
Understanding What Matters Most in the Higher Education Experience

THE PERSPECTIVE OF RECENT COLLEGE GRADUATES

INTRODUCTION

As colleges and universities broaden their reach and seek sustainability in an evolving higher education marketplace, few factors are as important as ensuring support for students from a diverse array of backgrounds and experiences. While leaders grapple with economic dynamics and technology transformation, the power of students' voices—and the impact of their educational choices—may be the single greatest determinant of institutional success.

In June 2018, Huron surveyed more than 1,000 recent graduates from four-year, U.S. public or private institutions to understand how they perceived their college experience and the factors that had the largest influence in shaping it. The goal of the research was to provide insight and direction to higher education leaders as they make decisions about institutional priorities in today's, and tomorrow's, student-centered era.

Survey respondents represent today's diverse national college graduate population in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and type of

institution attended. The research reveals that:

- **The majority of graduates (82%)** are satisfied with their college education and experience, providing a vote of confidence for American higher education.
- **Three-quarters of graduates (75%)** cite faculty members as top contributors to helping them achieve their educational goals, reinforcing the vital importance of faculty in the student experience.
- **Fewer than one in four graduates (24%)** found a full-time job through their

institution's career services or connections, just one of many career preparation factors on which institutions received lower ratings.

- **Two-thirds of graduates (63%)** believe their educational experience was worth the investment, revealing room for improvement in institutions' value proposition.
- **Two-thirds of graduates (64%)** felt a sense of belonging at their university—one of several important dimensions of personal experience driving high satisfaction.



DEFINING “SUCCESS” ON STUDENTS’ TERMS

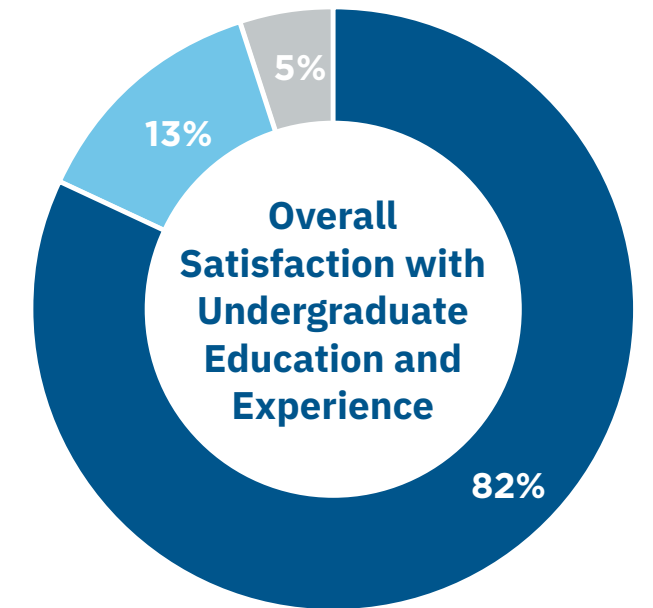
There are many data points four-year institutions can use to interpret student success: graduation rates, student-to-faculty ratio or alumni engagement, to cite a few. The most direct measure, however, may be recent graduates’ evaluation of their experiences as students. By understanding which factors influence satisfaction, leaders can identify and address those that will make a real difference for their institutions’ future.

Despite bleak predictions and opinions about the higher education landscape, the majority of recent graduates (82%) surveyed are satisfied with their undergraduate education—and there is reason to believe that overall satisfaction is improving.

Even when considering student debt, satisfaction levels remain steady for recent graduates. Of the 68 percent of respondents who took out loans for their undergraduate degree, satisfaction levels remained around 80 percent across

