



SENSE OF BELONGING:

Insights from the 2023 Diverse Learning Environments Survey

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Introduction

Administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) and housed at the Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST), the Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) Survey captures student perceptions regarding institutional climate; campus practices as experienced by faculty, staff, and peers; and student learning outcomes. Diverse student populations are at the center of the survey, and the instrument is based on studies of diverse student bodies and the complexity of issues that range from student mobility to intergroup relations.

The 2023 DLE survey was fielded from October 2022 to April 2023. Data from the 2023 survey offer useful insights for college and university administrators, faculty, and staff to better understand students' experiences.



This brief highlights differences in students' perceptions of their learning environments—even within the same campus contexts—to identify potential pressure points against persistence and completion.

70%
used financial
aid during the
academic year

57%
were students
of color

32%
identified as
LGBTQ+

26%
were
first-generation
students

26%
were ages 25
and older

34%
had a total
household income
<\$40,000

-
- 1 The 15 institutions included three universities, 10 four-year colleges, and two community colleges. Of these, nine were public institutions and six were private.
 - 2 The 10 states were California, Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Missouri, North Carolina, New Jersey, New York, and Oregon.
 - 3 Data analysis for this brief was based on the 8,559 students who completed 10 percent or more of the survey.

Students' perceptions of belonging can have an impact on their academic success, co-curricular engagement, mental health and well-being, and personal development (Gopalan and Brady 2020; Maghsoodi, Ruedas-Gracia, and Jiang 2023; Thomas 2012). Studies have also emphasized the importance of sense of belonging in influencing student retention in higher education (American Federation of Teachers 2003). Understanding students' sense of belonging within each of these domains equips administrators and other stakeholders to best address challenges, improve individual and collective campus experiences, and support student success.

Accessing Resources and Services as a Means of Belonging

Student Services

Students were asked to rate how frequently they utilized institutional services, with answers that ranged from “not at all” to “occasionally” to “frequently.” Of all the services listed, the majority of students responded that they frequently used academic advising (27 percent), followed by career counseling and advising (11 percent). The disability resource center and campus safety services—which, respectively, 84 percent and 80 percent of students reported that they did not use at all—were used the least.

More first-generation students occasionally or frequently used financial aid advising, compared with students whose parents or guardians had completed at least some postsecondary education.⁴ Among first-generation students, 12 percent frequently and 42 percent occasionally used this service, while 8 percent of non-first-generation students reported frequent and 30 percent indicated occasional use.

Over half (55 percent) of genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or other gender identifying students reported occasional or frequent use of student health services, and these students accessed these services at a higher rate than those of either men or women. Compared with men, women utilized these services more often. Two in five women students reported occasional or frequent use of student health services, while 35 percent of men did. Slightly fewer than two-thirds of men and women did not use this service at all (65 and 60 percent, respectively).

Among LGBTQ+ students, larger shares of gay or lesbian (55 percent), transgender (51 percent), bisexual (48 percent), and queer or other identifying (46 percent) students indicated that they occasionally or frequently utilized student health services, compared with non-LGBTQ+ students (35 percent).⁵

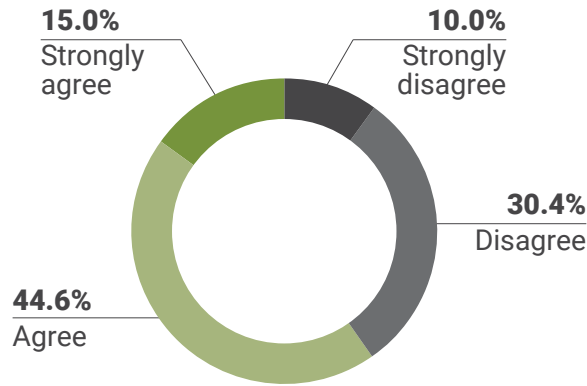
Among respondents, students of color (10 percent) frequently used tutoring or other academic assistance at a slightly higher rate than that of White students (7 percent).⁶ Black or African American (14 percent) and Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander (10 percent) students responded that they frequently used these services—a larger share than other racial or ethnic groups.

4 The term *first-generation students* includes respondents who reported that their parents or guardians had completed less than some college. The term *some college* describes the experience of individuals who made any progress in college but did not complete their degree or credential.

5 The term *LGBTQ+* includes respondents who identified as bisexual, gay or lesbian, transgender, or queer or other identity.

