

Sustaining Change: Efforts to Expand Student Success





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Sustaining Change: Efforts to Expand Student Success

By Graham Vyse

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Achieving the goals of the student-success movement was never going to be easy. Nearly two decades ago, when colleges began putting the onus on themselves to increase their retention and graduation rates, they were making an ambitious commitment to new policies, new programs, and a whole new perspective. Instead of mostly expecting students to find their own way on their academic journeys, institutions would actively support their efforts and make sure they stayed on the path.

Some colleges have made significant progress toward realizing this vision. More are working hard to do so. But amid enrollment and financial challenges — as well as unprecedented disruption from the federal government since January — how can colleges best sustain and expand the approaches that are supporting students?

To help answer that question — or at least provide insight to those grappling with it — *The Chronicle*, with support from the Ascendum Education Group, conducted an online survey of academic and administrative leaders and faculty members from February 5 to February 28, 2025. We received 874 responses from 430 administrators and 444 faculty. *The Chronicle* also conducted a dozen interviews for this report.

The survey found a striking degree of consensus between administrators and faculty members on the extent of the progress their institutions have made, which approaches have benefited students, and how to build on

what's working. Respondents were particularly focused on mental-health services, proactive academic advising, tutoring, support for first-year students, peer mentorship, and emergency financial assistance, among other strategies. At the same time, many respondents emphasized that success cannot come from any one initiative in isolation.

The survey also found keen awareness of shortcomings and challenges. Most respondents said they'd like to see academic advising improved at their institutions and more innovative thinking around their student-success efforts generally. Majorities

of administrators and faculty members expressed concern about federal- and state-policy changes, including the nationwide push to get rid of diversity, equity, and inclusion work. Respondents also registered their worry about colleges' ability to increase success with inadequate funding, staff turnover and hiring issues, and low morale among employees.

This report will explore these perspectives, examine how student-success efforts can move forward at a difficult time for higher ed, and explain why many leaders and advocates say this is a moment to broaden their vision, not narrow it.



The student-success movement is a relatively recent phenomenon. “When I first started my career 25 years ago, most colleges would report retention and graduation rates, but student success wasn’t discussed in any sort of strategic way,” says Jared Tippetts, the vice president for student affairs at Southern Utah University. Educators hoped their students would do well — and some administrators and faculty and staff members would give extra help to individual students — but colleges didn’t see it as part of their institutional role to try to guarantee good outcomes.

A former student-success director at Purdue University who consults with colleges and co-

hosts a [podcast](#) on the topic, Tippetts is living proof of how times have changed. Many colleges now have student-success directors — or deans, or vice provosts, or assistant vice presidents. They have on-campus student-success centers. Special administration teams or task forces issue reports, policies, and guidance.

The big shift took place in the late aughts and early 2010s, as low graduation rates were a source of national concern and governments demanded more accountability. Following the 2008 recession, as enrollment declines took a financial toll on colleges, many felt a new urgency to better support — and retain — their students. Helping low-income and minority students was seen as

a key piece of the puzzle, especially as changing demographics made student bodies more diverse.

Colleges didn't build these efforts on their own. Foundations funded many of them. Higher-ed associations and national groups such as Achieving the Dream, Complete College America, the Lumina Foundation, the University Innovation Alliance, and the Yes We Must Coalition promoted innovative strategies and best practices, collaborating with institutions doing the work.

One of the longtime success stories in the field, which many colleges across the country have studied, is Georgia State University. Timothy Renick, the founding executive director of the National Institute for Student Success there, oversaw a 70-percent increase in the graduation rate and a closing of achievement gaps when he was a vice president at the university. He says the institution is now graduating 3,500 more students per year than a decade ago, which is worth a gross increase of \$80 million per year in additional revenue. (It's also increased the number of students eligible for Pell Grants and improved its bond rating.)

Through his institute, Renick works with other colleges to share what worked for Georgia State (though following its playbook completely isn't always possible for institutions with different administrative structures or funding constraints). He's also followed the progress that's been made elsewhere. Renick estimates that it's probably less than five percent of colleges nationwide that "have made structural administrative changes" such as improvements to registration, advising, and financial aid. But most institutions have "taken

“When I first started my career 25 years ago, most colleges would report retention and graduation rates, but student success wasn’t discussed in any sort of strategic way.”

significant steps” toward reform — growing their awareness of student-success approaches, looking for models to emulate, and beginning to change their cultures.

“If you look at every public four-year institution in the U.S. over the last 15 years,” he adds, “on average their graduation rates have gone up by 6 percentage points, which is progress, but if you look at the institutions that were the early adopters of these approaches — using data and analytics to be much more proactive about supporting students, even if they’re not the best-resourced institutions — they, on average, have improved their graduation rates 16 percentage points. Those are sizable gains in a relatively short period of time.”



Progress to Build On

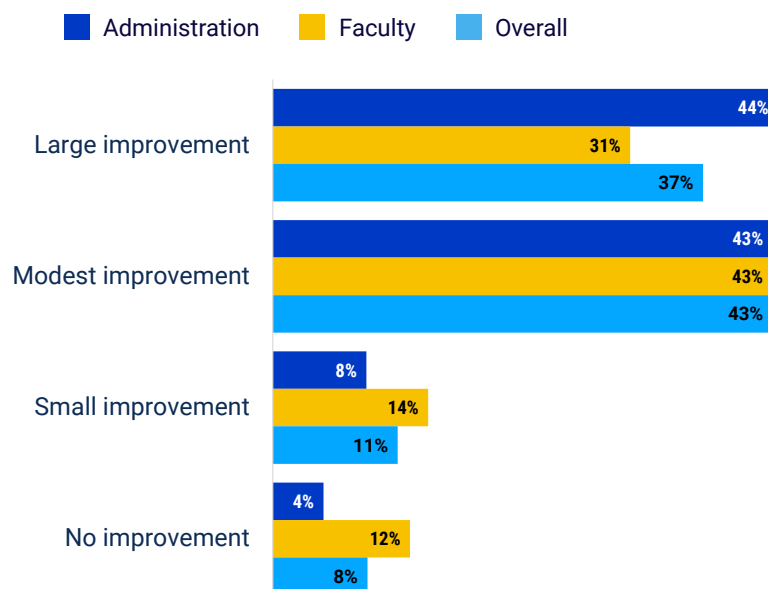
The *Chronicle's* survey found a clear perception of progress among respondents.

