	22%	30%	17%	19%
<b>I seldom get the “run-around” when seeking information on this campus.</b>				
Importance to students	78%	78%	78%	81%
Student satisfaction	45%	42%	53%	56%
Gap	33%	36%	25%	25%

**Takeaway: Be aware of campus climate perceptions and respond appropriately.**

Recognizing the importance that campus climate may play in retention and graduation, institutions have opportunities to improve campus climate perceptions by:

- Maintaining a priority on student safety both from external and internal threats and taking safety issues seriously.
- Exploring what “enjoyable experience” means to students and looking for ways to create appropriate expectations.
- Establishing welcoming activities, including orientation, introductions to campus culture, and relationship building between new students, upperclass students, faculty, and staff.
- Identifying ways to acknowledge students as individuals and responding to individual student needs.
- Training faculty and staff on the importance of their relationships with students and focusing on positive customer service in all student interactions.
- Recognizing campus “run-around” issues, whether they are in-person, on the phone, or on the website and working to eliminate these whenever possible.

**Five additional conclusions and suggestions for improving student satisfaction****1. Satisfaction assessment is a way to keep tabs on the priorities of students and to create an environment where improvement matters.**

As Table 2 illustrates, four-year institutions and career schools have a serious performance gap: many of their students feel tuition is not a worthwhile investment. Assessing their satisfaction and using it to guide improvements can not only strengthen the student experience, but also show the concern the campus has for students.

**2. Student satisfaction assessment can set the retention agenda and provide crucial data for accreditation and strategic planning.**

Dr. Laurie Schreiner’s (2009) study of satisfaction and retention found that student satisfaction is the greatest known predictive variable in student retention. Likewise, campuses with higher graduation rates tend to have higher student satisfaction. Satisfied students are more likely to have a worthwhile college experience and continue that experience through educational completion. Use satisfaction data to pinpoint areas of concern for student persistence and devise targeted retention strategies.

Accreditation agencies also ask for student satisfaction data as a metric for demonstrating institutional improvement. If a campus measures priorities well, the combination and identification of performance gaps can help an institution discover its top priorities for planning and action.

### 3. Communication with students can combat perception issues.

Media coverage and common misperceptions can undermine student satisfaction with the college experience—that it's not worth the money, that campuses are not safe, and so on. It's crucial for campuses to take charge of communicating with students about campus strengths and the commitment to improvement. This is often one of the biggest opportunities campuses have to increase the perception of their value and overall experience.

### 4. Satisfaction can highlight strengths that can be emphasized in recruiting students.

Nationally, students showed high levels of satisfaction in key areas. For community colleges, students felt the tuition they paid was worthwhile. Academic advising was a strength at four-year institutions and career schools. And students felt satisfied with the safety of their campuses across all sectors. These are just some of the strengths institutions could incorporate into their recruitment messages.

### 5. Satisfied students become satisfied alumni.

Satisfied students are likely to become satisfied alumni, which can help with fundraising. In fact, recent research does reflect a link between institutions with higher student satisfaction also having higher alumni giving rates (Bryant, Bodfish & Stever, 2015). Alumni who are satisfied can also provide other types of support as champions of your campus. Social media has dramatically increased the word-of-mouth effect for current and prospective students. High satisfaction can be communicated to family, friends, and others, elevating an institution in the eyes of the broader community.

#### Works cited

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Schreiner, L. (2009). *Linking student satisfaction and retention*. Cedar Rapids: Ruffalo Noel Levitz. <https://www.ruffalonl.com/papers-research-higher-education-fundraising/2009/student-satisfaction-retention>

#### Additional reports on student satisfaction assessment

Visit [RuffaloNL.com/benchmark](https://www.ruffalonl.com/benchmark) to download the full list of participating institutions in this study.

Student satisfaction reports are also available for:

- Adult students
- Online learners

**About the survey instrument used in this report**

*The Student Satisfaction Inventory provides colleges and universities with valuable data for student retention, campus planning, and accreditation. To see samples and learn more, visit [RuffaloNL.com/SSI](http://RuffaloNL.com/SSI).*

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**Questions about this paper?**

*Please email [ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com](mailto:ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com). We can discuss the findings, as well as ways you can assess your current students.*



**HOW TO CITE THIS REPORT**

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