RNL®

2023 National First-Year Students and Their Motivation to Complete College Report

Data and insights on the challenges and opportunities for completing a college degree, based on an analysis of nearly 80,000 first-year college students

Do today's first-year students think that college is worth it?

Students stand in a difficult position in higher education. They have emerged from a pandemic that disrupted their lives for two years and likely impacted their preparation for college. They are matriculating at a time of economic uncertainty for their families while also facing significant challenges paying for college. These and other factors are also taking a significant mental toll on these students, as they are increasingly stressed, distressed, and mentally strained. What can colleges and universities do to address these issues and help students succeed?

The 2023 National First-Year Students and Their Motivations to Complete College Report provides insights that illuminate how you can serve your students. These findings present a student perspective on the challenges and factors affecting their motivation and success.

The findings in this report are taken from data collected in 2022 from nearly 80,000 student records of first- and second-year students who completed an assessment in the RNL Retention Management System (RMS), a suite of three early-alert assessments that measure non-cognitive indicators in students:

- Incoming students: College Student Inventory (CSI)
- Students at the middle of the first year: Mid-Year Student Assessment (MYSA)
- Students entering year two: Second-Year Student Assessment (SYSA)

The findings are also broken down by institution type and show key trends over the last several years.

5 Key Findings About Incoming First-Year Students

1) Nearly 30 percent of students question whether college is worth it.

2) Three-quarters of incoming students want to meet new friends at college.

3) About 1 in 6 incoming students want to talk with a counselor.

4) Two-thirds of students want help selecting an educational plan that will help them get a good job.

5) Nearly all entering students are committed to college.

SOURCE OF DATA: 79,118 student records from students who took the RNL College Student Inventory Form B.

Find full results for more than 80 items in the Appendix

This report presents key highlights, but you can find national results for more than 80 items along with results by institution type: **RNL.com/FirstYear**

Why Assessment Matters: The Impact of Surveying Students on Graduation Rates

RMS assessments measure non-cognitive indicators in students, which reveal critical information about their attitudes toward college, strengths and challenges, and areas of assistance. With the data from the RMS, colleges and universities can identify which individual undergraduates are most at risk, gauge students' receptivity to assistance in key areas, and immediately connect at-risk students to relevant campus resources.

These interventions make a significant difference in graduation rates. An analysis of the internal data of campus clients using the RMS and client graduation rates in IPEDS shows that these institutions have higher graduation rates across the board.

RETENTION SUCCESS
Graduation rates for institutions that use the RMS compared to those that do not

RMS USE	FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE	FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC	TWO-YEAR PUBLIC
Using RMS	43%	38%	16%
Not using RMS	32%	27%	9%

RNL (2023) Internal Proprietary Data and U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education System.

RETENTION OPPORTUNITY
Fewer than half of colleges and universities use assessments to identify the needs of incoming students

48%
FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE

44%
FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC

30%
TWO-YEAR PUBLIC

Source: 2021 Effective Practices for Student Success, Retention, and Completion (RNL)

RETENTION STRATEGY

Surveying incoming students provides a holistic understanding of their needs and interests
Institutions that do not assess their incoming students are missing a chance to maximize the success of their students and their educational outcomes.

Assessing students delivers key benefits to campuses

- Pinpoint optimal strategies for student success
- Match students to the services that meet their needs
- Increase yield rates

- Identify needs of special populations
- Make advising/success coaching more effective
- Intervene with students before they decide to withdraw

1) Commitment To College

Nearly all students want to finish college, but many question whether it's worth it

The vast majority of incoming students express a strong commitment to completing their academic journey, and that trend has remained consistently high in recent years.

2022	4-YEAR PRIVATE	4-YEAR PUBLIC	2-YEAR PUBLIC	OVERALL
Strongly dedicated to finishing college	94%	95%	92%	94%

YEAR-TO-YEAR TREND	2019	2020	2021	2022
Strongly dedicated to finishing college	95%	95%	94%	94%

However, more than one in four incoming students question the value of college, an attitude that has increased in recent years.

2022	4-YEAR PRIVATE	4-YEAR PUBLIC	2-YEAR PUBLIC	OVERALL
Wonder if college is worth the time, money, and effort	27%	28%	30%	28%

YEAR-TO-YEAR TREND	2019	2020	2021	2022
Wonder if college is worth the time, money, and effort	25%	26%	28%	28%

Questioning whether college is worth it has appeared in other RNL research as well. In the *2022 National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report,* only 52 percent of students at four-year public institutions and 45 percent at four-year privates said they were satisfied the tuition they paid was a worthwhile investment (74 percent of students at two-year colleges said they were satisfied that tuition paid was worthwhile).

ⓘ Strategies for success

- **Conduct motivational assessments at three key points:** at the start of the first term, the middle of the first year, and between years one and two. This will provide data at the three most critical junctures of a student's career and enable you to intervene before students withdraw.

