



2020 National Freshman Motivation to Complete College Report

A study of the challenges and opportunities for
completing a college degree, based on an analysis
of more than 100,000 college freshmen



STUDENT SUCCESS





Introduction: Freshman motivations in light of a crisis

Ten years ago when RNL published its annual study of freshman motivations, those students were entering college in the shadow of the worst recession since the Great Depression. That report, which examined attitudes of students from 2009, provided insight into their motivations, attitudes, and needs in the midst of a very challenging time.

This *2020 National Freshman Motivations to Complete College Report* captures motivational data from students at the end of 2019—entering freshmen who completed their first term, as well as second-year students. This data was compiled just as the COVID-19 crisis began to unfold, but the comparisons between 2009 and 2019 still offer valuable data on how the attitudes of entering freshmen have evolved in the last 10 years.

While the impact of COVID-19 on the incoming class is a fluid situation, what is known is that colleges will need to pivot in the “new normal” after COVID-19. This is particularly true if colleges remain online at the start of fall 2020. As data from this study show, making social connections is the top priority of incoming students. That creates an extra challenge for campuses that may have to make the fall experience online or curtail many on-campus activities to comply with social distancing safeguards should campuses open. Building a sense of belonging through activities such as student-to-student chats, live online events, and other virtual engagements will be necessary to help prospective students make connections without having to physically be on campus.

Furthermore, the economic impact of COVID-19 on finances and on future job prospects of students could greatly impact the ability and willingness of students to finish their educational goals. Considerations should also be made for students who will be adversely affected by the closings of dorms and dining halls, work disruptions, and other changes in their living situations.

In the end, the relationship between student motivations and college completion remains unchanged. While the circumstances may be unprecedented, the attitudes and challenges of incoming students will still play a major role in whether those students start strong, persist, and succeed.

As you read these findings, keep in mind these key questions to ask about your understanding of non-cognitive indicators for student success in your first- and second-year students:

- ① What are the “hidden” strengths of first- and second year students?
- ② What are the “hidden” challenges of first- and second-year students?
- ③ What are the most sought-after areas of assistance students seek?
- ④ How should your institution align resources with the needs of your first- and second-year students?
- ⑤ How can your understanding of Generation Z students be enhanced with motivational data? What do you need to know about your adult learners?

1

ENTERING FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS REMAIN HIGHLY MOTIVATED, BUT ONE IN FOUR STUDENTS NOW QUESTION THE VALUE OF A COLLEGE DEGREE

PERCENTAGE OF INCOMING FRESHMEN DEDICATED TO FINISHING THEIR DEGREES

INSTITUTION/STUDENT POPULATION	2019	2009
Four-year private	96%	95%
Four-year public	97%	95%
Two-year public	92%	93%
National average	95%	95%
Traditional-age students	95%	N/A
Adult learners	96%	N/A
First-generation	95%	95%
African American	95%	96%
Hispanic	95%	95%

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Entering first-year students are just as committed to earning a degree as students were 10 years ago.
- However, only six in ten students graduate within six years.¹ With motivation so high during the first year, is something missing in student success efforts? Can colleges do more (or do things differently) to translate first-year motivations into four-year graduation rates? Or address the motivational, non-cognitive needs of first and second-year students?

Motivation is strong, but the perceived value of a degree has declined

While the desire to finish college is strong, fewer students today express satisfaction with going to college than students did 10 years ago. More also question the value of earning a degree.

Of all the things I could do now, going to college is the most satisfying

85.9%
2009

76.9%
2019

I wonder if college is worth the time, money and effort (value)

16.5%
2009

24.8%
2019

¹National Center for Educational Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/trendgenerator/>

Take advantage of all the resources you have to engage and motivate students



- **Assess student satisfaction to identify challenges.** RNL research² shows a direct correlation between student satisfaction and increased student retention.



- **Have a re-enrollment plan in place.** Even with the best intervention programs, some students will stop-out. Have a strategic plan to reengage them through multiple channels such as texting, calling, and surveys so they can resume their education as soon as possible.



- **Invest in alumni relations.** Promote alumni career successes to current students. Create alumni testimonials that illustrate the role their college education played in choosing their career paths and the successes alumni had with landing job offers. Demonstrate the value of a degree from your institution by citing job data correlated to industries, job titles, salaries, and geographic locations.



