

2025

NATIONAL
REPORT

OCTOBER 2025



ESSENTIAL CONDITIONS

for Community College Student Success

Maximizing Student Engagement
by Fostering a Culture of Caring



Acknowledgements

CCCSE gratefully acknowledges the many individuals who made this report possible.

First and foremost, we thank the students who participated in the 2024 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and the 2024 Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE). Their responses form the foundation of this report and offer critical insights into what it means to feel supported, seen, and connected in a community college setting.

We appreciate the students, faculty, and staff at three community colleges who participated in focus groups for this project. Their willingness to share their time, stories, and insights provided valuable context for the data presented in this report.

We thank Dr. Luis Ponjuán, associate professor at Texas A&M University, for his thought leadership and ongoing commitment to student success, which helped shape key dimensions of this work.

We are grateful to Dr. Brad Phillips, president and CEO of the Institute for Evidence-Based Change, for contributing compelling college stories that show a culture of caring in action.

Finally, we extend our thanks to the college leaders, practitioners, and partner organizations that are advancing a culture of caring across higher education. Your dedication to holistic student support is inspiring.

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A Strong Culture of Caring Is a Deciding Factor in Student Success

For decades, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) has shown that connections are central to student success. When we ask students in focus groups if they ever considered dropping out, many say “yes.” When we ask why they stayed in college, most students name an individual who made a difference.

New data from CCCSE show that these individual connections, while vital, may not be enough. Students need multiple types of support that are provided systemically, intentionally, and consistently throughout their college experience. Students who report that their college provides this rich fabric of support—this culture of caring—have higher levels of engagement and success.

Data from the 2024 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) illustrate the elements and impacts of a culture of caring.

A Comprehensive Approach to Meeting Student Needs

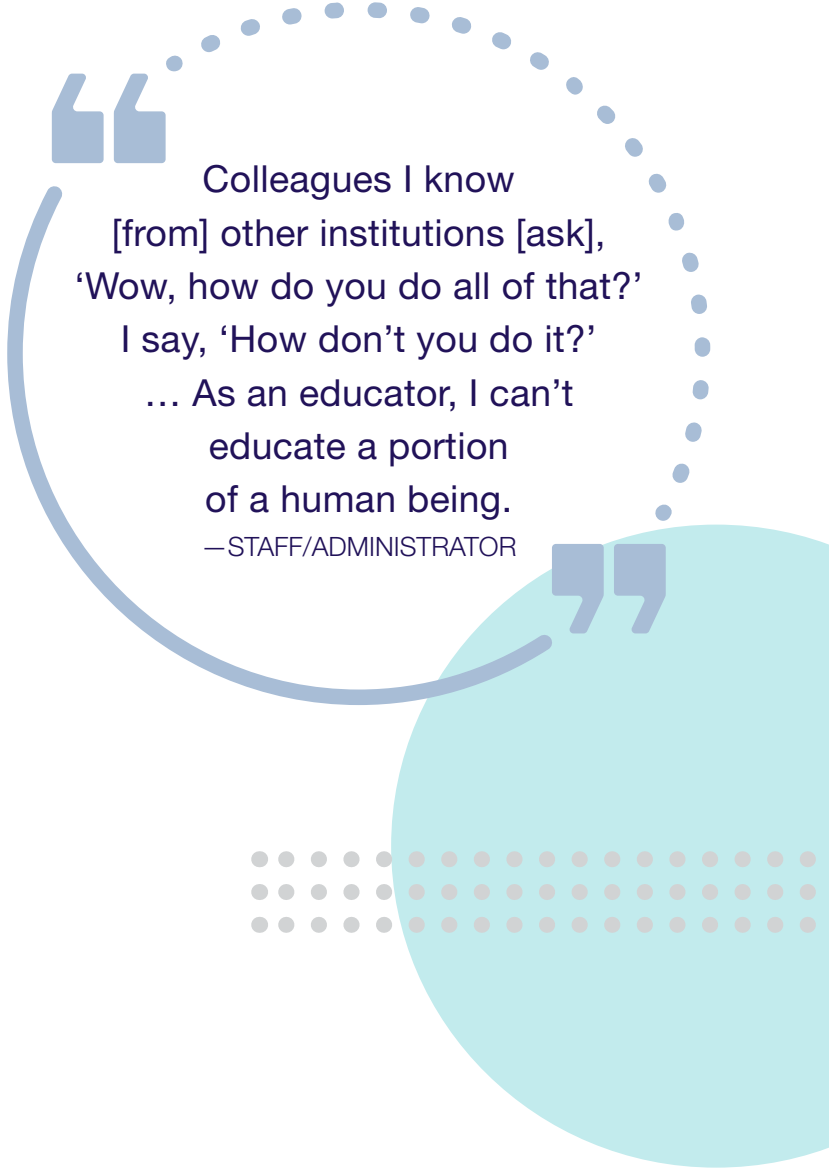
The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted students’ non-academic needs, and recent CCCSE reports revealed ongoing gaps in students’ basic needs and mental health support.

Since the pandemic, colleges across the country have intensified their efforts to meet these needs. While these actions have helped many individuals, students’ challenges—and obstacles to their academic success—persist. More than ever, students’ life circumstances, not just their academic needs, can create roadblocks that put college success out of reach.

Colleges have the ability, and the responsibility, to work on removing these roadblocks for all students. We believe it is time for all college leaders to ask themselves—and to ask everyone on their campuses—whether their college’s supports are sufficient to address students’ needs and whether these supports reach all students. We believe it is time for college leaders to ask whether they have established a comprehensive culture of caring.

Colleges that have a strong culture of caring inspire students and build their confidence in a variety of ways. For example, these colleges:

- Demonstrate that faculty and staff are in every student’s corner.
- Show every student that they belong at the college and can succeed.
- Communicate clearly about high academic expectations and a range of easily accessible college supports.



“ Colleagues I know
[from] other institutions [ask],
‘Wow, how do you do all of that?’
I say, ‘How don’t you do it?’
... As an educator, I can’t
educate a portion
of a human being.
—STAFF/ADMINISTRATOR ”

CCSSE and SENSE data show that an investment in caring can make an important difference—often the difference between succeeding or not—for all students. Findings include:

- **A culture of caring is related to student engagement and success.** When students feel supported, seen, and connected at their college, their engagement levels and GPAs are higher.
- **Colleges cannot make assumptions about which students need support.** Colleges cannot know which students most need support unless they talk with all students about the challenges that might disrupt their academic plans. Colleges must view their students—and their approach to educating their students—holistically.
- **Relationships matter.** The benefits of a strong culture of caring can be attributed, in part, to providing more services to more students. However, the attitudes and actions that undergird these services—the connections that faculty and staff make with students—are as important as the services themselves.

Data in this report come from Culture of Caring item sets that were administered in 2024. Select CCSSE and SENSE findings are displayed in this report. For the full analysis, see the methodology at <https://cccse.org/culture-of-caring/methodology>.

Findings in this report include:

- Data from 54,301 students across 127 community colleges that included the Culture of Caring item set in the spring 2024 administration of CCSSE.
- Data from 9,744 students across 58 community colleges that included the Culture of Caring item set in the fall 2024 administration of SENSE.



Many CCCSE Survey Items Provide Context for a Culture of Caring

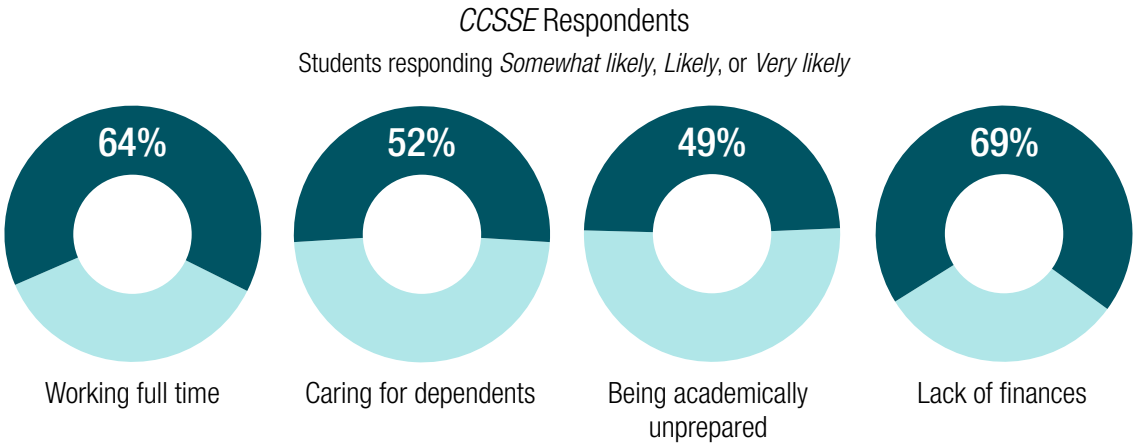
While the Culture of Caring item sets drive most of the findings presented in this report, colleges can consider many CCSSE and SENSE survey items in the context of a culture of caring. Findings from questions throughout CCSSE and SENSE indicate that colleges cannot make assumptions about which students need support. The data show the importance of extending the culture of caring to all students.

