

# The Elvee 2026

## Higher Education Retention Report



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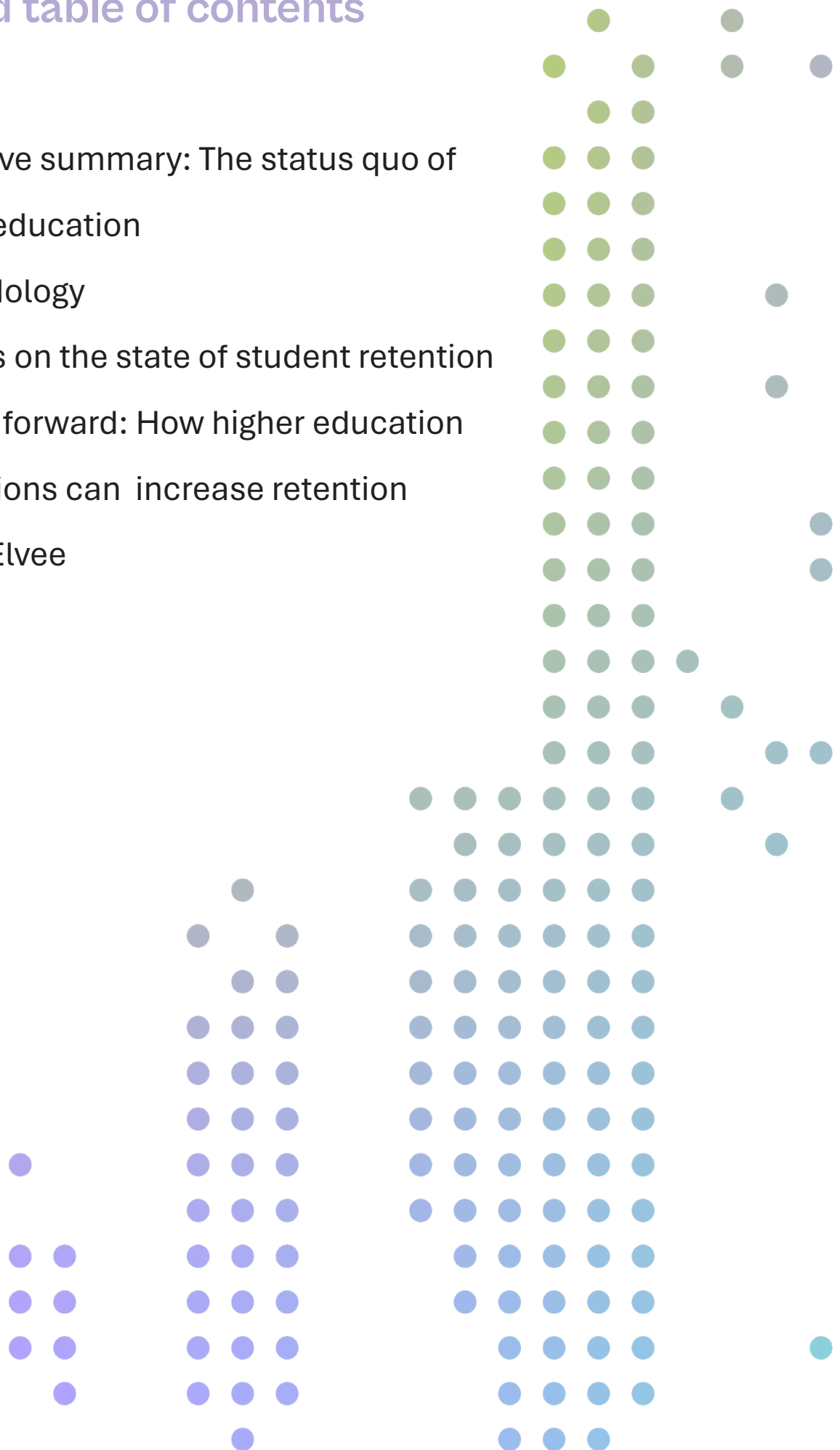
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## Executive Summary:

This report analyses survey responses from both enrolled and recently withdrawn students to shed light on the growing issue of college student dropouts, which in the U.S. has climbed to more than 30% per year. Leaving school is rarely due to a single cause, but often emerges from the convergence of academic pressure, financial difficulty, time management, and motivation. According to The Elvee 2026 Higher Education Retention Report, a staggering 42% of respondents have felt close to dropping out of their studies; almost half of the study body. Respondents frequently expressed challenges in managing their coursework alongside jobs and personal obligations (72%), while others highlighted stress or burnout (71%), and financial pressures (42%).

Dropouts take a toll on students and institutions alike. Those who drop out without a degree or certification often wind up with debt and face a situation in which they don't enjoy the well-demonstrated rise in earnings from a degree. College administrators take pride in improving young lives by providing higher education services, so when students drop out, they not only feel like they failed the student, but also suffer forgone tuition, worse completion rates, and the threat of additional scrutiny from accreditors and federal policy makers.

To combat student dropouts, college administrations and student success coaches work tirelessly to proactively support students. They implement services that advise and tutor students, as well as mental-health programs, targeted financial aid, early-alert systems, and student success programs aimed at catching all those falling through the cracks earlier. However with thousands of students to attend to, they cannot check in on each and every one. According to this study, almost 50% of students rarely or never get check-ins by administrators. With almost 30% of students hesitant to reach out for help, many who are struggling can fall through the cracks with the best of intentions.

This report offers an unparalleled view of the struggles facing students, efforts administrations are making through the students' lens, and explores the tactics and technology that could upend the status quo and help students succeed in much greater numbers. By leveraging original, high-quality polling data, contrasting it with past studies, and exploring the solutions available today, we aim to provide a comprehensive and updated picture of the rapidly changing landscape of higher education and actionable insights to encourage better results for students and institutions of higher education alike.

## Methodology

This survey was conducted by Centiment, a leading survey respondent provider, on behalf of Elvee. The survey included 1,050 respondents, all of whom were college students from across the United States. Respondents provided their views on 18 questions, some of which offered multiple-choice options, utilizing a Likert scale, and others that required respondents to “select all that apply.” Several open-ended questions were also answered by the group.

### Demographic Distribution:

Age variance was minimal, as expected, with 96.4% falling between 18-24, while 3.6% were 25-34. The pool of respondents was split almost exactly evenly on a gender basis.