- **Engage parents as retention advocates.** Three out of four parents of college students are involved in the college search process, so turn them into champions for retention.³



²RNL (2009) *Linking Student Satisfaction and Retention* (Cedar Rapids, IA: Ruffalo Noel Levitz) Available at: https://learn.ruffalonl.com/WEB2009LinkingSatisfactionandRetentionReport_LandingPage.html

³RNL (2019). *2019 Parents' Role in College Planning Report*. (Cedar Rapids, IA: Ruffalo Noel Levitz). Available at: <https://www.ruffalonl.com/papers-research-higher-education-fundraising/parents-college-planning-report/>

2 PROMOTE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND CAREER OPPORTUNITIES WITH TODAY'S STUDENTS

TOP 10 PRIORITIES FOR INCOMING FRESHMEN

	2019	2009		2019	2009
Meet new friends	73%	57%	Talk about getting a scholarship with someone	67%	64%
Get help selecting an educational plan to get a good job	73%	67%	Talk with someone about salaries and future occupation	60%	52%
Talk about qualifications needed for certain occupations	69%	63%	Meet an experienced student to seek advice	56%	47%
Receive help to improve study skills	69%	57%	Help selecting an occupation suited to my interests	56%	47%
Would like instruction on how to take college exams	68%	75%	Talk about advantages and disadvantages of certain occupations	50%	48%

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- For the last three years, RNL reports have shown that meeting new friends is a top priority for students. When compared to the last decade, student needs for peer connections have shifted. Making connections with other students emerged as a priority for almost three-quarters of entering college students in 2019 compare to little over half of students 10 years ago.
- In recent years, career-related issues have been the top priorities of entering freshmen, including five of the top ten priorities in 2019. Because career planning weighs heavily on the minds of first-year students, colleges need to make career development resources and information easily available to entering students. Design these resources and information to be meaningful to students. Career development is no longer “a place or office” that students visit. Career planning needs to be woven into students’ daily lives, in and out of the classroom. Educators need to think of career development as an “ecosystem” that can occur not just during career advisement meetings but also during class lectures, class field trips, college-sponsored internships, career fairs, alumni meet-and-greets, and more.
- Students in 2019 also placed a high priority on improving study skills, taking exams, and discussing scholarship options. 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.

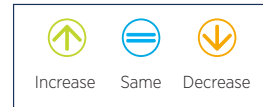
PROMOTE CONNECTIONS WITH OTHER STUDENTS TO INCREASE RETENTION

Students making peer-to-peer connections is a great step toward persistence. RNL's Melt Prevention solution is powered by Nearpeer, a unique social networking tool to connect incoming and current students.




Learn more at RuffaloNL.com/Melt

3 ENSURE STUDENTS HAVE THE FINANCIAL AND PERSONAL RESOURCES NEEDED TO COMPLETE THEIR EDUCATIONAL GOALS



TRENDS ON KEY FACTORS: 2009 TO 2019



Financial resources





-  Have the financial resources to finish college
45.5% 2009 **48.5%** 2019
-  Have financial problems that are distracting
30.8% 2009 **30.1%** 2019
-  Am in a bad financial position and pressure to earn extra money will interfere with my students
18.6% 2009 **22.9%** 2019

Students who are receptive to academic assistance

-  Would like instruction on how to take college exams
75.6% 2009 **67.6%** 2019
-  Would like help to improve reading skills
28.2% 2009 **37.9%** 2019

Students who are receptive to personal counseling

Students completing the College Student Inventory report that they would like to talk with a counselor about their:

-  General attitude toward school
18.4% 2009 **20.2%** 2019
-  Personal relationships
10.5% 2009 **15.9%** 2019
-  Emotional tensions
8.8% 2009 **16.2%** 2019
-  Discouraging feelings
8.5% 2009 **14.2%** 2019



RNL has not previously reported on responses from students on matters related to personal counseling, but as this is a major topic of conversation on college campuses, we have included it this year.

More students want career assistance in 2019

All of the career development percentages related to requests for assistance have increased over the last decade.