- **Use outcomes data and alumni stories to show the value of college.** Providing data on employment, graduate/professional school placement, income levels for college graduates, and similar metrics can keep students motivated to continue college. Add in stories from alumni (especially videos) to build interest and encouragement in reaching their educational goals.

2) Social Engagement

Incoming students are looking for a sense of belonging at their new institutions

More than anything, incoming students want to meet new friends when they arrive at an institution. Three out of four requested assistance in that area, making it the top request from new students (see p. 8 for the top 10 requests for assistance). The majority also expressed interest in clubs and meeting students to seek advice. While these numbers were lower for students at two-year institutions, a significant proportion of students still expressed interest in social engagement.

REQUEST	4-YEAR PRIVATE	4-YEAR PUBLIC	2-YEAR PUBLIC	OVERALL
Would like to meet new friends at informal gathering	76%	79%	55%	73%
Find out more about clubs and organizations at college	67%	75%	48%	66%
Meet an experienced student to seek advice	54%	60%	46%	55%
Find out about student government and activities on campus	52%	55%	38%	50%

ⓘ Strategies for success

- **Offer opportunities to connect virtually and in-person.** Virtual connections are a great way to start engaging students before they arrive at campus, and once they do arrive, be sure to have ample opportunities for them to interact with each other.

- **Tailor student life programs for specific populations**. First-generation or transfer students will likely have different challenges in meeting new students than other groups, for instance. Think of how you can create different engagement opportunities that will appeal to key student populations.

Campus success strategies

Here's what one of the institutions using the RMS said about how they use the survey to set up success opportunities.

"Whether students are seeking support with academics, social engagement, career guidance, or more, we anticipate their needs and reach out from our service departments early to help break the ice and ensure students know how to connect when they need us. Service departments and students alike have given rave reviews about the process. We are able to anticipate the needs of our students, show our students that we acknowledge and value their unique situation as a learner, and connect our service departments with students who really want or need their help."

3) Mental Health

Student success efforts must address the growing need for mental health and wellness

Increasing numbers of students report having mental health challenges. This was already on the increase before the pandemic but has jumped significantly in the post-pandemic period. More than 60 percent of students meet the criteria for having a mental health issue, and three-quarters report at least moderate psychological distress.*

While the number of incoming students who are requesting counseling services is lower than the numbers above, one in six incoming students said they wanted to talk to counselors about feelings of discouragement, unhappy thoughts, or emotional tensions. One in five want to talk with counselors about their general attitude toward school.

WANT TO TALK WITH A COUNSELOR ABOUT	4-YEAR PRIVATE	4-YEAR PUBLIC	2-YEAR PUBLIC	OVERALL
General attitude toward school	17%	20%	20%	19%
Difficulties in social life	16%	17%	15%	16%
Emotional tensions	17%	17%	14%	16%
Feelings of discouragement and unhappy thoughts	14%	15%	13%	14%

ⓘ Strategies for success

- **Ensure information on mental health resources are readily available**. Make sure you have this information during orientation and embedded into first-year-experience and other courses.

- **Look for resources that can help students access services quickly and when they need it.** Online/telecounseling resources are one way to provide counseling support at scale.

Campus success strategies

Here's how one four-year public university used their assessment data to support mental health initiatives.

> "We adopted the use of the College Student Inventory (CSI) as an initiative for our First-Year Experience Quality Enhancement Program. We were interested in learning the 'mental temperature' of our incoming freshmen. Little did we know that the CSI became our lifeline to support our first-year students who were affected by COVID with their transition and as their families were experiencing the mental and financial strain of the pandemic. The data we gathered from the CSI helped us implement initiatives to address some of the mental challenges students cope with in their first year."

*Abrams, Z. (2022, Oct 1). Student mental health is in crisis. Campuses are rethinking their approach. *Monitor on Psychology*, American Psychological Association. https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/10/mental-health-campus-care

4) Career Assistance

Show students how they can turn their educational journey into a promising career path

Career guidance was the second-most desired area of assistance for incoming students, with nearly 70 percent saying they wanted help creating an educational plan that would lead to a good job. Students also had several other career-related areas they wanted to discuss.

DESIRED CAREER GUIDANCE	4-YEAR PRIVATE	4-YEAR PUBLIC	2-YEAR PUBLIC	OVERALL
Help selecting an educational path to get a good job	69%	74%	62%	69%
Talk about qualifications needed for certain occupations	65%	70%	63%	67%
Talk with someone about salaries for future occupations	57%	62%	49%	58%
Help selecting an occupation suited to their interests	52%	58%	50%	54%
Talk about advantages/ disadvantages of certain occupations	52%	57%	46%	53%

ℹ️ Strategies for success

- **Incorporate student success plans in which career-related activities are connected to educational coursework**. This will help students see the relevance of their academic work to their career pursuits.

- **Merge career-related activities with opportunities to engage with faculty and staff**. Activities such as informational interviewing in the first year can provide new students with extra interactions with experts in their fields and additional knowledge about their careers.

