STUDENT CONNECTIONS℠

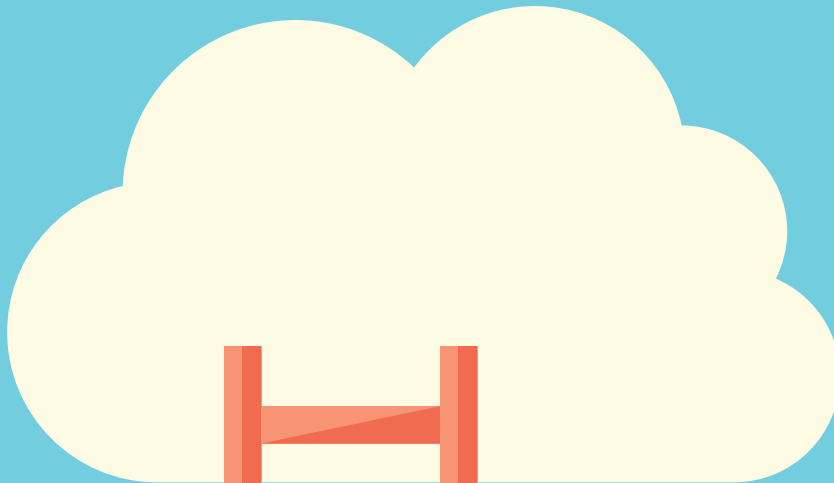# Success in the Eyes of Former Postsecondary Students

Part One of a Three-Part Series:
How Students Define Success

August 2017

Contents

Executive Summary

Student Connections regularly consults with students and academic experts to drive innovation and ensure product relevancy and effectiveness in meeting the needs of postsecondary schools and the students they serve. Recently, Student Connections commissioned a Student Success Survey. This survey polled nearly 1,300 anonymous former college students to:

1. Determine how students define success in their lives.

2. Understand the obstacles these students had to overcome to lead a successful life.

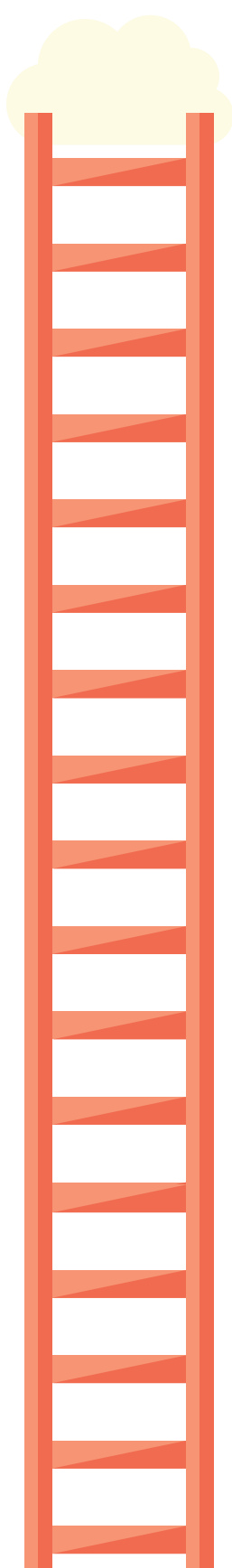3. Identify the skills students feel best prepared them for the future.

This paper, part one of three, offers a summary of how students define success.

We analyzed overall results as well as cross-tabulations by student age, highest level of education, time passed since last college course, full-time versus part-time status, historically black college or university (HBCU) status, gender, and first-generation (FGC) student status.

To qualify for this survey, respondents had to be former college students who completed a college course within the past five years. The resulting dataset includes a total of 1,237 complete responses. Significance testing is calculated at the 95 percent confidence level.

Our overall goal in conducting this research was to offer insight into how institutions can strengthen the effectiveness of their student success initiatives. Our findings indicate that students measure success by two principal outcomes: earning a stable income and doing what makes them happy in life. In our subsequent papers, we will review the biggest challenges students identified and the resources/skills they valued most.

Introduction

Interest in defining, tracking and encouraging student success has grown with the increasing scrutiny placed on the value proposition of higher education. Regular increases in tuition, which has risen, on average, more than 5 percent each year over the past decade, have easily surpassed inflation[1]. The resulting stress on students and their families has encouraged efforts to appraise the value of the postsecondary experience in the context of gainful employment. In this light, metrics such as income have become a common point of focus. This has further linked the college experience to vocational achievements. Similarly, the rapid growth of student debt which, at $1.4 trillion, now exceeds car loans and credit card balances[2], has prompted regulation and other intervention aimed at moderating debt and reducing student loan delinquency and default.

As a result, a perceived failure to deliver value to current and former students can create severe financial repercussions for schools. For example, the federal government monitors cohort default rates, denying colleges access to federal funds if they exceed established limits. Other metrics tracked include completion rates and whether former students are reducing their loan principal. Collectively, these indicators are marketed to the public as valid measures of an institution's ability to foster success for its students.

However, while this analysis may be informative about the progression of students through college and their financial condition after leaving, it does not directly describe the priorities college students themselves hold. A deeper understanding of how students define success and what they view as the biggest challenges and resources to achieving it can help schools deliver postsecondary outcomes that better align with the most relevant perspective of all: students'.

[1] http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-forgive-at-least-108-billion-in-student-debt-in-coming-years-1480501802

[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/19/business/dealbook/navient-loans-lawsuit.html
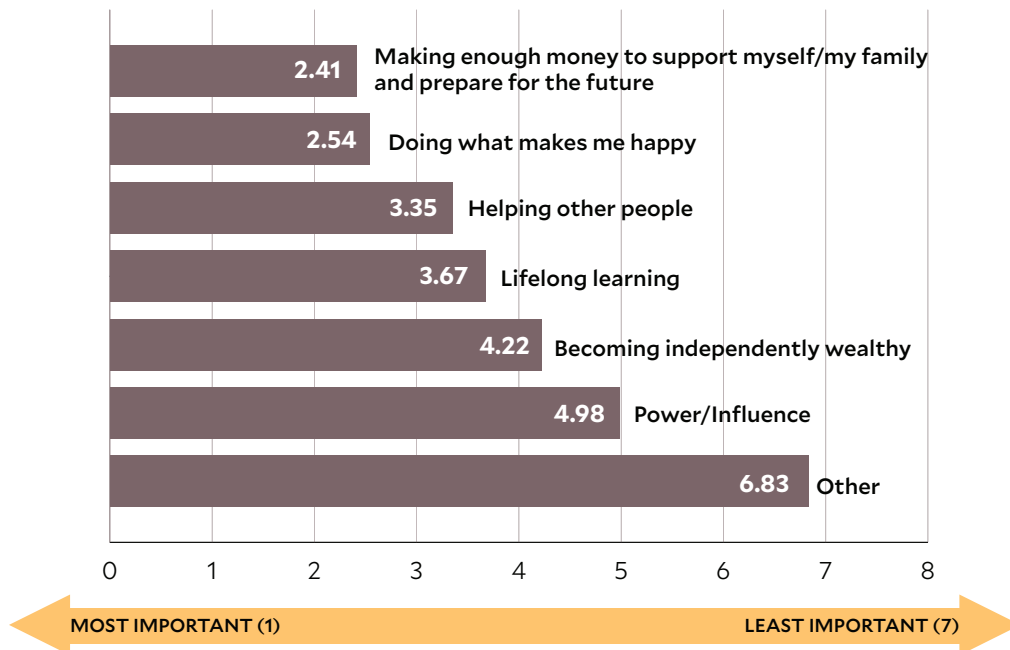
How Students Define Success

A LIVING WAGE AND A JOB THEY CAN LIVE WITH

Former students primarily associate success with two things: earning a stable income to support themselves and their families and doing what makes them happy in life. These responses were first or second among all segments of former students.

Which of the following best defines success for you?

On an aggregate level, how students define success is clear in the above chart. But there were some interesting correlations between some student characteristics and how these outcomes were weighted in their importance for success.