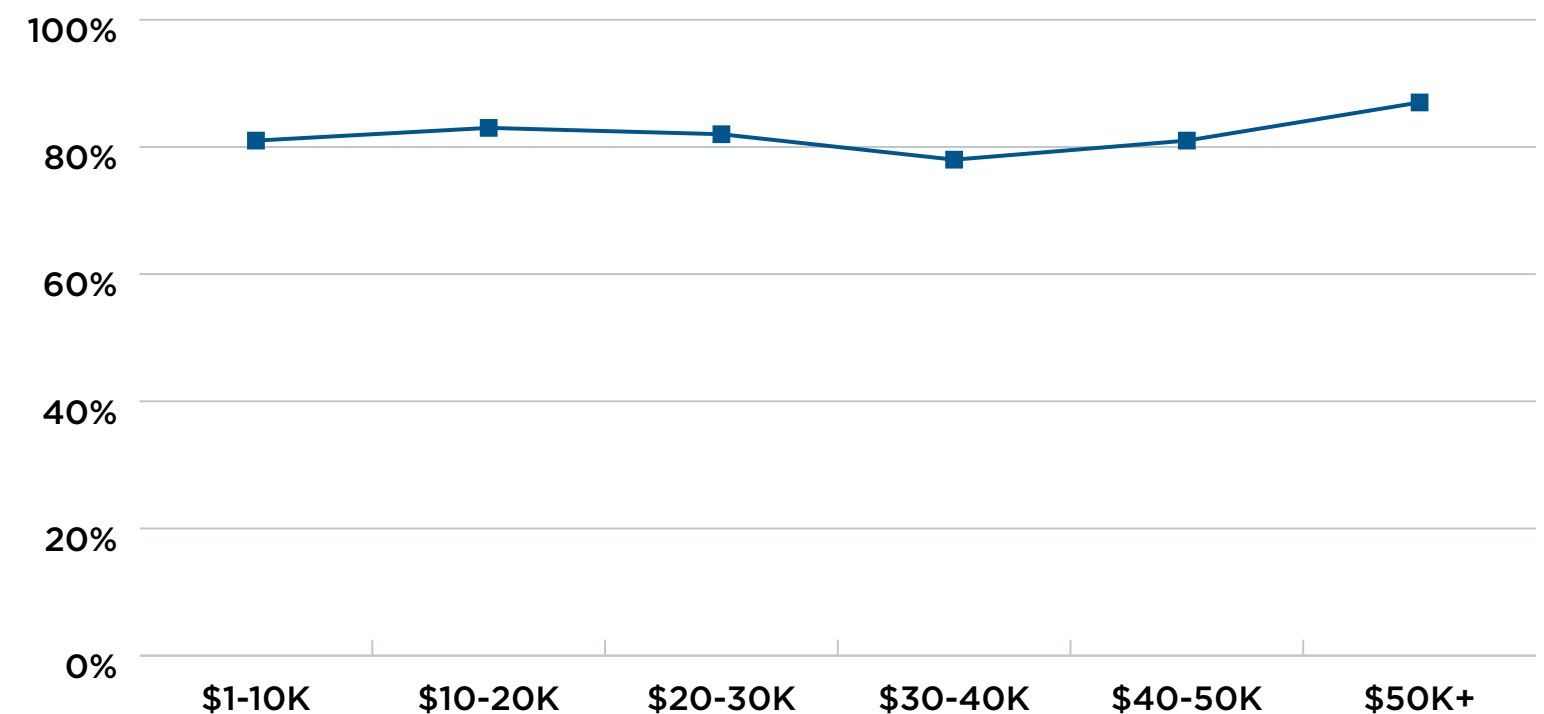
all levels of educational loan debt amounts.

What drives graduates’ satisfaction with their higher education experience? Current trends in the news highlight growing demands for four-year institutions to nurture workplace readiness and financial stability. And yet, survey respondents felt most rewarded when their institutions helped them develop holistically—through intellectual development, personal growth and a sense of fit on campus.



■ Satisfied ■ Neutral ■ Not Satisfied

Graduates with Student Loan Debt



RANKED GOALS FOR COLLEGE (% RANKING EACH IN THE TOP 3)

1. Personal growth and achievement (69%)
2. Gaining skills and knowledge for a specific career (68%)
3. Intellectual development (61%)
4. Economic stability (45%)
5. Being part of a college/university community (21%)

In line with the factors that impact satisfaction, graduates prioritized personal and intellectual growth as their primary goals for earning a bachelor’s degree. For graduates from all backgrounds and institution types, personal growth, career preparation and intellectual development rank above economic stability—signaling

the vital role colleges and universities still play in facilitating individual transformation.

THE FACULTY X FACTOR

Across the board, the survey results indicate that faculty members play the most significant role in helping graduates achieve their stated objectives. Compared to financial aid, campus services

TOP CONTRIBUTORS TO GOAL ACHIEVEMENT

1. Faculty members (75%)
2. Financial aid and admissions (66%)
3. Student and mental health (66%)
4. Academic advisors (66%)
5. Career advisors (61%)

and advising, faculty member relationships are the top contributor to goal achievement. Given faculty members’ leading role in helping students embrace new challenges or open doors to opportunities outside the classroom, institutions can make an even greater impact by clearly defining the importance of advising—and providing

incentives and rewards for those faculty who do this well.

The challenge institutions will face in the future, knowing that technology, education delivery and student populations will continue to evolve, is how to adapt and maintain these critical faculty-student relationships. Traditional higher education cost structures and emerging margin

pressure have many leaders focused on how to operate more efficiently. Artificial intelligence, flipped classrooms and online forums may help scale delivery and lower costs, but institutions must introduce these platforms in a way that doesn’t diminish

the critical personal connections between faculty and students. Implementing more efficient, scalable programs should not come at the expense of the relationships and support that are crucial to accommodating undergraduates’ expectations.

RECOMMENDED READING:

- ▶ [Connecting the Dots for Student Success](#)
- ▶ [Higher Education’s Dual Challenge](#)

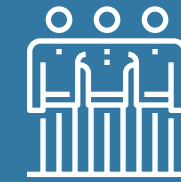
Drivers of Satisfaction



Graduates are **twice** as likely to be satisfied if they felt their institution promoted intellectual development.