Asked how the quality of their institution's student-success work had evolved over the past five to 10 years, 91 percent of them said they'd seen an improvement, though in most cases it was modest or small. More than half also said their college is keeping pace with peer institutions in making student success an institutional priority — and over a third said they're ahead of their peers on this issue.

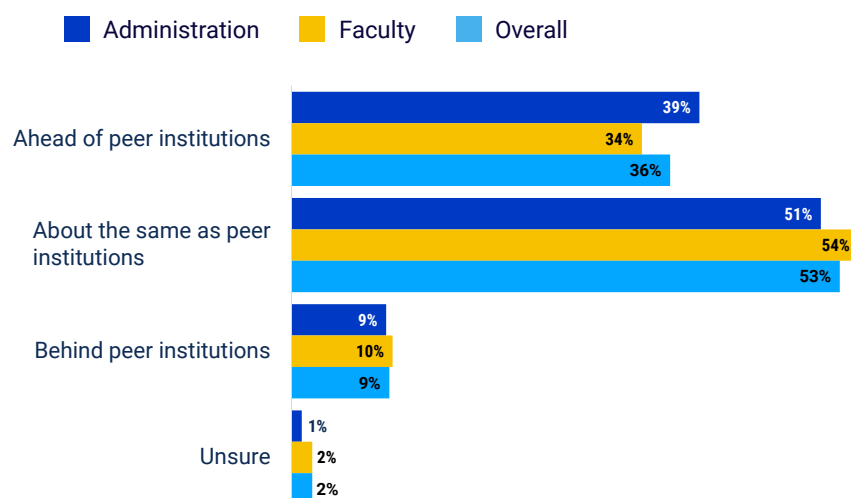
Even when *The Chronicle* asked slightly more specific questions, the answers remained fairly positive. Seventy-four percent of respondents agreed their institution has “the right culture and mind-set to make student success a priority,” although only 31 percent strongly agreed.

Seventy-eight percent said their college has “the right policies and practices to support students,” although just 22 percent expressed that view strongly. Asked whether their institution allocated “the right amount of its budget to support student success,” respondents were notably less sanguine, yet a solid majority — more than six in 10 — still agreed at least somewhat.

How would you rate the quality of your institution's efforts to support student success compared to 5-10 years ago?



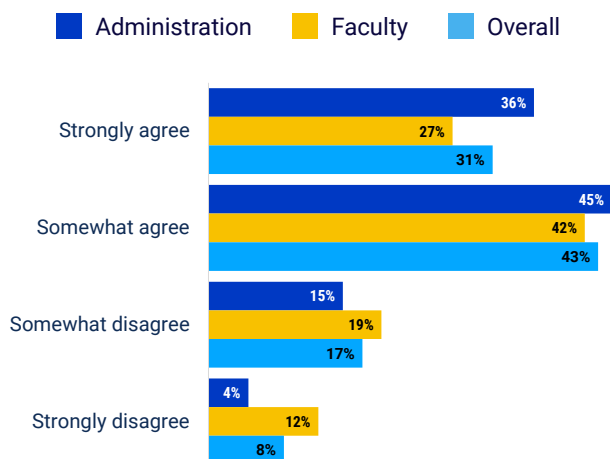
In general, how would you rate where your institution stands on making student success an institutional priority?



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 874 college administrators and faculty members
Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

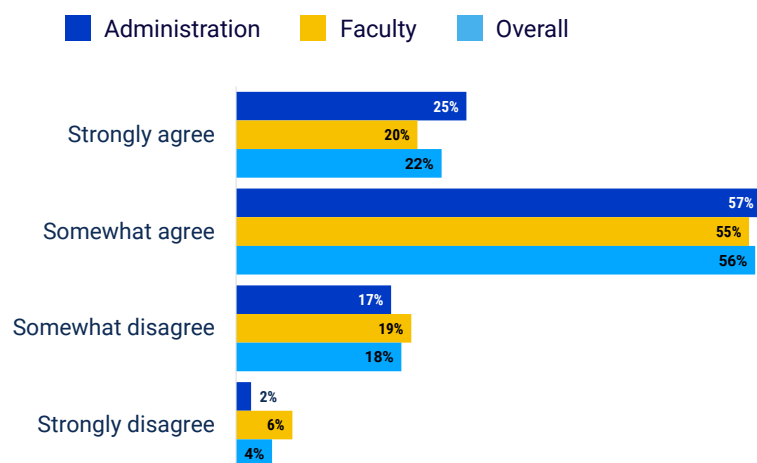
How much do you agree with the following statement?

“My institution has the right culture and mind-set to make student success a priority.”



How much do you agree with the following statement?

“My institution has the right policies and practices to support students.”



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 874 college administrators and faculty members
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On the question of which approaches to promoting student success had been beneficial at their institutions, the top choices — cited by more than 60 percent of respondents — were mental-health services, tutoring, support programs for first-year students, peer mentoring and advising, and proactive academic advising. To sustain progress, at least 45 percent of respondents said they wanted to expand mental-health services, proactive academic advising, support programs for first-year students, emergency financial assistance, and cross-departmental teams focused on student success.