1. "Making enough money" as a definition of success
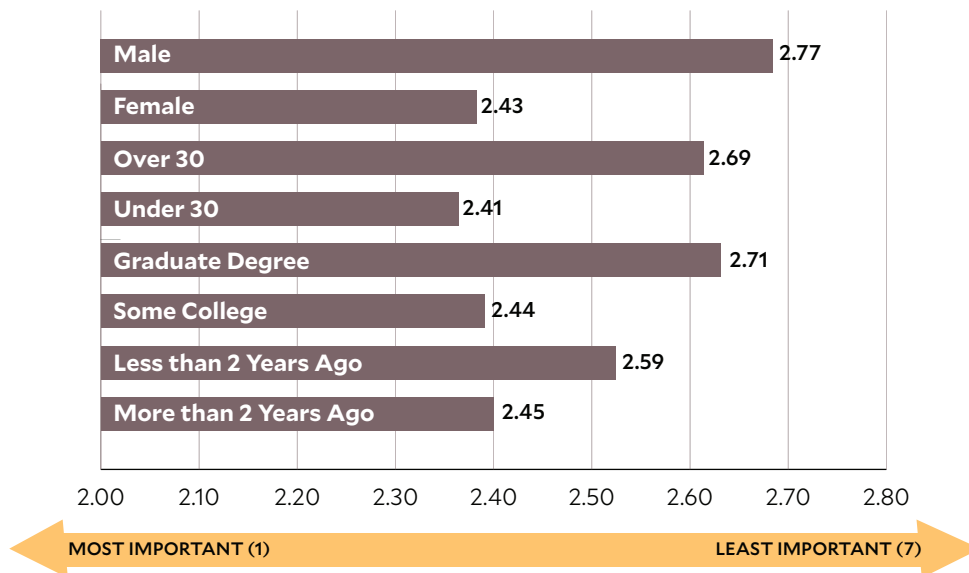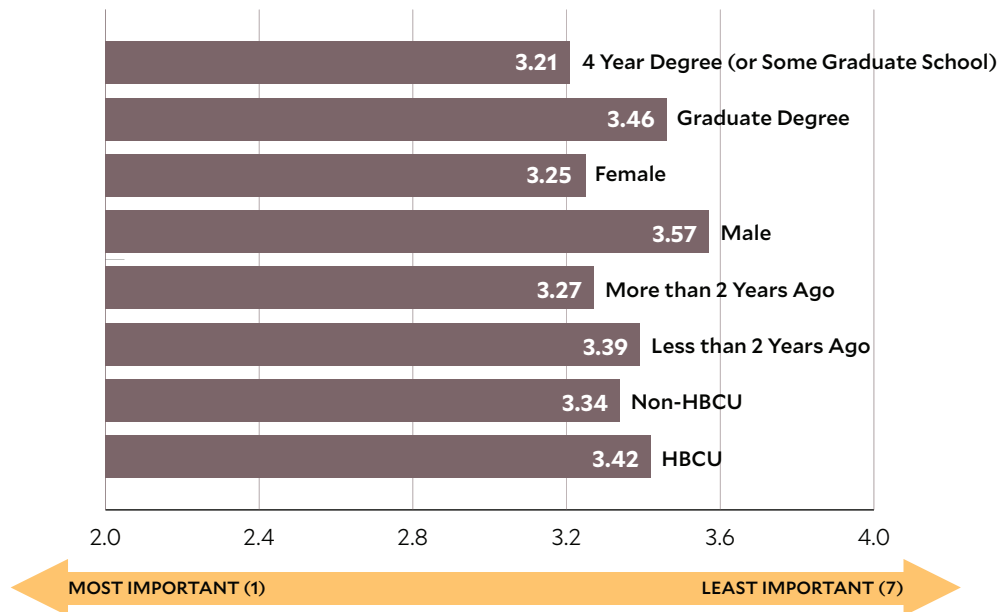
Segment	Value
More than 2 years ago	2.17
Less than 2 years ago	2.53
Part-time	2.24
Full-time	2.50
Over 30	2.25
Under 30	2.55
Non-HBCU	2.27
HBCU	3.36
Some College	2.30
Graduate Degree	2.47

Scale: 2.0 — 2.3 — 2.6 — 2.9 — 3.2 — 3.5

MOST IMPORTANT (1) ←————————————————————→ LEAST IMPORTANT (7)
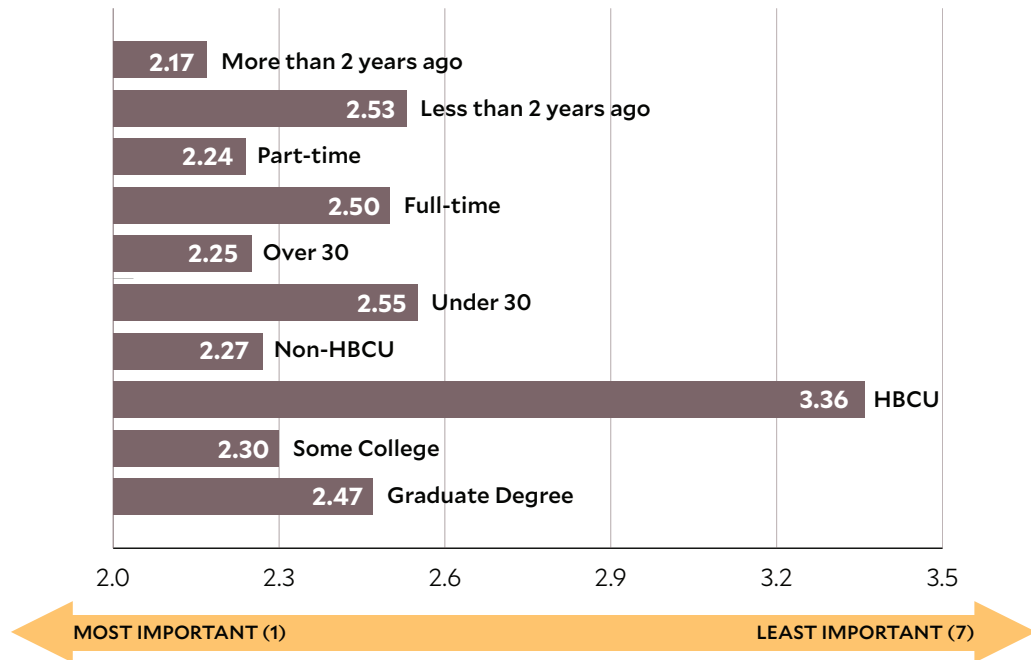
2. "Doing what makes me happy" as a definition of success.

Segment	Value
Male	2.77
Female	2.43
Over 30	2.69
Under 30	2.41
Graduate Degree	2.71
Some College	2.44
Less than 2 Years Ago	2.59
More than 2 Years Ago	2.45

Scale: 2.00 — 2.10 — 2.20 — 2.30 — 2.40 — 2.50 — 2.60 — 2.70 — 2.80

MOST IMPORTANT (1) ←————————————————————→ LEAST IMPORTANT (7)

As seen above, older students, part-time students and those who were in school more than two years ago were segments that tended to put more emphasis on the need to make sufficient money. Meanwhile, younger students and female students assigned higher value to the opportunity to do what makes them happy.
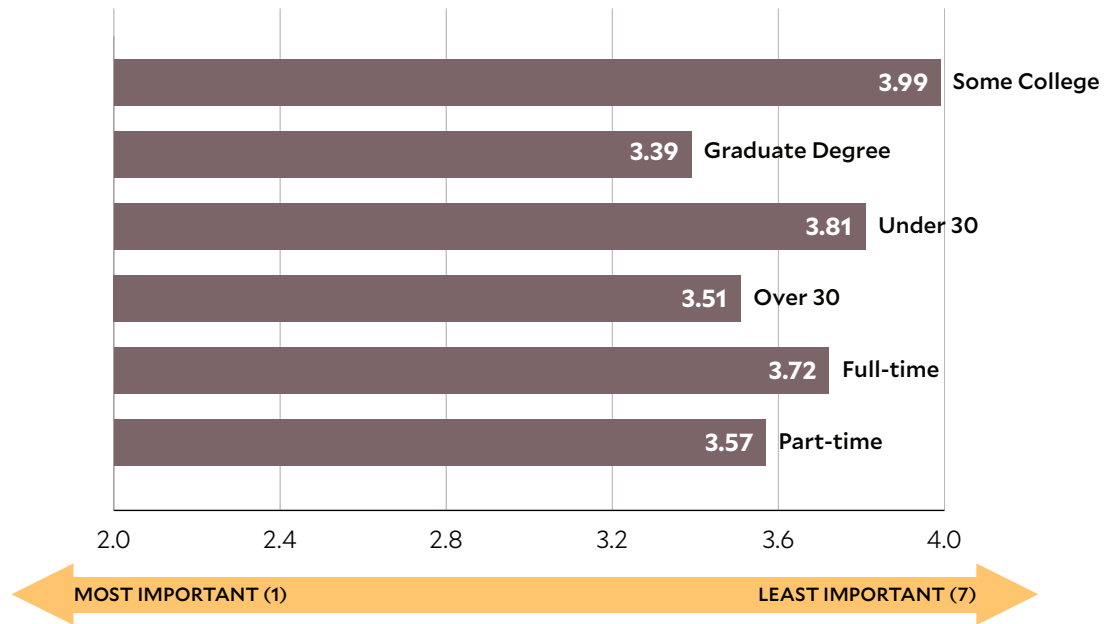
Note: HBCU students also ranked these outcomes as the top two markers of success, but their responses were more evenly distributed among all choices, resulting in larger differences in how HBCU and non-HBCU students scored categories.

3. "Helping other people" as a definition of success.

	Score	Category
	3.21	4 Year Degree (or Some Graduate School)
	3.46	Graduate Degree
	3.25	Female
	3.57	Male
	3.27	More than 2 Years Ago
	3.39	Less than 2 Years Ago
	3.34	Non-HBCU
	3.42	HBCU

2.0   2.4   2.8   3.2   3.6   4.0

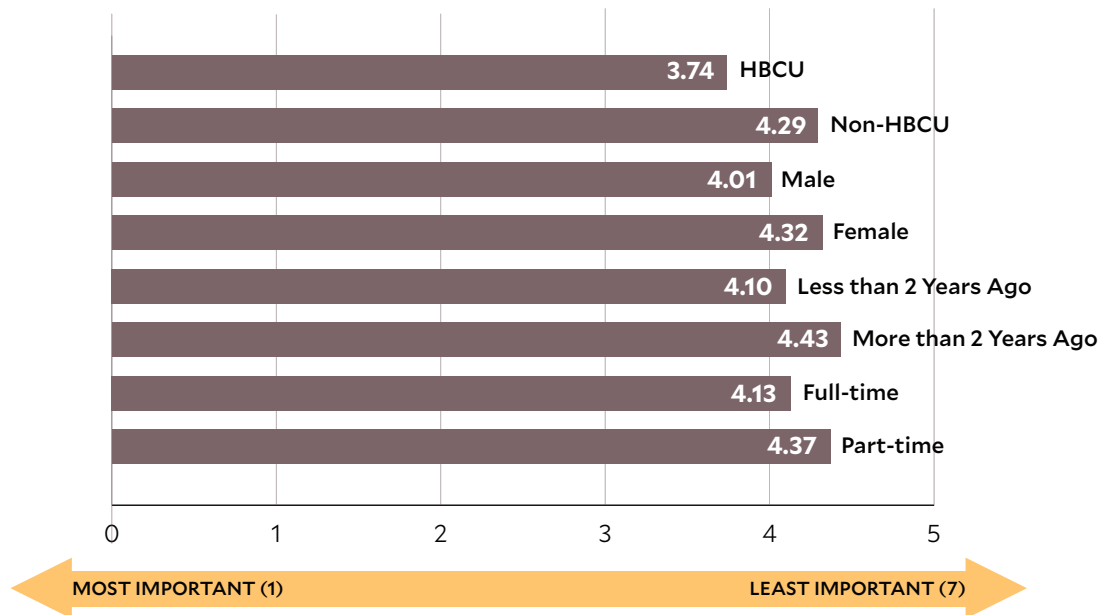MOST IMPORTANT (1)   LEAST IMPORTANT (7)

There wasn't as much variance in how different groups of respondents weighted the definition of success ranked third in overall importance: helping other people. However, there were some noticeable contrasts.

