

THE STATE OF THE **STUDENT** 2022

Adjusting to the “new normal”...and all that comes with it

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What does the higher education landscape look like in a world coming out of a “once-in-a-generation” global pandemic? One thing is clear: students, instructors, and faculty face a number of complex, emerging challenges.

To assess the landscape and help instructors and administrators better understand and respond to students’ needs, we surveyed more than 7,000 students and instructors in August 2022. Our research identified five key trends impacting the “state of the student” today. Read more and learn about steps you can take to better support students as their needs continue to change.

THE STATE OF THE STUDENT 2022

Adjusting to the “new normal”...and all that comes with it



Engagement
challenges



Enrollment
and retention
issues



Financial and
emotional
stress



Uncertainty
about the
future



Faculty-student
perception gap

Introduction

Like many of us, students are adjusting to a “new normal” post-COVID-19. But what exactly does this look like? While students and instructors have largely returned to in-person instruction, more schools are continuing to incorporate some online component in their courses, as the desire for flexibility has increased among students. Schools have improved online and hybrid experiences to meet these expectations, but students are facing new challenges, with many feeling unmotivated, disconnected, and uncertain about their futures.

This report summarizes key findings from our primary research and includes a deeper dive into five major trends. We discuss what these trends mean for students and some of the key strategic takeaways for instructors and administrators based on our findings.



1. Student engagement challenges

Despite the return to in-person instruction, students, instructors, and administrators all see student engagement as a significant challenge this year. We'll explore the ways students feel instructors can craft more engaging material in their courses.



2. Student enrollment and retention issues

Declining enrollment and retention are key challenges facing schools. What strategies can administrators pursue to increase enrollment and retention?



3. Financial and emotional stress

Due to increased financial strain, more students are working while in school, and the main reasons students took a gap year or dropped out of school were financial and emotional insecurity.



4. Students' uncertainty about their future

More students are unsure what major to pursue as they seek purposeful and meaningful careers where they can make a positive impact in the field, with most students' primary concern being finding a job they enjoy after graduation.



5. Gap between faculty and student perceptions

There are differences between instructors' and students' perceptions of students' preparedness post-graduation and the difficulty of finding internships.

With these insights and recommendations, we hope you'll be able to take steps that help you increase student retention, improve satisfaction with their education experience, and ensure they feel prepared for their careers. We want to make it easier for you to spot those students who are at higher risk of leaving school and keep them engaged so that every student has a chance to thrive and ultimately, succeed.

Trend #1: Student engagement challenges



Even as classrooms return to in-person learning, administrators, instructors, and students all recognize that declining student engagement is a significant concern. While students once again have more immediate access to their instructors and peers, they're struggling to readjust, particularly in terms of performance and participation. And instructors are feeling the strain of attempting to capture the attention of increasingly disengaged students.

Instructor and administrator perspectives

At the institutional level, administrators can tell students are disengaging from their courses and, for some, from higher education altogether. Nearly 30% of administrators find it a challenge to ensure that the courses their institutions offer are suitably engaging for students. With waning student enthusiasm, it's vital that higher education institutions advertise compelling major programs and courses each semester. These offerings should align with the fields and topics students find most interesting and relevant to their post-graduation goals. This alignment can be the difference in a student's decision to enroll in or transfer to an institution. And as 36% of institutions are currently considering student retention a difficulty (see Trend #2 for more information), it's important to meet students' needs wherever possible.

In classrooms, instructors are also observing concerning levels of disengagement. Two-thirds of instructors report that keeping students engaged is a challenge, and nearly half are struggling to ensure their students retain class material. Engagement and retention are important primary goals for instructors, and extensive student disengagement affects the classroom experience for everyone. As instructors struggle to improve engagement and retention levels, 31% are encountering difficulties developing course projects that successfully engage students.

Instructors' concerns about engagement aren't limited to online or hybrid formats, either. Rather, in each modality (online, hybrid, and in-person), roughly one-quarter of instructors identify the lack of student engagement and participation in their courses as the most stressful part of teaching, when asked unaided—proving that in-person courses aren't at all immune to disengagement challenges. In fact, for in-person courses, 21% of instructors find it concerning that students are less prepared and exhibit poor study skills, over double the concern of instructors who teach in hybrid or online formats.

Regardless of format, instructors report that the most stressful part of teaching is the lack of student engagement and participation.

Returning to in-person instruction hasn't solved the problem of disengagement even if students are happy to be back to "normal." Institutions and instructors will instead need to explore different methods of engagement to reenergize disconnected students, starting with understanding the student perspective on disengagement.

Trend #1: Student engagement challenges

The student perspective

Students, particularly undergraduates, realize that their low levels of engagement are a problem. Fifty-five percent of undergraduates admit they're struggling to stay engaged and interested in their classes. Another 55% acknowledge that they find it challenging to retain all their class material, and still 48% of them are concerned about being able to keep up with their class work. Although not as widespread, graduate students are also facing similar issues engaging in class. For these students, 38% find it difficult to stay engaged, and 34% are struggling to retain class material. As students enter the graduate level, navigating course material may become more manageable with more experience, but our research shows there are still challenges many students face engaging in the classroom.