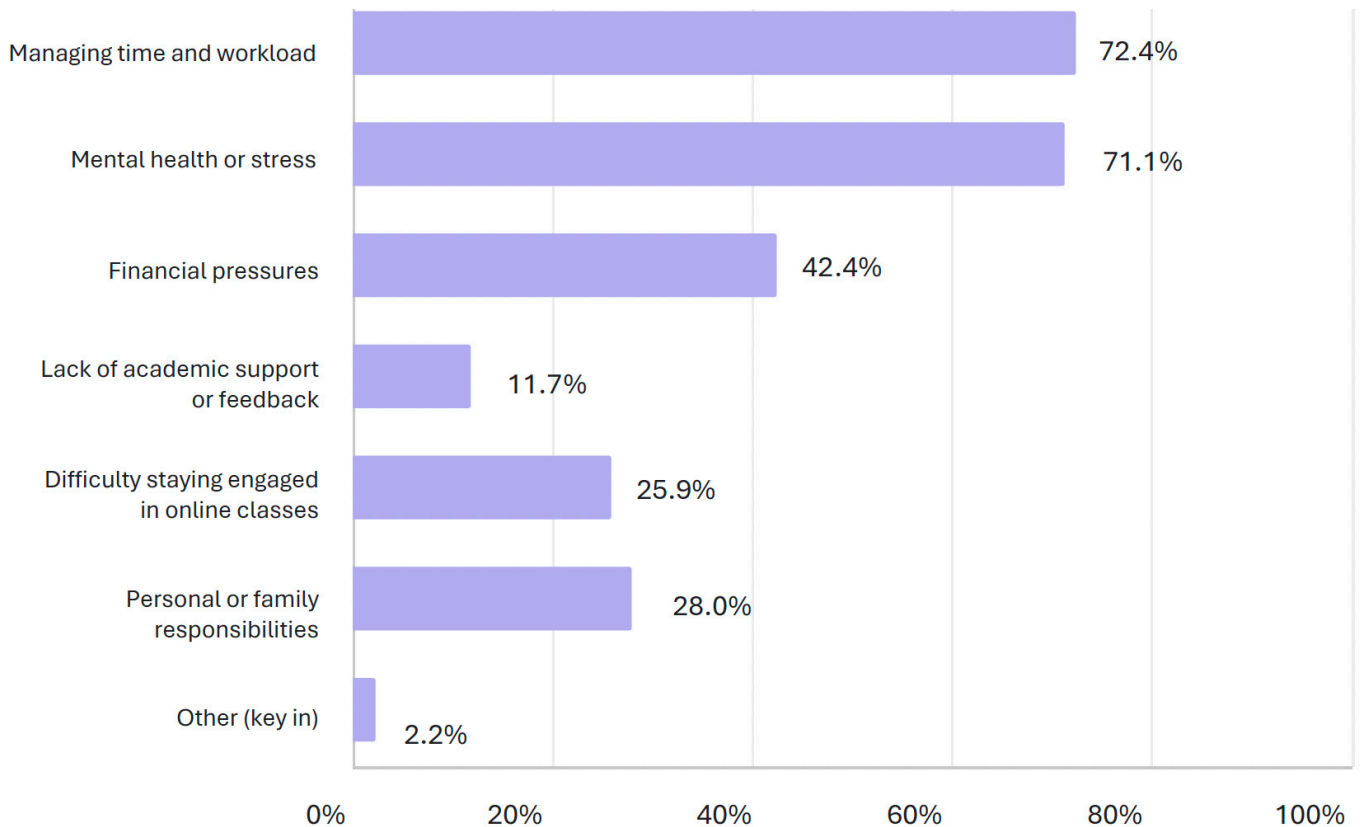


## Survey insights

### The student experience

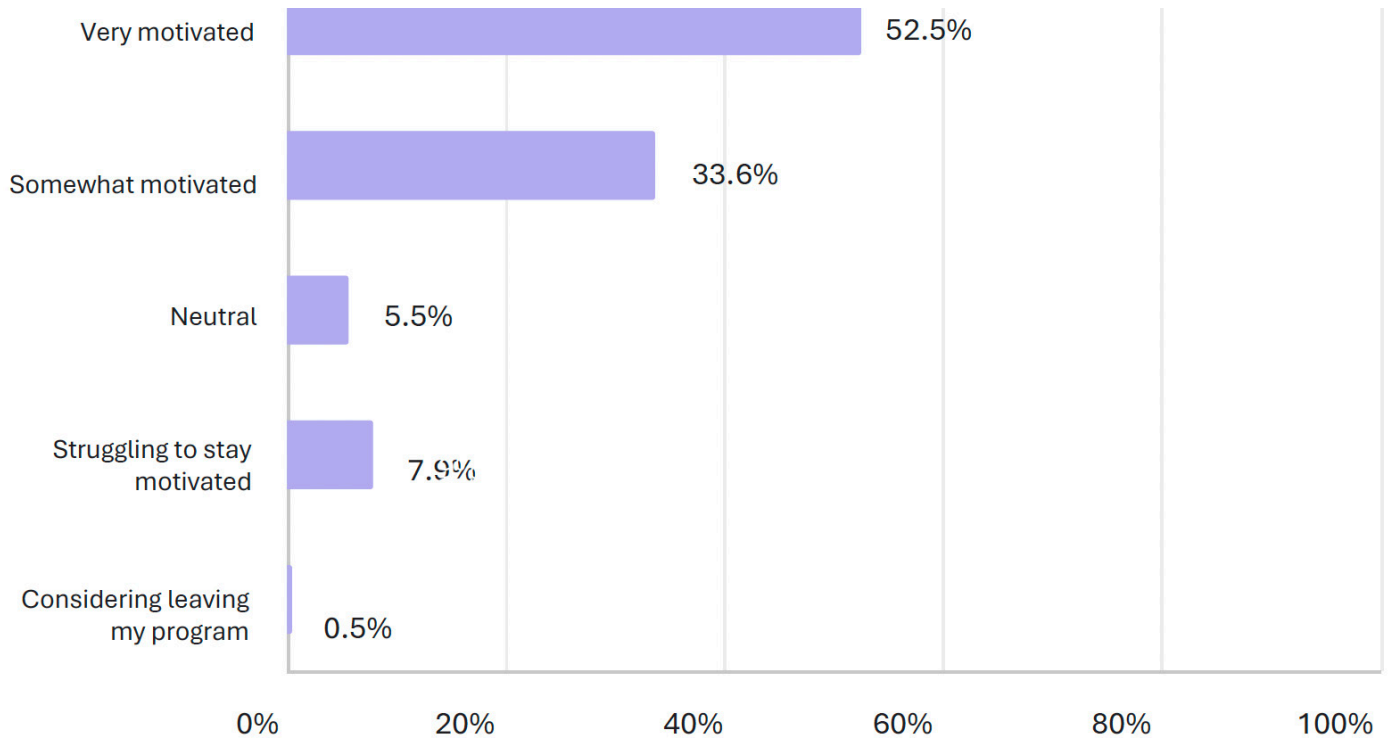
#### What are the biggest challenges affecting your academic performance?