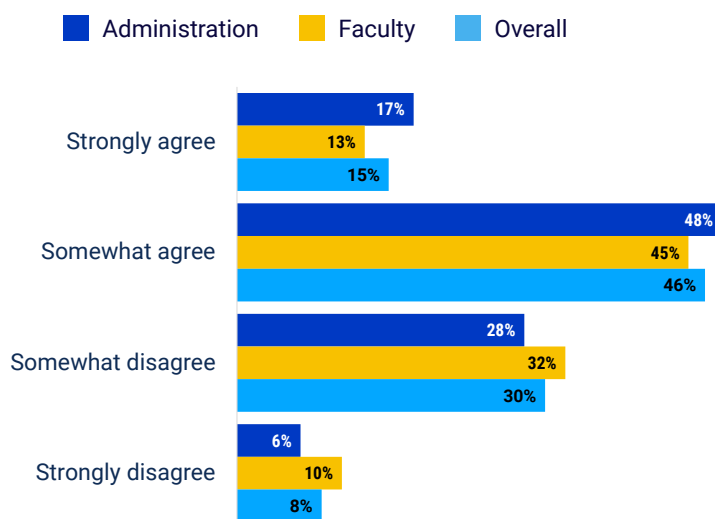
Certain approaches may not be necessary for most students, but can be vital for those who need them. For instance, a number of respondents pointed to the benefits of basic-needs supports such as food pantries and clothing banks. Karen A. Stout — the president and CEO of Achieving the Dream, a national nonprofit supporting community colleges — says the

Certain approaches may not be necessary for most students, but can be vital for those who need them.

institutions she works with try to help students struggling with food and housing insecurity or transportation challenges. She believes colleges should have “a strategy to braid together those supports, whether they’re offered by the community college or in partnership with community organizations,” and make sure they’re offered as part of the enrollment process and alongside advising.

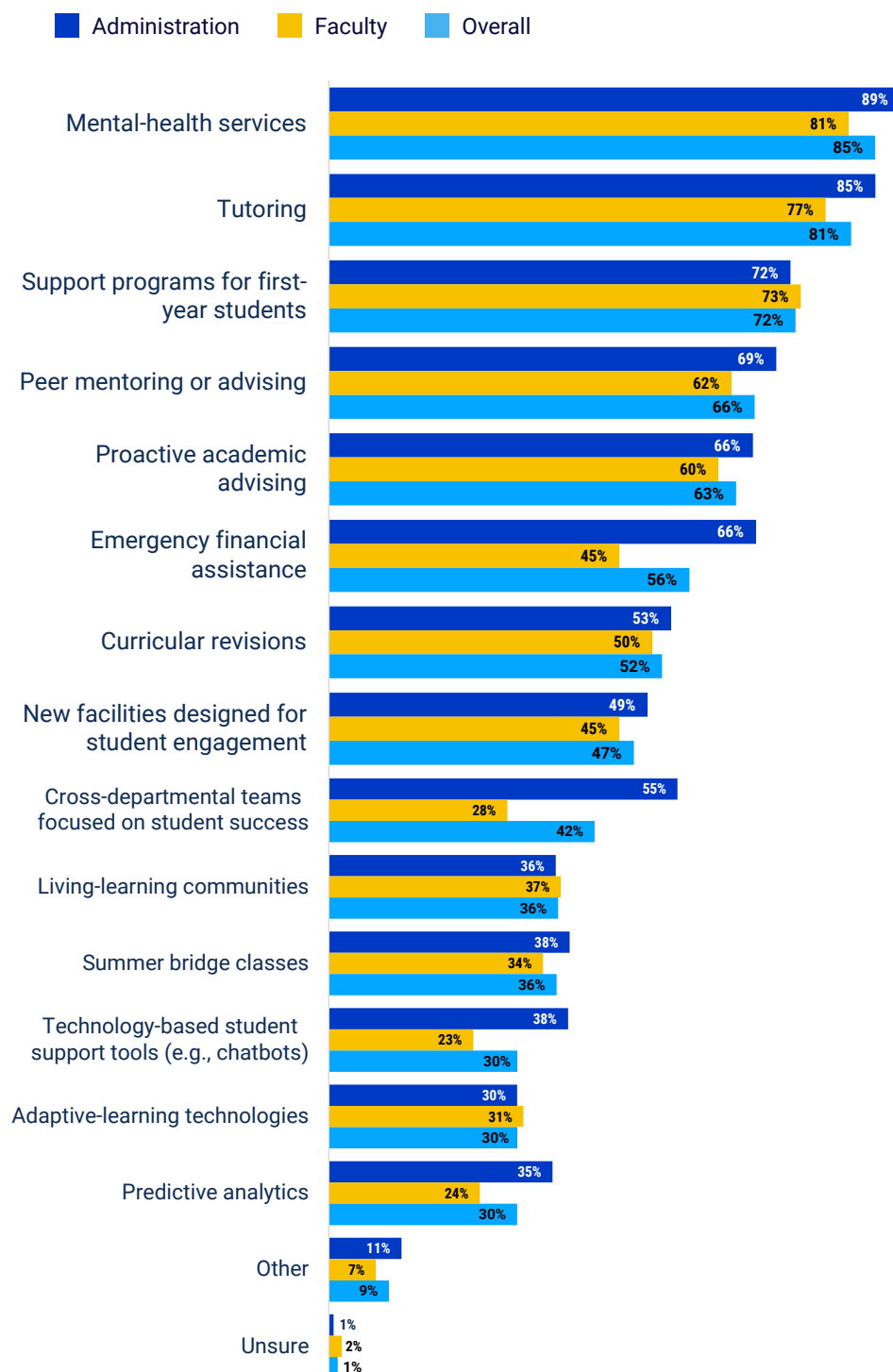
How much do you agree with the following statement?

“My institution allocates the right amount of its budget to support student success.”