For example, majorities of CCSSE respondents indicate that working, caring for dependents, and lack of finances could cause them to withdraw from class or college.

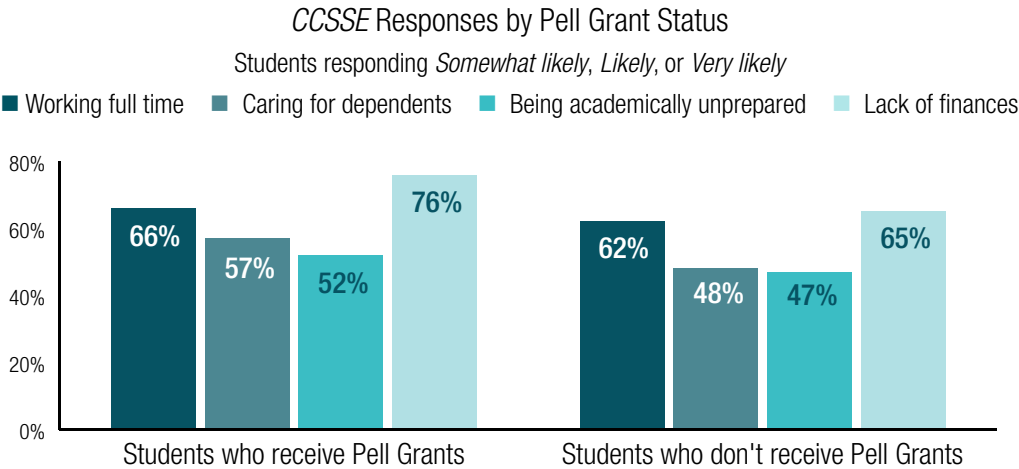
Unsurprisingly, students traditionally considered to face greater barriers—such as students who receive Pell Grants or take developmental education classes—are more likely to say these issues would cause them to withdraw. However, substantial percentages of students outside these groups report the same.

Students do not always self-select into support. Therefore, when colleges focus primarily on students who are traditionally deemed most vulnerable, large numbers of students who also need support go unseen. However, when colleges have a strong culture of caring, they make connections inescapable for all students and draw all students under the umbrella of caring.

How likely is it that the following issues would cause you to withdraw from class or from this college?



Source: CCSSE 2024 data

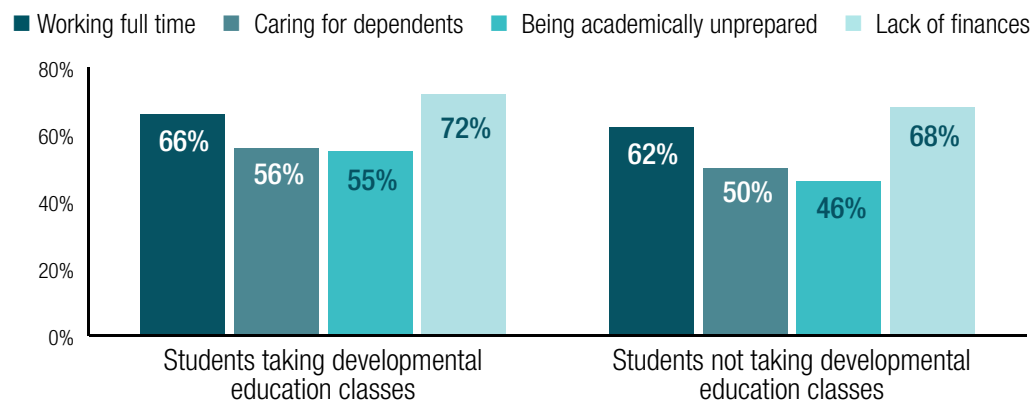


Source: CCSSE 2024 data

How likely is it that the following issues would cause you to withdraw from class or from this college?

CCSSE Responses by Developmental Education Status

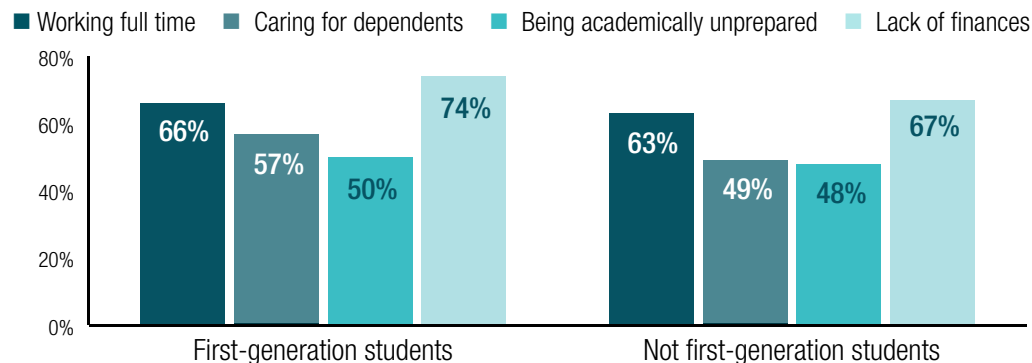
Students responding *Somewhat likely, Likely, or Very likely*



Source: CCSSE 2024 data

CCSSE Responses by First-Generation Status

Students responding *Somewhat likely, Likely, or Very likely*



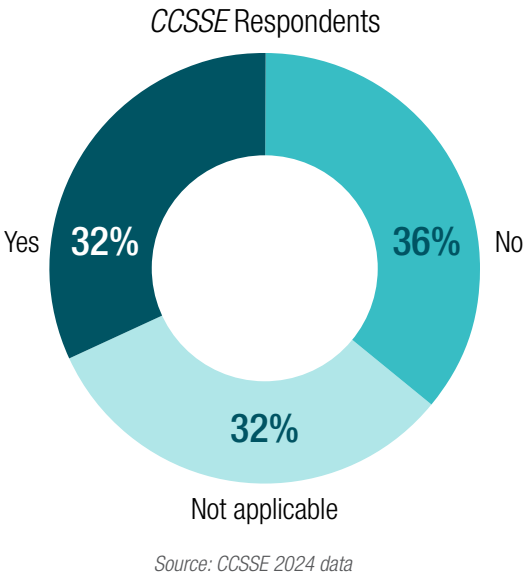
Source: CCSSE 2024 data

“We need to change how we think. [We always make] the student the problem. The student is not the problem. We have to change how we look at the student.”

