



# 2021 National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report

Based on 397,571 student records at four-year and two-year colleges and universities



## WHY SATISFACTION MATTERS MORE THAN EVER IN THE POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Higher education is continuing to adjust to what is now our new normal, in a world where the pandemic has affected and altered nearly every aspect of the college student experience. Institutions are responding to keep their campus communities safe in new ways while also navigating diversity, equity, and inclusion issues. Providing students with the ability to share their feedback on their experiences in a variety of areas is more critical than ever to be sure that their college is responding appropriately, meeting student expectations, and prioritizing issues that truly matter to students.

### Satisfaction surveying is the best way to assess how students value their experience.

For more than 25 years, thousands of colleges and universities have used the RNL Satisfaction-Priorities Surveys to assess their students, strengthen the student experience, increase student success and completion, and prioritize campus planning initiatives.

The surveys are valued so highly because they reveal where institutions are succeeding and where they should focus their attention and resources. By asking students to rate their satisfaction and priorities, campuses can quickly uncover strengths and challenges



#### STRENGTHS

- High satisfaction
- High importance

*Areas to celebrate and promote*



#### CHALLENGES

- Low satisfaction
- High importance

*Areas to prioritize for improvement*

The RNL surveys take a comprehensive look at the student experience, asking students for their feedback on issues inside and outside the classroom, and then provide **peer institution benchmarks** for specific student groups.

#### Here are just a few examples of the many ways campuses use satisfaction-priorities data:

- Determining which student success resources could most benefit students.
- Maintaining a quality student experience for all students, whether traditional students, online learners, adult undergraduates, or graduate students.
- Benchmarking the student experience against competing institutions.
- Improving campus efficiency and collaboration among departments.
- Prioritizing campus development projects.
- Documenting improvements year over year for accreditation purposes.
- Identifying campus strengths to promote in recruitment communications.

## How have student perceptions changed since the pandemic?

The current aggregate national data sets provided as benchmarking comparisons to individual institutions reflect three academic years of data: 2018–2019, 2019–2020, and 2020–2021 from more than 397,000 students at 652 institutions.

This year's report examines the shifts in student perceptions between the pre-pandemic academic year of 2018–2019 and the most recent academic year of 2020–2021. The 2019–2020 academic year is not included in the analysis since participation rates dropped dramatically once the pandemic hit in March 2020.

While the participating institutions in each academic year may be different, this comparison provides a valuable perspective on the student experience from before the pandemic to the current experiences of students in the world we live in now.

### THE DATA SETS



FALL 2018–SPRING 2019

**193,460**

students from **361** institutions



FALL 2020–SPRING 2021

**97,740**

students from **260** institutions

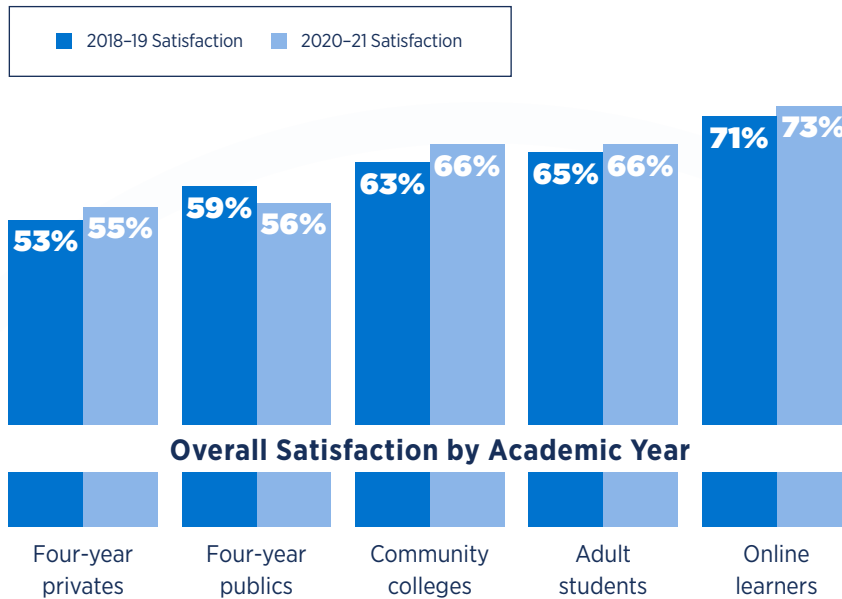
The results are reflected for five separate populations: students at four-year privates, at four-year publics, at community colleges as well as adult students in either graduate or undergraduate programs, and online learners.

For additional details on each of the five data sets, see page 23 of the report.



# HOW SATISFIED ARE COLLEGE STUDENTS AND HOW LIKELY ARE THEY TO RE-ENROLL?

## OVERALL SATISFACTION OVER TIME



Rate your overall satisfaction with your experience here thus far

### SCORING

- Not satisfied at all
- Not very satisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied
- Neutral
- Somewhat satisfied
- Satisfied**
- Very satisfied**

Percentages indicate the proportion of “satisfied” or “very satisfied” scores.

One-half to nearly three-quarters of college students reported that they were satisfied with their experience overall at the institution they were attending in the academic year 2020–2021. The overall satisfaction levels increased slightly in every case except at four-year public institutions.

Online learners and adult students consistently report higher overall satisfaction levels, with online learners (73 percent) having the most satisfaction.

Students at two-year institutions reported higher overall satisfaction levels than students at four-year institutions.