Select your top 3



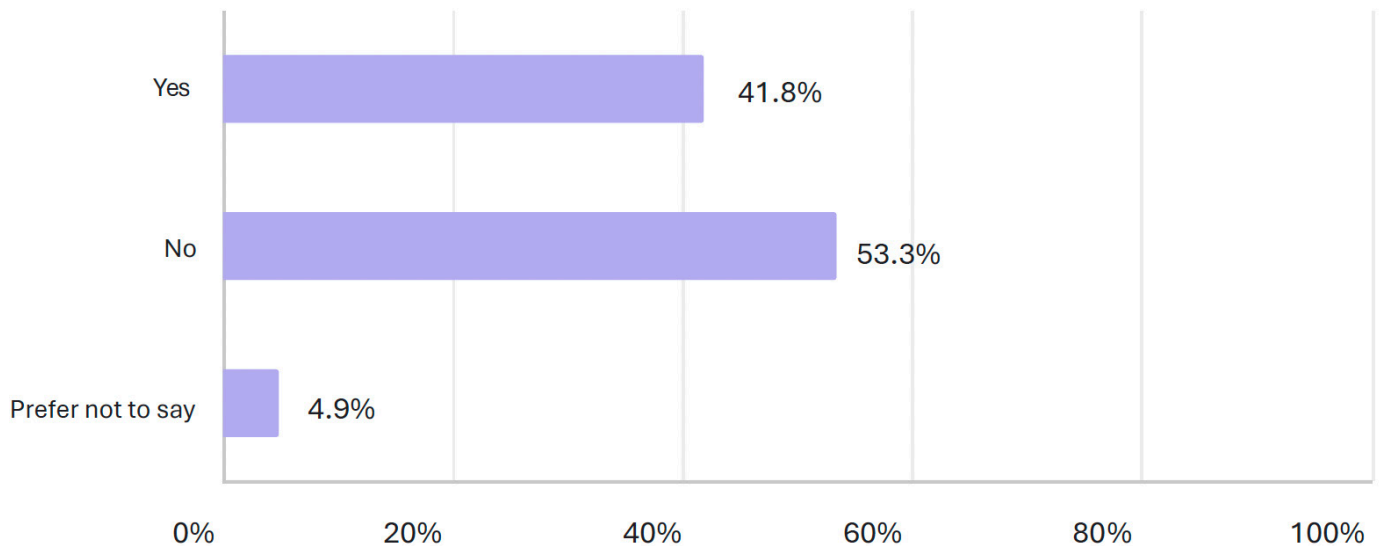
An alarmingly high percentage of respondents, namely 71%, cited mental health or stress as their biggest challenge, while financial pressures came in at 42%. This is mirrored by recent major studies by Gallup, Sallie Mae and Ipsos, albeit at lower rates, indicating that these issues may be getting worse. One trend these reports don't highlight is managing time and workload, which 72% of respondents cited as their biggest challenge. Most higher education institutions have programs to help students navigate stress, financial difficulties, as well as tools to manage time and workloads, indicating that the issue is not lack of resources, but a lack of awareness that help is readily available.

## How would you describe your overall motivation to complete your studies this year?



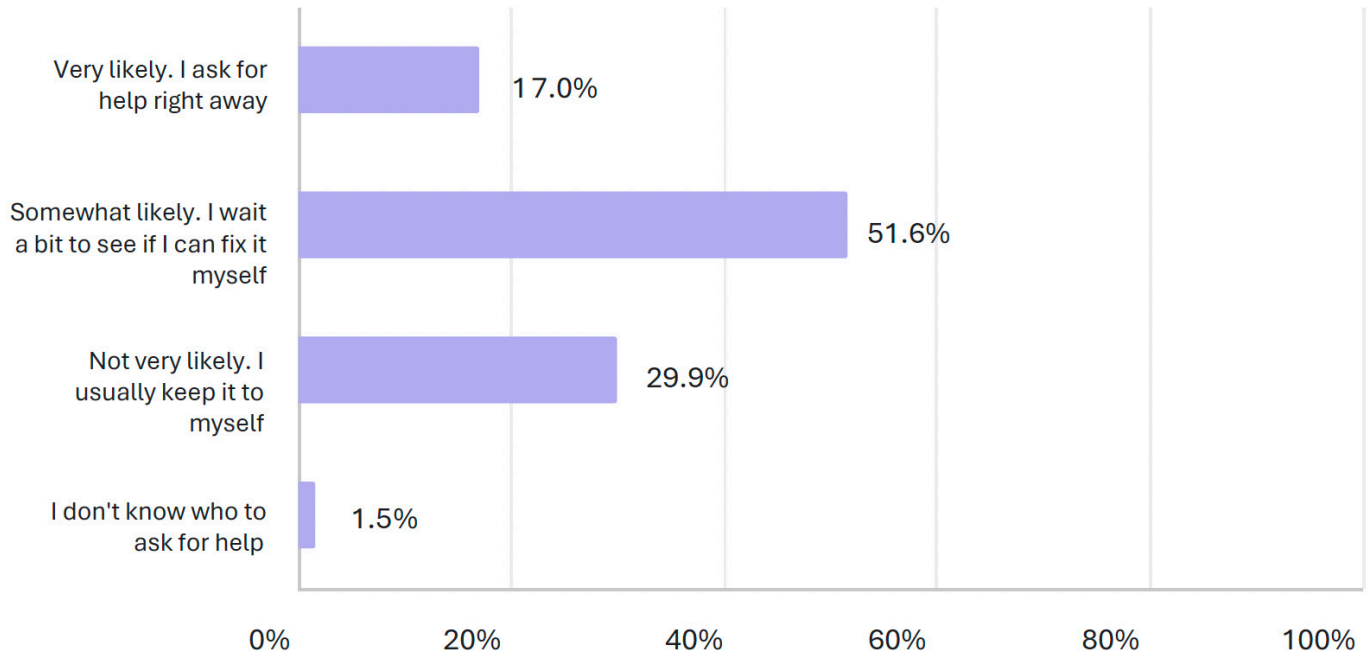
Every generation of younger workers earns the reputation of being “unmotivated” in their time, and Gen Z is no different. However the survey tells a different story, revealing that 86% of respondents are at least somewhat motivated and over half reported that they were “very motivated.” This is the generation that rejects long working hours and commitment without a clear ROI. Out of the gate, it’s clear that the challenge these students face isn’t their own motivation, but rather a confluence of factors that are primarily structural and personal.

## Have you ever felt close to dropping out or taking a break from your studies?



Approximately 42% of respondents claimed that they felt close to dropping out of their studies, more than 10% higher than the percentage that typically does end up dropping out. Amidst more remote classes, inflation, and other pressures, this high percentage of potential dropouts signal that costly dropouts could get worse. Further, it signals a potentially large wave of young men and women that will have taken on unforgivable debt for higher education without the higher salaries that come with a degree to pay it off. Colleges must act quickly to remedy the issue, the cost of not doing so is dire.