What are the challenges you face in your classes?



So, what kind of content would students find more engaging in their courses? They told us they're looking for current, relevant content that's applicable to the real world and promotes interaction. When asked unaided, one-quarter of students reported that additional real-world material, including application and experiential learning, would improve their educational experience. This type of material allows students to approach real-life scenarios, including realistic case studies and examples with direct links to the sort of work they'll encounter in their careers.

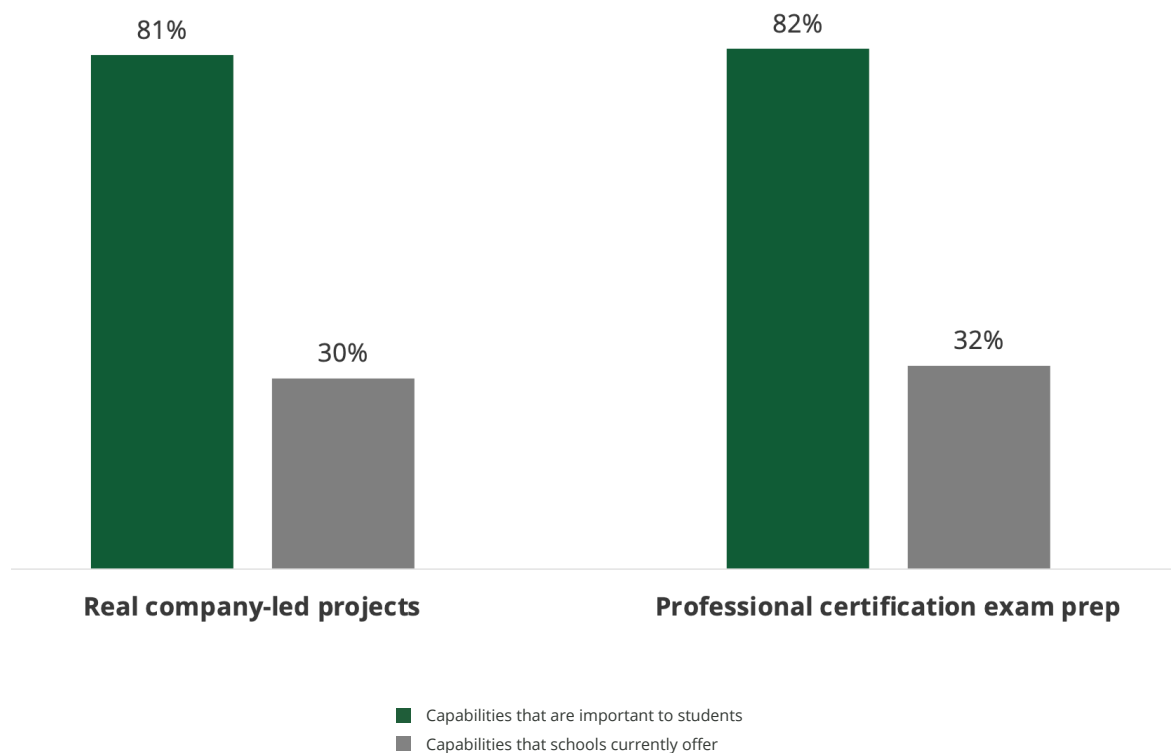
81% of students feel that it's important or very important for schools to offer real company-led projects.

Students aren't just looking for real-world applications, either. They also want more company-based projects, simulations, scenarios, and connections with real professionals in the field. Most students feel it's important or very important for schools to offer support in real company-led projects (81%) and professional certification prep (82%). Yet only around 30% of instructors noted that their schools offered each of these capabilities. Here's one student's positive experience with real-world material:

“My institution includes a variety of case studies and assignment formats that help simulate real-world problem solving. I also earned accredited certificates through my learning experience that are helpful for advancing my professional career.”

Students are looking for a career-connected education that they can feel confident will prepare them for successful employment post-graduation, so there's an opportunity for institutions to offer more career-related resources. These offerings can help students manage their coursework, stay engaged in class, and feel prepared for their future careers.

Trend #1: Student engagement challenges



When it comes to engagement, instructors, administrators, and students largely agree; students aren't engaged, at least at the levels that they need to be. And the problem isn't getting better on its own. Instructors are stressed and strained, across all modalities, and administrators need engaging content to attract and retain students. Since even the students themselves know they're struggling, they want to see more real-world applications and tangible experiences related to potential careers to help them stay engaged in their courses.