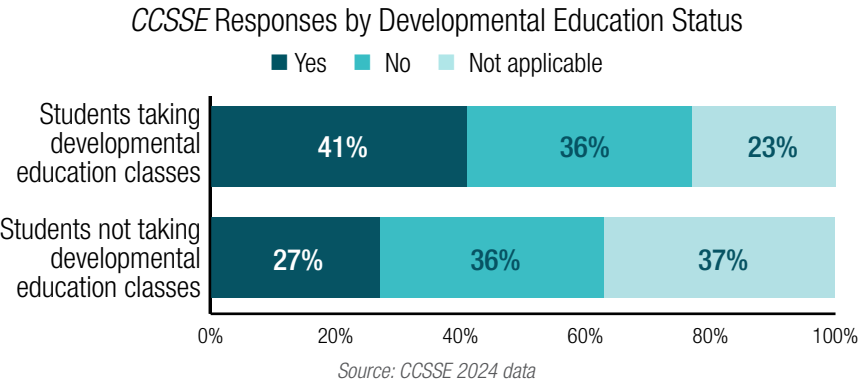
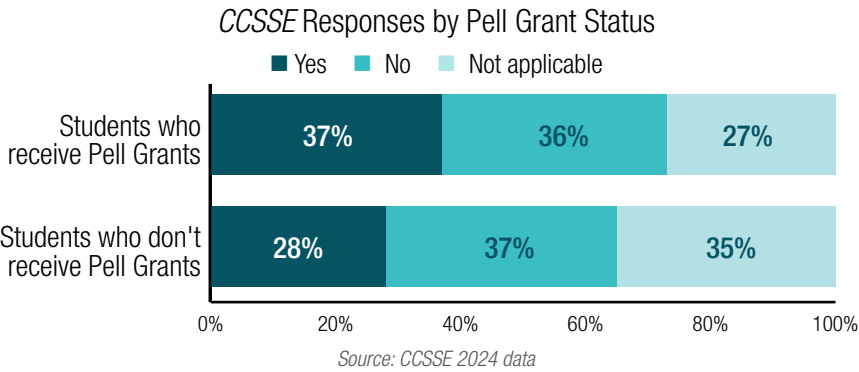
—STAFF/ADMINISTRATOR

Because students who need support do not always seek it, colleges must be proactive about connecting students with services. When asked if someone at the college contacts them if they are struggling academically, almost equal percentages of students traditionally deemed most vulnerable and their traditionally less-vulnerable peers indicate a need for greater outreach by the college.

Someone at this college contacts me if I am struggling with my studies to help me get the assistance I need.



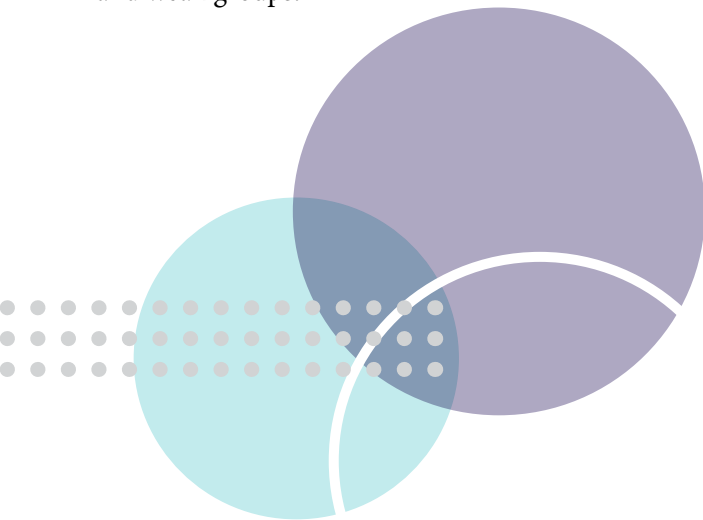
“Yes, teachers expect me to succeed because they care about me. ... They know my story. They know my background. They want to see me succeed.”
—STUDENT



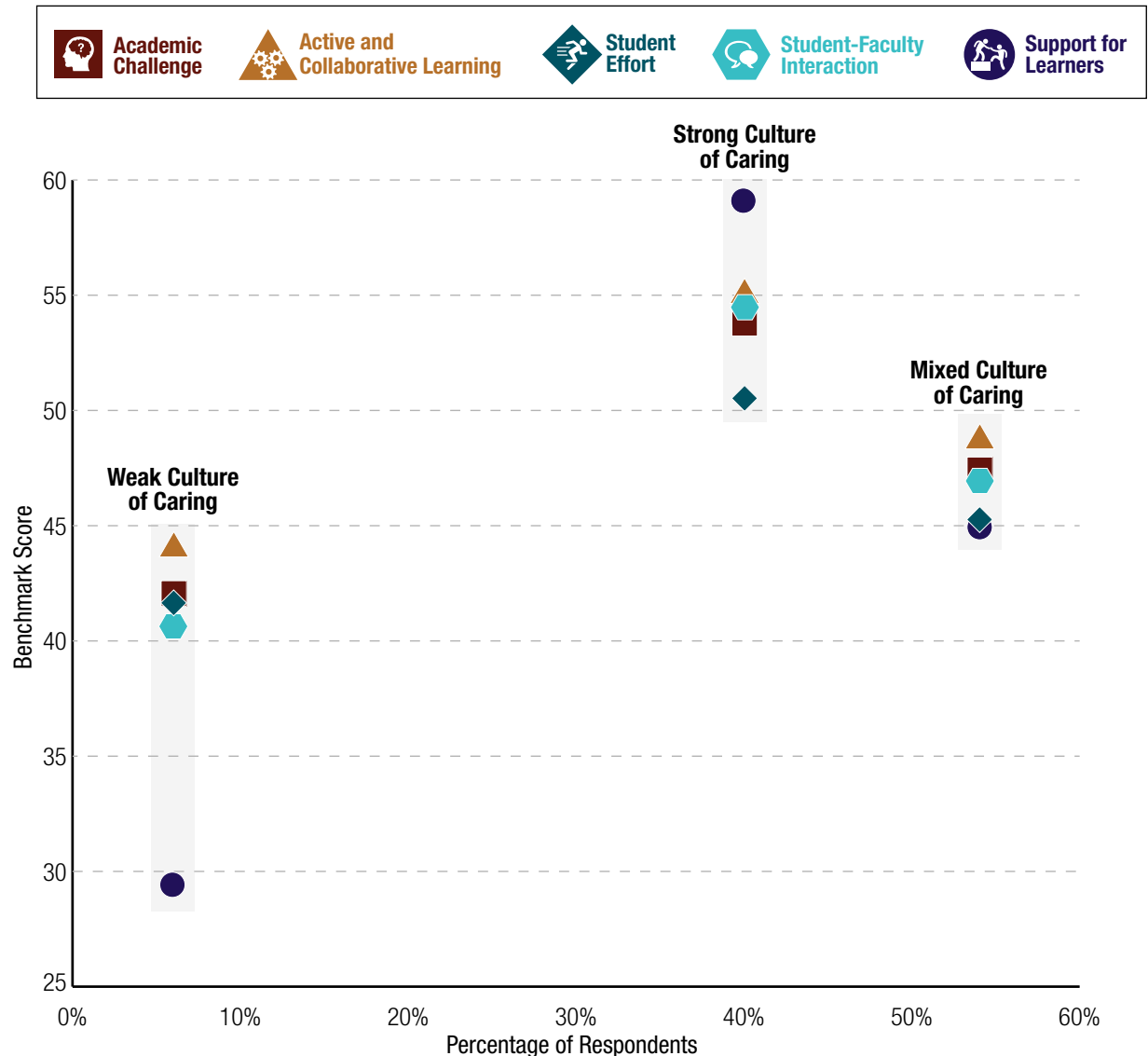
More Care, Higher Engagement

CCSSE benchmarks measure engagement in five areas. As analyses of CCSSE results have shown again and again, the more engaged students are—as shown by higher benchmark scores—the more likely they are to be successful.

To assess the relationship between a culture of caring and engagement, we divided student respondents into three groups based on the level of caring they reported experiencing at their college. Students in the Strong Culture of Caring group are the most engaged. Students in the Weak Culture of Caring group are the least engaged. Most respondents fall in the Mixed Culture of Caring group and have engagement levels between the students in the strong and weak groups.



Students Experiencing a Strong Culture of Caring Are More Engaged



Five Questions Colleges Can Use to Assess Their Own Culture of Caring

Because colleges cannot always predict which students will need support, the culture of caring must extend to all students. While some students will seek out support, colleges cannot depend on students to take action. They must be bold in making supports easy to access as well as in reaching out to students, making connections, and guiding them to the supports they need.

Colleges can use these five questions to assess their current culture of caring and identify ways to strengthen it.