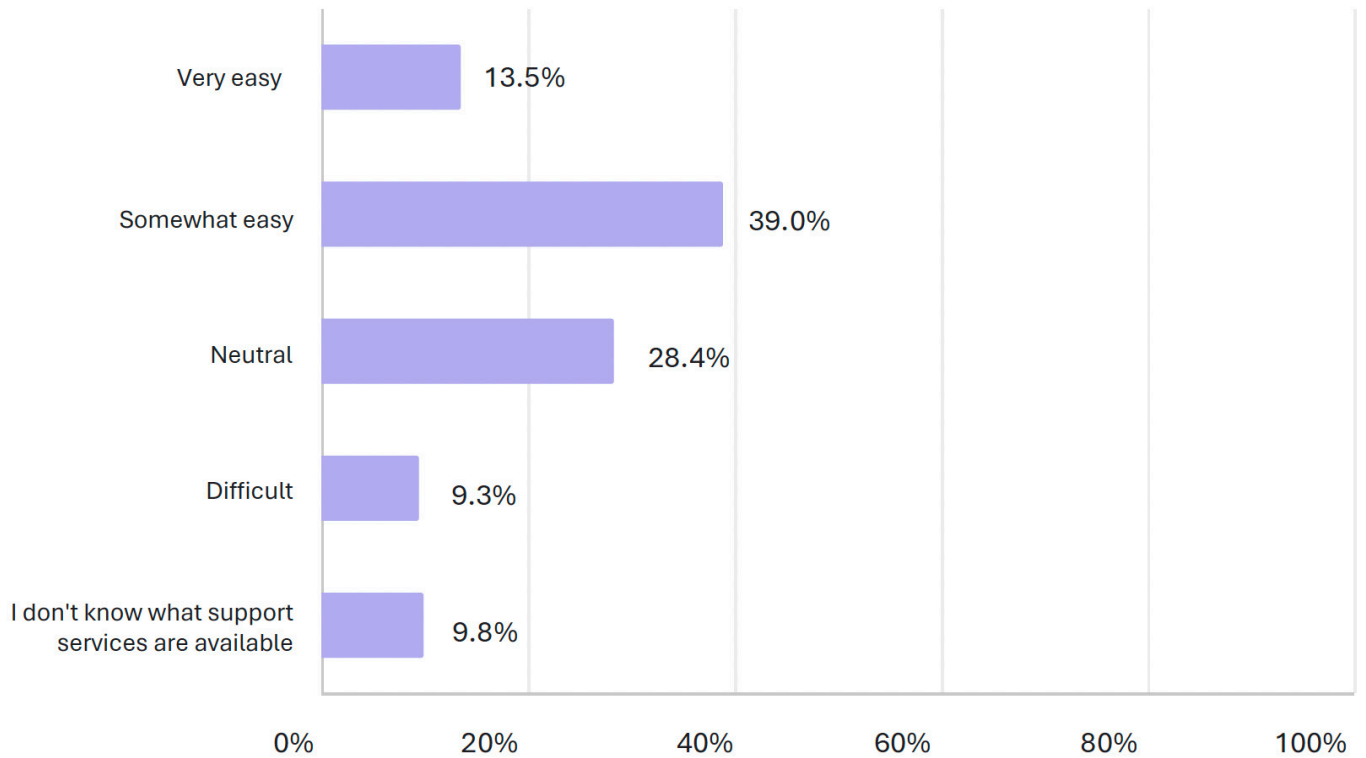
## When you start struggling in a class, how likely are you to reach out for help?



This question reveals one crucial truth: students often see the responsibility or fault as personal and not institutional.

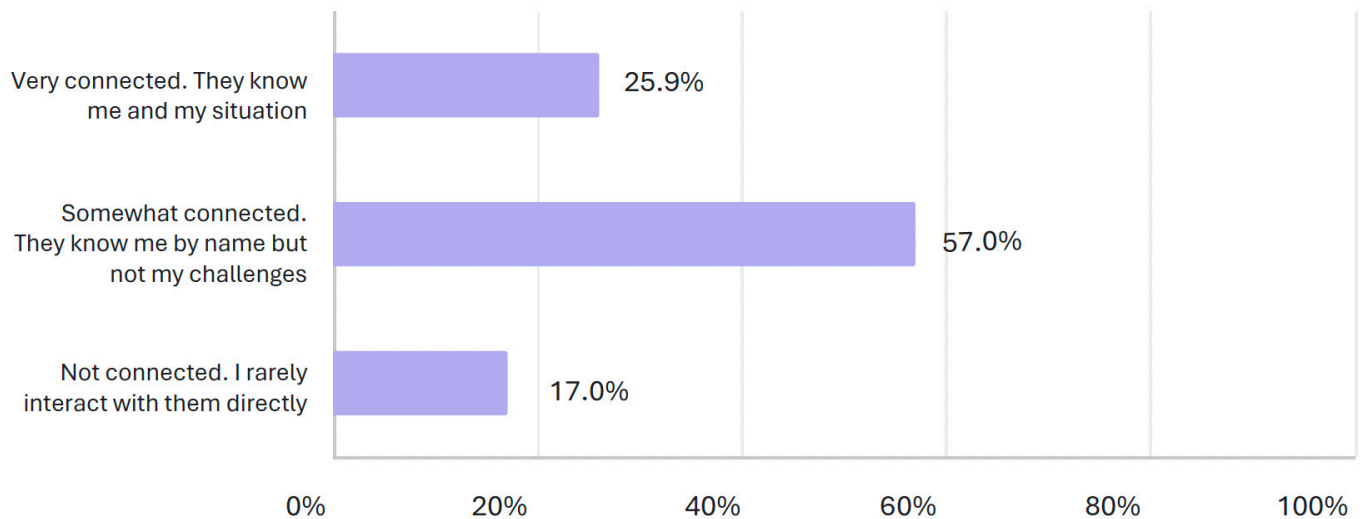
Only a modest 17% of students are very likely to reach out for help if they are struggling in class, while nearly double that percentage is not very likely to reach out [30%] at all. The majority in the middle is only “somewhat likely” and will wait a bit to try to fix it themselves. That individual responsibility and time spent waiting could exacerbate their issues, such as debt piling up, increasingly falling behind in class or general stress that develops into a full-blown breakdown. Institutions that are able to identify students who are struggling and offer help before problems get too big, ensure that dropping out is never an option.

## Have you reached out for support? If yes, how easy was it to resolve your issues?



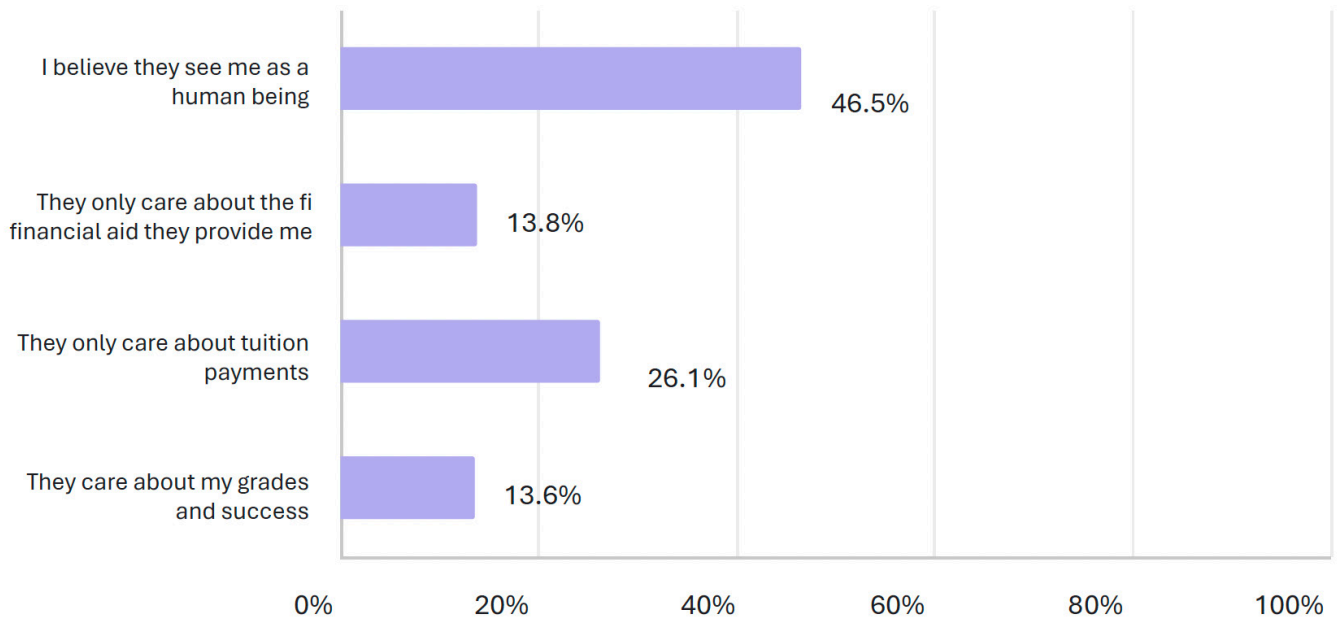
Less than 10% of students who reached out for support found resolving their issue to be “difficult,” and over half found it easy to varying degrees. This proves that once college administrations are involved, they are experts at solving students’ issues and being a supportive resource.