Trend #2: Student enrollment and retention issues



The effects of student disengagement, combined with financial strain and emotional stress in this uncertain global economic landscape, are creating difficulties in the higher education environment, especially for institutions and students. Our research showed that the three biggest challenges for higher education institutions are budget cuts (51%), declining enrollment (44%), and retaining students (36%). Colleges and universities then face the problem of needing to do more to attract and retain students with fewer financial resources. Financial strain, along with uncertainty about their field of study and mental health challenges, also plays a role in prospective and current students' decisions about their higher education.

What challenges does your school currently face?



Over half of higher education institutions are facing budget cuts at a time when they need to attract and retain more students.

Enrollment challenges and strategies

Schools are challenged with increasing enrollment as some struggle with declines. While less than 40% of instructors at larger schools and 4-year private schools did see increases in enrollment, 42% of instructors overall noticed declines in enrollment compared to the previous academic year. Instructors at 2-year schools, small schools (12,000 students or less), and those who taught online-asynchronous classes were most likely to have seen reductions. These enrollment challenges are likely difficult to face amidst declining student engagement as well.

However, some institutions are trying out new strategies to curtail these trends. Twenty-seven percent of schools are actively recruiting to increase enrollment, and 24% are increasing their marketing and advertising promotions. One institution is:

“ Adding new majors, minors, and concentrations; adding more summer online courses; [and] connecting accepted students with one another (remotely) early in the summer. ”

In the US, schools are also targeting students who live in different states. While these strategies can help with enrollment, increasing outreach and the number of programs will put further pressure on the already stretched budgets of many institutions.

Trend #2: Student enrollment and retention issues

Retention challenges and strategies

Thirty-six percent of institutions are struggling to retain students, particularly those opting to transfer to other schools—an important focus given the previously mentioned declines in enrollment. Students who take a gap year or drop out of school are most likely to do so in order to work full-time or take care of their mental health challenges (see Trend #3 for more information on financial and emotional stress). Forces outside the classroom are therefore significantly impacting students' decisions about their educational pursuits. Institutions can help support students through these difficulties to ensure students can continue their higher educational journeys while navigating difficult circumstances.

For instance, 10% of institutions are offering more financial aid, scholarships, and grants for students, with 5% also lowering tuition. With financial stress being such a significant challenge for students currently, offering financial support can help with retention and enrollment. To reduce mental health challenges, 31% of institutions are offering additional academic counseling to provide students with more consistent and valuable support. Instructors are also striving to be more proactive about offering their students emotional and academic support in the form of more frequent check-ins and earlier intervention for at-risk students.

Many administrators and instructors face enrollment and retention issues today. Still, proactive strategies that support at-risk students can help set them up for future success.



Trend #3: Financial and emotional stress



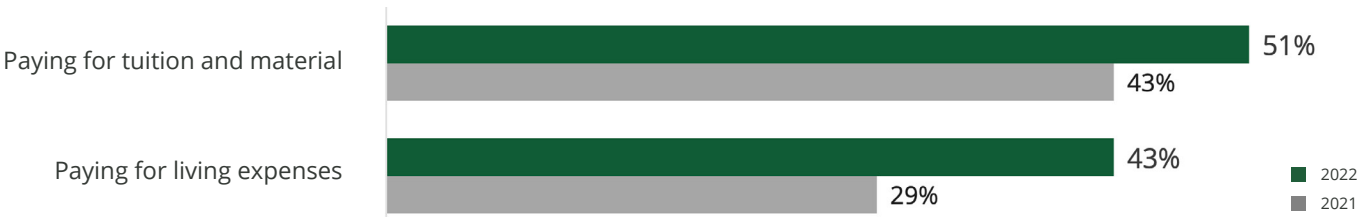
Financial strain and emotional stress are key factors in why students are feeling disengaged with learning and, in many cases, dropping out of education altogether. As the cost of living rises, many students are delaying education or taking on part-time work to pay for tuition, materials, and living expenses. Instructors are also noticing increasing financial and emotional challenges for students which are changing the way they engage with learning.

Financial strain and strategies

With the cost of living increasing for everyone, many students are feeling the strain financially. Just over half of students surveyed report that paying for tuition and course materials is a challenge—that’s up seven percentage points from last year. And it’s not just educational materials that students are struggling to pay for. Forty-three percent of students are finding it difficult to cope with living expenses, an increase of 14 percentage points from last year. Most students who take a gap year or drop out of school are most likely to do so in order to work full-time to support themselves and their family financially or to take care of their mental health challenges.

Paying for tuition and materials is a challenge for 51% of students.

What are the financial challenges you face in your education journey?



Trend #3: Financial and emotional stress

As more students struggle to cope with the rising cost of living, 45% of instructors saw greater numbers of students taking up part-time jobs, while 39% noticed more students dropping out altogether. With financial strain affecting how students are spending time outside class, many instructors say they're aware of these challenges. In fact, the two biggest reasons why instructors believed students took a gap year or dropped out were the need to work full-time to financially support themselves (56%) and not being able to afford tuition (48%).

10% of institutions are offering more financial aid, scholarships, and grants for students. 5% are lowering tuition.