Graduates are **1.8 times** as likely to be satisfied if they felt their institution drove personal growth.



Graduates are **1.6 times** as likely to be satisfied if they felt a sense of belonging.



Graduates are **1.5 times** as likely to be satisfied if they felt their institution helped them integrate into the campus community.



Graduates are **1.2 times** as likely to be satisfied if they got a full-time job with university help.

CAREER PREPARATION: HIGHER EDUCATION'S NEW JOB

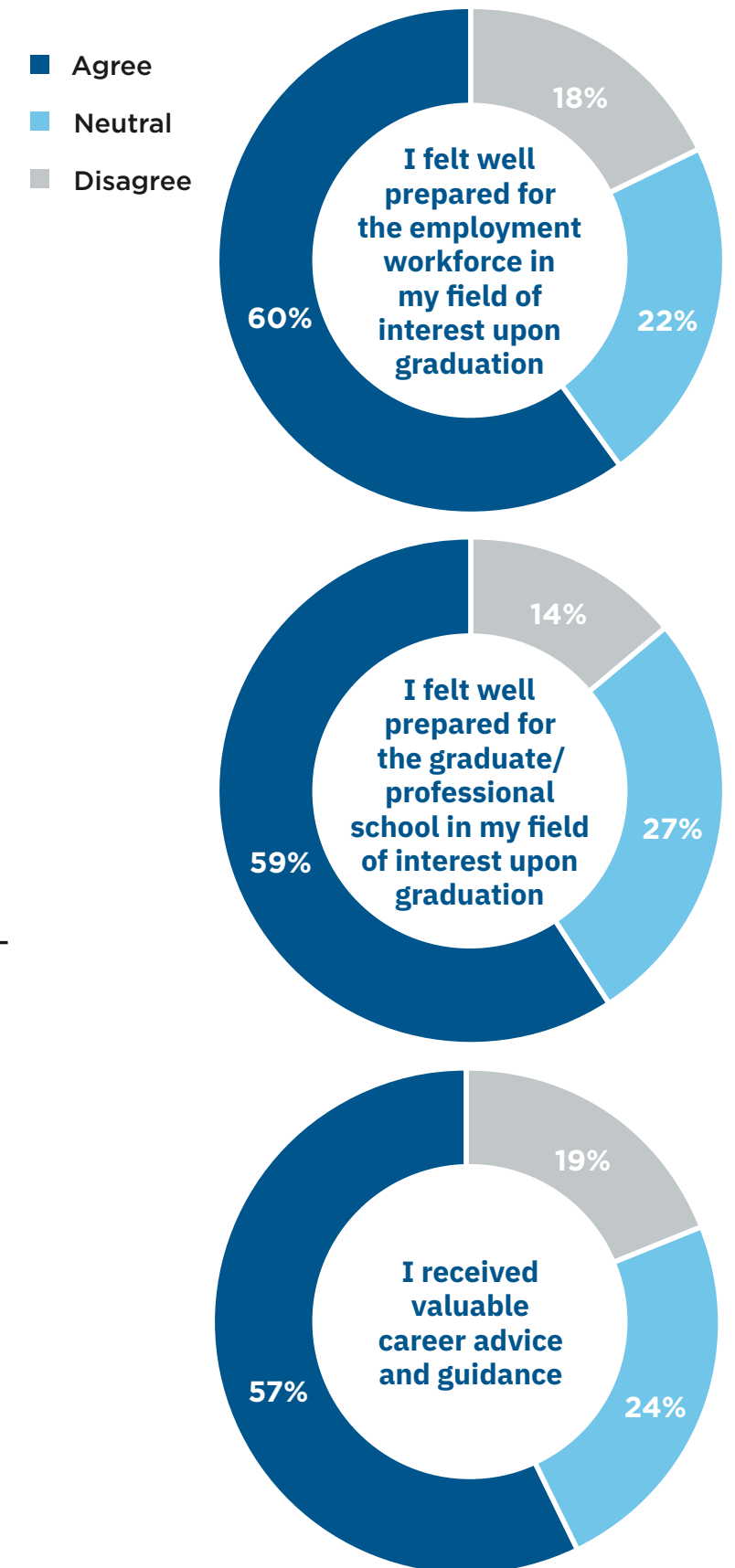
While recent graduates are satisfied with their overall college experience, one critical component stands out as an area for improvement: career advising and preparation. Only 60 percent of graduates feel they were well prepared for employment in their field of interest and even fewer (57%) feel they received valuable career advice and guidance from their institution. Recent research reinforces these feelings of under preparation—43 percent of graduates are underemployed in their first job, meaning that almost all of those graduating with a college degree are working at jobs that do not require one.¹

Respondents indicate that workforce readiness needs to be fostered beyond the classroom and curriculum. When asked what their institutions could have improved, graduates are most likely to highlight career services (27%).