## How would you describe your relationship with your professors or academic advisors?



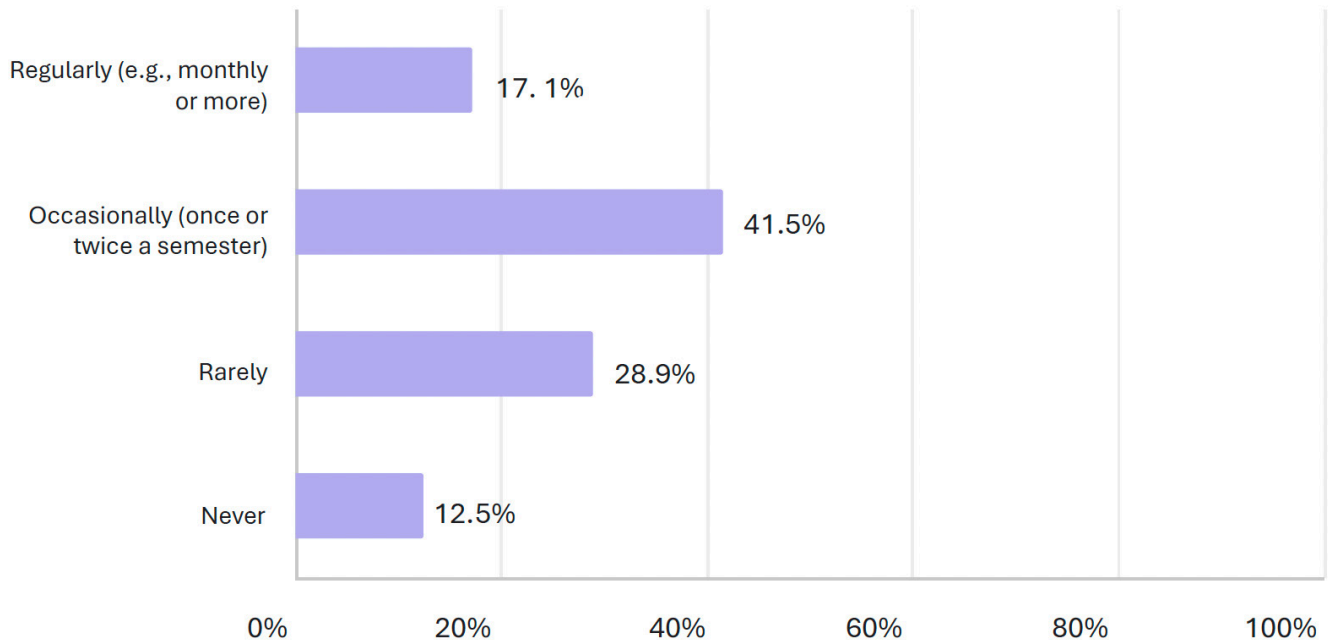
Engaging with academic advisors and professors comes with many benefits, from motivation and asking questions about course materials to feeling valued and even being more likely to remain in school. According to the survey, a quarter of students feel very connected with their professors, while 57% feel somewhat connected, indicating potential for growth. This is a great building block for universities to further engage with students, reach out when they are struggling and ultimately enrich their lives and careers by helping them stay in school.

## Do you think your university views you as a human being or simply sees grades, financial assistance needs, etc?



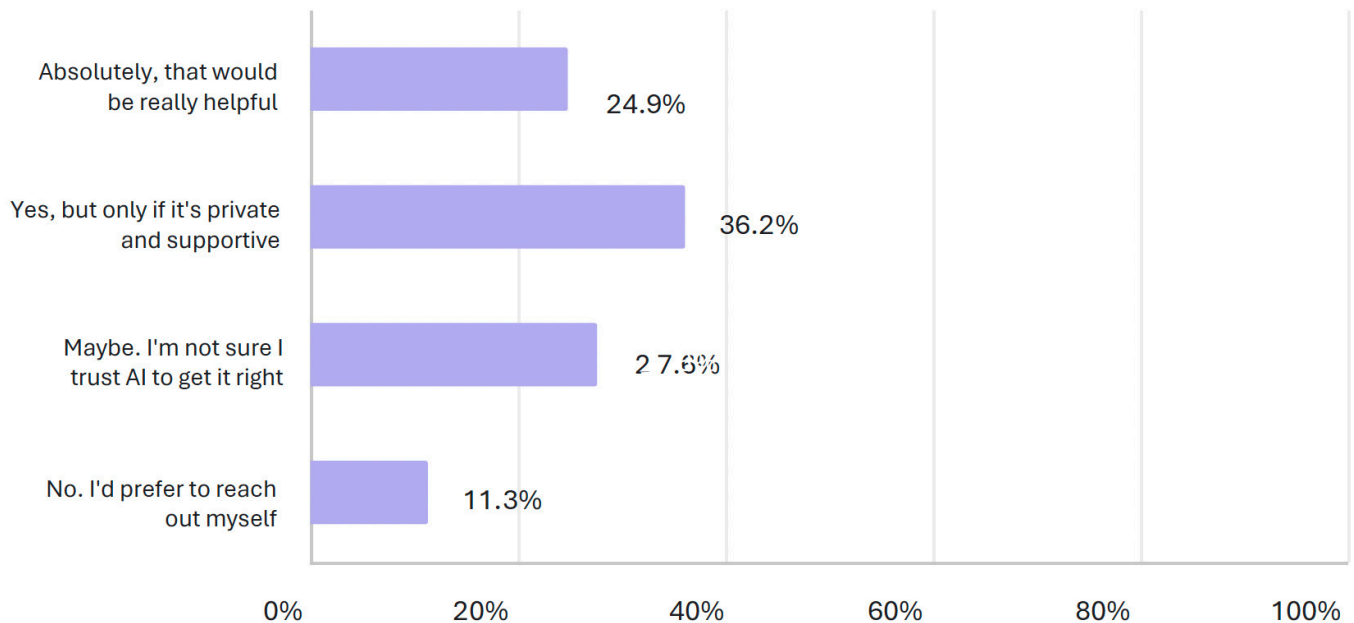
More than 46% of respondents believe that universities care about them, while almost 14% believe that they care about their success. In order to ensure that the student body feels valued beyond financial gain, universities can put further emphasis on providing support to students as needed.