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 874 college administrators and faculty members
Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

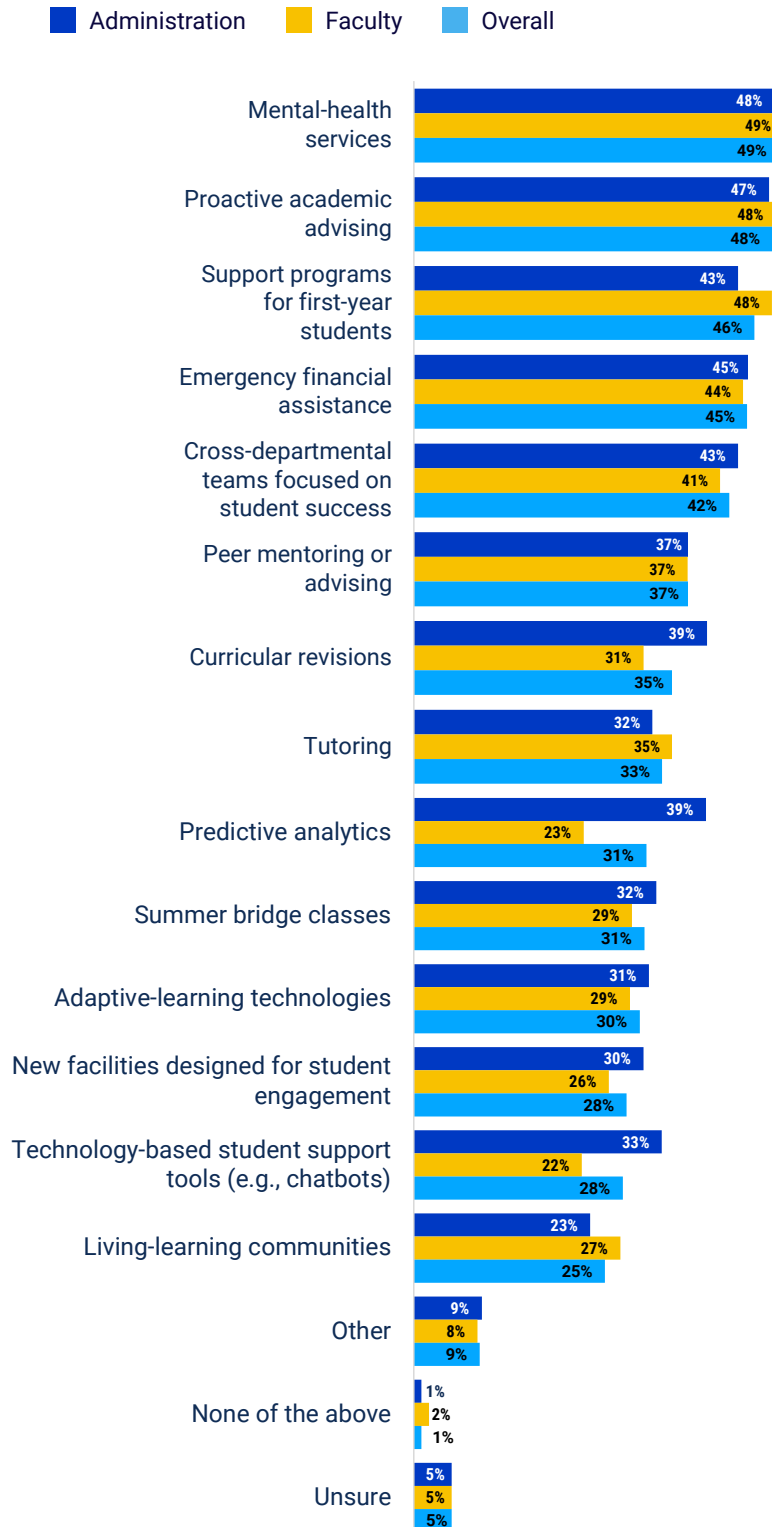
What approaches has your institution taken that have benefited students? Select all that apply.



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 874 college administrators and faculty members
Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

What approaches should be expanded to sustain progress?

Select all that apply.



Source: Chronicle survey of 874 college administrators and faculty members
Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Daniel Eisenberg, a professor of health policy and management in the Fielding School of Public Health at the University of California at Los Angeles, wasn't surprised to see the emphasis on mental health. Colleges have increased their focus on that issue over the past 15 years — and especially since the phenomenon of social isolation during the pandemic and increased concern about loneliness as a national public-health issue.

There's now "a widespread appreciation for how mental health is fundamental to the student experience," Eisenberg says, and an understanding that, "if we can better support mental health, students are going to have higher well-being and greater academic success."

He points out that research, including his own, shows that students experiencing high levels of depressive symptoms are about twice as likely to leave college without graduating. He mainly studies how to invest effectively in young people's mental health, serving as the principal investigator for the Healthy Minds Network (HMN) for Research on Adolescent and Young

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Adult Mental Health. "Most campuses probably would argue they're under-resourced with the number of counselors they have, but the percentage of students receiving mental-health counseling or therapy has gone way up," according to Eisenberg. "Some counseling centers are seeing 20 or 30 percent of their student population each year. A more typical percentage might be somewhere between 10 and 20 percent, but that's still a large fraction of students, and those services generally are effective, using evidence-based therapies or counseling methods." At the same time, he adds, "a lot more than 20 percent" of students would benefit from those services.

Mental-health resources can also come in the form of digital tools like meditation apps or chatbots, which might check in with students about their mental health, mindfulness practices, and peer support. "In the vast majority of cases, it's a tiny percentage of students using these tools and resources," Eisenberg said, and many of the resources aren't well funded or they're funded in an ad hoc way. "It may be that institutions have barely scratched the surface of what's possible."

Colleges need a "campuswide public-health approach," says Tony Walker, senior vice president for school programs and consulting at [The Jed Foundation](#), a nonprofit focused on youth mental health. Walker highlights his foundation's partnership with the University of North Georgia, which has a dedicated [website](#) promoting its various mental-health initiatives, including suicide-prevention training and a "Mental Health First Aid" program to teach staff members "how to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders."