## Why measure student satisfaction and priorities?

Evidence-based research has documented strong links between students’ scores on RNL Satisfaction-Priorities Surveys with several areas, including:



Student retention



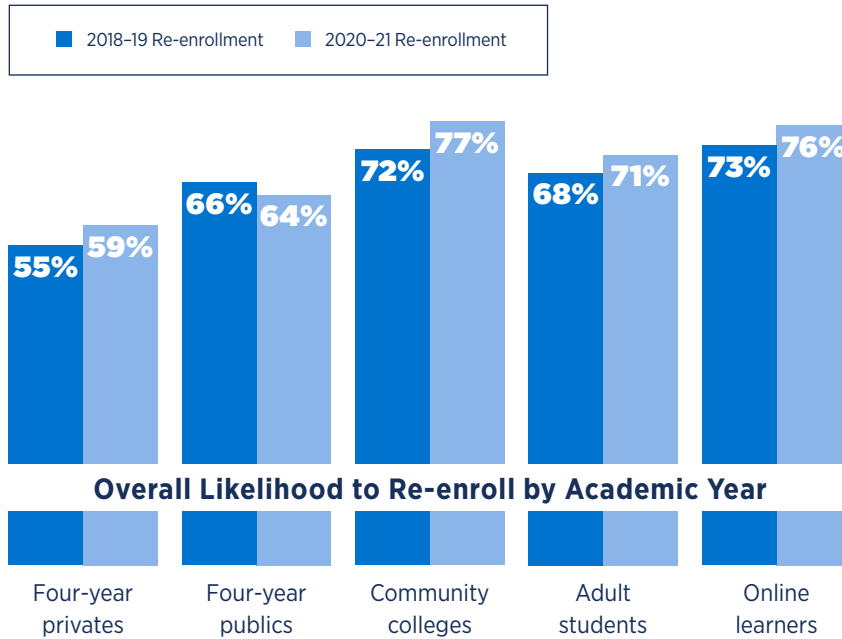
College completion rates



Alumni giving

TO LEARN MORE, DOWNLOAD THE INFOGRAPHIC AVAILABLE AT [RUFFALONL.COM/ASSESSMENT](https://RUFFALONL.COM/ASSESSMENT)

## LIKELIHOOD TO RE-ENROLL OVER TIME



All in all, if you had to do it again, would you enroll here?

SCORING

Definitely not

Probably not

Maybe not

I don't know

Maybe yes

**Probably yes**

**Definitely yes**

Percentages indicate the proportion of “probably yes” or “definitely yes.”

Knowing what they know now, would students re-enroll at their institution again? The majority of students in 2020–2021 said they would. Students at community colleges were the most likely to re-enroll. Online learners also had a high indication of re-enrolling. Again, except at four-year public institutions, the likelihood to re-enroll increased across all institution types compared with 2018–2019.

## TAKEAWAYS

The summary satisfaction and re-enrollment scores provide the big picture on the student experience. These are important scores to monitor to provide an indication of how institutions are performing based on the perceptions of their students. **Higher scores on these summary items typically correlate with higher institutional retention and graduation rates.**

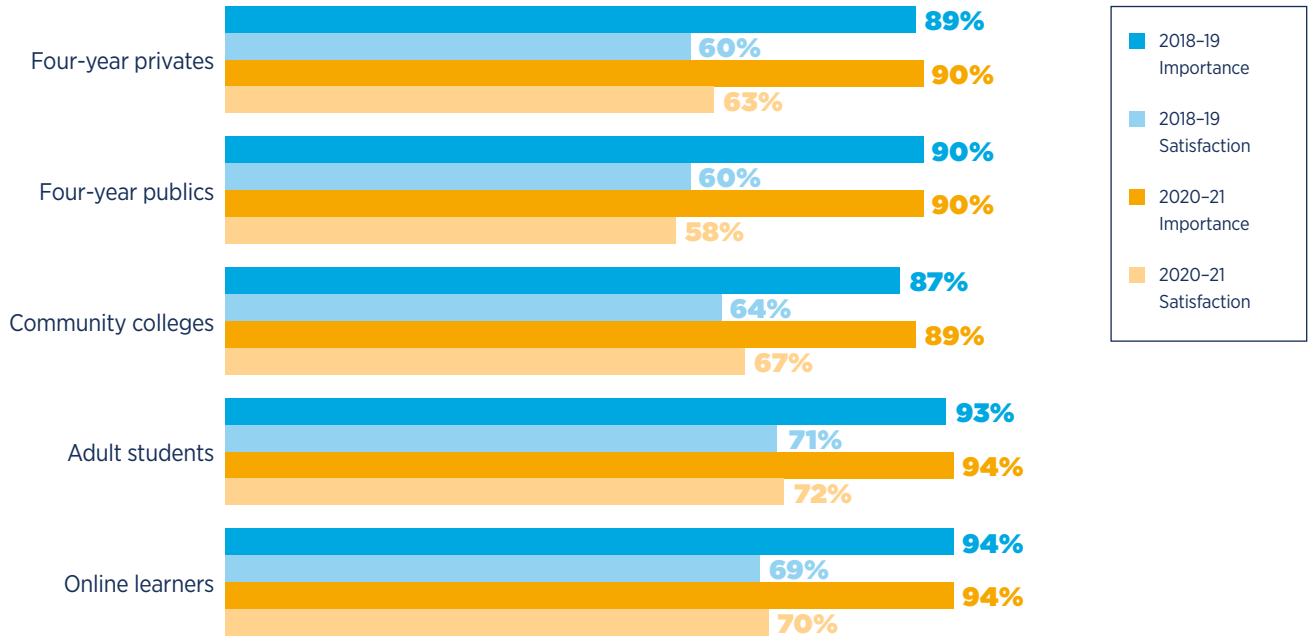
It may be surprising to observe that students in the most recent academic year indicated higher satisfaction and re-enrollment responses than in the pre-pandemic academic year. This could reflect students’ and institutional resiliency in adjusting to the new normal, or it might indicate that students who were not willing to adjust to safety measures, or to online and hybrid learning options, did not stay enrolled for 2020–2021 academic year.

The strong positive perceptions of students at community colleges is another item to note, both for the overall level of satisfaction and the likelihood to re-enroll. Based on these data, there is an opportunity for community colleges to highlight and emphasize the quality of the experience they are providing.

# HOW HAVE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS SHIFTED IN KEY AREAS OF THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE?

## The quality of instruction is excellent

The common denominator in the educational experience for traditional and nontraditional students is the instruction they receive from faculty.



The perceptions of the quality of instruction remained consistent in 2020–2021 when compared with the pre-pandemic 2018–2019 year. Students continued to place a high expectation on this item, and satisfaction levels stayed steady or increased slightly except for a small decline at four-year publics.

## TAKEAWAYS

Since most traditional campuses made the switch to online course offerings during the 2020–2021 academic year, the consistent perceptions of the quality instruction are a win for colleges and universities that had to navigate the new dynamic of online learning. On individual campuses this item may still be identified as a challenge (high importance, lower satisfaction). The recommendation is to isolate the data to specific programs to provide a clearer picture on where the instruction concerns are most often located.