4. "Lifelong learning" as a definition of success

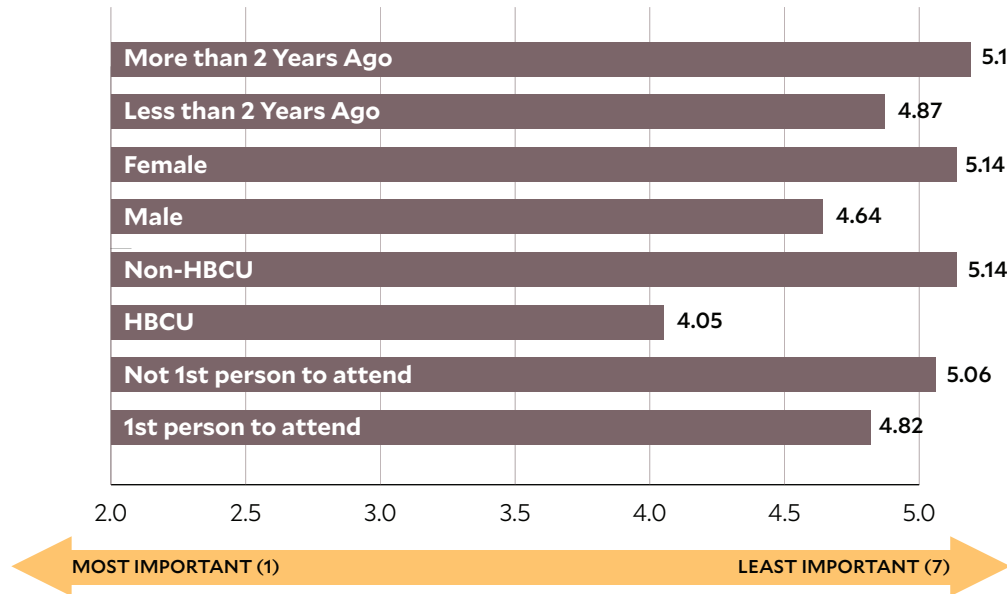|	Value
Some College	3.99
Graduate Degree	3.39
Under 30	3.81
Over 30	3.51
Full-time	3.72
Part-time	3.57

MOST IMPORTANT (1) ← → LEAST IMPORTANT (7)

"Lifelong learning" was ranked next in importance by the responders as a group. Unsurprisingly, there was a noticeable contrast between those with graduate degrees and those who had not completed college when ranking the priority of this outcome. Older and part-time students also were more likely to associate this outcome with success.

5. "Becoming independently wealthy" as a definition of success.

Category	Value
HBCU	3.74
Non-HBCU	4.29
Male	4.01
Female	4.32
Less than 2 Years Ago	4.10
More than 2 Years Ago	4.43
Full-time	4.13
Part-time	4.37

MOST IMPORTANT (1) ← → LEAST IMPORTANT (7)

"Becoming independently wealthy" was ranked second-last in importance to success. HBCU students and those who had left school more recently tended to score this area with more importance than their peers.

6. "Power/influence" as a definition of success

Group	Value
More than 2 Years Ago	5.19
Less than 2 Years Ago	4.87
Female	5.14
Male	4.64
Non-HBCU	5.14
HBCU	4.05
Not 1st person to attend	5.06
1st person to attend	4.82

MOST IMPORTANT (1)   LEAST IMPORTANT (7)

"Power/influence" was the least-important indicator of success for all groups. However, there were some contrasts in how strongly different segments of students felt when scoring this option.

Conclusions

Overall, students expect college to be a bridge to a lifestyle that is both personally and professionally rewarding so that they can support the needs of themselves and their families while also feeling fulfilled in the pursuit of their life's work.

While important to all students, a satisfying vocation correlated most strongly with responses from young students. Over time, it may be surpassed by what is perhaps a more practical consideration — making sufficient money. Proactively acknowledging the phenomenon of shifting perspectives may be a helpful consideration for institutions in counseling their students.

HBCU students, while sharing the overall student view of what most defines success, scored their responses more evenly. This resulted in relatively higher weighting in other indicators of success, perhaps a reflection of the greater barriers some of these students traditionally have faced.

The higher priority placed on lifelong learning by graduate students is unsurprising. However, it may be worthwhile to note that part-time students assigned greater importance to this consideration than did full-time students. This could serve as a reminder to institutions that part-time students value education at least as much as full-time students. It also may reflect the reality that many part-time students have returned to school because of a career disruption – or advancement opportunity – that has underscored the value of additional education.

In general, the contrast apparent among different student characteristics is a reminder that institutions must be attuned to the individual needs and expectations present among their diverse campus communities. At the same time, college students overwhelmingly aspire to a future in which they can do what makes them happy while supporting their families. As a result, institutions must help students align their degree focus with both qualitative and quantitative career aspirations.

Next in our three-part series of student success white papers, we will review what students report as the greatest challenges to achieving success.
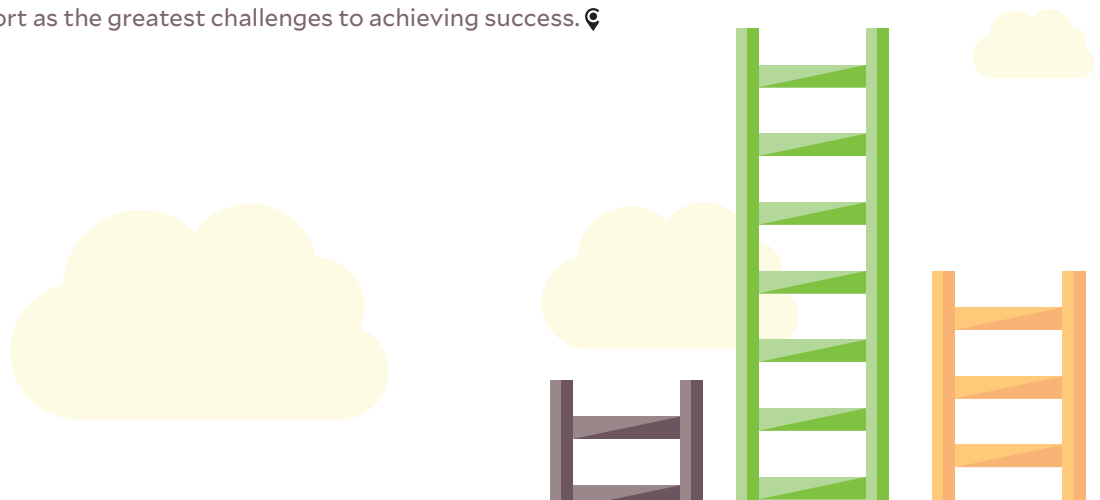
Contact Student Connections: (800) 766-0084 | www.studentconnections.org

Student Connections, a Strada Education Network company, is a nonprofit corporation passionate about helping students overcome the barriers that can get in the way of attending college, completing their programs of study and achieving success while in school and after graduation.
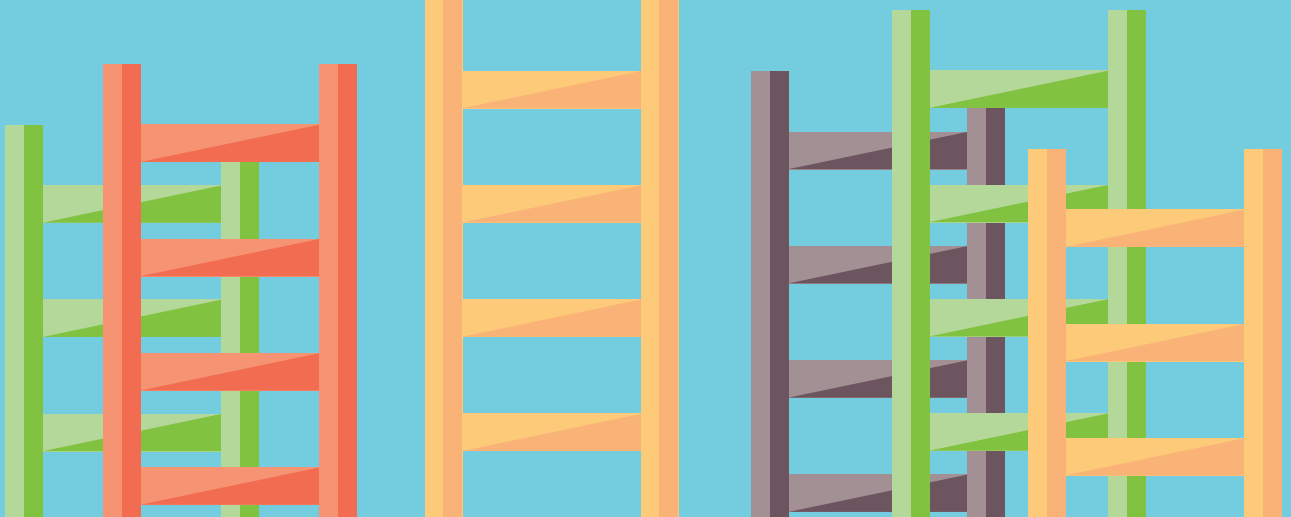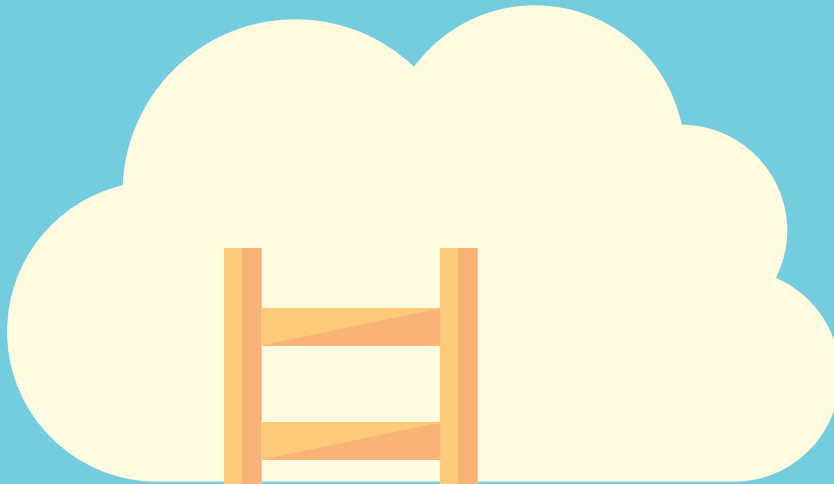
STUDENT CONNECTIONS℠