The University of California at Riverside even created an entirely new division for [Health, Wellbeing, and Safety](#), combining mental-health-support programs, campus police, and other services, all of which report to the same vice chancellor. “The idea is that holistic health and safety is important,” says Kim Wilcox, the university’s chancellor, “and it isn’t just about the police keeping students safe from bullets. It’s about being and feeling safe in a more holistic way.”

“For a long time in higher ed, advising was anything but proactive.”

Experts believe proactive, or “intrusive,” academic advising can be one of the most crucial factors in student success. Traditionally, advisers would meet with students infrequently — say, at the beginning of each semester to talk about which courses to take — but it’s increasingly common for advisers to act more like coaches. They help students navigate their academic journeys and offer them guidance

at regular intervals. They can use technology platforms to track students’ progress in courses, checking in with them if there are problems, and intervening if necessary.

“For a long time in higher ed, advising was anything but proactive,” says Renick, of Georgia State. “It basically meant waiting for students to identify their own problems and come to you. When you’d talk to faculty — and sometimes even advisers themselves — about how you might use predictive analytics to identify students who were at risk earlier on and proactively reach out to them to help them, that was a completely foreign concept and sometimes treated with a fair amount of hostility. Faculty often saw it as coddling students who should have to learn to identify their own problems and have the maturity and self-awareness to seek out help.” Today, he adds, those attitudes are increasingly “a non-starter.”

Tippets, of Southern Utah University, notes that, although fewer survey respondents may have highlighted the benefits of approaches such as living-learning communities and summer-bridge classes, many of those are highly effective for the students they serve. “They influence a small subset of the population,” he says, “but when you look at studies conducted on the impact of those interventions on those sub-populations of students, it’s remarkably strong.”



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Challenges to Navigate

Even as respondents saw progress to build on, they also perceived a number of threats to the advancement of student success. Eighty-one percent said they worried about federal and state rules to eliminate diversity, equity, and inclusion work on campuses, which include many efforts aimed at supporting students of color.

Adrianna Kezar — a professor of leadership and higher education at the University of Southern California — notes that the anti-DEI push threatens cultural-affinity groups, which can be limited to students who share an identity such as their race or ethnicity, as well as race-based scholarships, multicultural centers, and campus DEI offices, many of which are closing. “All of those things do support student success,” she says. Even just the rhetoric against DEI coming from the federal government is “having a chilling effect,” she adds. (Indeed, some sources who

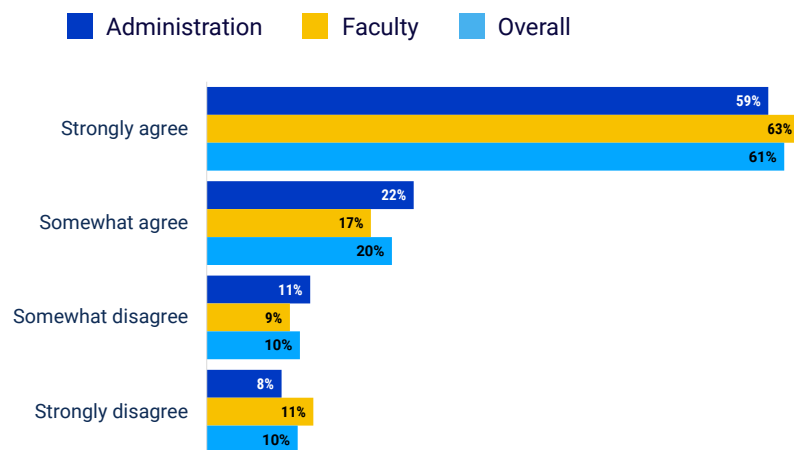
spoke to *The Chronicle* declined to comment on this subject.)

Renick, of Georgia State, acknowledges that DEI is a “politically delicate” subject, but says he and his center have never advocated programs based on race, ethnicity, or income level. He points out that his university has an excellent track record on graduating Black students, and he argues that “getting the big issues right” — from communication to advising to financial aid — is the “most effective way we can move the needle, not just on increasing graduation rates but also on reducing equity gaps.”

But getting the big issues right will require significant progress. Asked which “offices or units,” if any, needed improvement to help retain and graduate students at their institutions, the most popular response — cited by more than half of respondents — was academic advising.