As we go into the academic year ahead, with more high school students comfortable with online and hybrid learning environments, colleges and universities may see both higher expectations for the quality of the experience they are providing as well as students who are more accepting and satisfied with the modalities being offered.

### SCORING

#### Level of importance

- 1 - Not important at all
- 2 - Not very important
- 3 - Somewhat unimportant
- 4 - Neutral
- 5 - Somewhat important

#### 6 - Important

#### 7 - Very important

#### Level of satisfaction

- 1 - Not satisfied at all
- 2 - Not very satisfied
- 3 - Somewhat dissatisfied
- 4 - Neutral
- 5 - Somewhat satisfied

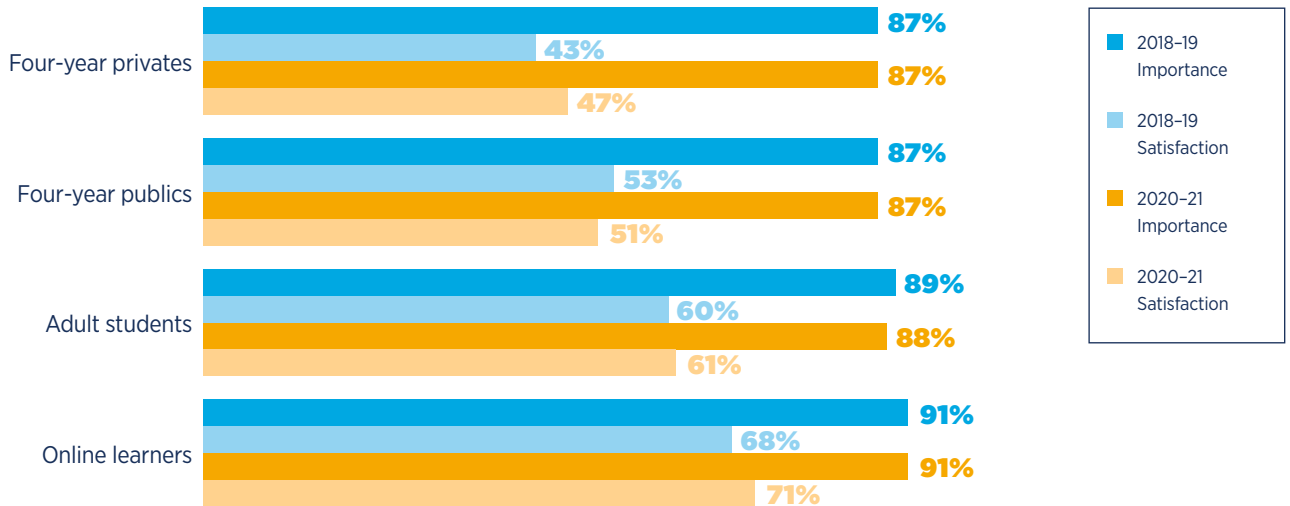
#### 6 - Satisfied

#### 7 - Very satisfied

Percentages indicate the proportion of students with scores of 6 or 7.

## Tuition paid is a worthwhile investment

Monitoring students' perception of the value they place on their financial investment has become even more critical as the cost of college has increased and learning experiences have been altered, and tracking these perceptions will continue to be essential in the academic years ahead.



Note: These data are not available for community colleges.

Four-year privates, which typically have higher tuition costs, reflect the lowest student satisfaction score in 2020–2021, though it has increased over the pre-pandemic academic year. Satisfaction levels held steady or increased for nontraditional students and dipped slightly for students at four-year publics.

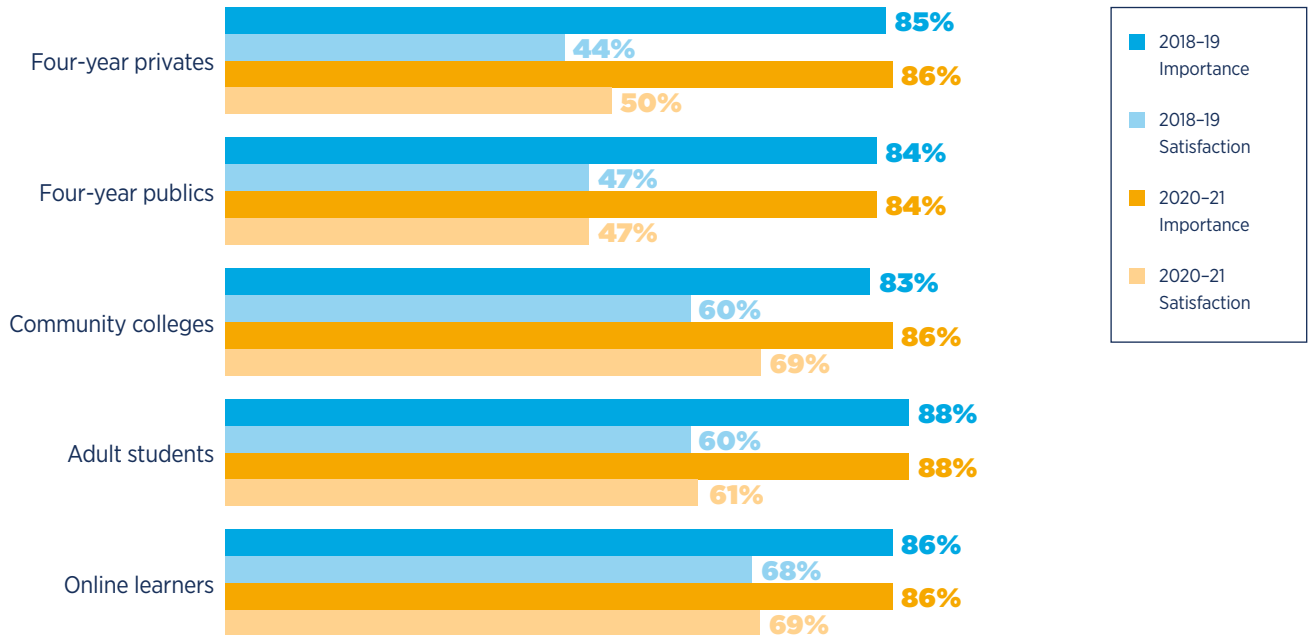
## TAKEAWAYS

This item is frequently identified as a challenge item within individual institutional data sets, indicating that it is a high priority area for colleges to address. Institutions need to continue to be sensitive to their tuition amounts, especially as college debt indicators rise and the overall student experience is adjusted in response to the ongoing pandemic concerns. In addition, intentionally communicating with students (and their families) about the value of their tuition investment should be a priority. During the recruitment process and after students enroll, the college should make the case for what students receive with their tuition dollars and how the college is working on their behalf to make the most of their investment.