Success in the Eyes of Former Postsecondary Students

Part Two of a Three-Part Series: The Greatest Obstacles on the Road to Student Success

September 2017

Contents

Executive Summary

Student Connections regularly conducts research with students and academic experts to support the development of innovative and relevant solutions for postsecondary institutions and their students. Earlier this year, we commissioned a Student Success Survey, polling nearly 1,300 anonymous former college students to:

1. Determine how students define success in their lives.
2. Understand the obstacles these students had to overcome to lead a successful life.
3. Identify the skills students feel best prepared them for the future.

We analyzed overall results as well as cross-tabulations by student age, highest level of education, time span since last college course, full-time versus part-time status, historically black college or university (HBCU) status, gender, and first-generation (FGC) student status.

To qualify for this survey, respondents had to be former college students that completed a college course within the past five years. The resulting dataset includes a total of 1,237 complete responses. Significance testing is calculated at the 95% confidence level.

Our overall goal in conducting this research was to offer insight into how institutions can strengthen the effectiveness of their student success initiatives. This paper, part two of three, reveals what students identify as the biggest challenges to their success. Our third paper will discuss the resources and skills most important to achieving success.

All the findings we present have the potential to help institutions strengthen the effectiveness of their existing student success initiatives. For example, this survey confirms that most former students find their financial situation to be the biggest obstacle to finishing school and becoming successful, making it a significant stress factor in their lives. This can lead to a cascade of related challenges; half of all students worked either a part- or full-time job to mitigate financial pressure. Younger (under 30) students reported that trying to balance coursework with the social aspect of college was a significant barrier for them as well, often leading to procrastination.
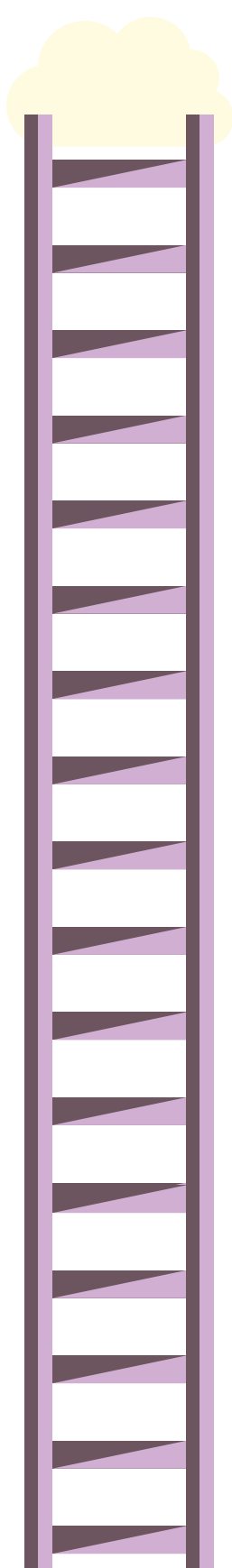
Introduction

Interest in defining, tracking and encouraging student success has grown with the increasing scrutiny placed on the value proposition of higher education. Regular increases in tuition, which has risen, on average, more than 5 percent each year over the past decade, have easily surpassed inflation[1]. Meanwhile, student debt has grown rapidly. At $1.4 trillion, it now exceeds car loans and credit card balances[2]. Increased attention on the financial complexities attached to the college experience has encouraged efforts to appraise the value of the postsecondary experience in the context of gainful employment. In this light, economic metrics such as income have emerged as popular points of focus, which has further linked the college experience to vocational achievements. Regulation and other intervention aimed at moderating debt and reducing student loan delinquency and default have established themselves as forces in academia, empowered to hold accountable institutions that run afoul of them.

As a result, a perceived failure to deliver value to current and former students can create severe financial repercussions for schools. For example, the federal government carefully monitors cohort default rates, potentially denying colleges access to federal funds if they exceed established limits. Other metrics tracked include completion rates and whether former students are reducing their loan principal. Collectively, these indicators are frequently marketed to the public as valid measures of an institution's ability to foster success for students.

However, while these efforts yield transparency about the progression of students through college and their financial condition after leaving, they do not directly address the underlying priorities that college students value. Knowledge sourced from student feedback, such as this survey, can provide this insight and help schools remain aligned with students in furthering student success in higher education.
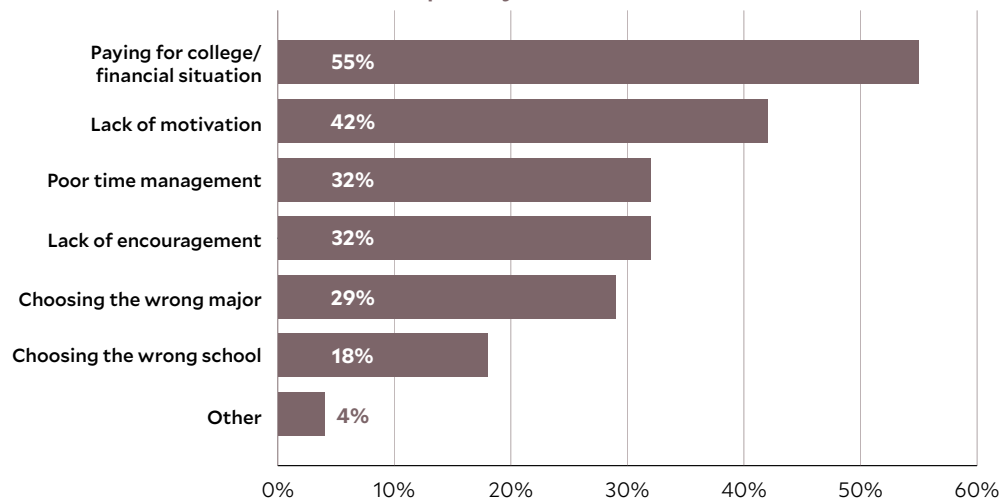
[1] http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-forgive-at-least-108-billion-in-student-debt-in-coming-years-1480501802

[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/19/business/dealbook/navient-loans-lawsuit.html
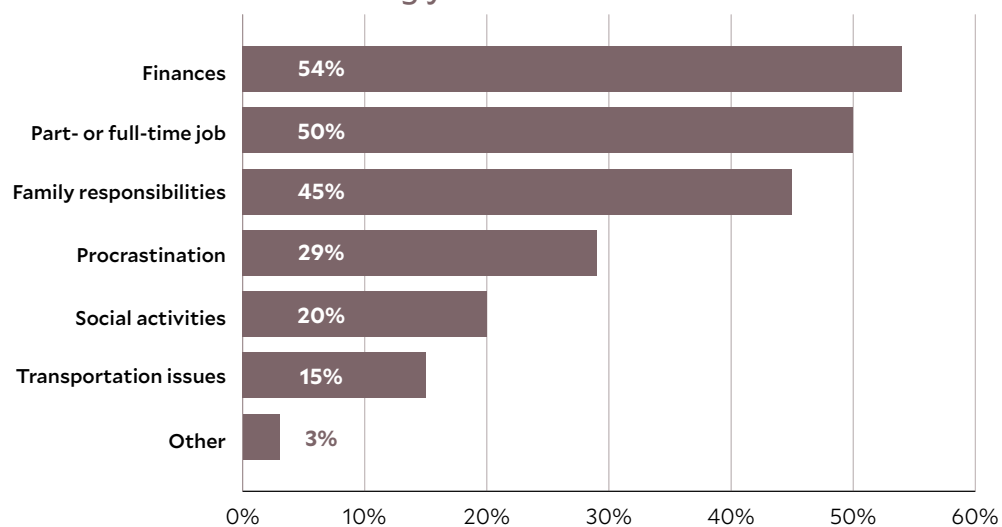
Overall Roadblocks to Success and Stress Factors

More than half (55 percent) of all respondents reported that financial factors were an impediment to their success. A similar proportion (54 percent) said finances were a major source of stress in their lives.

Which of the following had the most potential to impede your success?

Category	Percentage
Paying for college/ financial situation	55%
Lack of motivation	42%
Poor time management	32%
Lack of encouragement	32%
Choosing the wrong major	29%
Choosing the wrong school	18%
Other	4%

What were the biggest distractions/stress factors during your time in school?