## How often has your university or college reached out to check on your wellbeing or academic progress?



Almost 50% of students don't receive regular or even occasional check-ins from administrators, meaning no one is keeping an eye on or proactively approaching them. Often universities track grades, attendance and other signs to identify which students may need additional support. In this case, institutions may be missing select students who are struggling silently from almost half of their student body.

## If your university could use AI to detect when you're struggling early (based on participation, grades, or engagement), would you want them to reach out to offer help?

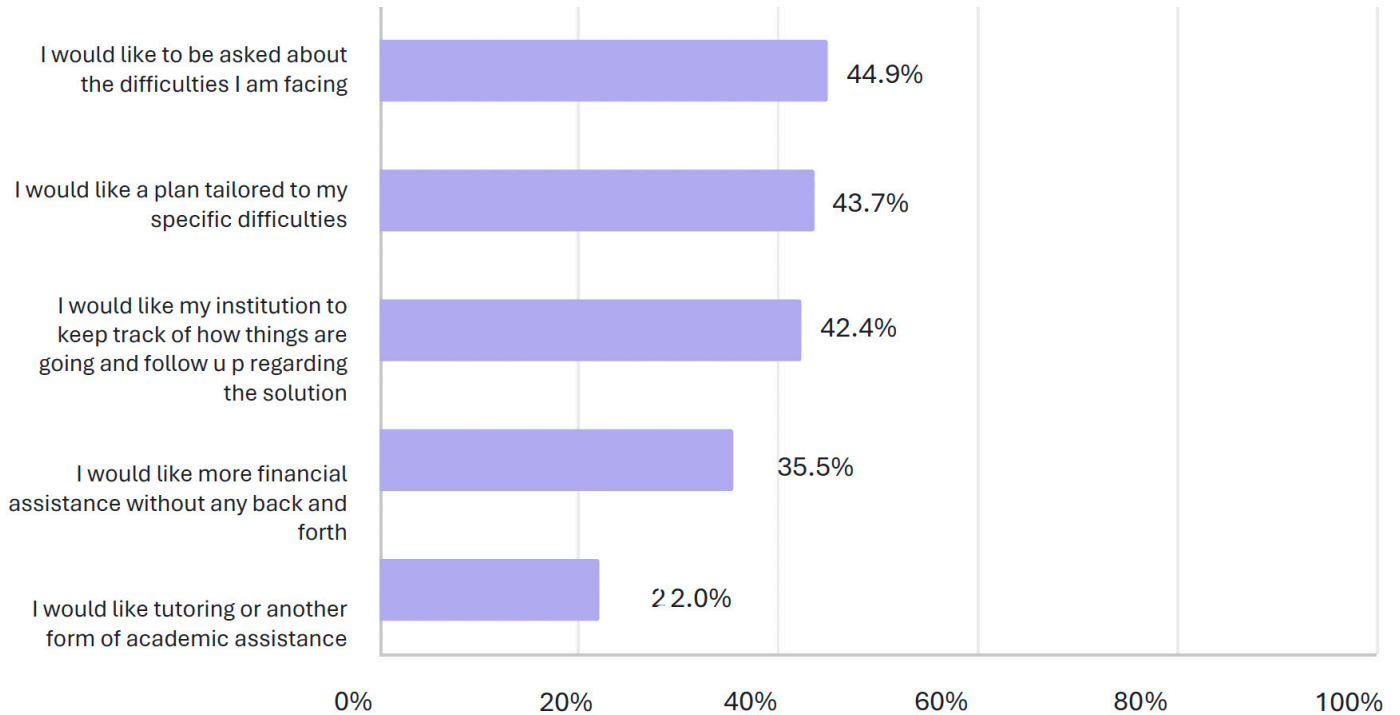


Over 61% of students believe that if AI detected their struggles early, they would want universities to reach out to help, and only 11% wouldn't. A key concern? Privacy. Most respondents wanted to ensure that their struggles remained exclusive if AI detection involved the administration. An emphasis on privacy, both in actually utilizing AI tools to detect student struggles and how administrations communicate about those tools, can spur acceptance and drive change.

## Survey insights

### How students want to connect

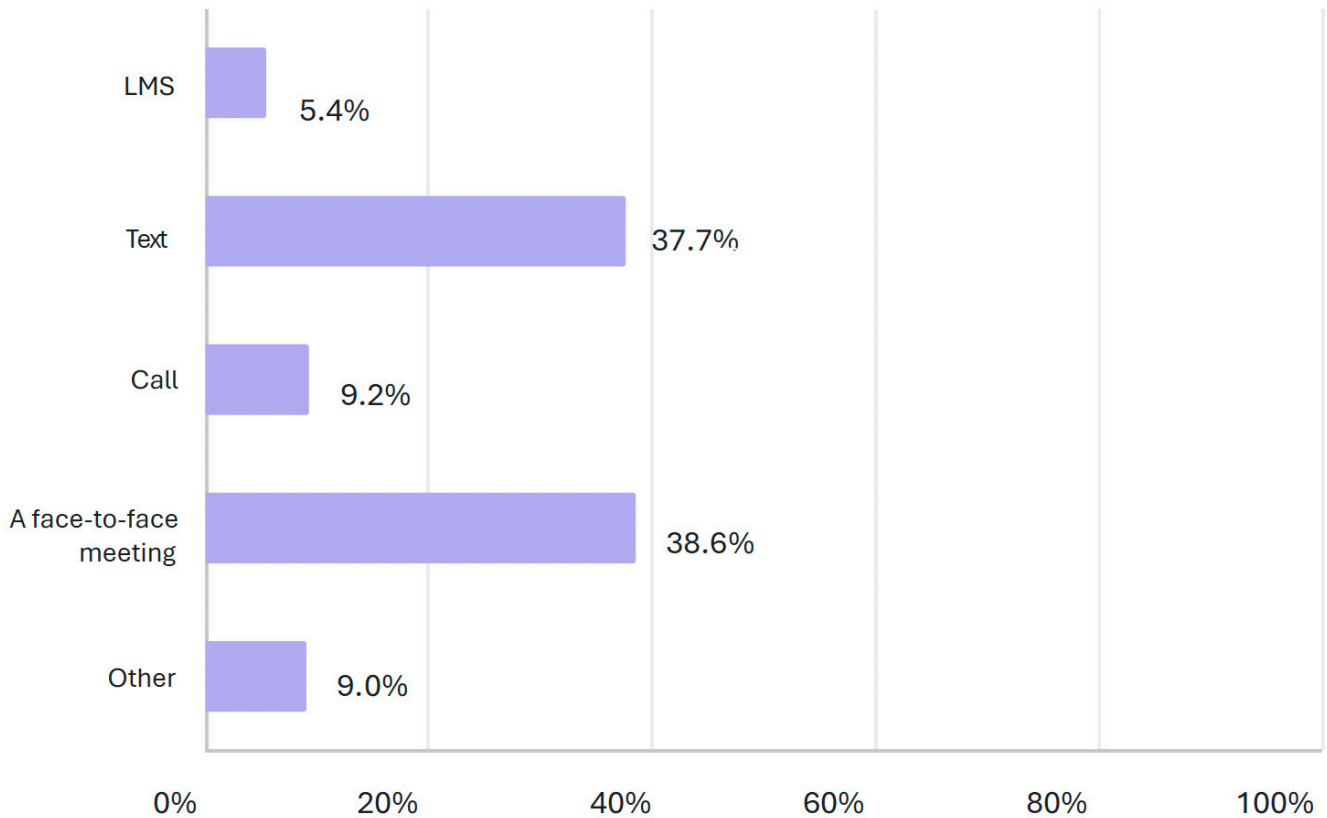
How would you like to be approached or supported by your institution when you face academic or personal difficulties?