The online learning population reflected in these results are students who *chose* to be enrolled online. This is an important distinction from students who may have experienced online or hybrid learning from traditionally face-to-face institutions. The perceived value of the tuition dollars in each case may be very different.

## Adequate financial aid is available for most students

The availability of financial aid is a key factor in the decision to enroll for many students at all institution types and an ongoing opportunity for institutions to make improvements in the amount of financial aid provided, along with the customer service offered through the financial aid office.



Adequate financial aid is often an area where institutions could be doing more to meet student expectations, especially at four-year institutions. Satisfaction on this item increased slightly at four-year privates and held steady at four-year publics in the recent 2020–2021 academic year. Community college satisfaction reflected a nice increase in satisfaction year over year. The adult and online learning populations stayed consistent with their generally higher satisfaction scores on this item.

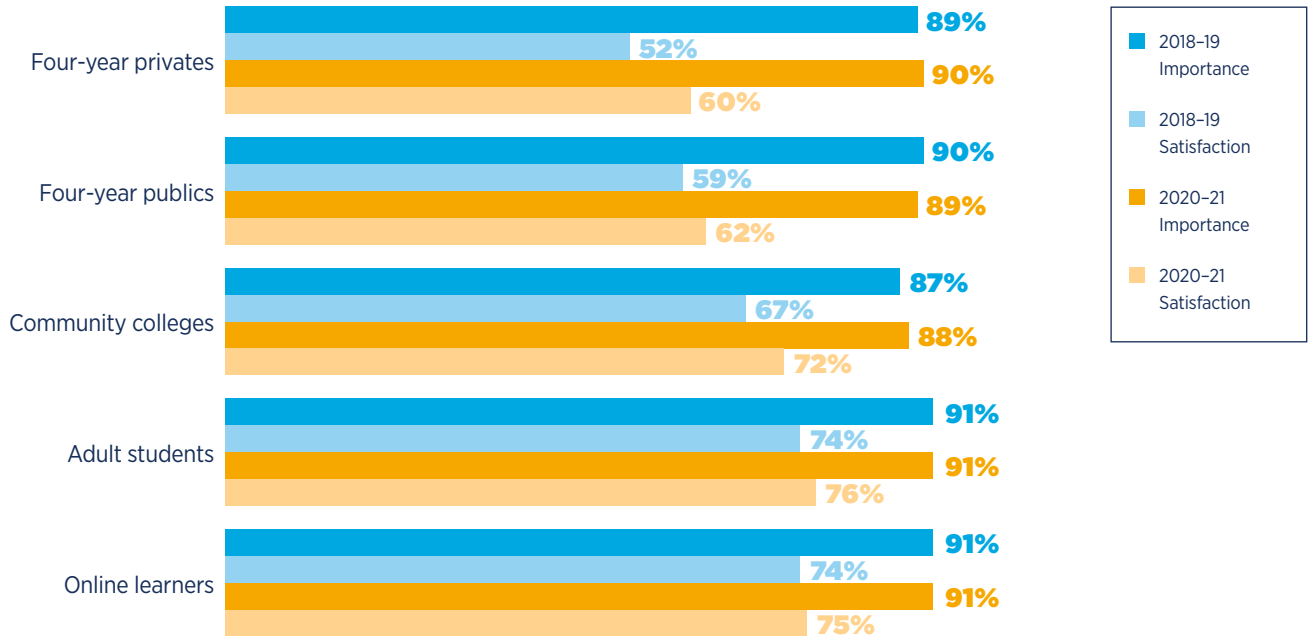
## TAKEAWAYS

While satisfaction levels held steady or increased in this area from one year to the next, colleges and universities will need to continue to be sensitive to the financial fallout from the pandemic and the effect on students and their families as they award financial aid. Institutions need to make sure students and families can find information and instructions for applying for aid. In addition, making the case for the value of the college experience and education (in any modality) can help demonstrate the return on the investment in an education. Finally and most importantly, ensuring that education is affordable and will not saddle students with debt levels they cannot handle should be ongoing priorities for an institution in today’s environment.



## Able to register for classes with few conflicts

Getting the classes students need, when they need them, has always been a priority area. It is also an area where institutions have often struggled to meet expectations.



Note: For the online learners, the item is phrased: "There are sufficient offerings within my program of study."

This item saw a nice increase in student satisfaction in 2020–2021 at four-year private institutions and at least slight increases for the other student populations, including four-year publics.