1. Do our students believe that faculty and staff care about them and their success at our college?



2. Do our students believe they can succeed academically at our college?



3. Do our students feel comfortable asking for help at our college?

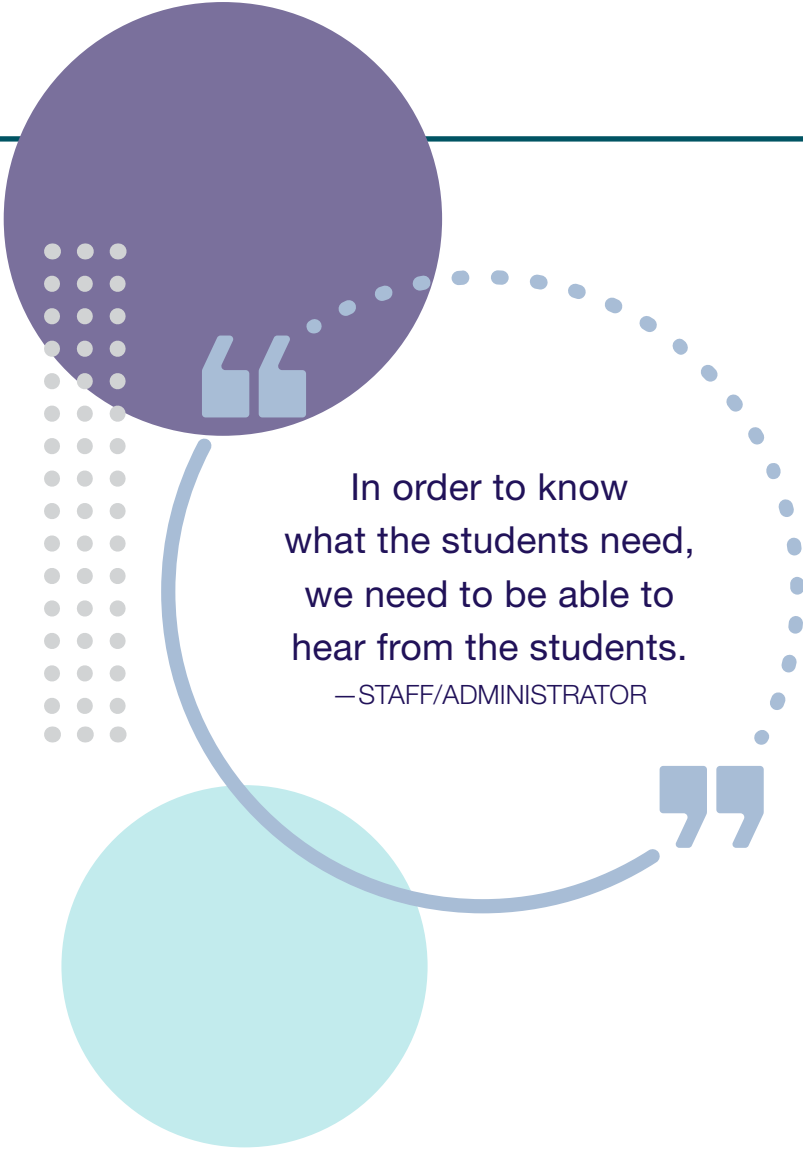


4. How many of our students are experiencing food or housing insecurity, and are we helping them meet these and other basic needs?



5. Do our students believe that our college considers their mental health and well-being a priority?

Colleges also should consider how they assess which students need support, how effectively they communicate about available supports, and whether faculty and staff need additional training to identify students who may be struggling and connect them to the support they need.



In order to know
what the students need,
we need to be able to
hear from the students.

—STAFF/ADMINISTRATOR

1. Do our students believe that faculty and staff care about them and their success at our college?

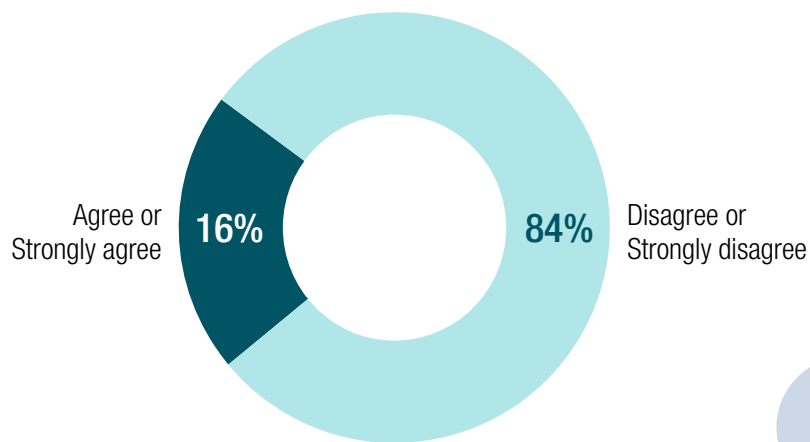
Many colleges work to create a college-going culture in their communities because they want potential students—including adults and students from elementary through high school—to believe they belong at college. Students who feel a sense of belonging have connections to other students as well as to faculty and staff members at their college. They identify as learners and believe they are valued participants in an academic community.

At the same time, most students face setbacks at some point during their college experience. Having a strong sense of belonging helps students more easily overcome these setbacks and continue working toward their educational goals.

CCSSE and *SENSE* data show that high percentages of students feel a sense of belonging, but findings also point to areas for improvement. For example, 16% of respondents say they feel invisible to faculty and staff, and 12% of students disagree with the statement “I belong at this college.”

I feel invisible to faculty and staff.

CCSSE Respondents



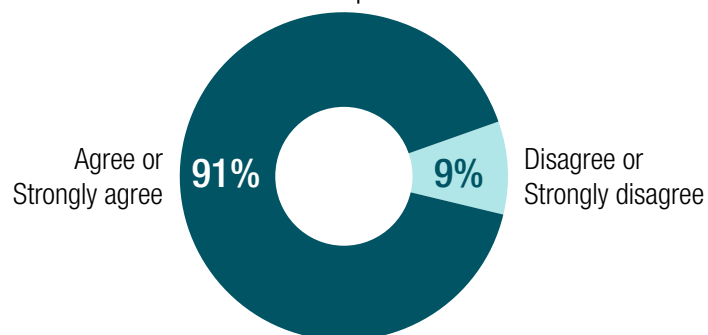
Source: *CCSSE* 2024 data

“When [my advisor] found out my living situation, that I found an abandoned house and kicked the boards in and used that as a place to live in while I was going through school, he reached out immediately. [He] started to position different chess pieces in my life to help me get money, to help me get housing, to help me get food so I can continue to be a straight-A student.”

—STUDENT

My instructors care about my success.

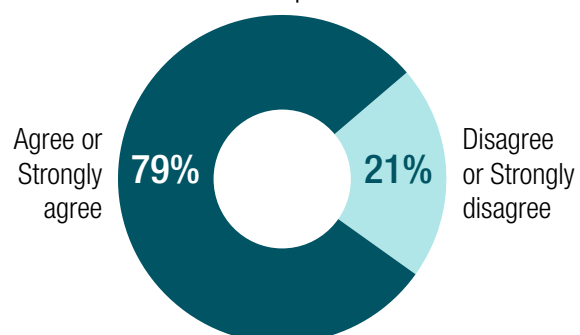
CCSSE Respondents



Source: CCSSE 2024 data

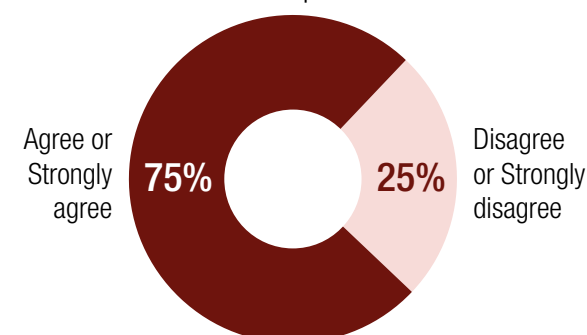
College staff (other than my instructors) care about me.

CCSSE Respondents



Source: CCSSE 2024 data

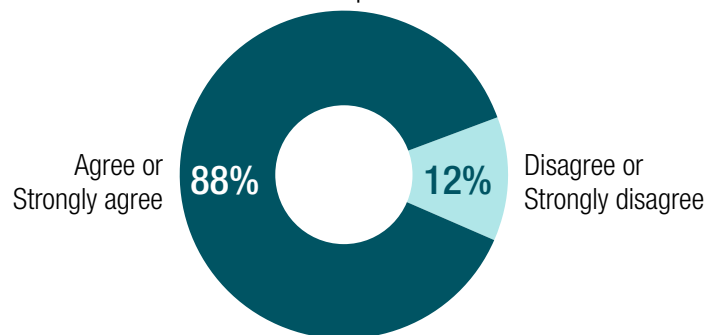
SENSE Respondents



Source: SENSE 2024 data

I belong at this college.