Large percentages of students embraced the idea of a proactive institution that doesn't wait for them to ask for help, but rather meets them where they are. The top response [45%] was that students would like to simply be asked about the challenges they are facing, while a plan tailored to their specific needs was a close second, and institutions tracking students and following up were similarly common. Uncomplicated financial assistance came in at nearly 36%, and tutoring, though the lowest, was seen as a helpful form of assistance. Notably, the lowest two were the responses that didn't have a proactive institutional component.

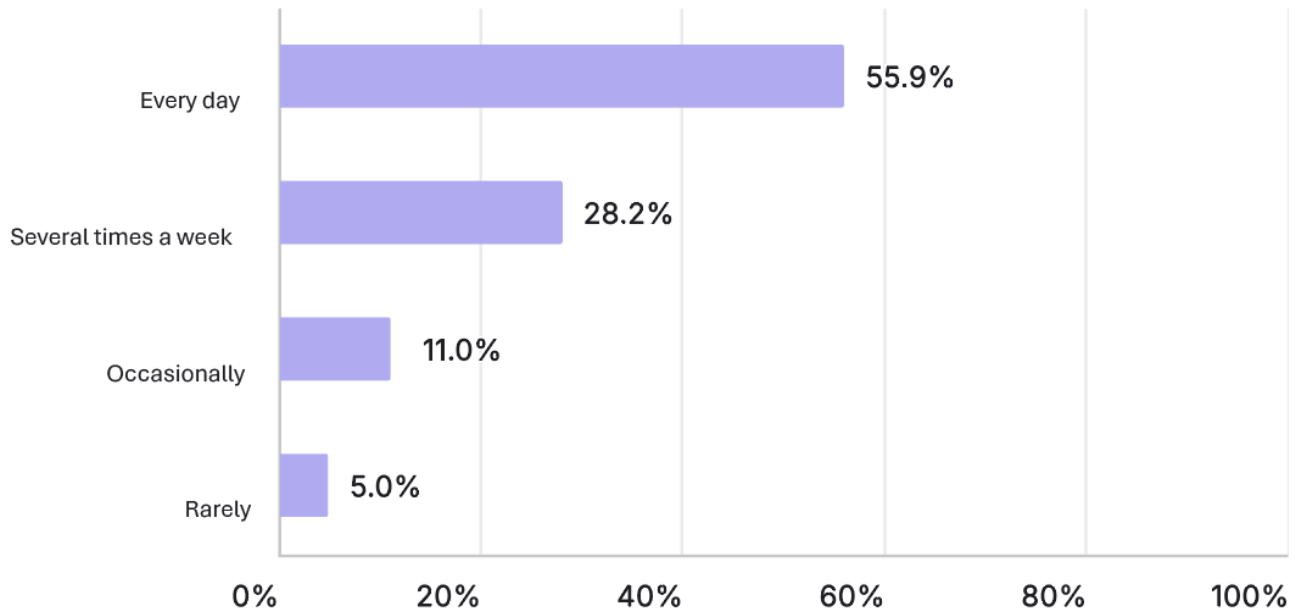
This third part of the institutional vs. individual issue facing universities provides a way forward. Earlier responses established student struggles, that many are unlikely to reach out for help, and that even if they did, it may be too late. This data reveals that if institutions were willing to engage, track, follow up, and to do so proactively, it would be seen as a welcome relief by many students, especially those struggling silently, too afraid or ashamed to ask themselves.

**What is your preferred method of communication for university-related matters (both for contacting the university and receiving information from the university)**



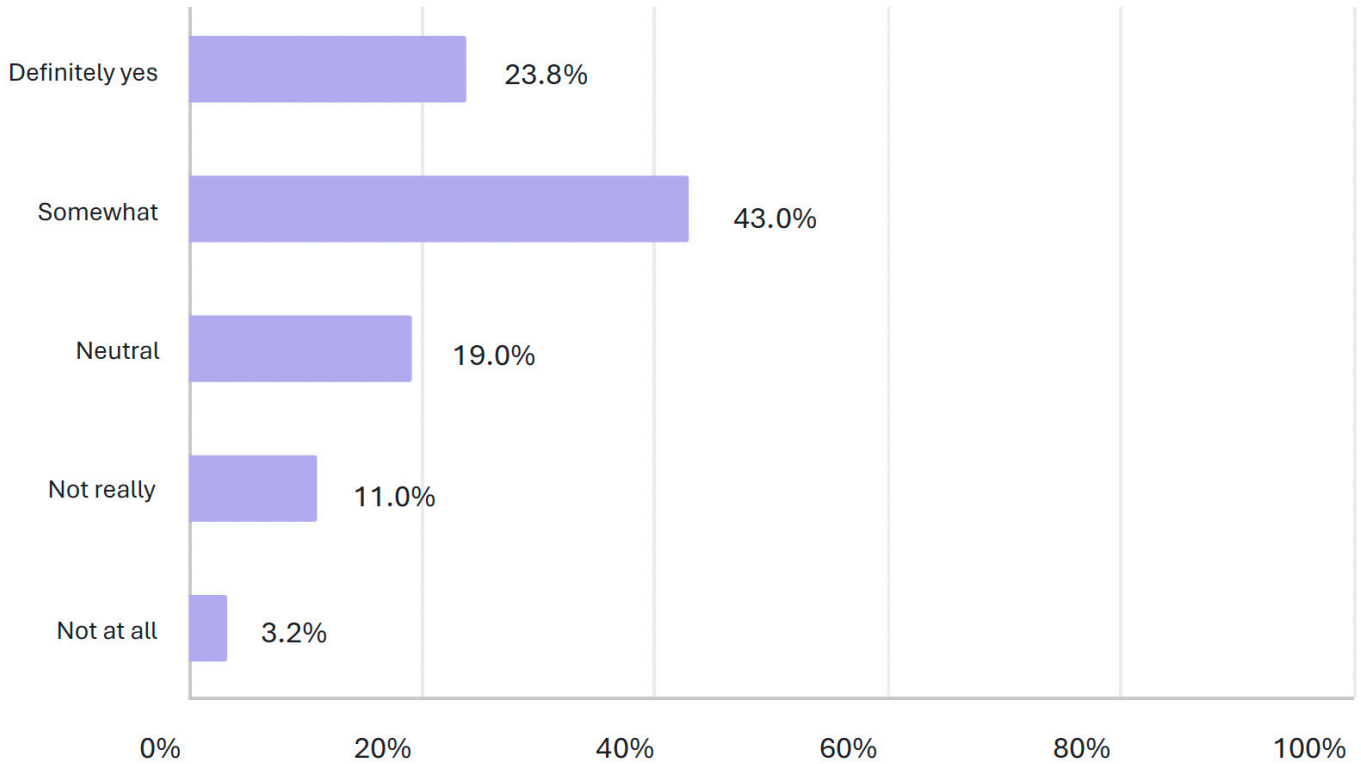
Students' preferred method of communications with administrators is face-to-face meetings, revealing that personal touchpoints and ad-hoc conversations that arise are invaluable even in a digital age. Texting as a communication method is almost as popular at 38%, as it proves an easy and informal way to engage with institutions without the need to log into additional platforms. While LMS systems are the least preferred choice for interaction, they are a valuable tool for administrators to maintain important information on students.