Although recent graduates view higher education as a conduit to careers, few graduates secured internships or full-time jobs through university services or alumni connections. Only half of those surveyed found an internship with help from their

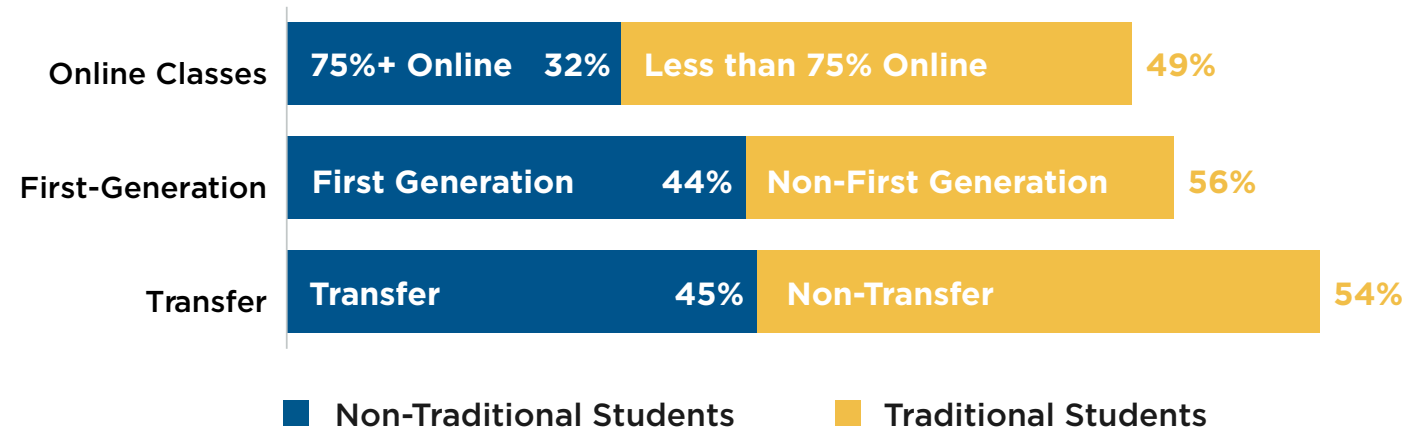
university. Even fewer found a full-time job through career services, with 37 percent obtaining a job with university help.

College graduates who do not fit the traditional student profile (including transfer, first-generation and online students)

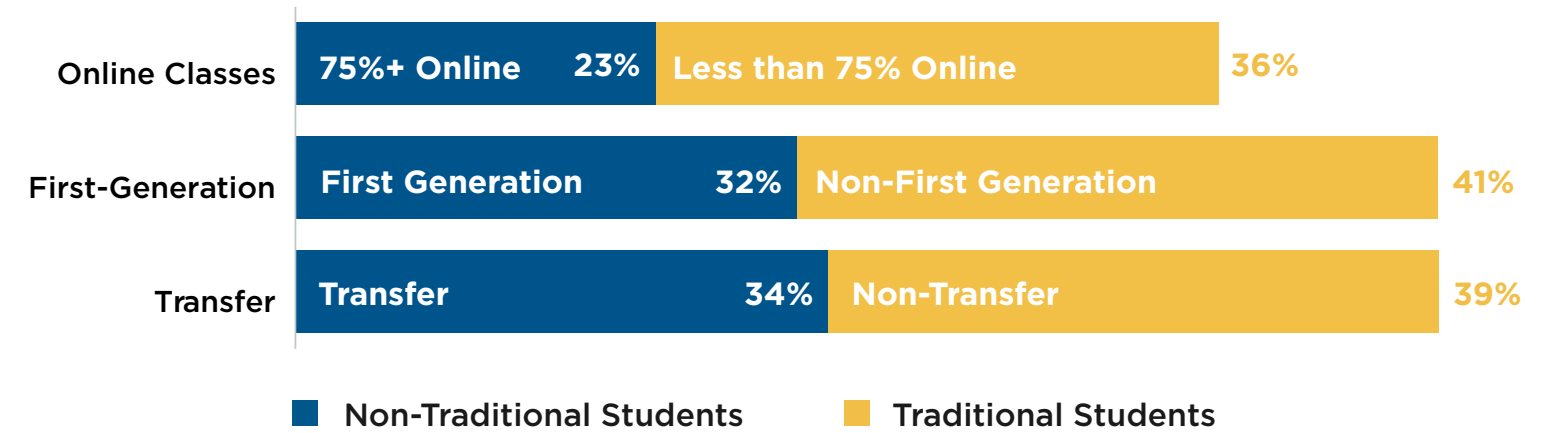


1. "Pomp and Circumstances: New Study Finds Most College Graduates Who Start Out Underemployed, Stay There," Burning Glass Technologies. May 23, 2018. <https://www.burning-glass.com/blog/study-finds-college-graduates-start-underemployed-stay/>

Completed An Internship With University Help



Obtained A Job With University Help



are even less likely to have had institutional help securing internships and jobs. Institutions will need to work harder to demonstrate that they deliver more than a “one size fits all” career support model.