TYPE OF ASSISTANCE	2019	2009
Help selecting educational plan to get a good job	73%	67%
Talk about qualifications needed for certain occupations	69%	63%
Talk with someone about salaries and future for occupations	60%	55%
Help selecting occupation suited to my interests	56%	47%
Talk about advantages and disadvantages of certain occupations	55%	48%

Students in 2019 also have more difficulty deciding on a career path, with one in four expressing confusion.



Increased confusion over career decision-making

21.8% 2009 **25.6%** 2019



Increased confusion when trying to choose occupation

19.6% 2009 **24.2%** 2019

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Compared to 10 years ago, entering first-year students are more confused about the career decision-making process and choosing the right occupation.
- Advisors and career success coaches need to be prepared to have relevant career development conversations with their students. This includes the first time they meet with students. That initial meeting should be applicable to the student's potential career path.
- Faculty, particularly those who teach first- and second-year students, need to include career development information, resources, and tips into their class lesson plans and interactions with students.
- Colleges need to tap into their alumni networks. Alumni can be great advocates for showing how their college education prepared them well for their career choices. Take advantage of new online resources that can track and report alumni career paths. Use this data to inform students about which majors translate into which jobs. This information can also be meaningful for students' parents.
- The economic impact of COVID-19 has already had a significant impact on job prospects for recent college graduates. Investing in career-readiness resources and strategies to assist future graduates in the volatile job market will be an imperative.

4

PROVIDE RESOURCES AND OUTREACH SPECIFICALLY FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

2009–2019 TRENDS FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

KEY CHALLENGES	2019	2009	CHANGE
I am deeply dedicated to finishing college	95%	95%	N/A
Of all the things I could do right now, going to college is the most satisfying	78%	88%	-10%
I wonder if college is worth the time, money and effort	29%	19%	-10%
Confused when trying to choose an occupation	27%	23%	4%
Confused about which occupation to pursue	25%	19%	6%
Financial situation creates pressure to earn extra money	31%	24%	7%
Easy to be friends with people who have different political opinions from me	71%	58%	13%
RECEPTIVITY TO ASSISTANCE			
Receive help to improve study habits	76%	62%	14%
Receive help to improve math skills	60%	50%	10%
Receive help to improve reading skills	47%	34%	13%
RECEPTIVITY TO CAREER GUIDANCE			
Get help selecting an occupation that suits my interests	59%	49%	10%
Talk about advantages/disadvantages of certain careers	57%	48%	9%
Talk about qualifications needed for certain occupations	72%	64%	8%

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Be aware of financial pressures for first-generation students. These students may come from socioeconomic backgrounds that are more vulnerable to economic fallout from the COVID-19 crisis.
- Be committed to promoting motivation. Invest in alumni testimonials that speak to the value of education and the role college plays in finding the right job and having career success. In particular, use testimonials from successful first-generation alumni.
- Invest in career resources. Get first-generation students the career help they need. Connect them to job planning resources on and off campus. Be proactive. Do not wait until a student's last year to make these resources available. Begin talking about career development during the student's first year of college. Correlate career discussions to the value an education can have on job success.

5 BUILD A FULL FIRST-YEAR PROGRAM

RNL's Mid-Year Student Assessment results indicate that by the second term a significant percentage of students do not get the help they requested, and a significant number of students are still seeking help in these areas. This is evidence that intentional and integrated support for first-year students is needed in the second term as well as in the first.