6 The term *students of color* includes respondents who identified as racial and ethnic categories other than White.

FIGURE 1. STUDENTS' ABILITY TO TALK WITH A CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL WHEN NEEDED

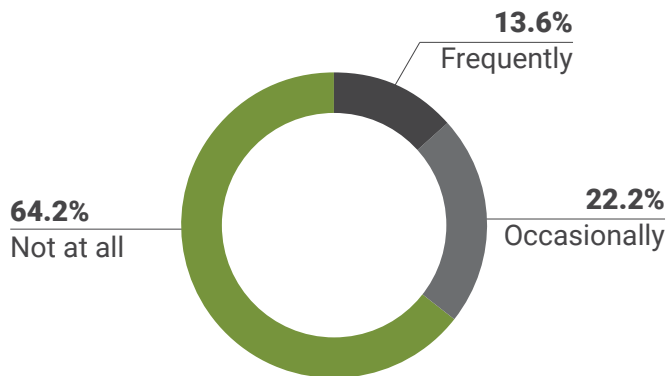


Students were asked to indicate their agreement as to the availability of mental health professionals on their campus. Overall, 30 percent of students disagreed and 10 percent strongly disagreed that they were able to talk with a campus mental health professional when needed (see figure 1). Nearly one-third of students of color (32 percent) disagreed that they were able to talk with a campus mental health professional when needed, while 10 percent strongly disagreed. Disagreement was highest among Hispanic or Latino (34 percent disagreed, 9 percent strongly disagreed) and Black or African American students (33 percent disagreed, 12 percent strongly disagreed). A higher share of students who identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community disagreed (34 percent) or strongly disagreed (12 percent) with the statement that they were able to talk with a campus mental health professional when needed, compared with non-LGBTQ+ students who disagreed (29 percent) or strongly disagreed (9 percent).

Basic Needs

Nearly one-fourth of students (22 percent) reported that they occasionally felt hungry but did not eat because they did not have enough money for food; an additional 14 percent reported that they frequently felt hungry (see figure 2). The share of students who frequently felt hungry but did not have enough money for food was highest among students whose total household income was less than \$40,000 (21 percent). A larger share of students who identified as LGBTQ+ (16 percent) than that of non-LGBTQ+ students (12 percent) reported that they frequently felt hungry. About 17 percent of students of color frequently felt hungry; within this group, American Indian or Alaska Native (23 percent) and Black or African American (20 percent) students represented the largest shares of respondents.

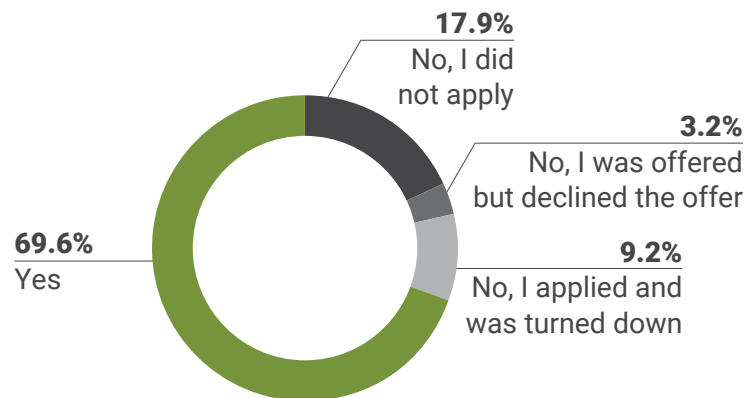
FIGURE 2. FREQUENCY OF STUDENTS WHO FELT HUNGRY BUT DID NOT EAT BECAUSE THEY DID NOT HAVE ENOUGH MONEY FOR FOOD



Financial Aid

Students were asked whether or not they used financial aid. Among all students, 70 percent reported they used financial aid during the academic year (see figure 3). Nearly three in four (74 percent) students of color reported that they used financial aid; shares of students who indicated this were highest among American Indian or Alaska Native (85 percent), Hispanic or Latino (84 percent), and Black or African American (79 percent) students. Among students whose total household income was less than \$40,000, 84 percent reported that they used financial aid, compared with students whose total household income was \$40,000 or more (63 percent). Four in five first-generation students reported that they used financial aid, in contrast with 65 percent of students whose parents or guardians had completed at least some college or more. Students who attended private institutions (73 percent) used financial aid at a higher rate, compared with students who attended public institutions (68 percent).

FIGURE 3. STUDENTS' USE OF FINANCIAL AID



Students' Feelings and Experiences of Belonging

Students were asked about their agreement with statements regarding their sense of belonging at the college or university they attended. Nearly three-fourths of students agreed (52 percent) or strongly agreed (22 percent) that they felt a sense of belonging on their campus. Over half of all students (56 percent) agreed and an additional 25 percent strongly agreed that they felt they were a member of their college or university.

How Students Feel About Interactions with Faculty

Students were also asked a series of questions about their interactions with faculty. The majority of students reported positive experiences with faculty engagement in their classes. Most respondents (61 percent) agreed that faculty empowered them to learn, with an additional 26 percent of students who strongly agreed with this statement. Moreover, most respondents agreed (55 percent) or strongly agreed (37 percent) with the statement that faculty believed in students' potential to succeed academically. Most students also viewed faculty feedback as helpful. More than two-thirds of respondents felt that faculty provided them with feedback that helped them to assess their progress, either often (42 percent) or very often (27 percent).

Over one-third of students (36 percent) said that their professors very often encouraged them to ask questions and participate in discussions, while 39 percent said this often occurred. Only 2 percent of students indicated that they never felt encouraged by faculty to ask questions and participate. Students also reported that they felt their contributions in class were often (38 percent) or very often (24 percent) valued. A larger share of conservative and politically middle-of-the-road students reported that they never felt their contributions were valued by faculty (5 percent for both groups, a response rate that was about two times higher than the approximate 2 percent of liberal and far-left students who responded as such). A higher share of students at private institutions (44 percent),

when compared with those who attended public institutions (36 percent), reported that they often felt that their contributions were valued by faculty. These groups both had similar proportions of students who responded that they felt their contributions were very often valued (25 percent and 24 percent, respectively).