CCSSE Respondents



Source: CCSSE 2024 data

“If I miss one day of class, I’ll get an email within the hour after class is over: ‘Oh, are you okay? Why did we miss today?’”
—STUDENT





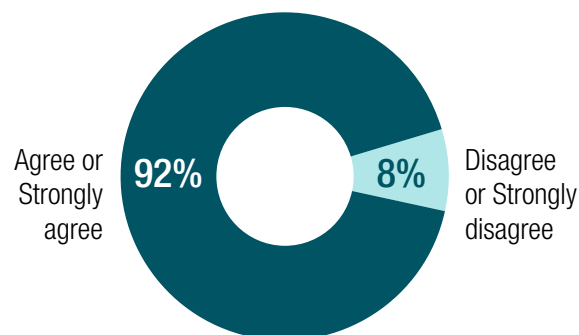
2. Do our students believe that they can succeed academically at our college?

Self-efficacy relates to students' confidence in their ability to succeed academically. Students who believe they can succeed—and who have instructors who believe they can succeed—are more likely to persevere when they face challenging coursework or academic difficulties. Students also thrive with a combination of high expectations and high support.

Large majorities of the most recent *CCSSE* and *SENSE* respondents have high self-efficacy. At the same time, significant numbers of students lack the core beliefs that will help them succeed. For example, more than one in 10 *CCSSE* respondents and more than two in 10 *SENSE* respondents disagreed with the statement “My instructors have high expectations of me.”

I can succeed academically at this college.

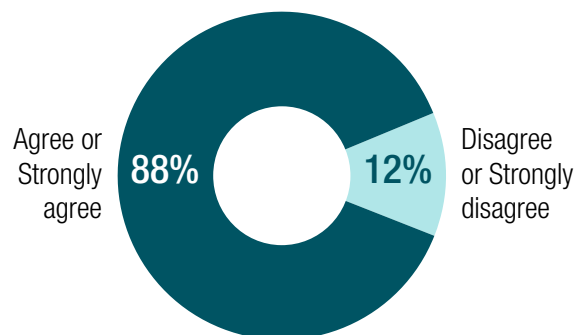
CCSSE Respondents



Source: *CCSSE* 2024 data

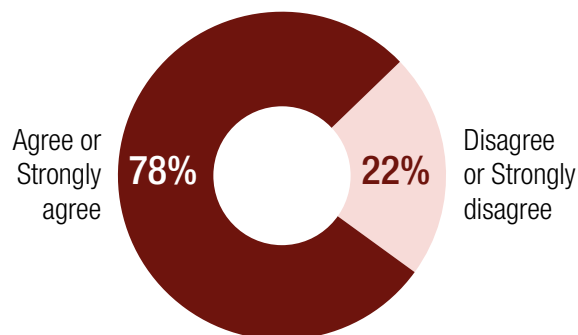
My instructors have high expectations of me.

CCSSE Respondents



Source: *CCSSE* 2024 data

SENSE Respondents



Source: *SENSE* 2024 data

[This college is] really there for you. Yes, they expect a lot, but it's not like they tell you, 'Go do it alone.' They're like, 'I'm going to be here with you, though. We're gonna do it together, and I know you're going to succeed.'

—STUDENT

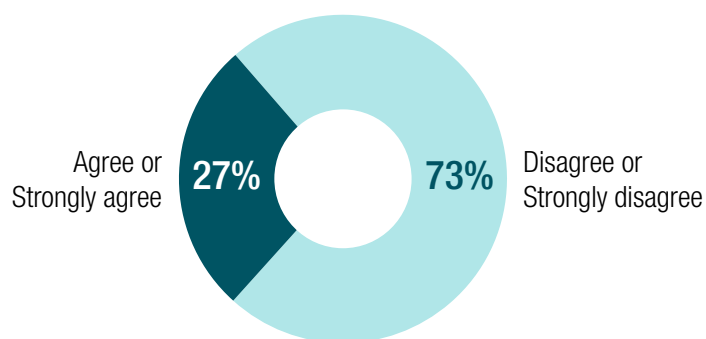
3. Do our students feel comfortable asking for help at our college?

Students who need assistance do not always seek it out, so colleges must be proactive in identifying how they can support each student and then connecting each student to the services they need. At the same time, students must actively use the services that are presented to them.

For a variety of reasons, some students resist asking for help or using available services. Traditional-age students are more likely to feel intimidated about asking for help and to believe that asking for help will make them feel weak. Colleges can learn more about why their students may not ask for help through student focus groups and interviews.

It intimidates me to ask my instructors for help with coursework.

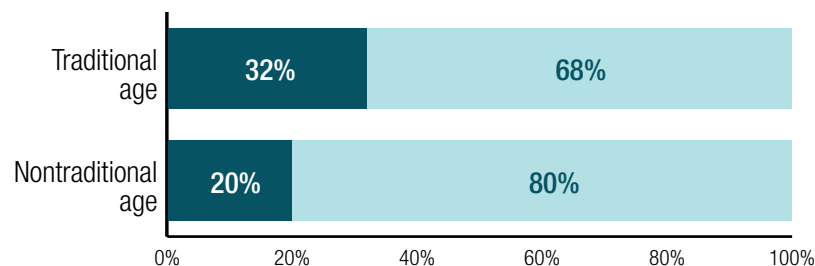
CCSSE Respondents



Source: CCSSE 2024 data

CCSSE Responses by Age

■ Agree or Strongly agree ■ Disagree or Strongly disagree



Source: CCSSE 2024 data



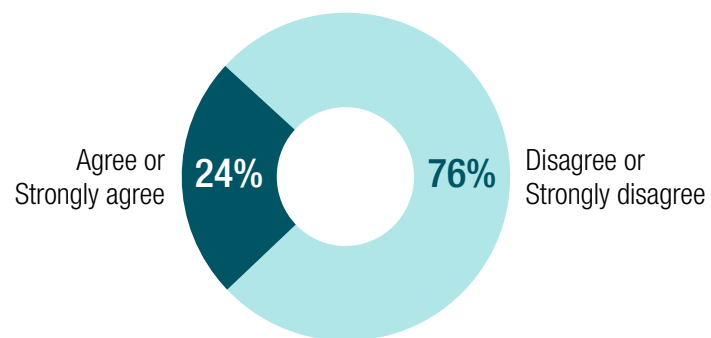
I'm scared that I'm going to ask the dumb question, or they'll look at me differently because of [my] question. [But] no. They always help me, always clarify the question. They always help cheer me up saying, 'It's okay, you got this.'

—STUDENT



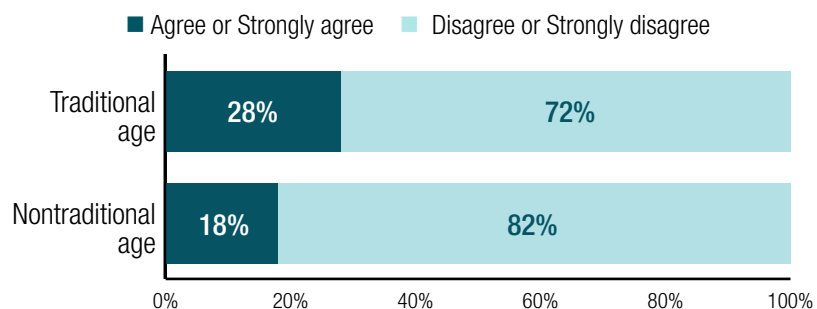
Asking for help with my classes makes me feel weak.

CCSSE Respondents



Source: CCSSE 2024 data

CCSSE Responses by Age



Source: CCSSE 2024 data

I will be graduating soon.
I never had a family member
that graduated college or even
went to college. Everything
[was] brand new.

—STUDENT

4. How many of our students are experiencing food or housing insecurity, and are we helping them meet these and other basic needs?

Mission Critical, published by CCCSE in 2022, explored the role of community colleges in meeting students' basic needs. The COVID-19 pandemic both highlighted and exacerbated the unacceptable numbers of students experiencing food and housing insecurity.