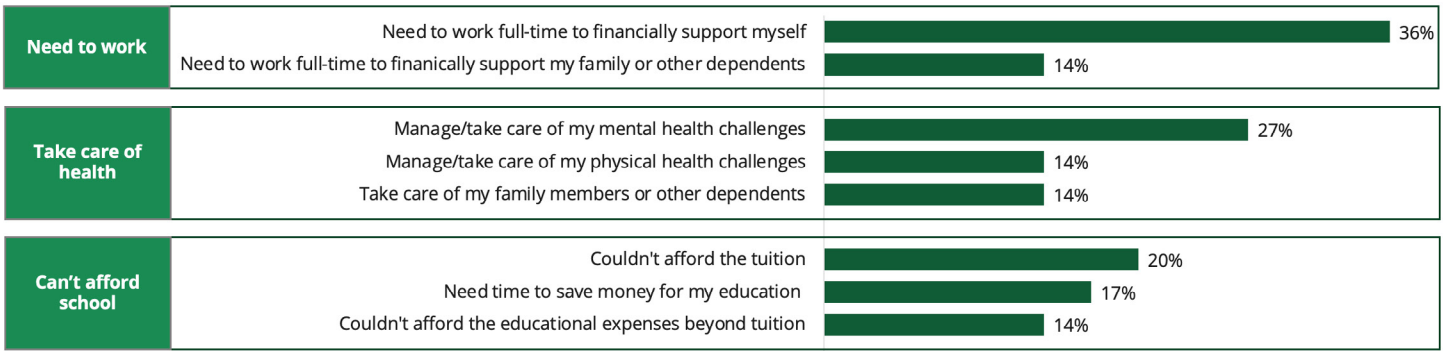
As noted in the previous section, providing more financial aid and scholarship opportunities—where viable—can go a long way in helping more students stay in school. By easing that financial burden, more students can focus on education rather than dividing their time between school and work, thereby lessening the emotional strain that comes with balancing work and life.

Emotional stress and strategies

Along with the stress that comes with financial worries, emotional strain and declining mental health are also big challenges facing students—and concerns of instructors. When students were asked unaided why they dropped out of school, life factors, emotional stress, and uncertainty were key reasons.

Which of the following are reasons why you took a gap year or dropped out of school?

(This chart includes factor analysis; N=59)



Undergraduate students are more likely to have difficulty with declining mental and emotional health, with 49% noting it as a challenge they're facing in their education journey—almost 20 percentage points more than graduate students. Almost half of undergraduates find it challenging to deal with declining mental and emotional health.

Trend #3: Financial and emotional stress

Students who take a gap year or drop out of school are most likely to do so in order to work full-time or take care of their emotional health challenges. Here's an example from one student:

“During the fall semester of 2021, I faced some extenuating circumstances that negatively impacted my mental health. I had to go on a medical leave of absence to save my academic career and put myself in a stable environment. I spent the end of fall semester and all of spring semester working on my mental health and building a support system to help me transition back to school.”

Instructors are also clearly aware of the emotional concerns their students are facing—47% believe that students leave school to address their mental health challenges. With students increasingly reaching out to their peers and instructors for help and support throughout their education, it's important that instructors foster connection and get to know students right from the start.

45% of undergraduates and 48% of graduate students felt that having their instructors available for extra help and support improved their academic experience.

Students are looking for more support and connection to help them deal with their emotional challenges. When asked unaided what schools could do to make their education journey better, 12% of students responded that they'd like to see mental health resources in place. It's important that institutions provide these resources and counseling services and, where these facilities do already exist, that they are promoted widely so that students know they're there. Thirteen percent of students also wanted their instructors to be more understanding, encouraging, and honest. When students feel understood, they have a better educational experience.



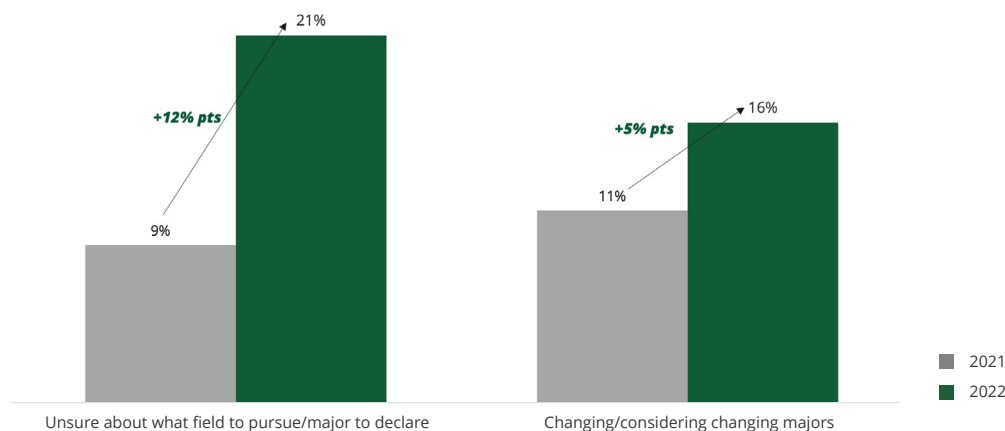
Trend #4: Students' uncertainty about their future



Today's students are largely seeking meaningful careers they can enjoy while also making an impact on the world. However, they don't always find the field where they can reach their goals and make an impact right away. The research shows instructors often misunderstand students' motivation for choosing or changing their major. Getting such insight can help institutions refine their offerings and programs and help instructors deliver on the kinds of content that can best engage students.