- **Have outcomes data by major**. Information on job placements, professional and graduate school paths, and other quantifiable metrics on career outcomes will reinforce the value of an area of study.

- **Communicate career information to parents**. Showing the value of completing a degree to parents will encourage them to communicate that value to their students.

Campus success strategies

This two-year institution uses its assessment data to connect their students to the most appropriate services such as career services:

> "We have been utilizing the CSI for more than five years, but recently made changes to utilize our student results more holistically. We have begun identifying the support services that are most important to each individual learner using their unique CSI results, and we provide students with proactive and targeted connection to the supports that are most important to them before they even begin their program."

5) Top Requests for Assistance in the First Two Years

How do student requests for assistance change?

The first two years of college are the most critical for student success—if students can make it to their second year, they are highly more likely to complete their educational goals. But how do their needs change over the course of those two years?

The three RMS assessments reveal the answers to those questions, and here are the top 10 requests for students at those three junctures.

Incoming students: Top 10 requests for assistance

① Would like to meet new friends at an informal gathering **73%**

② Help selecting an educational plan to get a good job **69%**

③ Receive help to improve study habits **67%**

④ Talk about qualifications needed for certain occupations **67%**

⑤ Find out more about clubs and organizations at college **66%**

⑥ Would like instruction on how to take college exams **65%**

⑦ Talk with someone about getting a scholarship **63%**

⑧ Talk with someone about salaries for future occupations **58%**

⑨ Meet an experienced student to seek advice **55%**

⑩ Help selecting an occupation suited to my interests **54%**

Incoming students express a variety of needs: meeting friends and engaging socially, career planning, study habits, and scholarships. These results show why it's important to assess students individually so you can connect them to the most relevant and helpful campus resources.

Middle of first-year: Top 10 requests for assistance

1. Receive help with an educational plan to prepare for a good job..................................... **52%**
2. Discuss qualifications needed for various occupations.. **52%**
3. Discuss salaries and future outlook for various occupations.................................. **52%**
4. Discuss advantages and disadvantages of various occupations............................. **51%**
5. Receive help selecting an occupation suited to my interests and abilities............ **47%**
6. Help in improving my study habits.. **42%**
7. Instruction in effective ways to take college exams....................................... **40%**
8. Help improving my math skills... **39%**
9. Help improving my writing skills... **39%**
10. Get information about opportunities for holiday or summer jobs...................... **38%**

By the middle of the first year, the top requests for assistance focus on career and academic support. Students at this point want help succeeding academically and aligning those academic interests with a post-college career.

Second-year students: Top 10 requests for assistance

1. Identify work experiences or internships related to my major.......................... **67%**
2. Define goals suited to my major or career interests(s)................................... **55%**
3. Explore advantages and disadvantages of my career choice........................... **54%**
4. Prepare a written academic plan for graduation... **49%**
5. Discuss options for financing my education.. **48%**
6. Figure out the impact of my grades on my desired major............................ **48%**
7. Find tutors in one or more of my courses.. **43%**
8. Get help with study skills (time management, taking notes, exam skills, etc.)..... **42%**
9. Find better ways to manage my personal finances (incl. loans, work, credit cards)... **42%**
10. Find ways to balance the demands of school with work............................... **42%**

The second-year interests are similar to the mid-year interests, but there is a shift to acquire experience/skills through internships, solidify their career interests, and stay on the path to graduation. It's also notable that second-year students have financial concerns, both with paying for college and personal finances as well as balancing school with work.

ℹ️ Strategies for success

- **Keep assessing students as they progress.** As students' needs change, it is important to have accurate, up-to-date data that will inform your outreach and connect them to the most relevant resources.

- **Be proactive in providing support.** Once you have been surveying students, you will understand common challenges and frequent needs for assistance, allowing you to anticipate some of those needs and have the right kinds of support available.

- **Act on your data and address gaps in support.** Assessment is only as effective as the actions it informs. Make sure your student assessment data guides your strategies. You also should assess students to uncover if they received the assistance they needed—and if they did not, look at how you can ensure that those needs are met for future students.

About the instruments used in this report

This report uses data from students who completed an assessment from the Retention Management System in the summer/fall of 2022 or ahead of the 2022-23 academic year.

College Student Inventory Form B

Administered during orientation or within the first few weeks of class.

Total Respondents	Four-year private	Four-year public	Two-year public
79,118	**26,842**	**34,207**	**18,069**

Mid-Year Student Assessment

Administered at the mid-point of the first year.

Total Respondents	Four-year private	Four-year public	Two-year public
7,589	**3,129**	**3,275**	**1,185**

Second-Year Student Assessment

Administered toward the end of the first year or fall of the second year.

Total Respondents

1,465

Strengthen student success by assessing your students

Find out how you can gain insights into each student, intervene earlier with them, and connect them to the resources they really need.
RNL.com/RetentionManagement

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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 satisfaction and priorities assessments
- Resources for career services

- Student retention planning
- Yield and engagement to prevent stop-outs
- Predictive analytics for student retention

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