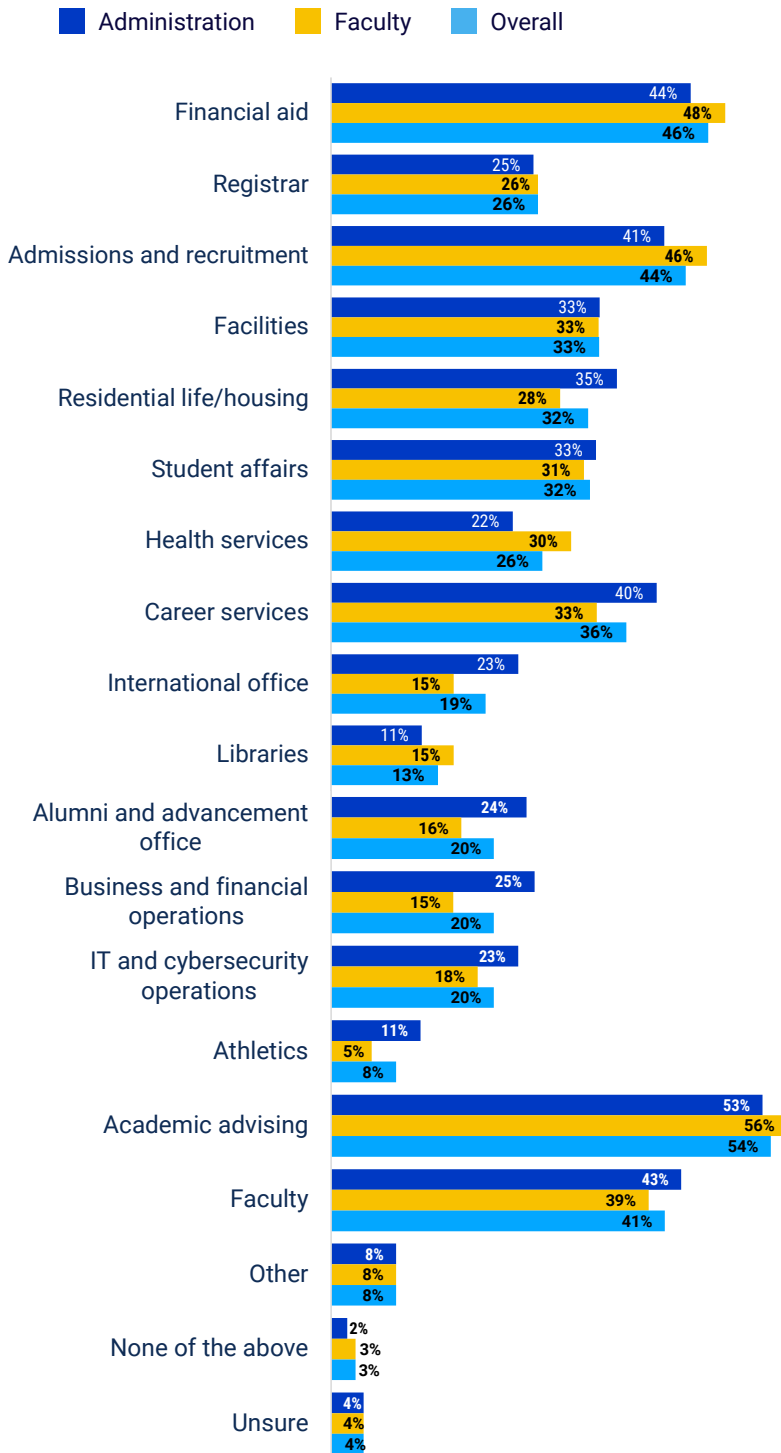
How much do you agree with the following statement?

“I am concerned that state and federal rules to eliminate DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) work on campuses will hurt student success.”



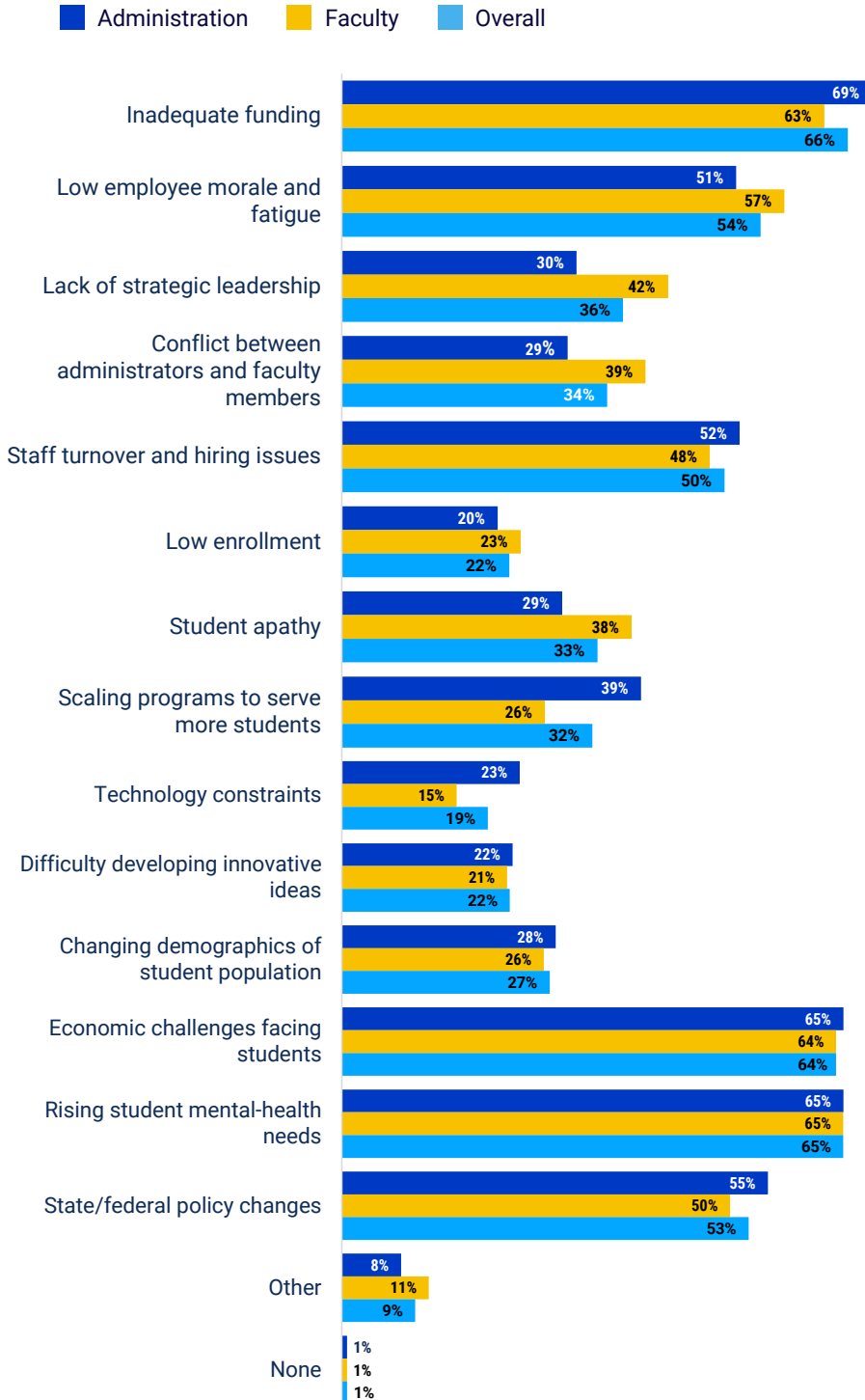
Source: *Chronicle* survey of 874 college administrators and faculty members
Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Thinking specifically about what your institution needs to help retain and graduate more students, which of the following offices or units, if any, do you feel need improvement?
Select all that apply.