Over the past year, students have grown increasingly uncertain about which field of study they would like to pursue. In fact, 21% of students reported feeling unsure about what major to declare, showing an increase of 12 percentage points from last year. And since the prior academic year, 16% of students have changed or considered changing their major, an increase from the 11% of students who did so last year.

What are the challenges you face in your education journey?



Motivations for changing majors

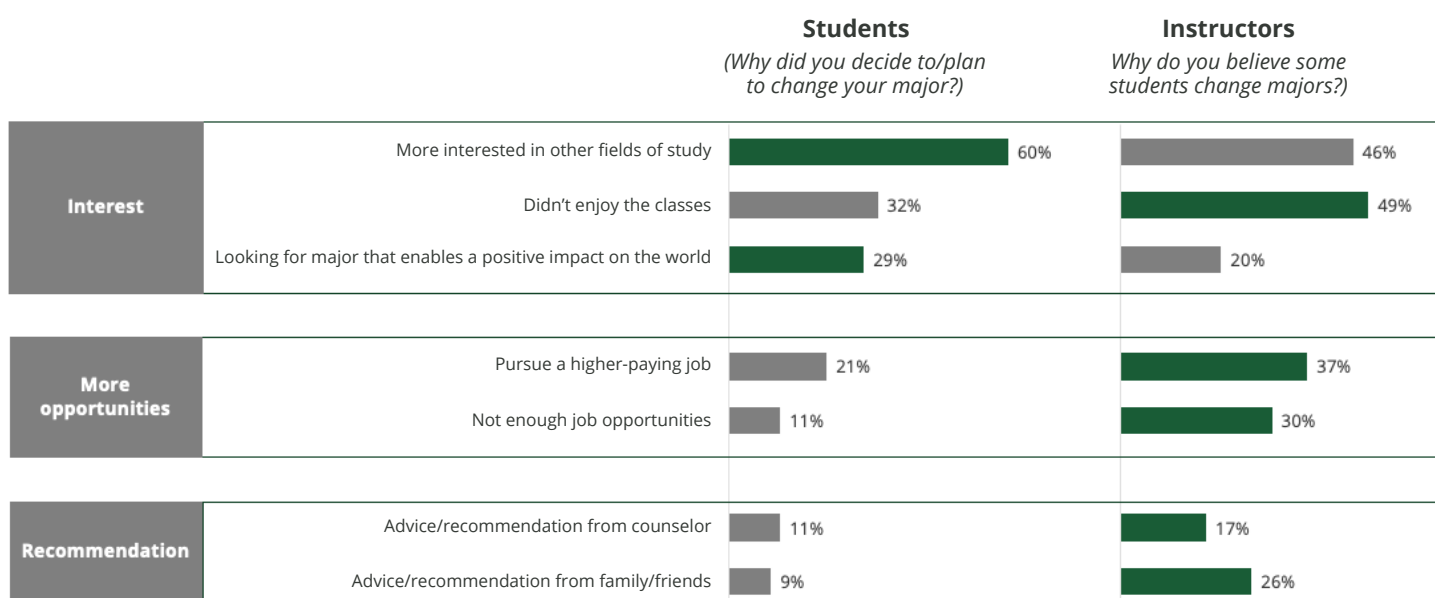
A student's choice of major is motivated by interest in the field (57%), potential career opportunities (46%), and making a positive impact (41%). Students in psychology, chemistry or biochemistry, and biology are particularly interested in making a positive impact in the world while students in accounting, finance, marketing, technology, engineering, and math are more interested in career potential. Overall, today's students are searching for impactful careers they can enjoy, and they're seeking a major program that can help them reach this goal.

When students do change their majors, 60% of them do so because they're more interested in another field of study. Nearly 30% make the switch because they're looking for a major that enables them to make a difference in the world. There's an opportunity for instructors to ensure that their students understand the career possibilities and positive impacts associated with their courses. To prepare students for their careers, one student said that instructors can:

“ Teach students the value of an education and how their degree will impact the world around them. ”

Since many students want to pursue disciplines that allow them to have purposeful and meaningful careers after graduation, instructors can help lessen student uncertainty through more career-connected content. While searching for meaning, students could be overlooking the impactful possibilities for employment that align with the program they're already in.