TOP REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE FROM ENTERING FRESHMEN AND RESULTS AT MID-YEAR

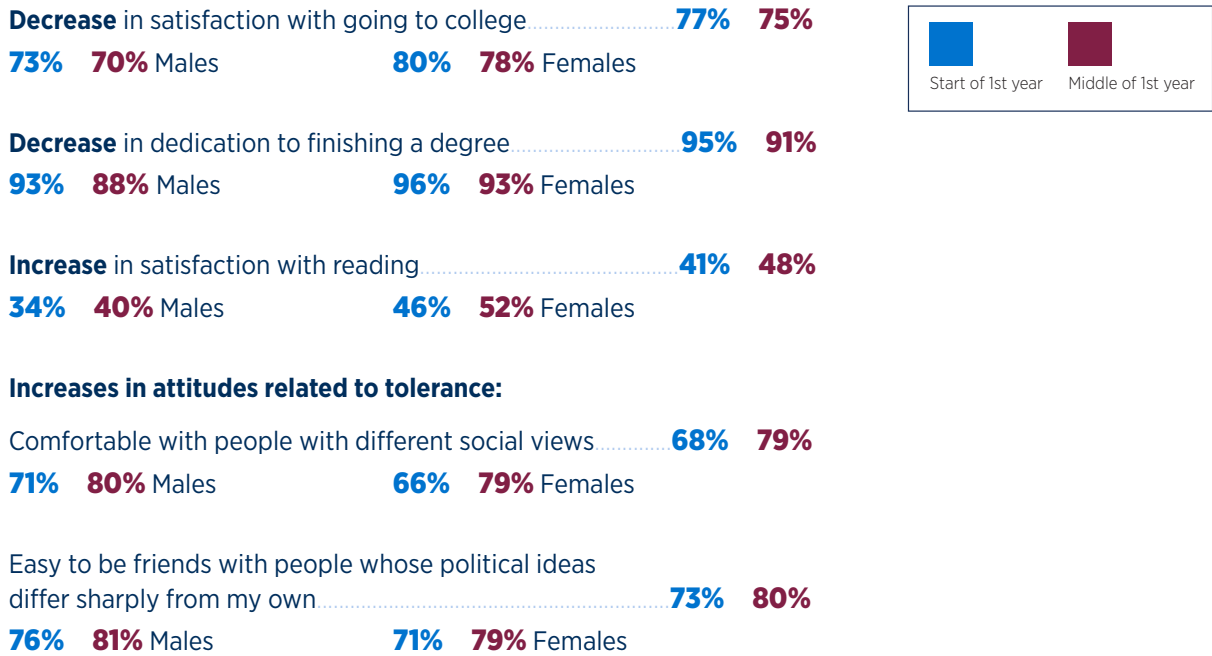
	REQUESTED IN 1ST TERM	RECEIVED IN 1ST TERM	STILL WANT IN 2ND TERM
Meet new friends	73%	41%	28%
Get help selecting an educational plan to get a good job	73%	42%	51%
Talk about qualifications needed for certain occupations	69%	45%	50%
Receive help to improve study skills	69%	54%	37%
Would like instruction on how to take college exams	68%	51%	37%
Talk about getting a scholarship with someone	67%	N/A	N/A
Talk with someone about salaries and future occupation	60%	34%	51%
Meet an experienced student to seek advice	56%	N/A	N/A
Help selecting an occupation suited to my interests	56%	38%	45%
Talk about advantages and disadvantages of certain occupations	55%	34%	49%

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Career-development assistance requests are the top five areas of interest for first-year students. These requests remain priorities into the second semester of enrollment. Knowing this, connect students early on with career services so they see the value of a degree and the impact an education can have on getting the job they desire.
- Be sure to assess students at mid-year. Do not let these gaps linger and negatively impact students' attitudes toward completing their degrees or whether they feel the institution cares about their success.
- Connect first-year students with enrolled students. Set up meet-and-greet events. Perhaps consider matching the students with those who are seeking the same degree and/or career path. Also consider using social networking platforms to create student connections, such as RNL's Melt Prevention solution (RuffaloNL.com/Melt)

Notable changes in attitudes during the first year of college

These results show changes from when students took the RNL College Student Inventory as entering freshmen to when they took the RNL Mid-Year Student Assessment.



6

BUILD A FIRST-TO-FOURTH-TERM STUDENT SUCCESS PLAN

Focusing on the expectations and experiences of second-year students is a proven strategy to improve graduation rates. Institutions need to address the needs of returning sophomores much in the same way they do incoming freshmen.






TOP REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE FROM SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS	STUDENTS WHO REQUESTED
Identify work experiences or internships related to my major	71%
Define goals suited to my major or career interests	57%
Explore advantages and disadvantages of my career choice(s)	56%
Figure out the impact of my grades on my desired major	50%
Prepare a written academic plan for graduation	49%
Find tutors in one or more of my courses	47%
Discuss options for financing my education	45%
Get help with study skills	40%
Find ways to balance the demands of school with work	38%
Select an academic program or major	37%

KEY TAKEAWAYS






- Pay close attention to students returning to campus in the fall of 2020. Assess their educational needs and career goals in light of the economic fallout from COVID-19. Do they need financial assistance? Do they need to work while taking classes and thus need help balancing class assignments and work demands? Do they need motivation when it comes to believing their education will pay off in terms of career success? In the wake of COVID-19 and the uncertainties of the virus's impact on the current and future state of the economy, students may need extra reassurance that their education will play a positive role in finding a job best suited to their skillsets and career desires.
- Identify gaps in what students want vs. what they actually get. When students feel they are receiving the support they need, not only will their learning abilities increase, their college satisfaction and motivation will as well.