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 874 college administrators and faculty members
Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

What are the biggest challenges to improving student success at your institution? Select all that apply.



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 874 college administrators and faculty members
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“It’s good that people think academic advising could make a difference,” says Nia Haydel, the vice president for institutional transformation and scaling at Complete College America. “They’re saying that if we were able to invest in that area, we could have even better outcomes.”

At the same time, Wilcox thinks it’s telling that about a third of respondents saw room for improvement in most of the offices listed. “It underscores the shared responsibility,” he says. “It isn’t housing’s problem or admissions’ problem. It’s a collective problem.”

Asked to identify the biggest challenges to improving student success at their institutions, more than 60 percent of respondents listed inadequate funding, economic challenges facing students, and rising student mental-health concerns. More than half of respondents also listed state- and federal-policy changes, low employee morale and fatigue, and staff turnover and hiring issues.

Haydel says colleges have to find ways to prioritize those work-force issues — to make sure employees can go on breaks, take days off, and lean on their coworkers when they’re struggling. “You also have to tell people when they’re doing a good job,” she says. “As a Gen X-er, I come from a generation where you know you’re doing a good job if I don’t say you’re doing a bad job, but I’m more and more mindful of saying things like, ‘I really appreciate what you’re doing. I know that was a tough meeting. Thank you.’”

“If we’re always going to think we’re stifled because we don’t have the funding, we’re never going to address this problem. We’re never going to have enough funding — and we’re certainly not going to get more in this environment.”

It’s unsurprising that inadequate funding was the challenge most respondents cited, but Kezar, of USC, says this can’t be an excuse for inaction: “If we’re always going to think we’re stifled because we don’t have the funding, we’re never going to address this problem. We’re never going to have enough funding — and we’re certainly not going to get more in this environment.”

Fortunately, she notes, there are ways colleges can use their existing resources to improve morale on their campuses — and help administrators, faculty, and staff give students what they need.

Moving Forward Despite Difficulties



One of the most common refrains among experts about what it will take to improve student success is the need for better collaboration and breaking down silos. “There are so many good-hearted, well-intended people who feel overwhelmed by the fact that their institution is so big and siloed that they can’t get coordination in place,” Renick says. It “undermines the very heart of student success.”

While *The Chronicle’s* survey respondents were fairly positive on this issue, with 85 percent agreeing that administrators and faculty members and staff work well together to support students at their institutions, 54 percent only agreed somewhat, as opposed to strongly — and 78 percent agreed that their institution requires more innovative thinking when it comes to supporting student success. There’s clearly plenty of room for improvement.

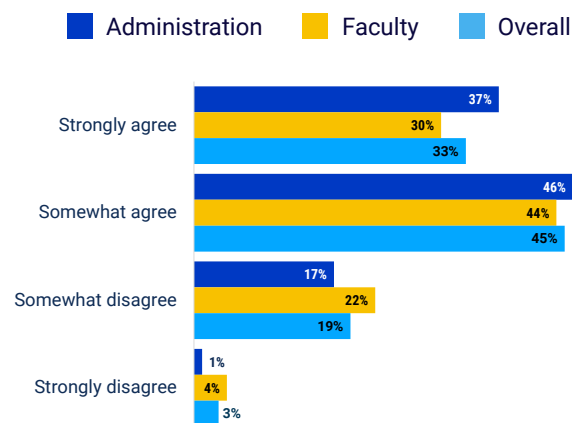
“I think part of the reason for the underuse of mental-health resources is that they exist

“There are so many good-hearted, well-intended people who feel overwhelmed by the fact that their institution is so big and siloed that they can’t get coordination in place.”

somewhat separately from students’ classes, extracurricular groups, and residential settings,” says Eisenberg, the UCLA professor. “Maybe

How much do you agree with the following statement?

“My institution requires more innovative thinking when it comes to supporting student success.”



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 874 college administrators and faculty members
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some resident advisers have training related to mental health, but there's not enough integration." He can envision colleges integrating these resources more visibly into course-management software or making sure academic advisers know how to recognize when students might benefit from mental-health resources and how to connect them with that support.

“It’s only the rare institution that has assessment data helping it to understand how much impact programs are having and how effective they are.”

Stephanie J. Bannister — the vice president for the FirstGen Forward Network with FirstGen Forward, a group that advocates for first-generation students — thinks about the silos in her work, too. She says she’s always surprised when she meets a longtime employee at a college who doesn’t know there’s an office for first-generation students on campus. Those sorts of experiences are part of why she believes institutions can’t be afraid to overcommunicate about the existence of their student-success initiatives, how to access them, and opportunities for collaboration.

“A College of Agriculture may have incredible supplemental instruction and tutoring,” Bannister says, “but that doesn’t mean Arts and Science students have the same level of support.”

Experts stress that closing those kinds of gaps is part of the way forward. Several of them noted how the survey appeared to show a relative lack of confidence — especially from faculty members — that cross-departmental teams had been beneficial. Kezar wonders whether, in some cases, faculty aren’t being included on these teams — or whether they need to be given greater opportunities to contribute.

Bannister notes that a number of the challenges respondents cited — inadequate funding, employee fatigue, and staff turnover — would all benefit from “a collective, cross-collaborative approach.”

“There are very few things all campuses can do, but one of them is setting up cross-departmental teams,” says Kezar.