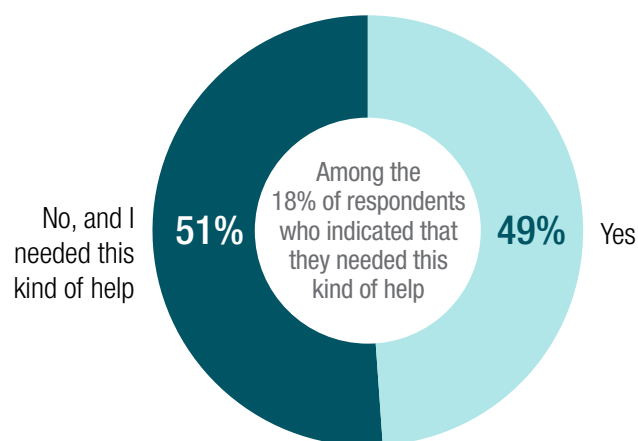
Before the pandemic, most institutions offered some basic needs assistance, such as food pantries, free meals, and clothing closets. During and after the pandemic, many colleges expanded basic needs support by providing additional

services directly to students and connecting them to relevant government and community supports.

Unfortunately, many *CCSSE* respondents report that they continue to have unmet basic needs. In addition, findings from *SENSE* respondents, who are all entering students, show the importance of asking students about their needs during their earliest interactions with their colleges.

In the last 30 days, did your college ever help you get food when you could not afford to purchase it?

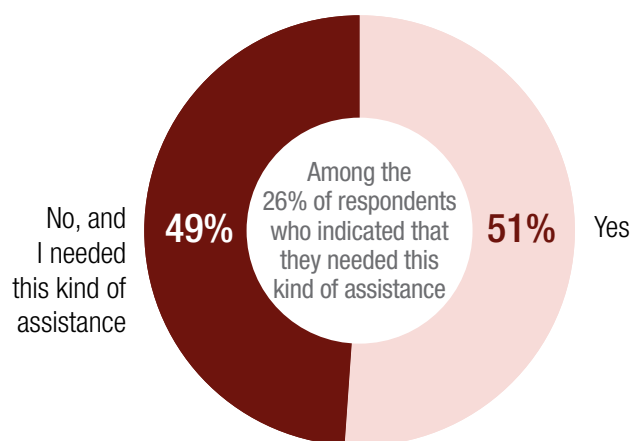
CCSSE Respondents



Source: *CCSSE* 2024 data

Since registering for classes, have you been asked if you need assistance obtaining food?

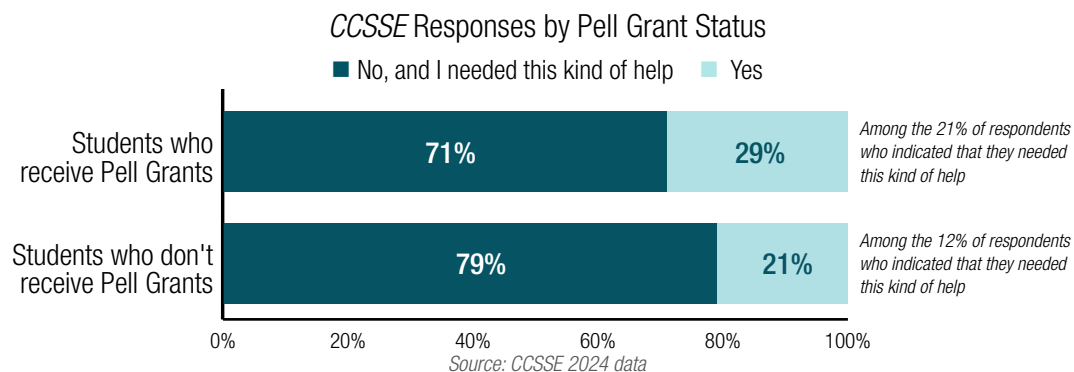
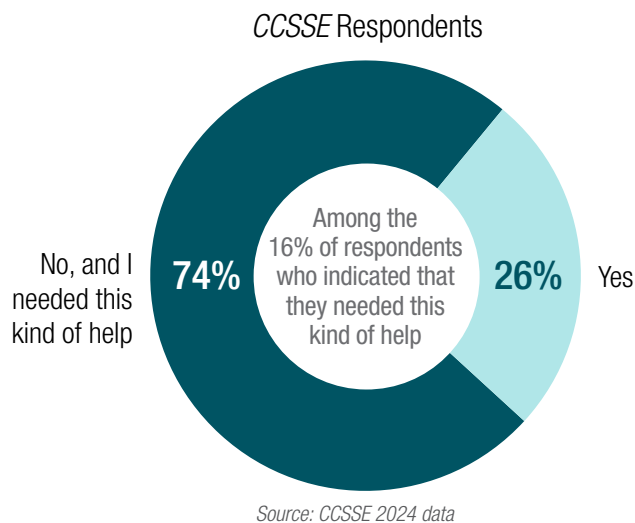
SENSE Respondents



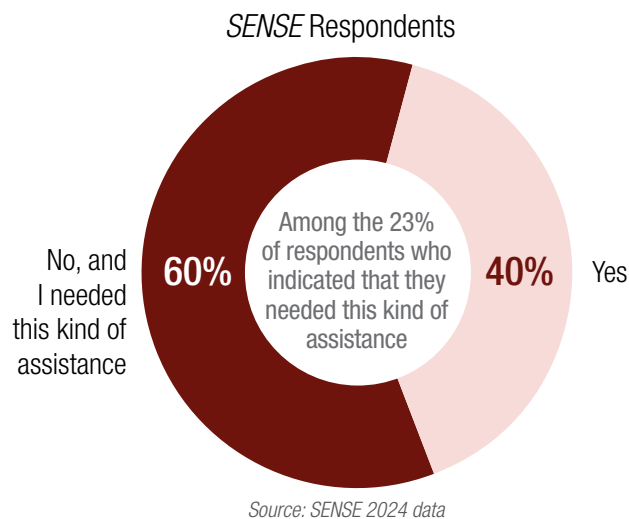
Source: *SENSE* 2024 data

If you don't eat right ... you can't learn.
—STUDENT

In the last 12 months, did your college ever help you maintain secure and affordable housing (rent, utility bills, etc.)?



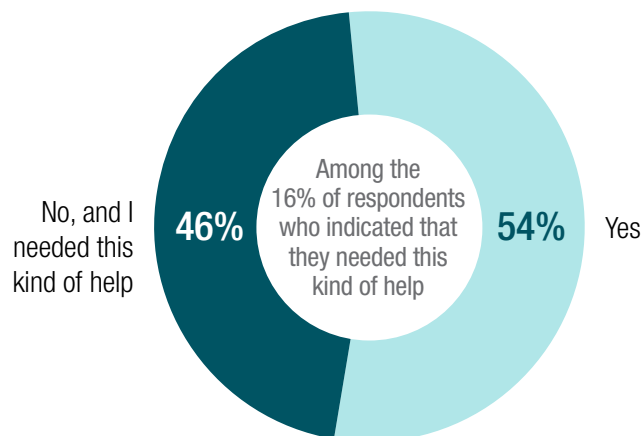
Since registering for classes, have you been asked if you need assistance maintaining or securing affordable housing (rent, utility bills, etc.)?



“If [a student has] not had a place to lay their head for the last three nights, how can I ignore that and expect them to be their whole selves when they walk into my classroom?”
—STAFF/ADMINISTRATOR

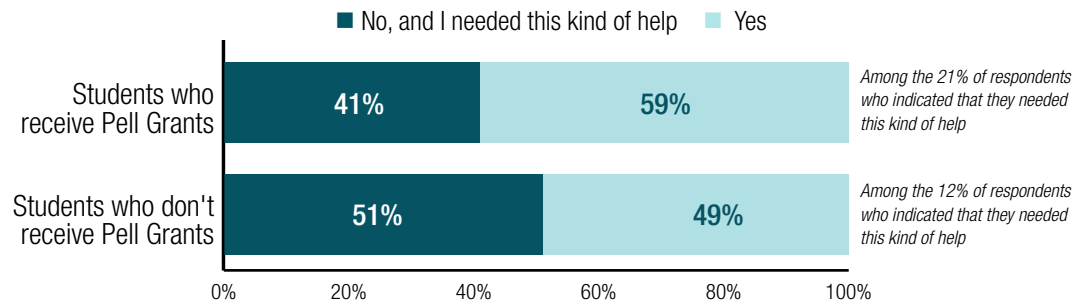
In the last 12 months, did your college ever provide you with support to help you get to campus?