Civitas Learning reviewed the impact of thousands of student success initiatives from several higher education institutions. In the case of first-year students, success with the initiative was relative to the way the initiative was deployed, the way it was managed, the students who were supported, and more.

First-year student persistence benefited the most from these five student services.

-  Advisor meetings (7.07 lift in persistence)
-  Supplemental instruction (6.06 lift)
-  Tutoring (5.20 lift)
-  Scholarships (5.03 lift)
-  Developmental ed programs (3.08 lift)

Compare this to students who completed four or more terms—the importance of targeted, informed student support structures is apparent.

-  Scholarships (3.42 lift)
-  Advisor meetings (3.37 lift)
-  Career planning (2.63 lift)
-  Tutoring (1.98 lift)
-  Supplemental instruction (1.49 lift)

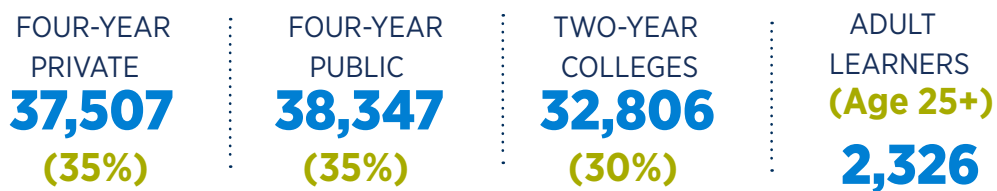
Source: *What Really Works: A Review of Student Success Initiatives*
https://media.civitaslearning.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/02/Civitas_Learning_What_Really_Works_Report.pdf



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.

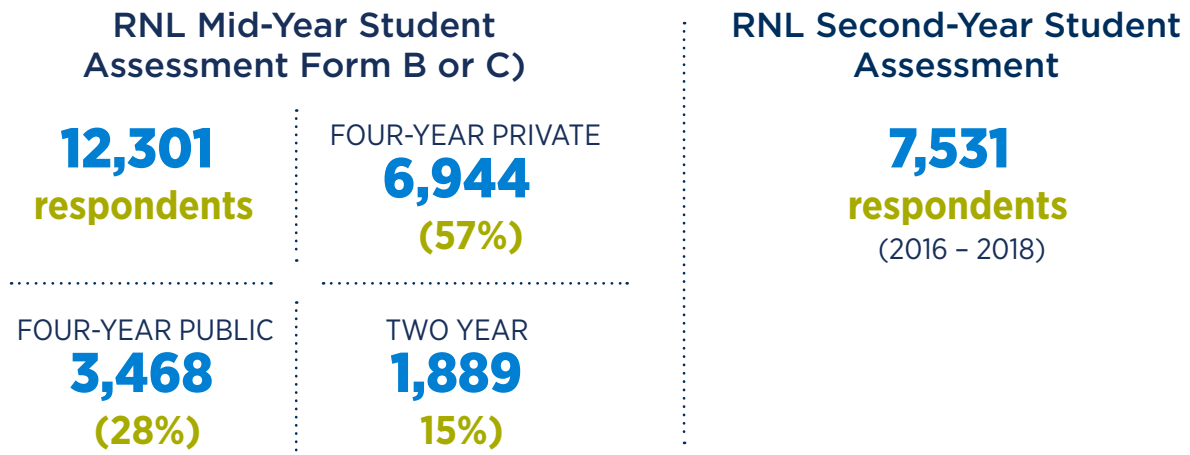
This study uses data from 108,660 students who completed the RNL College Student Inventory™ (CSI Form B or C), a college completion risk survey and self-assessment administered during orientation or in the first weeks of classes, including:



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 non-cognitive, 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



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



Visit RuffaloNL.com/StudentSuccess
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