Undergraduates as early as freshman year are already beginning to think about their post-college plans, leaving many institutions ill-prepared to offer

the appropriate level of support. Current structures separate academics and career planning, but shifting student and workforce needs build a case for integrating the two. Given graduates’ strong emphasis on the importance of career preparation, higher education’s value proposition is evolving. Colleges are no longer only expected to create critical thinkers—they are also tasked to provide career pathways.

RECOMMENDED READING:

- ▶ [Building Higher Education’s Future Business Model](#)
- ▶ [Higher Education Needs to Get Creative to Ensure a Financially Viable Future](#)

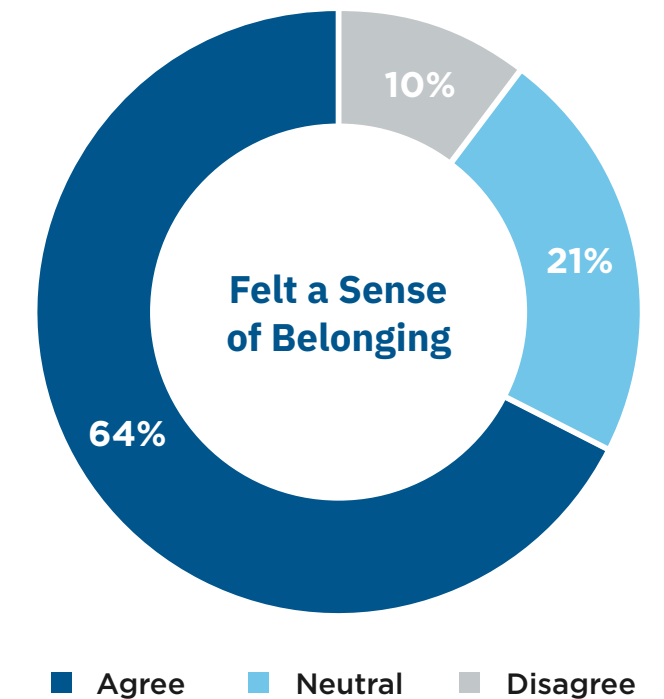
FEELING A SENSE OF BELONGING MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE

It is no longer a surprise that demographics in higher education are changing. Institutions' new responsibility is to embrace the implications these changes have on the student experience. Successfully integrating and supporting students from all backgrounds significantly impacts how recent graduates rate their institution. Creating an inclusive environment is a driver of belonging, as are faculty support, campus life and preparation for life after graduation.

College students expect a higher-touch onboarding experience and want to see the institution dedicated to their success every step of the way. Among respondents, only two-thirds (64%) felt a sense of belonging at their alma mater. A supportive culture is more than a “nice to have,” considering students are almost twice as likely to be satisfied with their educational experience if they felt they

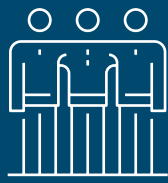
belonged at their institution. Additionally, graduates who felt this sense of belonging are more likely to recommend the institution and have a higher interest in engaging as an alumnus. Graduates were nearly three times as likely to have felt a sense of belonging if they believed their university accommodated students from diverse backgrounds and financial

means—a finding shared by all demographic types. Satisfaction with faculty support, campus life and career preparation also correlated with a greater sense of belonging. When considering how to best integrate transfer and part-time students, there are additional challenges. Non-traditional graduates are less likely to feel that their institutions helped integrate them into the campus



community. Many universities are designed with the full-time student in mind, so institutions should recognize the need for a different approach to integrating non-traditional students into the campus community. Recent graduates' perspectives reinforce the value of inclusivity that students want from their institution. To cultivate a greater sense of satisfaction and belonging, institutions need to

DRIVERS OF SATISFACTION



Graduates are **2.9 times** as likely to have felt a sense of belonging if they believed their university welcomed and supported students from diverse backgrounds and financial means.



Graduates are **2.3 times** as likely to have felt a sense of belonging if they were satisfied with faculty support.



Graduates are **twice** as likely to have felt a sense of belonging if they were satisfied with campus life.