Trend #4: Students' uncertainty about their future



However, instructors are often unaware that seeking a meaningful career motivates students' decisions to change majors more than job opportunities. In fact, 37% of instructors misidentified that pursuing a higher-paying job was the main driver for switching majors, and 30% believed students leave a major that doesn't offer enough job opportunities, yet only 21% and 11% of students identified these as respective reasons they changed or planned to change majors. Interest, enjoyment, and impact are the main reasons students report switching majors. Even as students are career-focused, they're more concerned about the positive change they can create in the field rather than their monetary gains.

After graduation, 57% of students are concerned with finding a job they're passionate about, and 46% want to work for a company they believe in. Yet only 20% of instructors believed that students change majors to make a positive impact on the world. Since many students are motivated by discovering their passion, instructors can make it clear to students what potential careers are related to their majors and how those careers can fulfill students' desire for meaning and impact.

Plus, students were least likely (9%) to switch majors after getting advice from family and friends, but over 25% of teachers believed this advice played a role in students' major decision. Students are looking internally rather than externally for direction in their futures. Instructors can also offer their support, which can help students process their goals and better understand the career possibilities associated with their major.

While students are growing more concerned about their major decisions, they're also striving to make a positive difference in their future careers. Administrators and instructors can offer their expertise to help students understand how their education can help them reach their goals.

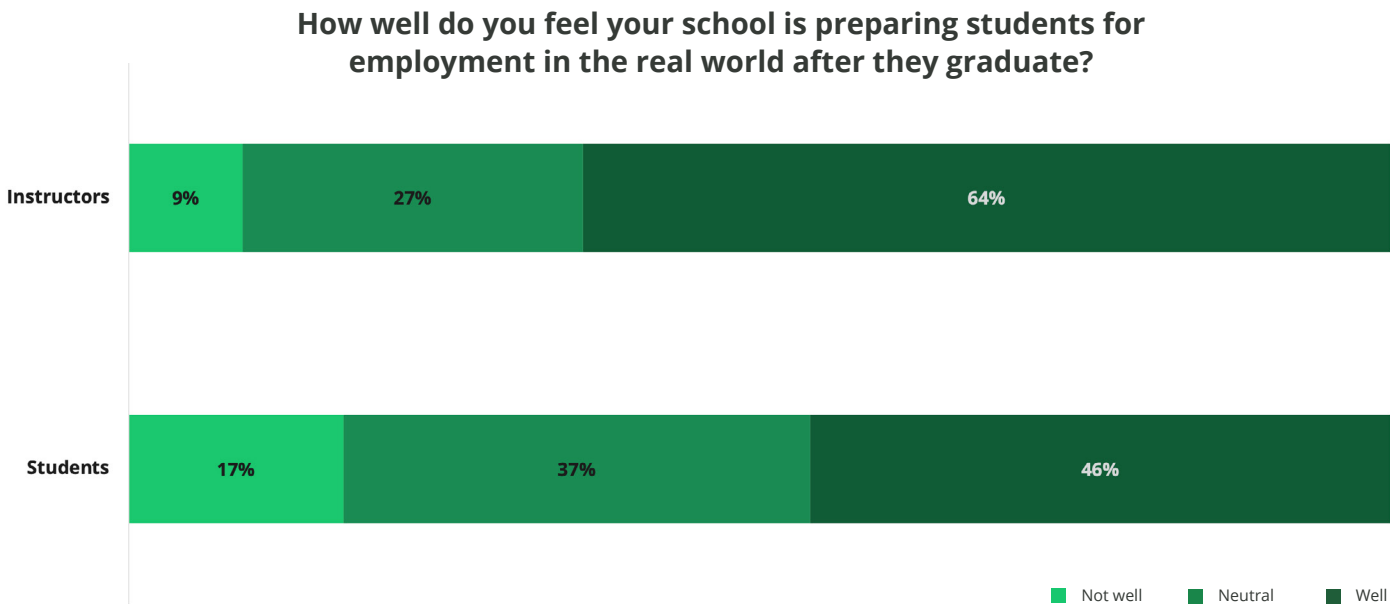
Trend #5: Gap between faculty and student perceptions



Students and instructors are often not aligned on their perceptions of student experiences, as we saw briefly in the previous trend. When instructors clearly understand how students are thinking about their futures and the challenges they’re facing, instructors and administrators can provide the most relevant support to students on their educational journeys. While instructors and students are on the same page about disengagement (see Trend #1 for more information), they’re disconnected on students’ post-graduation preparation and internship experiences.

Post-graduation preparation

Students don’t think they’re being as well-prepared for the “real world” as instructors believe. Compared to 64% of instructors feeling that their institutions are adequately preparing students for post-graduation employment, only 46% of students feel well-prepared (top 2 box).



This disconnect relates to our findings on student engagement and retention (see Trends #1 and #2, respectively). To better prepare them for the real world, one student wants instructors and institutions to:

“Talk about the job requirements, have shadowing options, and show what the job is really like vs. explaining how people feel about the job.”