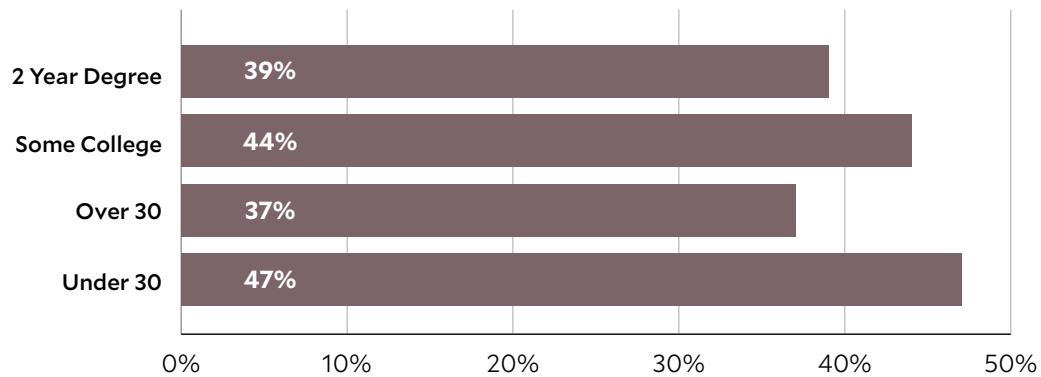| Category	Percentage
Finances	54%
Part- or full-time job	50%
Family responsibilities	45%
Procrastination	29%
Social activities	20%
Transportation issues	15%
Other	3%

Financial stresses, whether caused by a lack of money management skills or simply by the need to pay expenses, create subsequent challenges. As seen in the second chart above, half of the former students reported that having a job was a distraction or source of stress while enrolled in classes. As the second-biggest distractor that former students reported facing, employment is likely one aspect of the same challenge: maintaining financial wellness while pursuing an education.

But our survey results illustrate that challenges to student success affect various student populations in different ways. The remainder of this report reviews some of these contrasts, an awareness of which can help institutions proactively tailor resources to the needs of diverse campus communities.

Paying for college/financial situation as an impediment to success

Category	Percentage
Male	47%
Female	59%
Graduate Degree	49%
4 Year Degree (or some graduate school)	53%
2 Year Degree	58%
Some College	60%
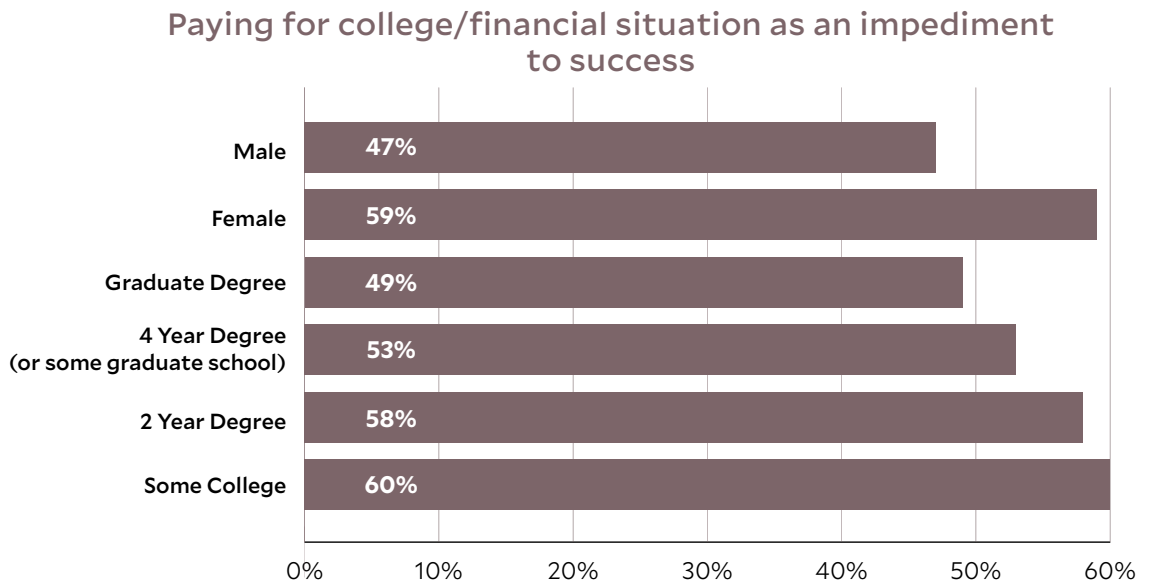
Respondents clearly cited financial issues as the top threat to success. But this problem correlated most strongly with responses from students who had not completed a degree (60 percent), and from students with a two-year degree (58 percent). It ranked significantly lower on the opposite end of the postsecondary spectrum; only 49 percent of those with graduate degrees reported finances as an impediment to their success. There was also a noticeable difference in responses segmented by gender.

Lack of motivation as an impediment to success

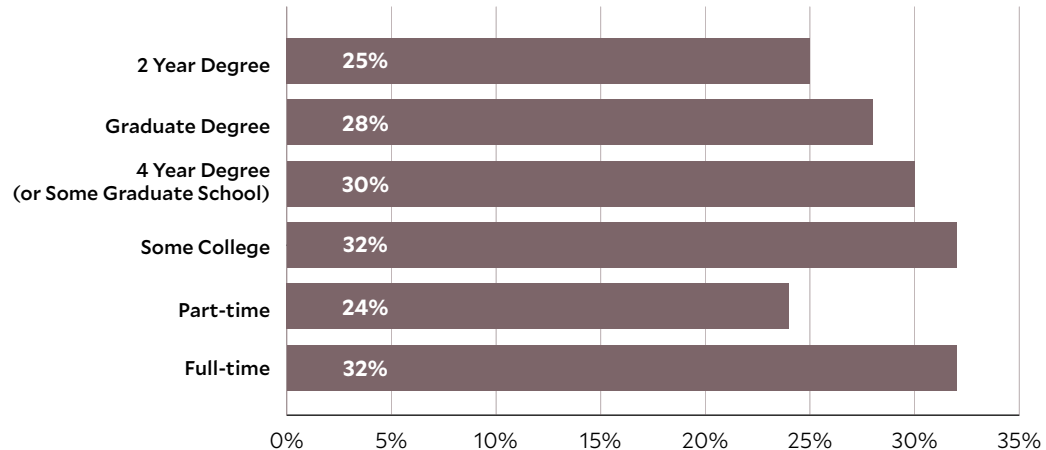| Category	Percentage
2 Year Degree	39%
Some College	44%
Over 30	37%
Under 30	47%

(0% — 10% — 20% — 30% — 40% — 50%)

While a lack of motivation was cited by 42 percent of overall responders (second only to financial concerns), nearly half (47 percent) of those under 30 indicated it in their response, contrasting with 37 percent of those over 30. Interestingly, when this question was cross-tabulated by highest degree obtained, lack of motivation was lowest among students with two-year degrees and highest among students who did not complete their degree.

Lack of encouragement as an impediment to success

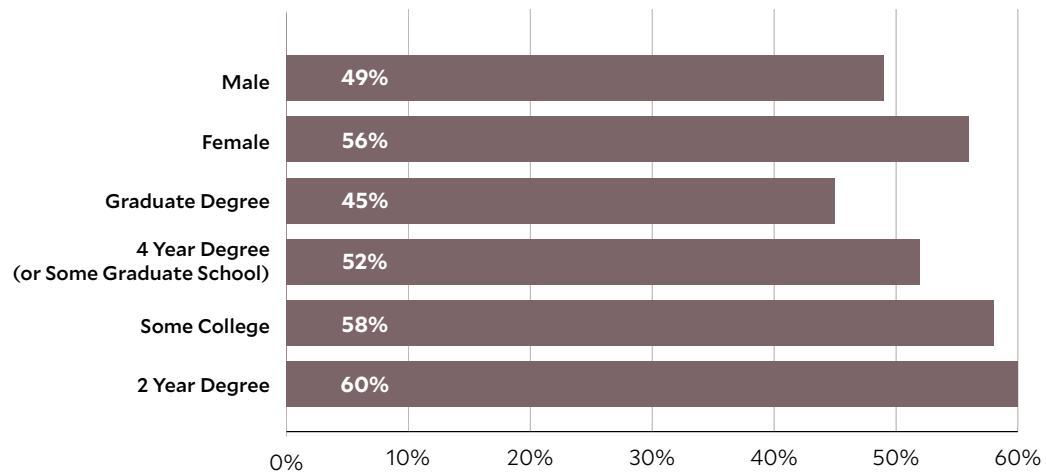| Category	Percentage
Graduate Degree	26%
Some College	32%
4 Year Degree (or Some Graduate School)	35%
2 Year Degree	36%
Non-HBCU	30%
HBCU	41%

(0% — 10% — 20% — 30% — 40% — 50%)
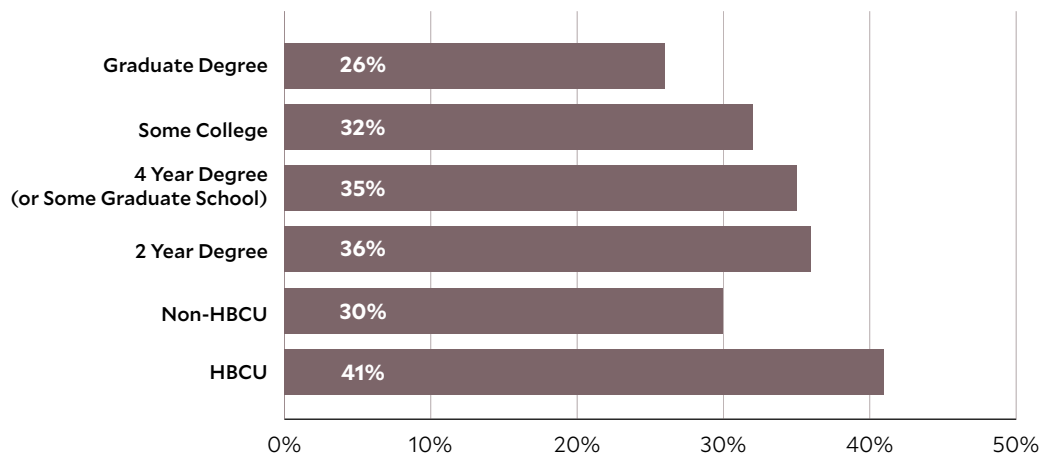
Overall, a third of respondents (32 percent) said a lack of encouragement or support was an impediment to their success. There was a substantial difference between HBCU students and non-HBCU students and between those who completed graduate degrees and those who did not progress as far in postsecondary education.