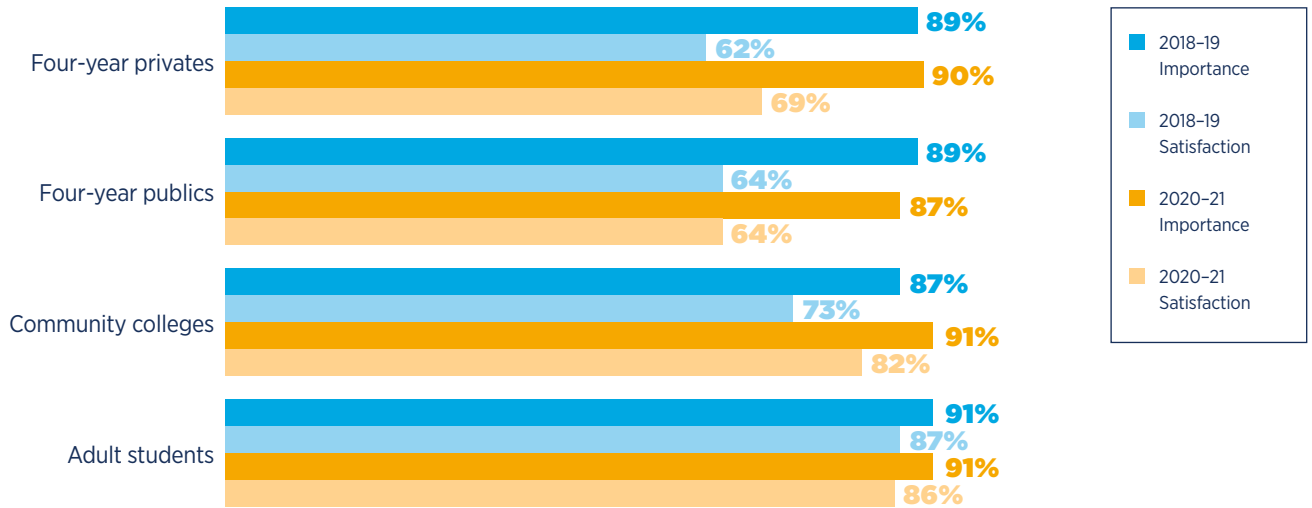
## TAKEAWAYS

Based on the results indicated here, it appears that the addition of online course offerings has provided students with more opportunities to be satisfied with accessing the classes they need with fewer conflicts.

Institutions will want to continue to be aware of how they are addressing this issue in the year ahead as campuses transition back to face-to-face options. Are there opportunities to continue to offer online or hybrid options for high-demand courses that may not have enough physical space in a classroom?

## The campus is safe and secure for all students

In the past year, the sense of being safe and secure on campus has likely expanded to not only include potential physical threats but the ability of the campus to keep them safe from health concerns as well.



Note: This item is not asked of online learners.

Satisfaction levels increased significantly on this item at four-year privates and community colleges and held steady for four-year publics and adult students.

## TAKEAWAYS

Regularly taking the pulse of student perceptions of this item will be important in the year ahead. Are institutions meeting student expectations with feeling safe and secure, based on policies and procedures for keeping the campus community healthy, as well as having security staff respond quickly in emergencies and keeping on-campus locations well-lighted and secure?

A sense of security is a baseline requirement for students to be able to appropriately focus on their instruction and their interaction with faculty and other students. This is true more than ever as a result of the global pandemic. But as stated earlier, students appear to be resilient and satisfied with how their institutions are responding during this unprecedented situation for campus safety.

## WHAT ARE THE UNIQUE OBSERVATIONS FOR EACH STUDENT POPULATION?

### FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS

FACTOR IN THE DECISION TO ENROLL	2018-19	2020-21	COMPARISON
Cost	80%	81%	+1%
Financial aid	84%	85%	+1%
Academic reputation	78%	77%	-1%
Size of institution	59%	61%	+2%
Opportunity to play sports	37%	41%	+4%
Recommendations from family/friends	46%	48%	+2%
Geographic setting	59%	60%	+1%
Campus appearance	61%	61%	0%
Personalized attention prior to enrollment	64%	66%	+2%

Percent of students who indicate the factor is important or very important

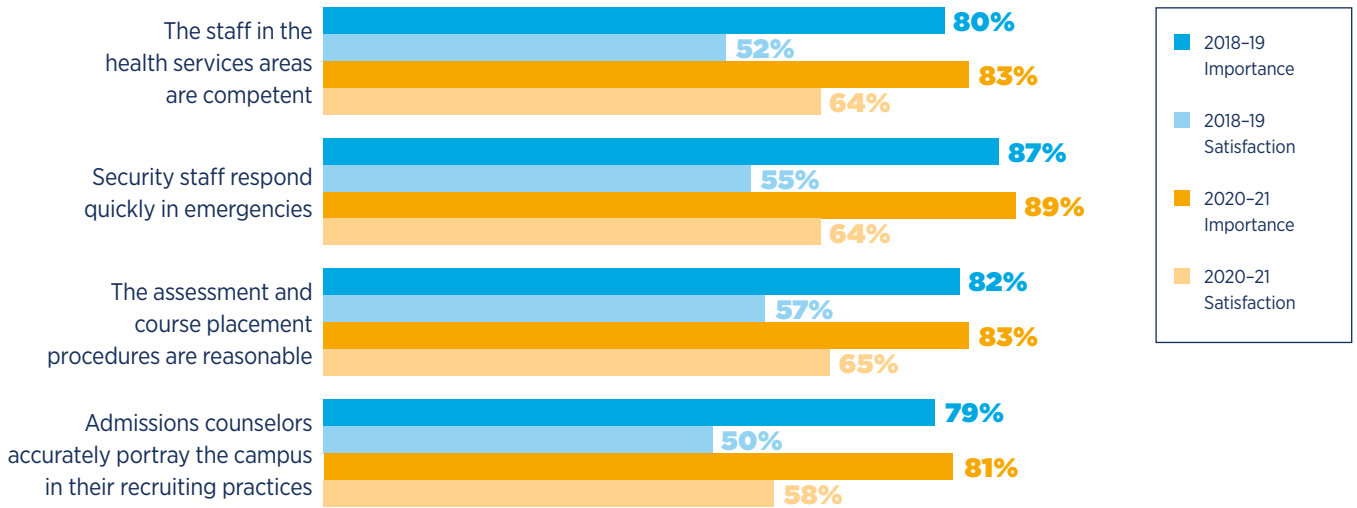
What is of note here is what didn't change. Financial aid, cost, and academic reputation are the primary factors. Even the importance of geographic setting stayed similar; perhaps with more online offerings, it was not as emphasized by students.



## FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS

### Importance and satisfaction levels on key items

Satisfaction levels increased between 2018–2019 and 2020–2021 on these items of interest at four-year private institutions.



The trend for four-year privates were increases in student satisfaction on all individual items. These highlighted items had among the greatest improvement in satisfaction year over year.

## DEMOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

- 10% fewer living on campus (42% in 2020–2021 vs. 52% in 2018–2019) with 7% more living with their parents and 5% living in their own house.
- 6% more indicating their permanent residence is in state (67% vs. 61%).
- 3% more attending their first choice institution (62% vs. 59%) .

## FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

### Enrollment factors

FACTOR IN THE DECISION TO ENROLL	2018-19	2020-21	COMPARISON
Cost	81%	83%	+2%
Financial aid	81%	82%	+1%
Academic reputation	76%	73%	-3%
Size of institution	57%	54%	-3%
Opportunity to play sports	36%	33%	-3%
Recommendations from family/friends	51%	46%	-5%
Geographic setting	65%	57%	-8%
Campus appearance	61%	55%	-6%
Personalized attention prior to enrollment	61%	56%	-5%

Percent of students who indicate the factor is important or very important

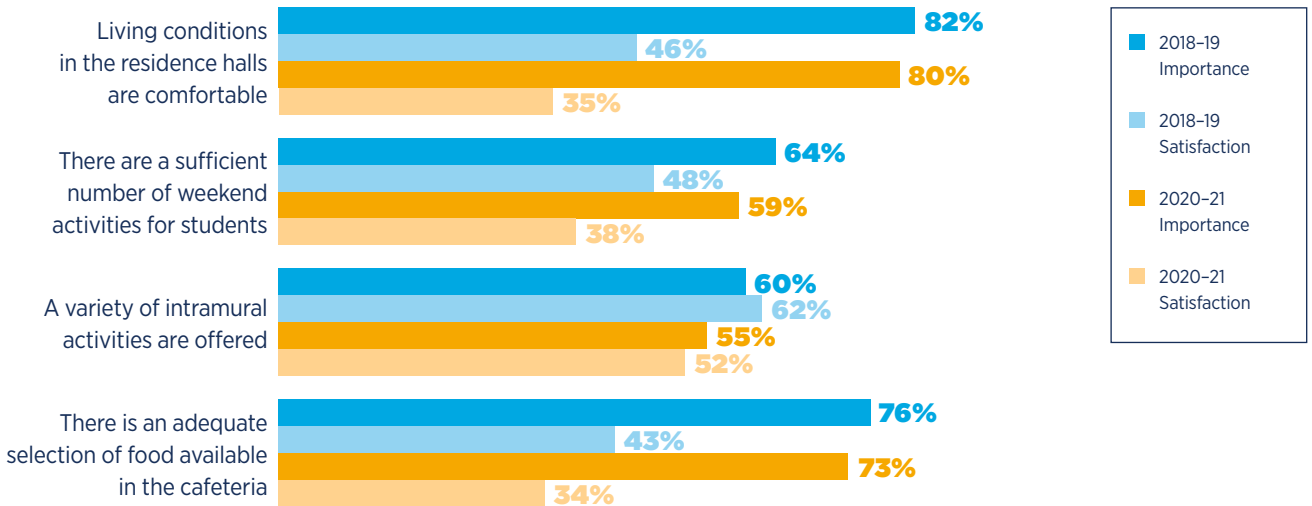
Several areas dropped in importance to students as factors in the decision to enroll, but cost and financial aid remained consistent in their high levels of importance.

The importance of geographic setting dropped the most, perhaps because of online and hybrid offerings that made students less concerned about the campus's physical location.

## FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

### Importance and satisfaction levels on key items

Satisfaction levels decreased between 2018–2019 and 2020–2021 on these items of interest at four-year public institutions.



Four-year publics had drops in satisfaction in most areas. These items had among the largest declines in satisfaction between 2018–2019 and 2020–2021.

### DEMOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

- There are double the percentage of graduate/professional students reflected in 2020–2021: 18% vs. 9%.
- There were significantly more Black/African American students (18% vs. 11%).
- More were attending their first choice institution (65% vs. 62%).

## COMMUNITY COLLEGES

### Enrollment factors

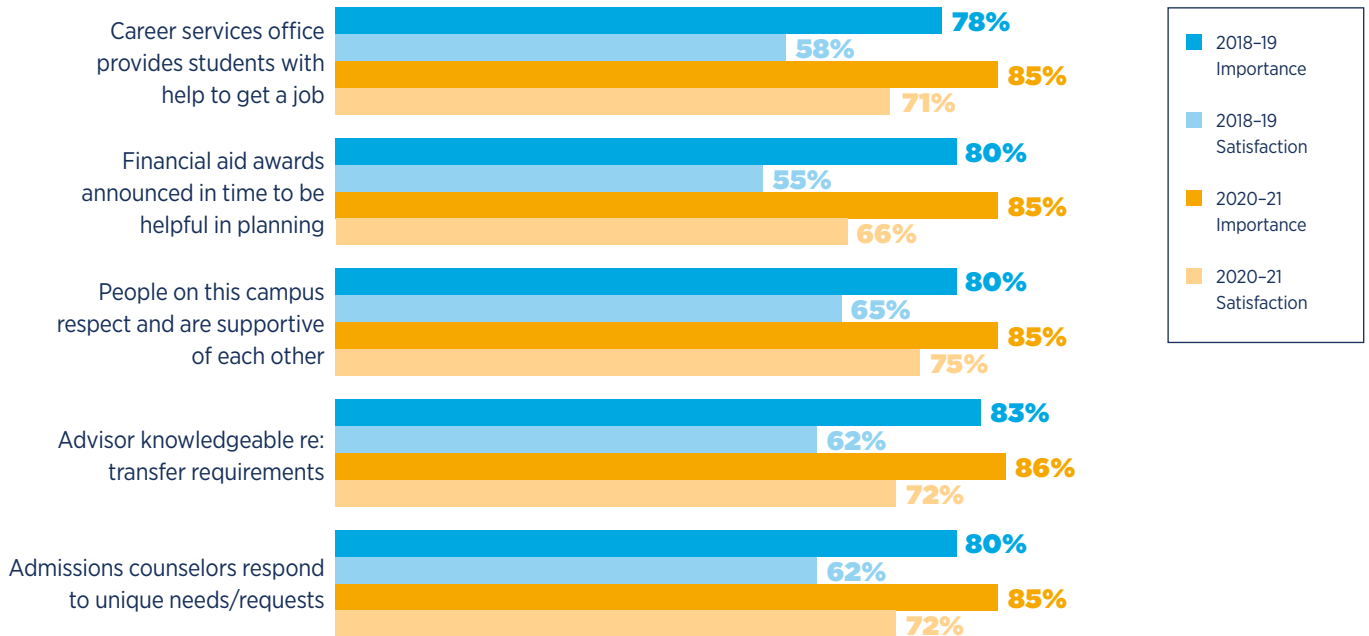
FACTOR IN THE DECISION TO ENROLL	2018-19	2020-21	COMPARISON
Cost	85%	85%	0%
Financial aid	79%	83%	+4%
Academic reputation	73%	77%	+4%
Size of institution	55%	59%	+4%
Opportunity to play sports	35%	40%	+5%
Recommendations from family/friends	53%	58%	+5%
Geographic setting	65%	70%	+5%
Campus appearance	58%	60%	+2%
Personalized attention prior to enrollment	62%	67%	+5%

Percent of students who indicate the factor is important or very important

While cost held steady and remained the most important factor in the decision to enroll for community college students, all other areas increased in importance. Of particular interest is the higher importance indicated for geographic setting, which may indicate students' interest in staying closer to home in 2020-2021.