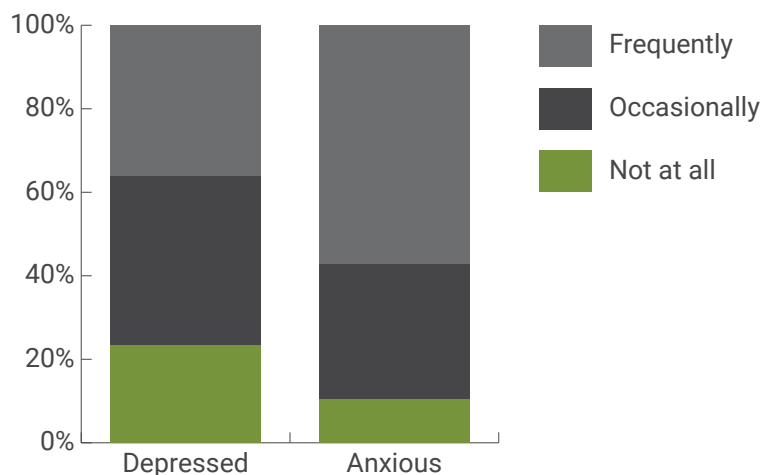
How Students Feel About College Marketing

One out of every five students who attended private institutions (21 percent) and more than one out of four students who attended public institutions (27 percent) strongly agreed that their institution’s publications (e.g., brochures, website) accurately reflected the diversity of its student body. Students who attended private institutions disagreed or strongly disagreed (24 and 6 percent, respectively) with this statement at double the rate of those who attended public institutions (12 percent disagreed, whereas 3 percent strongly disagreed).

Students’ Feelings of Depression and Anxiety

Students were asked how often they felt depressed. Two out of every five students (41 percent) reported that they occasionally felt depressed, with an additional one-third of students (36 percent) who reported that they frequently felt depressed (see figure 4). Larger shares of Black or African American students (40 percent), students of two or more races or ethnicities (40 percent), and White students (38 percent) reported that they frequently felt depressed. Depression was also more prevalent among LGBTQ+ students, with more than half of transgender (63 percent), bisexual (53 percent) and queer or other identifying students (54 percent) who reported that they frequently felt depressed. Comparatively, fewer non-LGBTQ+ students (28 percent) reported that they frequently felt depressed. The highest rates of those who reported they frequently felt depressed were genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or other gender identifying students (63 percent), followed by women (37 percent) and men (26 percent). Conversely, one-third of men indicated that they never felt depressed, compared with 21 percent of women and 7 percent of genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or other gender identifying students.

FIGURE 4. FREQUENCY OF STUDENTS WHO FELT DEPRESSED OR ANXIOUS



Additionally, students were asked how often they felt anxious. Over half of all students (57 percent) indicated that they frequently felt anxious, and nearly one-third of students (32 percent) reported that they occasionally felt anxious (see figure 4). Feeling anxious was a common experience for LGBTQ+ students—with the majority of transgender (82 percent), bisexual, (74 percent), gay or lesbian (72 percent), and queer or other identifying students (75 percent) who reported that they frequently felt anxious—while less than half (49 percent) of non-LGBTQ+ students did so. Anxiety was also common among genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or other gender identifying students, with over four in five students (83 percent) who frequently felt anxious, followed by women (61 percent) and men (41 percent).

Considerations for Senior Leaders

How can these insights become actionable on campuses today? College presidents and senior executives have a responsibility to provide resources and build collective capacity in order to address the complex challenges that students face. A good starting point is to identify which campus offices have data on students' use of services and their perceptions of belonging. From there, solutions for improving belonging, persistence, and completion can be prompted by asking the following questions:

- How are we assessing students' sense of belonging at the institutional level, especially that of underrepresented students?
- Does the distribution of the institution's service usage rates look like the campus's population?
- How are we identifying barriers to engagement for our students and actively working to reduce those barriers?

This approach is crucial for fostering a supportive and successful campus environment. Once these questions have been posed, senior leaders should bring any insights to cabinet meetings, stakeholder conversations, and engagement with community partners to address gaps that have been identified.

As college presidents and senior executives navigate these conversations, it may also be useful to consult these resources:

- *What Works for Improving Mental Health in Higher Education?*—This brief provides insights on effective resources, practices, and policies to promote well-being among all students and offers recommendations to help higher education leaders make evidence-based investments in student mental health.
- *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: 2024 Status Report*—This report examines over 200 indicators to determine who accesses a variety of educational environments and experiences in order to explore how student trajectories and outcomes differ by race and ethnicity.
- *Driving Toward a Degree 2023: Awareness, Belonging, and Coordination*—This report by Tyton Partners uses insights from students, staff, and administrators to improve awareness, foster belonging, and reinforce coordination of equitable student support services.

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