CCSSE Respondents



Source: CCSSE 2024 data

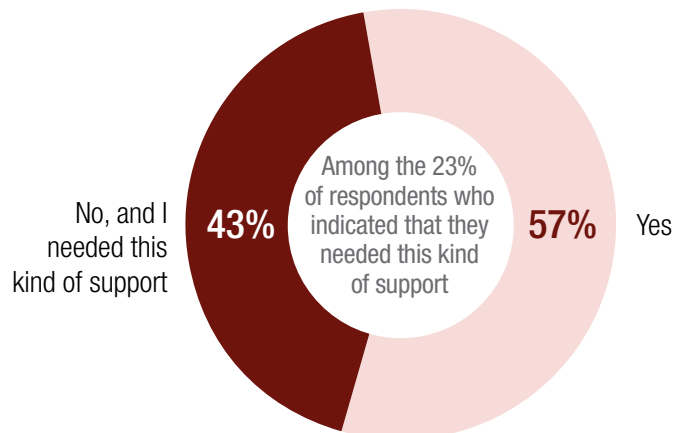
CCSSE Responses by Pell Grant Status



Source: CCSSE 2024 data

Since registering for classes, have you been asked if you need support getting to campus?

SENSE Respondents



Source: SENSE 2024 data

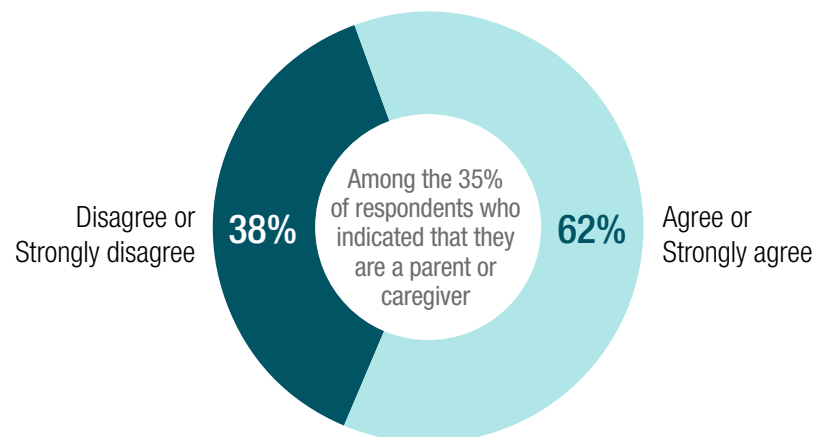
The first day of class the teacher told me, 'We have a resource room, and no one goes hungry on this campus. You can always go to the resource room and grab something.' She said if you're embarrassed to go in there, she'll go in there for you.

—STUDENT



This college supports me as a parent or caregiver.

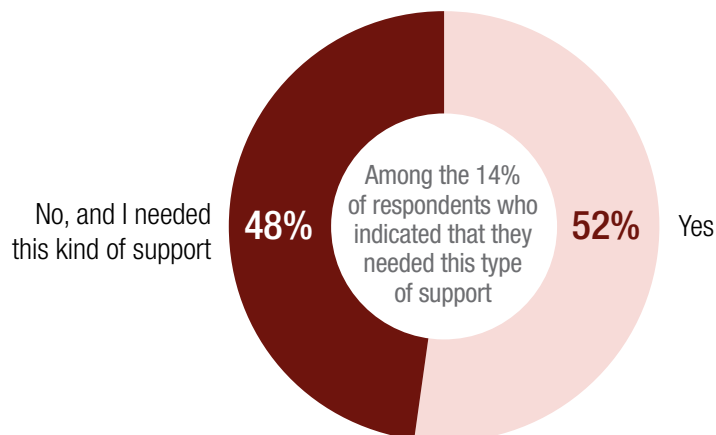
CCSSE Respondents



Source: CCSSE 2024 data

Since registering for classes, have you been asked if you need support as a parent or caregiver?

SENSE Respondents



Source: SENSE 2024 data

Talking to [instructors] and creating that bond is really what sets the semester for you. Knowing that you can come to someone and they're willing to help you [makes] you want to keep learning and sticking with that class.

—STUDENT

5. Do our students believe that our college considers their mental health and well-being a priority?

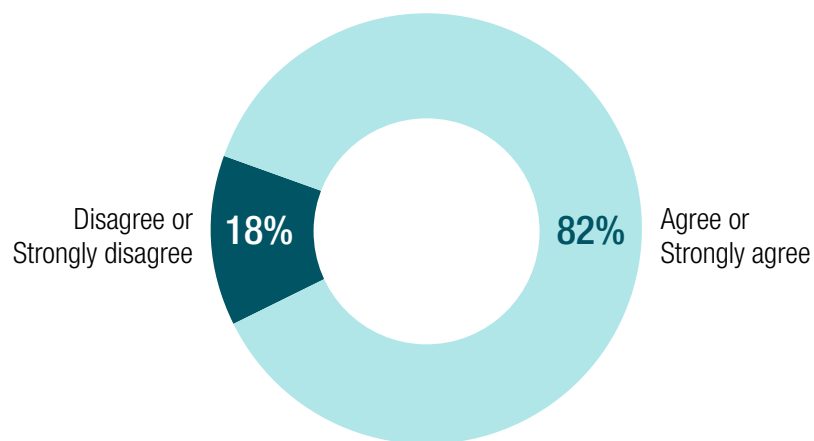
In 2024, CCCSE's *Supporting Minds, Supporting Learners* highlighted the connection between students' mental health and their academic success. The report documented the rise in Americans' mental health challenges, which was well underway prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and was exacerbated by that event.

Supporting Minds, Supporting Learners also demonstrated how mental health challenges affect a student's ability to focus on their academic work and often result in lower grades and a higher likelihood of withdrawing from classes.

The most recent CCSSE findings illustrate that colleges have opportunities to improve their efforts related to students' mental health and emotional well-being. Nearly a fifth of students do not believe that students' mental and emotional health is a priority at their college. More than a third would not know where to go if they were seeking help for their mental or emotional health.

Students' mental health and emotional well-being is a priority at this college.

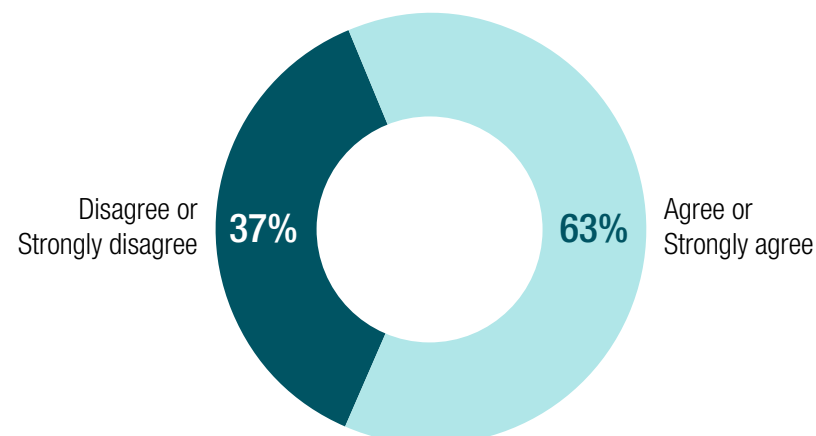
CCSSE Respondents



Source: CCSSE 2024 data

If you needed to seek professional help for your mental or emotional health while attending this college, you would know where to go.

CCSSE Respondents



Source: CCSSE 2024 data

Caring Campus in Action

Across the country, colleges participating in Caring Campus are creating transformative experiences that improve student success by building stronger connections between students and the faculty and staff at their college.

Caring Campus, developed by the [Institute for Evidence-Based Change](#), focuses on embedding care into everyday practices. Through Caring Campus, colleges are changing campus culture in tangible ways. The result is not only improved outcomes, but also stronger relationships between students and the institution.

The following profiles demonstrate how three different institutions emphasize simple, intentional acts of caring that make a lasting impact.

