

Student Perceptions and Expectations of Support Services in Higher Education

Blackboard's research reveals students' mixed perspectives regarding support provided by their institutions, including gaps in support for at-risk, minority and online students and services to support mental health.



Study Background and Methodology

This survey was conducted in January 2021 in partnership with Qualtrics, a market-leading experience management and survey platform company. Over 2,100 postsecondary students from across the United States responded, reaching a broad array of traditional and non-traditional student audiences. The purpose of the study was to better understand the entire student support experience, barriers to student success, and whether there are differences based on student population. Respondents spanned across award level, institution type, and modality. The study includes statistically significant data on the following student populations: non-traditionalⁱ, minorityⁱⁱ, onlineⁱⁱⁱ and at-risk^{iv}. In the survey, student support services were categorized into the following areas for feedback: Academic support/Tutoring; Financial aid; Advising; Mental health; Physical health; IT or technology assistance; Career services; Military/VA benefits; Accessibility/Disability; Registration; and Student records.

i. Non-traditional: a student meeting at least one of the following criteria: part-time enrollment, financially independent, has child(ren)/dependent(s), English as a second language, first generation, work full-time

ii. Minority: any non-white student identified as Black or African American, Hispanic or Latinx, Native American, Alaska Native, Asian or Asian American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or Multiracial

iii. Online: student enrolled "fully online" prior to the COVID-19 pandemic

iv. At-risk: identified in the study as those who indicated they were either not planning to continue or complete studies as scheduled or were undecided on whether to complete

Silver Linings and Lessons Learned from the Pandemic

During the pandemic, student support became increasingly important for students, with 65% indicating that support services are more important to them now than before the pandemic. The Blackboard survey showed that despite countless challenges students faced because of COVID-19, the majority were satisfied with the level of support they received. A notable percentage (74%) of students reported support was at least as good or better during the pandemic, suggesting that many of the virtual and alternatives to in-person support that institutions developed improved student support for many.

However, this was not the case for all. About a quarter of students reported feeling support worsened during the pandemic. The study highlights that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to student support and that each student population has its own unique needs and expectations when it comes to support services. A personalized experience could potentially be the most effective strategy.



A majority of students reported support was at least the same or better during the pandemic (74%).

38% of students responded that support got better during the pandemic, while 36% said it stayed about the same.



Over half of students (52%) were satisfied with the level of support they received during COVID-19, while 27% were indifferent and 21% were dissatisfied.



65% of students believe support services are more important now than before the pandemic.



While 74% of students believe support stayed the same or got better, 26% of students reported support at their school worsened during the pandemic.

At-Risk Populations Report a Lack of Support but Suggest Institutions Can Change Their Stop-Out Trajectory

At-risk student populations were far more likely to report a lack of necessary support services to succeed when compared to their counterparts.

The survey showed that at-risk populations were less likely to have received support in the past or have known where to find it, were less likely to believe their school cares about supporting them, and had much lower confidence that their support needs would be met at school compared to their peers. For example, at-risk students were nearly half as likely to feel confident they could find academic/tutoring support (32% vs 60%). Just a quarter of at-risk students were confident they could find advising support while more than half of not at-risk students felt confident (25% vs. 52%).

And for financial aid support, only 39% of at-risk students felt confident finding support compared to 56% of not at-risk students.

They also cited much more difficulty getting support they need compared to their peers, suggesting that they have actively tried to get support, but have not successfully received the support they need.

There are clear steps to take for colleges and universities to improve—and at-risk students, themselves, believe universities can take action to keep them from discontinuing.



79% of at-risk students said their institution could or might be able to help get them back on-track.

Online, Minority & Non-Traditional Students Have Different Experiences and Expectations Around Support

Across different sub-populations, the study revealed that students had different experiences accessing and receiving the support they need.



Across all services, students of color were less confident they'd find appropriate support



Online students were also less likely to find necessary support services

When asked how institutions can look to improve their support services, students indicated they value continual availability (24 hours a day, 365 days a year) as a premium requirement (43% selected in top three), followed closely by speed (41%), and ease-of-access (38%).

However, student preferences differed based on circumstances, and the survey highlighted how various student populations prefer distinct methods and channels of communication, suggesting a customized and personalized approach for addressing varying needs.



At-risk students are more likely to prefer automated services than other populations, including chatbots (34% to 19%, respectively) and self-service phone menus (34% to 25%, respectively).



Non-traditional students are slightly more likely to prefer text messages than traditional students (48% to 41%, respectively).



Online students are more likely to consider technical support an impact on their ability to remain enrolled.

Gaps in Mental Health Support Emerge

While mental health was cited as the most important area of support (tied with financial aid), it was also the most difficult area to receive support and accounted for the lowest level of student satisfaction among all categories of student support. Among at-risk populations, mental health was the second-most cited factor (44%) impacting their ability to stay enrolled (following financial aid at 50%). The study highlights access to mental health support as a major area of need.



Mental health was cited as the most important area of support (tied with financial aid), with 85% of students listing it as important or very important.

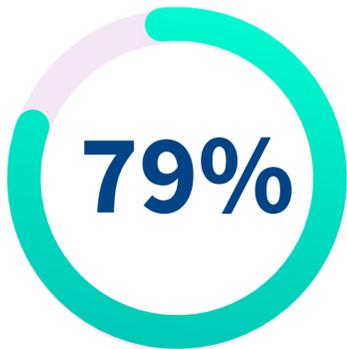


Yet, 21% of students found it somewhat or extremely difficult to get mental health support.



Additionally, 16% of students were extremely or somewhat dissatisfied with the level of mental health support they were receiving.

Post-Pandemic Takeaways



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The percentage of at-risk students who said they believe their school can or might be able to provide support to change their mind regarding enrollment.
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The percentage of at-risk students who said mental health had the greatest impact on their ability to stay enrolled, the second-most-cited factor behind financial aid.
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The percentage of students who like receiving automated reminders for upcoming tasks and deadlines, including half of students who “like [them] a great deal.”
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This study reveals the importance of personalized experiences to support the unique needs and expectations of diverse student populations.

For more information about the survey, methodology or findings, email press@blackboard.com