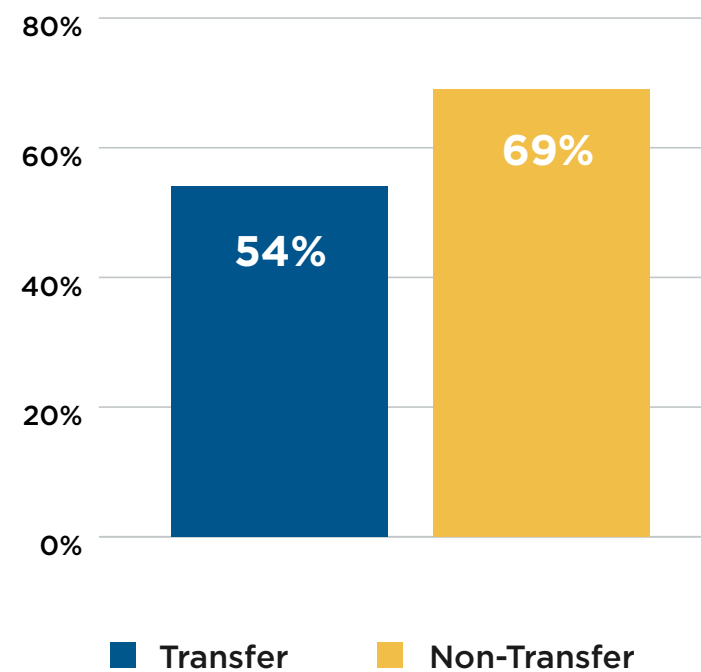
Graduates are **1.7 times** as likely to have felt a sense of belonging if they felt well prepared for a job or graduate school.

“walk their talk” with investments to support all types of students.

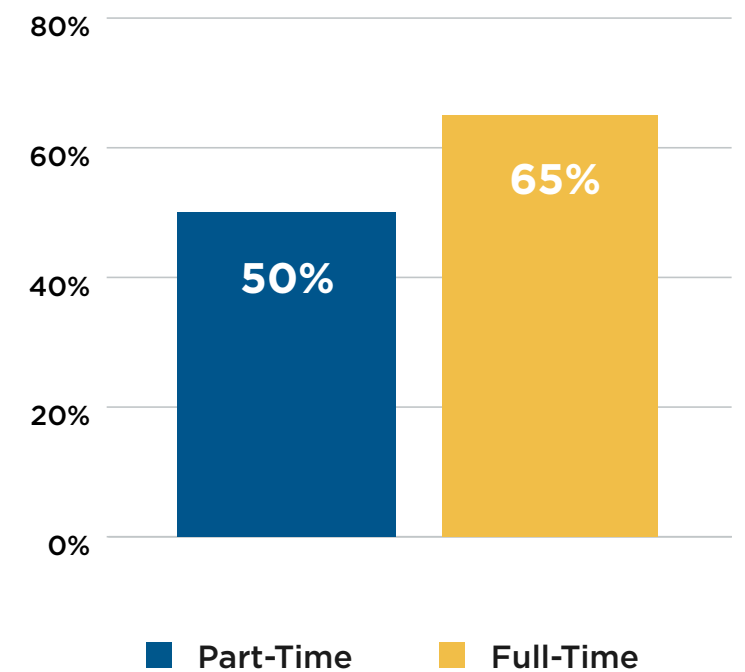
A successful enrollment strategy is not only about who an institution enrolls, but also about

how well it champions students throughout the entire educational experience. As the percent of students who attend college straight from high school declines, these pressures will only intensify.²

Felt Institutions Helped Integrate Into the Campus Community



Felt Institutions Helped Integrate Into the Campus Community



RECOMMENDED READING:

- ▶ [This is Not Your Parents' Alumni Association](#)
- ▶ [Rethinking the Four-Year, On-Campus Student Experience](#)

2. “Impact and Implications: Projections of Male & Female High School Graduates,” Bransberger, Peace. Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, September 2017. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57f269e19de4bb8a69b470aet/59ea16d7f6576e071292e5bb/1508513510465/DataInsightsGender-rev.102017-ca.pdf>

ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT STARTS WITH AN EXCEPTIONAL UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE

The impact of shifting student demographics, preferences and needs are cascading down to alumni relations teams. Increasing engagement remains the highest priority for alumni offices, but recent graduates' sentiment reveals institutions may still be missing the mark.³