At a community college in Southern California, faculty and staff noticed that students often seemed lost during the first few weeks of the semester. In response, the college implemented a Welcome Week as part of its Caring Campus strategies. Years earlier, the college had developed a first-week experience, but with Caring Campus support, the work became more robust and intentional. Staff volunteers in “Ask Me Anything” T-shirts stood in common areas, offering directions, handing out campus maps, and answering questions. Faculty held office hours in the quad and invited students to informal coffee chats. One student shared that after being

welcomed by three different people on her first day back on campus, she felt like she finally belonged at college—a feeling she had never experienced before. Her attendance improved, and she joined the student government to help others feel the same way.

In Texas, a college serving a largely rural population began implementing Caring Campus practices. For example, staff adopted the Caring Campus practice of *warm referrals*. Instead of simply pointing students to resources, they would walk students to the financial aid or counseling office, call ahead to make an appointment, or follow up afterward to ensure that the student got the help they needed. One staff member recounted how a student who had considered dropping out due to financial challenges returned to the staff member’s office months later to say thank you because she was on track to graduate.

At a Midwest college, faculty embraced the idea that a simple connection with a student could make a meaningful difference. Professors began arriving 10 minutes early to class to chat with students informally and staying after class to answer questions. One instructor started each class by asking students to share one good thing that happened that week, building a sense of community and care. A student who had been struggling with anxiety and isolation later wrote in a course evaluation that it was the first time she felt seen and supported by a professor.



These stories are not isolated—they are examples of how Caring Campus, implemented by faculty and staff, fosters an environment in which students are more likely to stay, succeed, and complete their educational goals.

Caring Campus is not about creating new programs; it is about being intentional with what already exists—walking a student to the right office, greeting them by their preferred name, or showing up early just to listen. These actions are small, but the effect is profound. As these colleges show, when students feel cared for, they are more likely to believe they belong. And when students believe they belong, they persist and complete.

Next Steps

The intensity of a college's culture of caring is evident in every aspect of college life. When a college has a holistic culture of caring, students are aware of it from their first interactions with the institution, and it is evident to anyone who visits the campus. When asked about their college, students will describe an environment in which they feel supported and know where to turn for help.

When a culture of caring is lacking, the impact is equally strong even if no one is actively describing it.

Colleges that are interested in developing a culture of caring—or deepening an existing culture of caring—should involve faculty and staff in assessing current practices and identifying opportunities for better connecting with and supporting students.

Everyone on a campus who comes in contact with students can play a role in the college's culture of caring. College leaders should engage all employees in conversations about their role in a culture of caring and build student-focused actions into the day-to-day work of all faculty and staff.

To support all employees, colleges should make supports easy to find and access. They also should make supports inescapable by making sure students are reminded about supports multiple times from multiple sources, beginning with students' earliest interactions with the college.

College employees in all areas and at all levels can:

- Make participating in an active culture of caring their top priority. Consider how their work can support each component of caring.
- Create opportunities to connect with students, build trust, and act as a resource over time.

Presidents and senior leaders can:

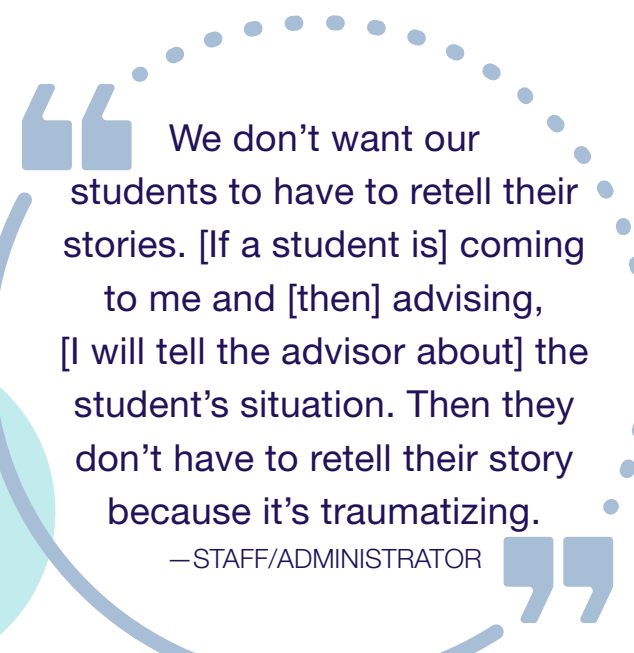
- Commit to developing a culture of caring. Make this work a priority for everyone at the college, and make sure each person understands what their role can be, what resources they can direct students to, and the importance of encouraging students to use these resources.
- Designate a person or team of people to maintain a centralized list of current services that are part of the college's culture of caring. Make sure everyone on campus has access to this



I have changed
how I email or text my
students. Now my first
comment is ... 'I missed you
today. Is everything okay?'
[and not] 'Where are you?' [or]
'Why aren't you at class?'
I changed my frame
of mind.
—INSTRUCTOR

information so they use it in their contacts with students. Include campus, community, and government resources.

- Make sure advisors' caseloads allow for asking students about their needs and following up regularly.
- Allocate sufficient funds for emergency aid to help students facing unexpected financial burdens.
- Build partnerships with community organizations that provide critical services related to housing, food, child care, health care, and mental health care, or delegate specific people to do so.
- Develop systems—and train employees—to recognize and respond to students who may be experiencing food or housing insecurity, anxiety, or depression.
- Provide professional development so all staff are better able to identify students who may be struggling and connect them to the support they need.
- Encourage leaders of student government and student organizations to share information about available resources with other students.



We don't want our students to have to retell their stories. [If a student is] coming to me and [then] advising, [I will tell the advisor about] the student's situation. Then they don't have to retell their story because it's traumatizing.

—STAFF/ADMINISTRATOR

Faculty members can:

- Increase students' self-efficacy with a combination of high expectations and high support. Acknowledge that coursework is challenging, and connect students to tutoring and other resources when they need support.
- Ask students to complete a voluntary, confidential questionnaire on the first day of class, and explain that this information is to help students be more successful in the class. Ask students, for example, what challenges would keep them from being successful in the class and what types of support they might find helpful. Then return to these questions when meeting with students who are academically underperforming in the course.
- Include information about college supports in syllabi, email signature blocks, and other regular communications with students.
- Regularly remind students to ask for help when they need it.
- Invite advisors, counselors, or staff from various support programs into classrooms to briefly present information about resources that are available to students.
- Look for changes in a student's behavior, such as missing class, not turning in assignments, or looking unkempt, and recognize that these changes may be indicators that the student is struggling. Offer to connect the student to mental health supports.

Advisors, counselors, and other staff who interact with students can:

- Ask every student what would prevent them from being successful. Use each student's responses to identify supports they need, and then connect them to appropriate services. Revisit these questions regularly because students' circumstances can change. Follow up with students who need support.
- Position themselves as a resource for students, and remind students to ask for help when they need it.
- Create a needs assessment for all students to complete at the beginning of each academic term. Based on responses, route students to support resources. Send follow-up messages during the academic term to students whose responses indicated a need for assistance.

- Share details about a range of supports as part of routine contacts with students, such as communications about registration, orientation, and billing.
- Coordinate with faculty members to make sure they are aware of resources they can share with students.

Trustees can:

- Allocate funds for emergency assistance and other student supports as well as relevant professional development for employees.
- Help the college build partnerships with community organizations that address food and housing insecurity, provide mental health support, meet students' transportation needs, and offer resources for students who are parents.

Students Also Can Play an Essential Role

While colleges must take the lead in establishing a culture of caring, students themselves are powerful agents in sustaining and strengthening that culture through their daily interactions with peers. When students have the tools and opportunities to care for their peers, they become integral partners in creating an environment in which every student feels valued and supported.

Colleges can prepare students to support each other by:

- Providing training related to recognizing signs of distress and using effective peer support strategies.
- Creating structured opportunities for students to connect with and help one another.
- Equipping students with knowledge about campus resources so they can guide their peers to appropriate support services.

“When I first got here, when I first started taking my classes, it was really strange to see people care so much about [my] well-being and how good [I did] in school. I never really had that personal attachment. [It] was really nice and, honestly, really refreshing.”

—STUDENT

“I focus on relationship-building in my class. I teach math, but I am more of a relationship-builder than a math teacher a lot of times.”

—INSTRUCTOR

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