## Importance and satisfaction levels on key items

Satisfaction levels increased between 2018–2019 and 2020–2021 on these items of interest at community colleges.



Importance scores and satisfaction levels increased on the majority of items at community colleges with these items reflecting some of the largest improvements.

## DEMOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

- There are fewer 19 to 24 year-olds in 2020–2021 (43% vs. 49%), more 25 to 34 year-olds (by 3%), and more 35 to 44 year-olds (by 4%).
- Fewer students worked part-time off campus (31% vs. 39%) and more were not employed (33% vs. 26%).
- There were more females (69% vs. 61%) and fewer males (31% vs. 39%).
- More students were attending their first-choice institution (74% vs. 69%).



## ADULT STUDENTS

### Enrollment factors

FACTOR IN THE DECISION TO ENROLL	2018-19	2020-21	COMPARISON
Cost	79%	80%	+1%
Financial aid/scholarships	78%	78%	0%
Academic reputation	80%	81%	+1%
Size of institution	54%	54%	0%
Future employment opportunities	78%	79%	+1%
Recommendations from family/friends/employer	62%	62%	0%
Campus location (close to home/work)	75%	72%	-3%
Availability of evening/weekend courses	78%	76%	-2%
Personalized attention prior to enrollment	69%	70%	+1%

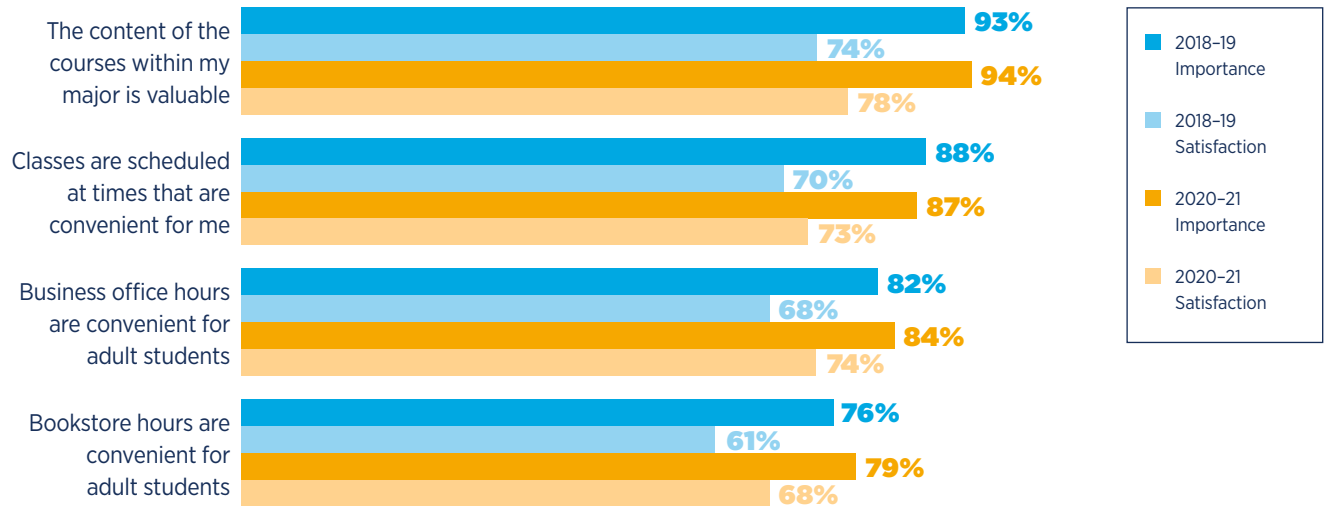
Percent of students who indicate the factor is important or very important

The top four factors in the decision to enroll have stayed consistent without much shift in importance. It is interesting to note that the campus location and availability of evening/weekend courses may have dropped in importance due to more classes available online in the past academic year.

## ADULT STUDENTS

### Importance and satisfaction levels on key items

Satisfaction levels increased between 2018–2019 and 2020–2021 on these items of interest for adult students.



In general, satisfaction scores for adult students stayed fairly comparable year over year, with some of the larger shifts in satisfaction reflected here.

### DEMOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

- There are significantly more daytime students in 2020–2021 than there were in 2018–2019 (49% vs. 39%).
- More students were not employed (24% vs. 19%).
- There were fewer Caucasian/White students (48% vs. 52%).

## ONLINE LEARNERS

### Enrollment factors

FACTOR IN THE DECISION TO ENROLL	2018-19	2020-21	COMPARISON
Ability to transfer credits	84%	83%	-1%
Cost	84%	85%	+1%
Financial assistance available	82%	82%	0%
Future employment opportunities	80%	80%	0%
Reputation of institution	83%	82%	-1%
Work schedule	91%	90%	-1%
Flexible pacing for completing a program	91%	91%	0%
Convenience	93%	92%	-1%
Distance from campus	63%	64%	+1%
Program requirements	85%	85%	0%
Recommendations from employer	59%	57%	-2%