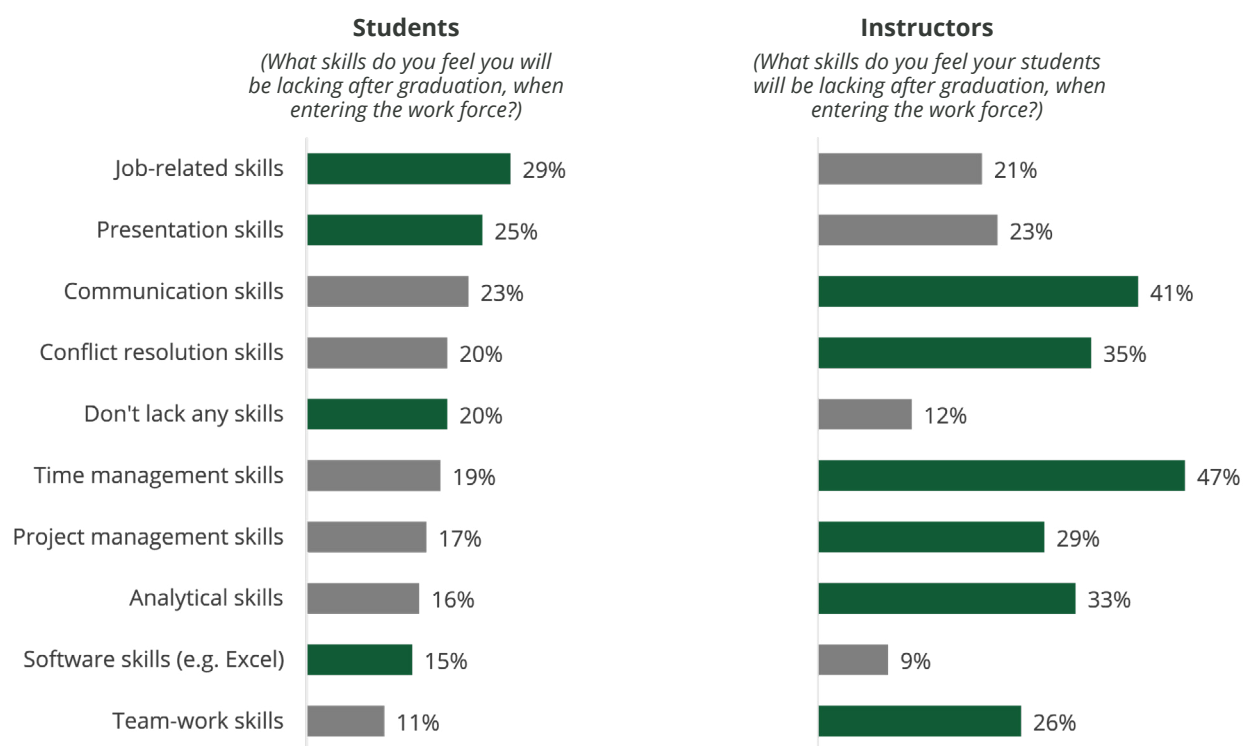
Students want career-connected, real-world applications in their courses to prepare them for their careers, but they feel their courses aren’t delivering. Without that experiential learning, they can grow further disengaged, some to the point of transferring schools or dropping out.

Trend #5: Gap between faculty and student perceptions

In regard to post-graduation concerns, instructors expect students to focus on paying for school when students are more concerned with the shorter-term goal of getting a job. Nearly half of instructors believe students are most concerned with paying off their student loans after graduation. Rather, most students are primarily focused on job prospects.

Over half of students reported that their biggest concern after graduating is finding a job they're passionate about, and 38% are worried about not having enough experience to land a job. Forty percent of students are concerned about not making enough money after they graduate, but this concern follows landing a job they enjoy, and only 29% of them actually feel that student loans are a concern. Working in a meaningful career where they can make an impact is important to students (see Trend #4 for more information), and concerns about finding this career are prioritized over financial worries.

Students and instructors perceive the post-grad skills gap quite differently



Similarly, students are job-focused when it comes to skills as well. Instructors are more likely to think that students will lack soft skills post-graduation. They don't feel their students can meet what their future careers will demand in terms of communication, conflict resolution, time management, project management, and analytics skills. On the other hand, students are most likely to feel that they'll be lacking job-related skills, rather than soft skills, when they enter the workforce. Directly communicating to students what skills they're gaining in their classes and showing them how those skills translate to tasks they'll see in their careers can help students and instructors align on the perception of job-related skills. Showing students how their education is preparing them for their futures can also help keep them engaged (see Trend #1 for more information).

Trend #5: Gap between faculty and student perceptions

Internship experiences

Even though finding an internship has become easier for students since the previous academic year (up 19 percentage points), instructors and students aren't yet aligned on their perspectives of the search. Instructors think it's easier for students to land an internship than what students actually report. In fact, 34% of students still think it's difficult or very difficult to get an internship. When administrators and instructors offer guidance to students on finding internship opportunities, this support can help students decrease the time spent searching for positions and ease the associated emotional stress. Bringing more real-world experiences into the classroom can also help ensure students don't miss out on the career-connected experiences they're looking for in case they don't land an internship position.