Choosing the wrong major as an impediment to success

| Category	Percentage
2 Year Degree	25%
Graduate Degree	28%
4 Year Degree (or Some Graduate School)	30%
Some College	32%
Part-time	24%
Full-time	32%

Overall, 29 percent said that choosing the wrong major was an issue that threatened their success. Here, we can observe contrasts that correlate with degree completion and full- vs. part-time status. Those with two-year degrees were most comfortable with their area of study, while choosing the wrong major was an issue for a third of those who did not receive a degree. Full-time students were more likely to be disappointed in their degree choice than part-time students.

Finances as a stress factor during school

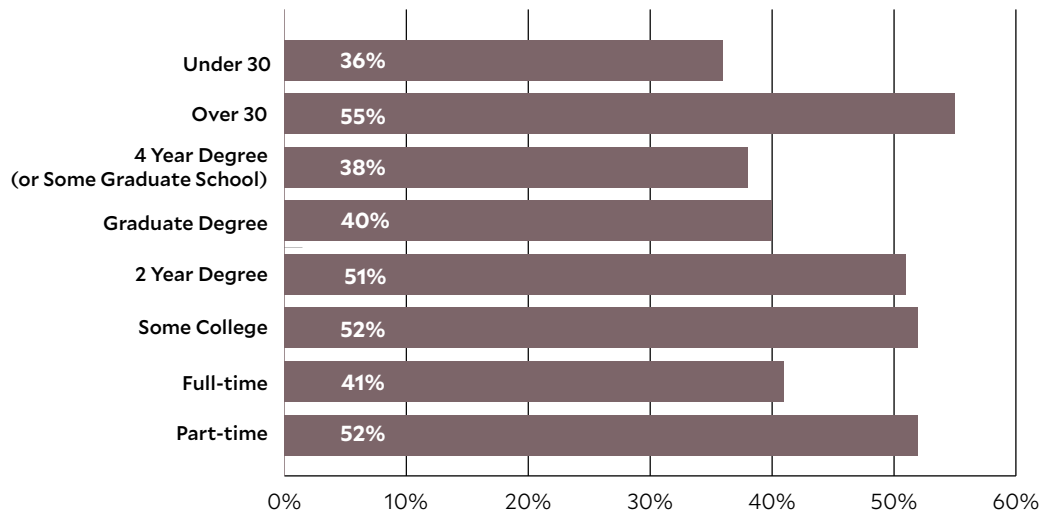| Category	Percentage
Male	49%
Female	56%
Graduate Degree	45%
4 Year Degree (or Some Graduate School)	52%
Some College	58%
2 Year Degree	60%

Echoing the results detailed on page 3, finances were again the top response when former students were asked about stress factors and sources of distraction in school. Although the question was framed differently, we observed a similar correlation between financial concerns and failure to complete; 58 percent of those who did not graduate cited this issue vs. 45 percent with graduate degrees. Sixty percent of those with two-year degrees reported finances as a distraction. The connection between financial stress and academic advancement suggests this issue is preventing some students from continuing their education and others from attaining a degree of any kind. In addition, female students were more likely to say that finances were a stress during college.

Employment as a stress factor during school

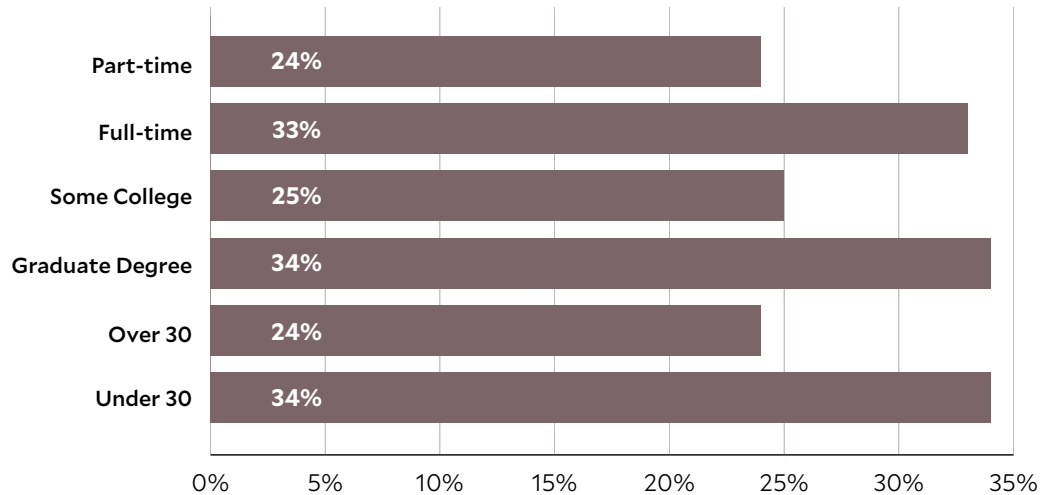| Category	Percentage
Part-time Students	58%
Full-time Students	46%
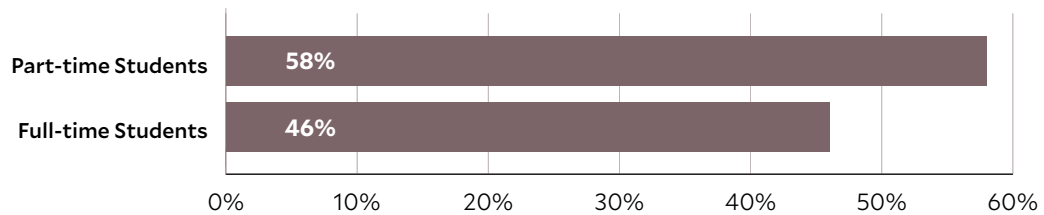
Employment is another common distraction for students. Affecting 50 percent of all responders, it was highest (58 percent) among part-time students and lowest (46 percent) among full-time students. In effect, students trade a lighter class load for the distraction of a nonacademic workload.

Family responsibilities as a stress factor

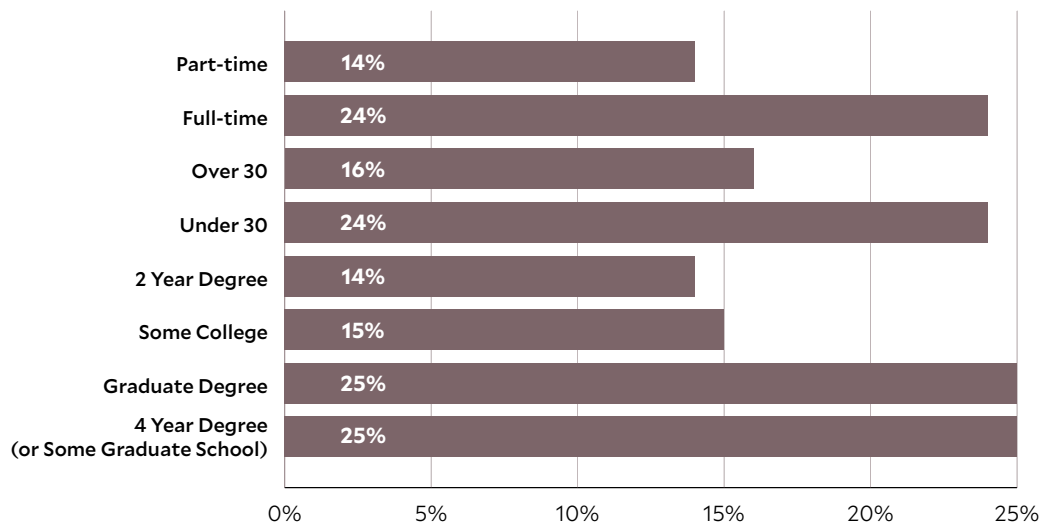| Category	Percentage
Under 30	36%
Over 30	55%
4 Year Degree (or Some Graduate School)	38%
Graduate Degree	40%
2 Year Degree	51%
Some College	52%
Full-time	41%
Part-time	52%

Nearly half of all respondents (45 percent) said family responsibilities were a source of stress. This was more likely in those over 30 vs. those under 30. In addition, family stress was a greater problem for students who did not complete a degree and those who received two-year degrees compared to those who had advanced further in their education, marking another trend tied to degree completion. Part-time students were affected more than full-time students.

Procrastination as a distraction

Category	Percentage
Part-time	24%
Full-time	33%
Some College	25%
Graduate Degree	34%
Over 30	24%
Under 30	34%

(0% – 35% scale)

Overall, 29 percent of respondents listed procrastination as a distraction/stress factor during school. This was highest (34 percent) among younger students and less likely (24 percent) among respondents over 30. When responses were segmented by completion level, graduate students reported the greatest problems with procrastination, as did full-time students vs. part-time students.

Social activities as a distraction

Category	Percentage
Part-time	14%
Full-time	24%
Over 30	16%
Under 30	24%
2 Year Degree	14%
Some College	15%
Graduate Degree	25%
4 Year Degree (or Some Graduate School)	25%

(0% – 25% scale)

Younger students, full-time students, and those with graduate or four-year degrees were more likely than their peers to be distracted by social activities.

Conclusions

Students see financial issues as the biggest challenge to their success. As a result, many students are employed during college, forcing them to divide their time between their job and their academic workload. In many cases, family responsibilities further tax their resources. To better equip them for effective financial management, regardless of degree level, all students should be exposed to programs that develop money- and time-management skills.

Although challenges related to financial concerns are widespread among all student groups, survey data show the issue was greater for students who did not progress as far on the academic path. This indicates that completion, in general, and attainment of advanced degrees, in particular, could be aided by the early availability of financial literacy resources.

A lack of motivation was second only to financial concerns as an impediment to success. Nearly half of those under 30 indicated it was a problem, contrasting with only 37 percent of those over 30. This highlights the need for schools to ensure traditional students have access to tools that help them build practical competencies, such as goal setting, that can help students remain engaged and on track. Students who failed to earn a degree were appreciably more likely to report problems with motivation than those who had received two-year degrees. This could indicate that students challenged by low motivation could benefit from engagement that increases their awareness of the link between a field of study and a career path.