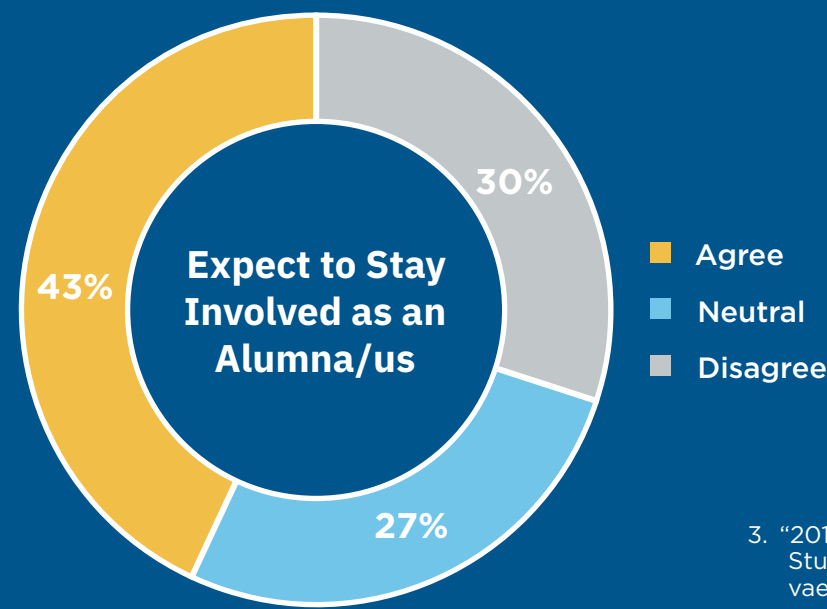
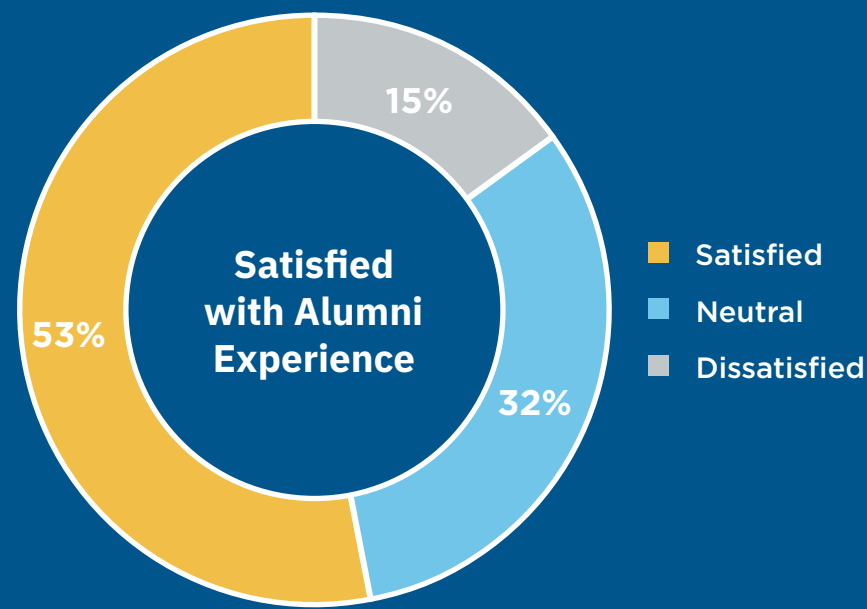
Only half (53%) are satisfied with their alumni experience and even fewer (43%) expect to stay involved as alumni.

There is room for improvement. Alumni engagement grows from outstanding experiences and support as undergraduates.

- Students are **3.7 times** as likely to stay involved as alumni if they felt a sense of belonging.
- Students are **3.4 times** as likely to stay involved as alumni if they felt their institution helped them integrate in to the campus community.

- Students are **2.6 times** as likely to stay involved as alumni if they were well prepared for a job or graduate school.
- Students are **2.6 times** as likely to stay involved as alumni if they were satisfied with career services.

To produce engaged alumni, institutions need to deliver an exceptional undergraduate experience on all fronts.



3. "2017 VAESE The Alumni Relations Benchmarking Study," Alumni Access. http://www.alumniaccess.com/vaese_alumni_study_download



WHAT MATTERS MOST TO STUDENTS TODAY AND TOMORROW?

By understanding and meeting the expectations of those they serve, institutions will be well positioned to create and sustain effective student experiences rooted in inclusion, support and satisfaction.

Unifying leaders, faculty and staff around the student can materially change the experience institutions offer and the value students derive from college. By drawing on students' needs and objectives to inform institutional decision-making, colleges and universities can become a lifelong resource rather than a finite four-year experience.

Colleges and universities have the opportunity to plan more holistically for student success. This research emphasizes the importance of investing in students' sense of wellbeing, the relationships they foster and the transitions they make following graduation. Generating lifelong engagement starts with institutions that invest in creating communities for all who enroll, in enabling faculty to meaningfully engage with students and in tools and services that prepare students for the future.

Key Takeaways

As your institution plans for the future, consider the factors that have the greatest influence on student success and be prepared to:

Think differently.

Understand the impact faculty engagement has on student success at four-year institutions and be intentional about preserving these dynamics amid technological and operational change.

Plan differently.

Address graduates' expectations for career support by investing in stronger, integrated resources across the student experience. This may include a heightened focus on workforce readiness, promoting continuous discussion about career preparation in and outside the classroom, and exploring experiential learning opportunities beyond the traditional campus.

Act differently.

Align stakeholders around creating an inclusive environment that meets students' needs and objectives throughout their educational journey. Evaluate your institution on its ability to deliver student-first experiences and nurture satisfied graduates.



ROSEMARIA MARTINELLI

Rose has more than 25 years of experience in higher education. She brings a highly analytical approach to enrollment and student lifecycle management along with deep experience in admissions, marketing, selection, financial aid and student retention.

Her ability to translate the distinctive value proposition of institutions into enrolling best fit students has resulted

in increased retention and student satisfaction. She specializes in helping institutions manage the challenges of enrollment management and student retention while balancing Net Tuition Revenue (NTR) needs.