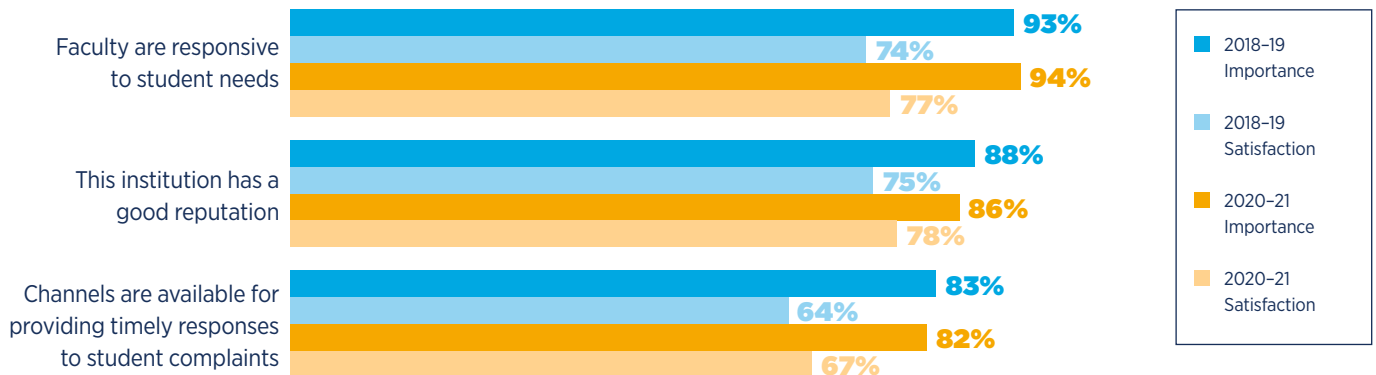
Percent of students who indicate the factor is important or very important

The factors in the decision to enroll held consistent year over year for online learners.



## Importance and satisfaction levels on key items

Satisfaction levels increased between 2018–2019 and 2020–2021 on these items of interest for online learners.



The importance and satisfaction scores reflect that the overall experience of online learners didn't change much between 2018–2019 and 2020–2021. The majority of scores remained steady year over year, with these three items reflecting a couple of the larger improvements in satisfaction.

## DEMOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

- There were more students enrolled primarily online rather than primarily on campus in 2020–2021 than there were in 2018–2019 (97% vs. 94%).
- Fewer students were employed full time (67% vs. 72%) and more not employed (18% vs. 14%).
- There were fewer Caucasian/White students (58% vs. 62%).

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ASSESSING STUDENT SATISFACTION GOING FORWARD

Do you know how satisfaction levels have shifted on your campus since the pandemic? Have you identified internal trends or made note of areas where students may have higher expectations than they did in years past?

As budgets tighten and the student experience continues to evolve in the current environment, assessing student satisfaction will remain a critical data point for institutions to gather. Understanding student priorities along with their satisfaction levels based on the experience you are providing can inform and guide the actions you take going forward.

If you took a year off from assessing student satisfaction because of the pandemic, it is an ideal time to return to your regular assessment cycle going forward. Understanding any shifts in satisfaction and priorities will be crucial given how much the higher education experience has changed for students.

All survey instruments in the RNL Satisfaction-Priorities Survey family can be implemented with an online administration, inviting students via email to complete the survey electronically. RNL manages the email invitation and reminder messages on your behalf. Results are available via a reporting dashboard within three weeks, giving you national comparison data, year-over-year trend comparisons, and the ability to slice the data on all demographic variables.

## Ready to benchmark your students' satisfaction and priorities with RNL Satisfaction-Priorities Surveys?

**It's easy to survey your students with RNL surveys.**

By capturing both how satisfied students are, as well as levels of importance, the **RNL Satisfaction-Priorities Surveys** provide valuable insights for campus planning and strategy. Institutions can pinpoint their greatest challenges as well as areas of success that should be promoted. Colleges and universities use these surveys for:

- Student retention planning
- Campuswide planning projects
- Accreditation documentation
- Benefits that should be promoted in student recruitment



See survey samples at [RuffaloNL.com/SatisfactionSurveys](https://RuffaloNL.com/SatisfactionSurveys)

## SURVEYS SPECIFIC TO THE POPULATIONS YOU SERVE

The **RNL Student Satisfaction Inventory**, the original instrument is designed for traditional students who are primarily enrolled on campus, with versions specific to the four-year and the two-year experience.

The **RNL Adult Student Priorities Survey** is available for undergraduate and graduate students at four-year institutions, primarily enrolled on campus.

The **RNL Priorities Survey for Online Learners** is for students enrolled online at four-year or two-year institutions, at the undergraduate or graduate level.

## WHY ADMINISTER THE SURVEY INSTRUMENTS FROM RNL?



They measure both the level of satisfaction and the level of importance, giving you results that show what truly matters to students.



The surveys capture perceptions of the student experience inside and outside of the classroom.



You can track institutional trends, year over year, to show improvements in student satisfaction.



You can slice the results by all demographic responses to see how particular subpopulations respond differently on key items.



Most surveys can be completed in just 15 to 20 minutes online.



You receive benchmarks within three weeks that compare your students' scores to peer institutions, so you know where your students are significantly more or less satisfied.

## SOURCE OF THE DATA



National sample of **397,571** students from **652** colleges and universities, fall 2018 through spring 2021



### FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE

**105,471**

students from **223** institutions

(25% freshmen; 22% sophomores;  
23% juniors; 24% seniors)

ACADEMIC YEAR	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	NUMBER OF INSTITUTIONS
2018-2019	47,388	115
2020-2021	21,921	79



### FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC

**60,834**

students from **60** institutions

(20% freshmen; 18% sophomores;  
25% juniors; 27% seniors)

ACADEMIC YEAR	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	NUMBER OF INSTITUTIONS
2018-2019	34,967	30
2020-2021	6,462	12



### COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGES

**100,104**

students from **131** institutions

(64% full-time; 36% part-time)

ACADEMIC YEAR	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	NUMBER OF INSTITUTIONS
2018-2019	55,258	84
2020-2021	25,572	52



### ONLINE LEARNERS

**89,261**

students from **141** institutions

(67% undergraduate; 33% graduate;  
94% primarily online; 6% primarily on ground)

ACADEMIC YEAR	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	NUMBER OF INSTITUTIONS
2018-2019	37,572	75
2020-2021	30,855	68



### ADULT STUDENTS

**41,901**

students from **97** institutions

(74% full-time; 26% part-time;  
42% undergraduate; 58% graduate)

ACADEMIC YEAR	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	NUMBER OF INSTITUTIONS
2018-2019	18,275	57
2020-2021	12,930	49

## 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.

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## 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**



Visit [RuffaloNL.com/StudentSuccess](https://RuffaloNL.com/StudentSuccess)

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### How to cite this report

RNL (2021). *2021 National Student Satisfaction Report*. Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Ruffalo Noel Levitz.  
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Download the Appendix to find the list of institutions included in this study. [RuffaloNL.com/Satisfaction](https://RuffaloNL.com/Satisfaction)