About a third of former students said a lack of encouragement or support was an impediment to success. Students with two-year degrees were much more likely to report this issue than students with graduate degrees, as were HBCU students vs. non-HBCU students. Institutions should view this as a confirmation that well-tailored student-support resources influence postsecondary outcomes, including persistence through increasing levels of degree completion.

Interestingly, full-time students were more likely than part-time students to say that choosing the wrong major had been a problem. Students who failed to complete a degree also were more likely to be challenged by this issue, confirming that academic counseling is important to retention, but too many full-time students are not effectively reached.
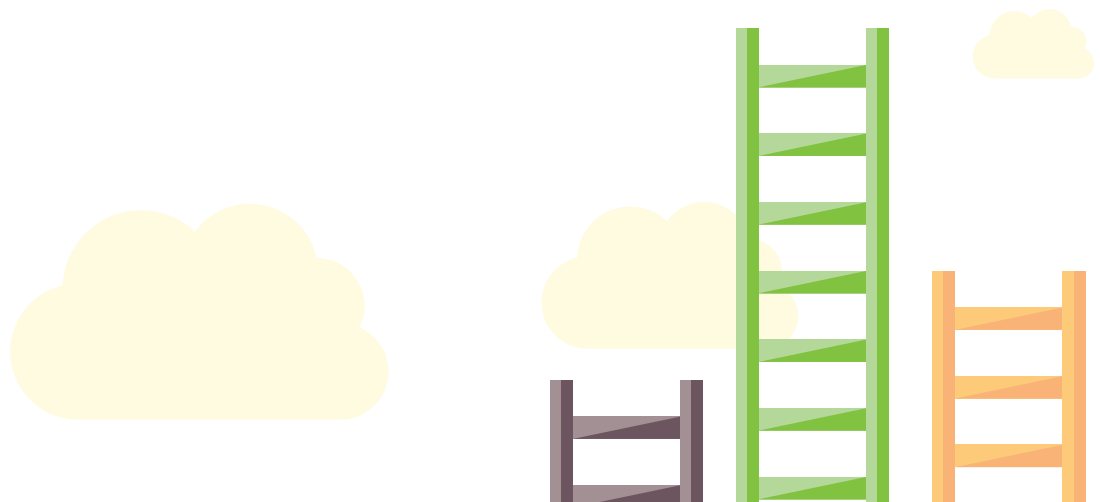
Unsurprisingly, nontraditional students were most likely to report challenges in balancing school with family obligations (55 percent vs. only 36 percent for those under 30), highlighting an opportunity for schools to add value for these students through flexibility. Those who failed to complete a degree were also much more likely to report difficulties balancing school and home life, as were those with two-year degrees vs. four-year and graduate degrees, indicating the impact this challenge can have on retention and progression.

Overall, these results point to a practical-skills gap that allows nonacademic factors, such as financial literacy and time management, to threaten academic outcomes. In a dangerous cycle, students may be responding to financial challenges by taking on a workload that jeopardizes academic achievement.

Indeed, studies have shown that most students who fail to complete a degree leave school for nonacademic reasons. They are far more likely to cite difficulties with their finances than difficulties with their grades. With nonacademic factors having such a profound effect on student success, schools need to be more proactive or at least more effectively responsive to issues students face during school. But institutions are understandably focused on academic learning. They may not have the resources to individually counsel students about practical decisions, even though such choices may create ramifications that last a lifetime.

Although this marks a dilemma, it also highlights a rich opportunity for schools to add value to the educational experience. Technology now offers institutions previously impossible breadth and reach in engaging students. Adaptive, interactive platforms allow schools to effectively fill in gaps when it is most practical – and effective – for students, complementing tutors, mentoring, orientation, and other traditional resources.

But when institutions lack an accurate understanding of the advantages students most value and the impediments they find most troublesome, they cannot effectively maximize opportunities or meet challenges. This report has provided insight about how students, both overall and as various demographic groups, weigh the obstacles facing them. In part three, we will focus on what students had to say about resources that promoted their success. Integrating this insight into your student engagement strategy can avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and ensure the diverse needs of any campus community are effectively met. ℂ

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Success in the Eyes of Former Postsecondary Students

Part Three of a Three-Part Series:
Empowering Student Success

October 2017

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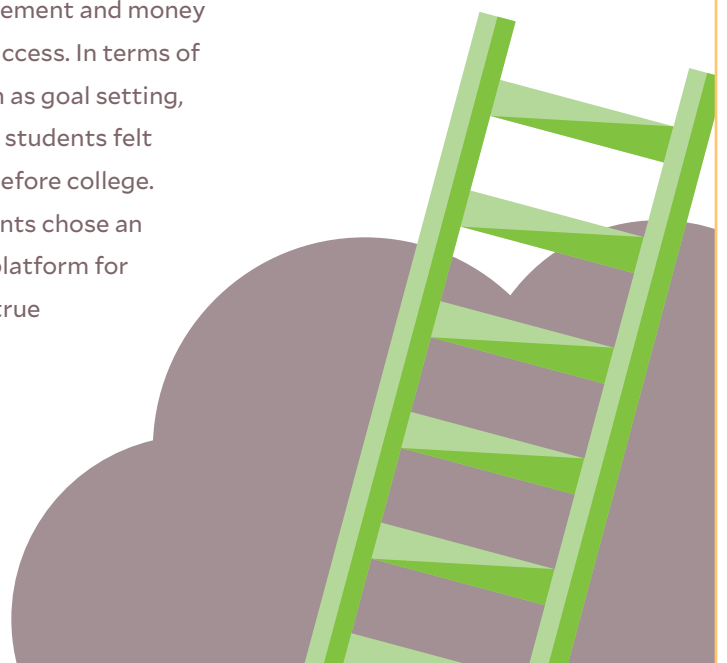
1. Determine how students define success in their lives.
2. Understand the obstacles these students had to overcome to lead a successful life.
3. Identify the skills students feel best prepared them for the future.

This paper, part three of three, reviews student input about skills they feel best prepared them for the future.

We analyzed overall results as well as cross-tabulations by student age, highest level of education, time passed since last college course, full-time versus part-time status, historically black college or university (HBCU) status, gender, and first-generation (FGC) student status.

To qualify for this survey, respondents had to be former college students who completed a college course within the past five years. The resulting dataset includes a total of 1,237 complete responses. Significance testing is calculated at the 95 percent confidence level.

Our overall goal in conducting this research was to offer insight into how institutions can strengthen the effectiveness of their student success initiatives. In their responses, students indicated goal setting, independent learning, time management and money management were top enablers of their success. In terms of skills that support long-term success, such as goal setting, money management, and problem solving, students felt they should be exposed to these abilities before college. Additionally, a significant fraction of students chose an online resource/smart app as a preferred platform for developing soft skills. This was especially true of recent graduates.

Introduction

Interest in defining, tracking and encouraging student success has grown with the increasing scrutiny placed on the value proposition of higher education. Regular increases in tuition, which has risen, on average, more than 5 percent each year over the past decade, have easily surpassed inflation[1]. The resulting stress on students and their families has encouraged efforts to appraise the value of the postsecondary experience in the context of gainful employment. In this light, metrics such as income have become a common point of focus. This has further linked the college experience to vocational achievements. Similarly, the rapid growth of student debt which, at $1.4 trillion, now exceeds car loans and credit card balances[2], has prompted regulation and other intervention aimed at moderating debt and reducing student loan delinquency and default.

As a result, a perceived failure to deliver value to current and former students can create severe financial repercussions for schools. For example, the federal government monitors cohort default rates, denying colleges access to federal funds if they exceed established limits. Other metrics tracked include completion rates and whether former students are reducing their loan principal. Collectively, these indicators are frequently marketed to the public as valid measures of an institution's ability to foster success for students.

However, while this analysis may be informative about the progression of students through college and their financial condition after leaving, it does not directly describe the priorities college students themselves hold. By understanding which skills and resources correlate with successful postsecondary outcomes for students, schools can add value to the student experience by complementing their academic offerings with efficient and effective student success programs and resources.

[1] http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-forgive-at-least-108-billion-in-student-debt-in-coming-years-1480501802

[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/19/business/dealbook/navient-loans-lawsuit.html

Resources Students Value

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING HAS CONTRIBUTED THE MOST TOWARD YOUR SUCCESS?

Value	Category
2.60	Goal Setting
3.15	Independent Learning
3.27	Time Management
3.62	Money Management
4.16	Mentoring/Coaching
4.35	Networking
6.85	Other