Prior to joining Huron, Rose served as assistant vice president for enrollment management at the University of Chicago. In addition to college

admissions and financial aid, she was responsible for coordinating graduate admissions and implementing new admissions technology throughout the university. Rose served for five years as the associate dean for full-time MBA admissions at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business and was the director of MBA admissions and financial aid for five years at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.



JOSELYN ZIVIN

Joselyn leads comprehensive institutional engagements and directs Huron Higher Education's Market Intelligence Group. Joselyn partners with colleges, universities and research enterprises to develop strategies and build stronger organizations based on in-depth market research and analysis. She holds a Ph.D.

in History from Duke University and has more than 20 years of higher education experience, having served as a cabinet-level university administrator, full-time faculty member, and consultant to more than 100 institutions on market and strategy planning.



LAURA YAEGER

Laura is a founding member and leader in Huron's higher education practice and has been consulting in the higher education and healthcare industry for more than 25 years. She has worked as a strategic business advisor to more than 50 premier universities, academic medical centers, healthcare organizations and other non-profit research institutes

Laura specializes in helping large research universities, university systems and academic medical centers become better-positioned to achieve strategic and financial goals, manage risk and prepare for the future. This includes areas as diverse as strategic and financial planning, organizational and service delivery design, operational performance improvement, information technology and enterprise risk management. Prior to joining Huron, Laura

was a partner and founding member of the higher education consulting practice of Arthur Andersen LLP.

Laura is a recognized speaker and serves on the board of the Children's Research Fund at Lurie Children's Hospital. She was also recognized as a Top 25 Consultant in 2015 by Consulting magazine for her excellence in leadership and commitment to collaboration and client service.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

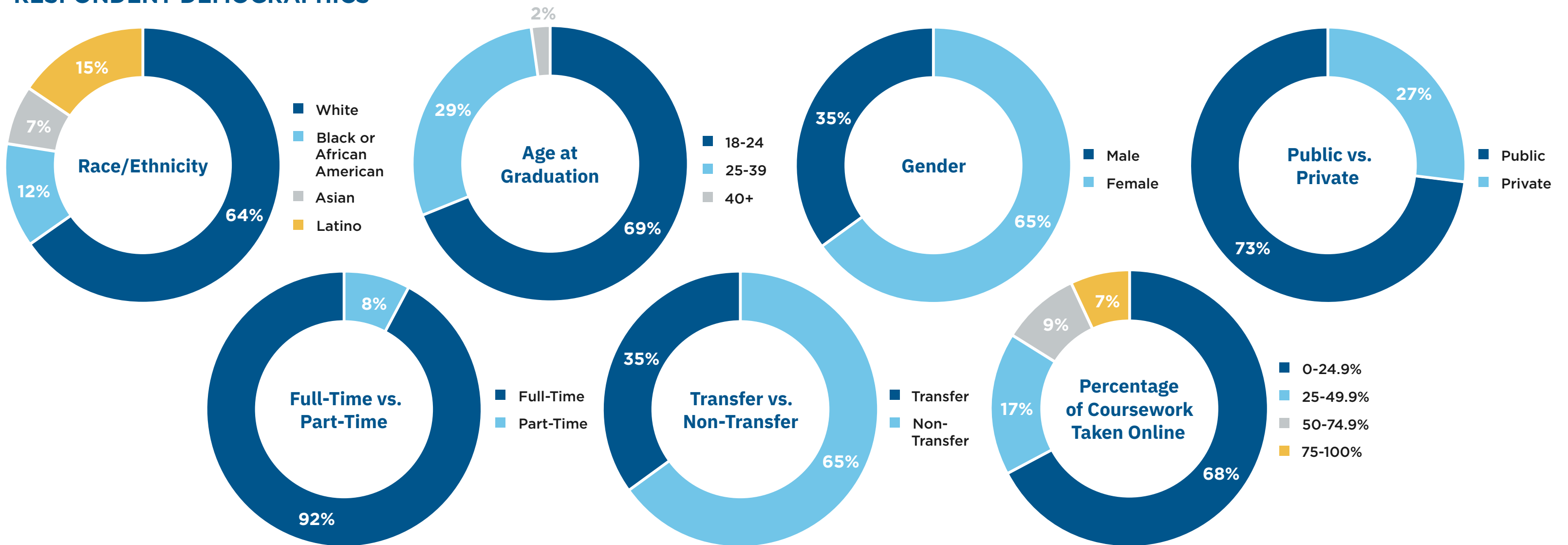
In June 2018, Huron surveyed more than 1000 recent graduates from four-year, U.S. public or private institutions. Respondents were drawn from a national

research panel of students who graduated with a bachelor's degree in the past 30 months. The primary research objective was to understand how these

recent graduates perceived their higher education experience and the factors that had the largest influence in shaping it.

Note: Survey respondents were those who had successfully graduated. Considering the [National Student Clearinghouse reported](#) that just over half (56.%) of those who started college in 2011 had completed six years later, the perspectives of graduates only tells half the story about what higher education does well and it can do better.

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS





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