## How often do you use your Learning Management System (e.g., Moodle, Canvas, Blackboard)?



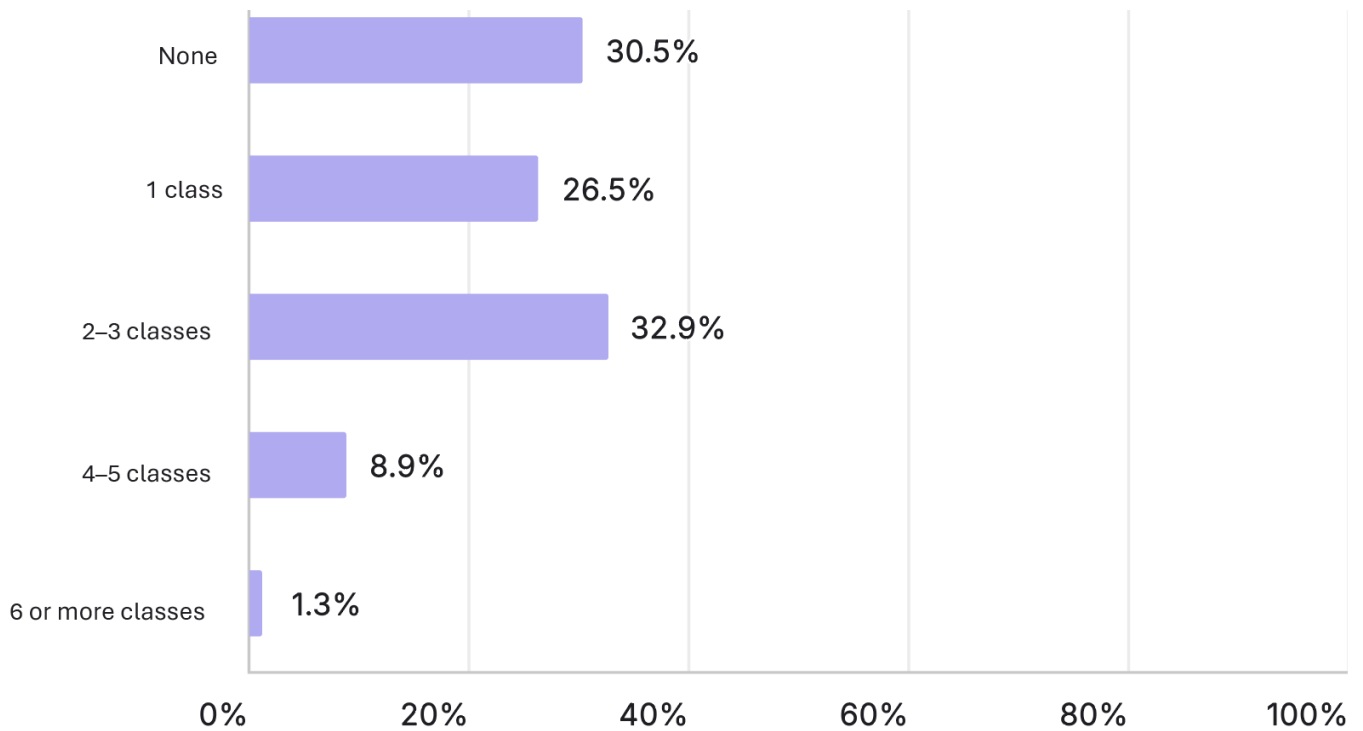
LMS systems are essential, and they are used by an overwhelming majority of students, with more than 83% checking in daily or weekly. Nevertheless, as indicated in question 8, it is students' least preferred method of communicating with administrators and should be avoided for personal, one-to-one communications.

## Do you feel that your online learning platform (LMS) helps you stay engaged and on track?



Notably only 24% of students were sure that LMS systems help them stay engaged and on track, while the majority at 43% stated that it helped them somewhat. This indicates that students need more than digital tools to stay on track with their courses.

## How many virtual or remote classes are you currently taking?



While many point to COVID as the reason for the remote learning period for college students, roughly 70% of the students we polled are engaging in remote learning at some level. The most common answer among respondents was that they are taking 2-3 remote classes at 33%. The lasting impact of remote study underscores the need for in-person interactions and closer monitoring. It's more difficult for students to be vulnerable and open up about their struggles when they are not regularly interacting with professors face-to-face. Furthermore, it's difficult to ascertain key metrics such as engagement, attendance, and ability, which can be indicators of disengagement or even dropping out.

## Moving forward: How Higher Education Institutions Can Increase Retention

Bachelor degree holders' median lifetime earnings are \$1.2 million higher than those with a high school-level degree, and they are half as likely to be unemployed. The benefits of higher education are well known, as millions of hopeful students enroll in programs each year, many taking on financial burdens to do so. Those that ultimately drop out put themselves in a precarious position; having paid tuition without a degree to show for it. There are many reasons they leave, from financial issues to stress and mental health. Only 17% of students are very likely to reach out for help, leaving many to struggle silently, not knowing that administrators have dedicated programs to provide individual support.

Conversations with higher education institutions reveal that all of them strive towards the same goal: they would love to see students graduate and would do anything to assist them. They have sophisticated tools such as financial aid, academic support programs, mental health support, peer mentoring and case management. However, their resources in terms of student success coaches make it impossible to scale the help and find every single student who needs it.

Over 61% of students believe that if AI detected their struggles early, they would want universities to reach out to help, the caveat being that their struggles and data remains private. Elvee is a leading AI prediction platform designed to elevate human engagement, combining advanced AI to detect early signs of disengagement with emotionally intelligent interventions. It empowers student success coaches to take the right action at the right time, by identifying higher education students at risk of dropping out with advanced warning and high accuracy, often before students recognize they are struggling themselves. This is key, as it is unfortunate if a student were to waste a full semester on failed classes, when they could have succeeded with dedicated support.

The tool reviews hundreds of data points on an ongoing basis and looks for patterns such as how students manage their workloads over time, interact with learning platforms and large periods of inactivity. With the right tools at hand, administrators can help students stay on the path to success, and leave school with a coveted degree in hand, ready for a better life.