When students do get an internship, 77% are satisfied or very satisfied with their experiences. It's important to students that they're involved with challenging work that allows them to learn, apply their learning to their future career, and make meaningful contributions in the workplace. Students who don't get the chance to contribute to interesting work aren't satisfied with their internship experiences. Again, many students are very focused on gaining job-related skills and understanding how the world works before they graduate so they can feel confident they'll be well-prepared to do a job they enjoy.

When administrators and instructors understand the nuances of students' experiences, especially with post-graduation preparation and work experiences, they can use the insights to ensure their programs and courses fulfill students' needs. Our research revealed there are opportunities to bring more career-connected experiences into the classroom, refine students' soft skills, and offer more job-related support so that students are ready to excel in their careers post-graduation.



Conclusion: Strategies to better support students

Based on our findings, even as students encounter difficulties in their educational journeys—and in their personal lives—there are opportunities for instructors and administrators to improve their students' experiences.

Enable a career-connected educational experience

Students want to feel that their education is preparing them well for their future careers. They don't just want to hear about what companies are doing—they want to experience it. Schools need to offer more engaging application- and company-based projects that help students connect what they're learning to the real world.

While case studies are still valuable, students are also looking for more application-based assignments that help them to apply what they've learned. By asking students about their interests at the beginning of the semester, instructors can better create real-world projects to engage them right from the start. Base assignments on the kinds of tasks that students would be asked to undertake in the real world—here, partnering with companies allows students to work on projects in real time.

Proactively offer support to students

Consider checking in on students more frequently, especially those considered at risk, to increase retention. Reaching out to students about their experiences and challenges can help institutions and instructors offer needed support and relevant guidance. That level of support can help with retention, an important focus for many institutions as enrollment continues to decline.

Trying to better understand what students are interested in and offering additional programs with a mix of flexible formats, combined with effective financial and emotional support, can help schools better meet the demands of students' diverse needs and challenges.

Make students aware of financial and mental health assistance

Offering financial support when available can help with student enrollment and retention as students face significant financial strain. Mental and emotional health challenges also affect students' ability to focus on their higher education, so support can help.

If your school does currently offer a good range of support services, institutions need to increase awareness of them so that students know they're available and use them more often. Supporting students through their financial, mental, and emotional struggles can also help institutions with multiple challenges, including enrollment, retention, and engagement levels.

Conclusion: Strategies to better support students

Help students find their purpose

Offering more career advice can help guide students through their education journey, especially when they're feeling more uncertain than ever about the future. Career advice should be combined with financial support and mental health counseling, offering a holistic approach to support and guidance services.

Showing students what they can do with different degrees can help them make the right choices for their futures. Not only will this reduce uncertainty around their future career choices, but it can also help with motivation and engagement. More soft skills training (especially at 2-year schools)—particularly in time and project management and teamwork—will also help students feel more confident in their skill set after graduation. Internships should be meaningful, giving students the opportunity to work on projects that both motivate and inspire them, while giving them the relevant experience for their desired career.

Create meaningful connections between students and faculty/instructors

Our insights show just how important it is to connect regularly with students throughout their educational journey—60% of undergrad students found support from family and friends most helpful this academic year, followed by the ability to interact with students/instructors (56%) and extra help and support from instructors (45%).

More networking and mentorship opportunities with both professionals and peers can also help students to feel more prepared for the workplace. In fact, students who feel more prepared for the real world reported that their instructors were available for extra help (52%) and a mentor at school kept them on track (52%).



Methodology and demographics

The aim of this study was to better understand how the needs, attitudes, and behaviors of students and instructors are evolving in response to change in the higher education landscape. The survey addresses their experience in the 2021-2022 academic year and assesses how students and instructors are similar (or different) regarding key topics and trends.

In August 2022, we surveyed 5,258 students and 2,452 instructors in North America. Respondents used courseware from a variety of publishers in their courses, with 67% of students and 26% of instructors using Wiley courseware. Students and instructors study a range of disciplines from business and STEM fields to the humanities. Ninety-three percent of instructors were professors with 15% acting as department heads/ chairs and 3% being deans. All subgroup differences we’ve called out are statistically significant (with 95% significance) or the difference exceeds a certain threshold.

| | Students | Instructors |
|--------------------------------------|----------|-------------|
| Undergraduate level | 89% | 74% |
| Graduate level | 11% | 26% |
| 4-year public school | 64% | 48% |
| 4-year private school | 20% | 32% |
| 2-year public school | 13% | 17% |
| Vocational or technical institutions | 3% | 3% |

When 2022 report results are compared to last year’s research, we’re referring to a similar survey completed by 1,046 graduate and undergraduate students from November 25 to December 7, 2020. These students also used courseware from a range of publishers, with 88% using WileyPLUS.



About us

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