That kind of approach can improve the use of technology on campus, too. “Many students are responding to texts who aren’t responding to emails,” Renick says, “but if your financial-aid office has one texting platform, your library has another, and your career-services office has yet another, you’re undermining the effectiveness of the whole approach, because you’re going to get a series of uncoordinated communications. You need to decide to have one texting platform.”

Another imperative is the use of data to identify students’ needs, assess how well various supports are working, and foster collaboration within colleges. (Bannister talks about the need

for “data democracy and literacy” — making it known where information can be found and how to understand it.)

“It’s only the rare institution that has assessment data helping it to understand how much impact programs are having and how effective they are,” Renick says. “That kind of data isn’t the norm, in part because this whole approach to student success is new. There hasn’t been a 30- or 40-year culture of collecting data, and on many campuses data resources aren’t particularly strong.”

He acknowledges that it often takes an up-front financial investment to ensure a college has the data and technology resources it needs, but when these tools are implemented effectively, he argues, “they’re going to more than pay for themselves and put you on stronger financial footing.”

Most of the student-success movement’s work has focused on supporting students outside the classroom, but there have been high-profile examples of where successful engagement with faculty led to productive reforms of course structure. Odessa College, in Texas, for instance, sees itself as a model for how shortening courses to eight weeks can increase enrollment, course completion, and credentials awarded.

Kimberly McKay, Odessa’s vice president for student services and enrollment management, says the eight-week structure has been “a game-changer for our part-time students and working students” and the best thing she’s ever been a part of in higher ed — but it couldn’t have been successful without “highly engaged faculty committed to developing relationships with their students and thinking outside the box.” Odessa didn’t suggest that faculty members

should change how they taught, but it asked them to commit to practices such as knowing all students by their names, meeting with them one-on-one, and communicating with them frequently. The college also provides training for faculty members when they’re onboarded and periodic professional development.

Experts see potential for student-success efforts to be further integrated into coursework, while realizing that getting buy-in from faculty members — and giving them the support they need — would have to be a prerequisite. (This could include ensuring they have access to evidenced-based teaching practices or strategies for working with different populations of students.) Kezar calls this work “the missing link” — “the unrealized part of the student-success agenda.”

Another ubiquitous sentiment about student success, however, is that there are no silver bullets. This theme emerged in *The Chronicle’s* survey results, too. Asked to recommend a single change that would “meaningfully improve student success across higher education,” respondents gave a variety of predictable answers — increasing funding, lowering the cost of college, or adopting one of the specific strategies discussed in this report. Yet many respondents simply rejected the premise of the question.

“We’re making a difference, but we need to get better at identifying the students who need us when they need us,” says Tippetts, of Southern Utah University. “For so long, we just created initiatives for all students and weren’t strategically focused on getting the right students to do the right things. That’s where this movement will continue to go. We’ll get so much more strategic and refined.”



As much as colleges have taken greater responsibility for students' well-being — and formed some clear ideas about how it can be sustained and expanded — their efforts inevitably raise another question that's both fundamental and somewhat fraught: Do they have the right definition of success?

It's clear that the common definition — the ability to retain and graduate students — will continue to be a key metric for colleges. It's quantifiable, easily understandable, and scrutinized by governments and the public. (It's also, obviously, a metric on which many institutions still hope to improve.) Yet most respondents to *The Chronicle's* survey, including a majority of administrators and faculty, said this definition isn't adequate.

Whether students feel successful is virtually always dependent on many factors, including their academic experiences, intellectual development, personal relationships, sense of belonging, and confidence in their futures. As Kezar puts it, "If they've graduated but had the worst experience ever, been turned off by education, and don't feel a positive connection to society, that's not student success." Conversely, if they haven't graduated but still managed to come away with knowledge and skills that improve their lives — or transferred to another institution that's a better

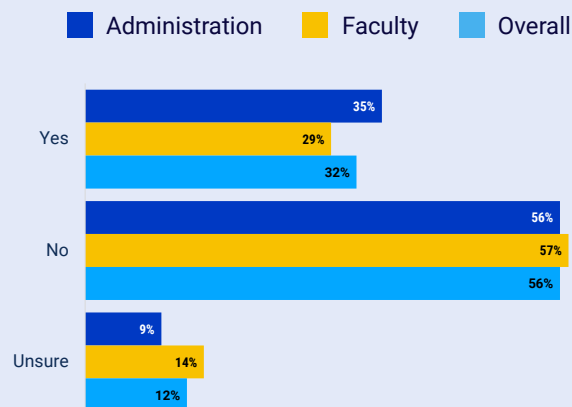
fit for them — it's hard to argue those aren't successful outcomes.

Many leaders and advocates believe colleges should have a more expansive definition of success that includes post-graduation outcomes, but those can be even harder to measure than a college experience. (A graduate's income, for example, can have nothing to do with how successful they are. Even the best — and

best-paid — social workers make less than investment bankers.)

However an institution chooses to define success, though, its definition should be understood and acted on throughout its ranks — by administrators and faculty and staff members. Especially with all higher ed faces today, that kind of clarity and coordination is a prerequisite to progress.

Student success is frequently defined by how well institutions retain and graduate students. Do you believe this definition adequately captures student success?



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 874 college administrators and faculty members
Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Eight-hundred and seventy-four people responded to *The Chronicle's* online survey, which was conducted between February 5 and 28, 2025. The respondents included 430 academic and administrative leaders as well as 444 faculty. The administrators included directors (20 percent), deans (9 percent), and associate, assistant, or vice deans (7 percent). Four percent were vice presidents and 4 percent were associate, assistant or vice provosts. Three percent were presidents or chancellors and 2 percent were provosts or held other positions. Among the faculty, 32 percent were tenured, 7 percent were nontenured, 4 percent were tenure track, 4 percent were department chairs, and 4 percent were part-time or adjunct.