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8
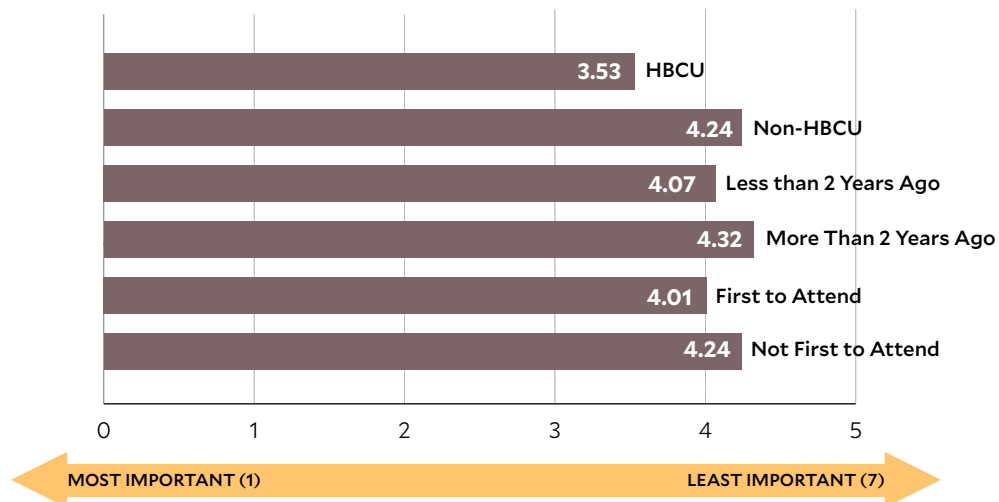
MOST IMPORTANT (1)   **LEAST IMPORTANT (7)**
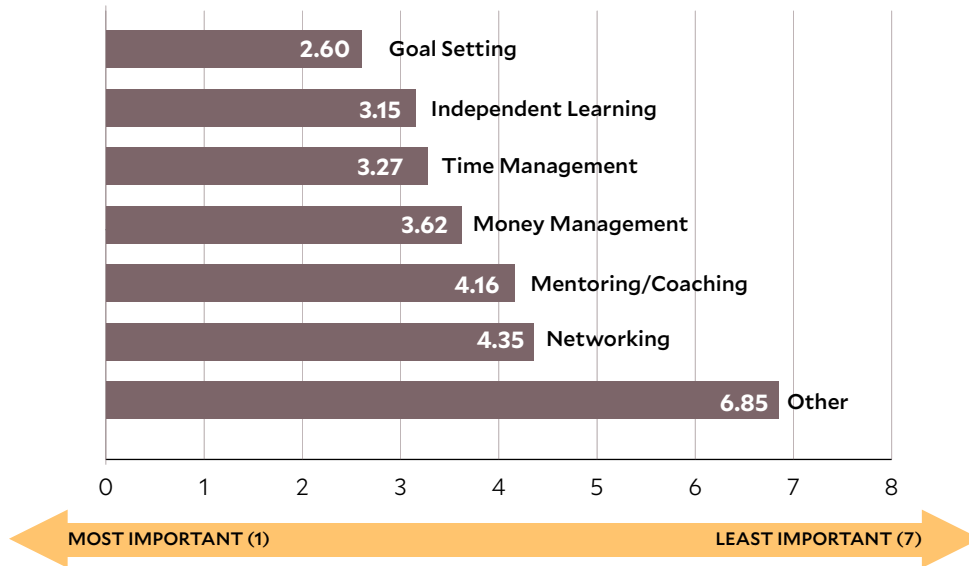
All student groups agreed that setting goals contributed the most toward their success. Independent learning and time management were also important. These findings are relevant when considering m-learning approaches to empowering students with key nonacademic skills (see conclusions section).

Although networking emerged as the least important tool for success, such opportunities tend to grow with time and as careers develop. In addition, while students prefer to acquire nonacademic skills before college, nearly half indicated college was the best time to acquire the networking skill (see page 12).

Comparative importance of mentoring/coaching among different student groups

3.53	HBCU
4.24	Non-HBCU
4.07	Less than 2 Years Ago
4.32	More Than 2 Years Ago
4.01	First to Attend
4.24	Not First to Attend

MOST IMPORTANT (1)   LEAST IMPORTANT (7)

Students who graduated recently leaned on mentors/coaches significantly more than students who had been out of school for longer periods of time, suggesting a growing importance of this role. HBCU and first-generation students also ranked this factor higher than their peers.

Comparative importance of networking among different student groups

4.07	HBCU
4.38	Non-HBCU
4.18	First to Attend
4.43	Not First to Attend
4.29	Full-time
4.45	Part-time

MOST IMPORTANT (1)   LEAST IMPORTANT (7)
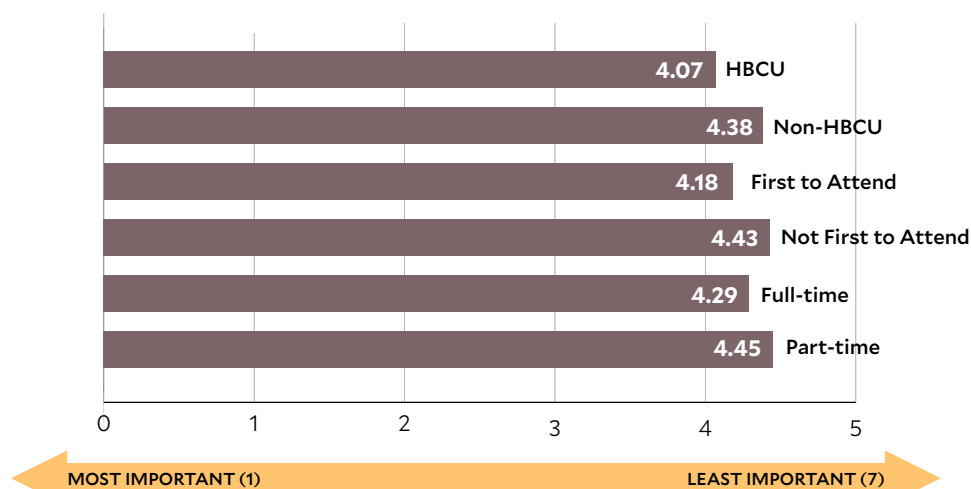
HBCU, first-generation, and full-time students were more likely to say that networking had played a role in their success.

Which resource most helped to overcome the barriers to your success?

Other

17%

Personal determination (good planning, focus, goal setting)

38%

21%

Family guidance and support

24%

Financial aid (grants, scholarships, student loans)
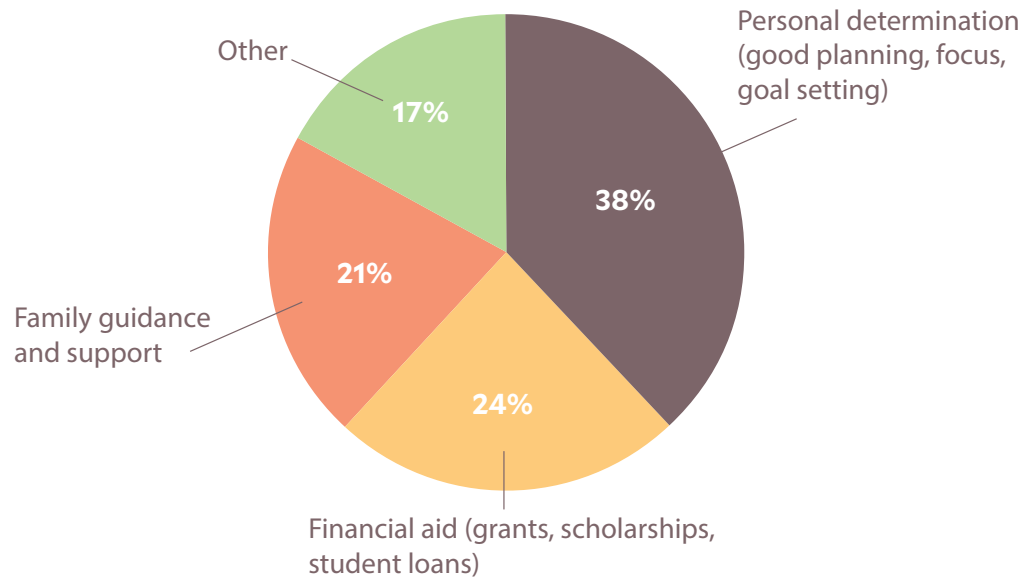
Overall, students point to three key resources they relied on to become successful: personal determination (defined as good planning, focus, and goal setting); financial aid; and family guidance and support. Seventeen percent selected other resources (choices included money management, school career counseling, school peer mentoring, school tutoring, transportation aid and "other").

Comparative importance of personal determination among different student groups
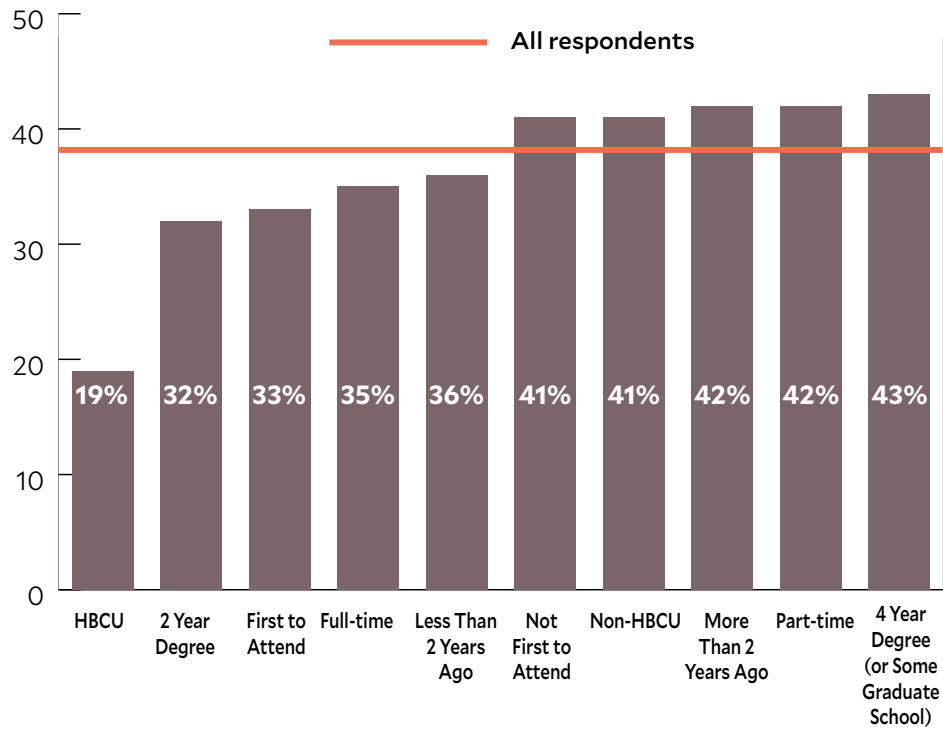
Personal determination was less a factor in overcoming barriers for first-generation, two-year, and HBCU students.

Comparative importance of financial aid among different student groups

Legend: ▬ All Respondents

Bar chart values:
- Graduate Degree: 16%
- Male: 19%
- 4 Year Degree (or Some Graduate School): 22%
- Female: 27%
- 2 Year Degree: 29%
- Some College: 29%
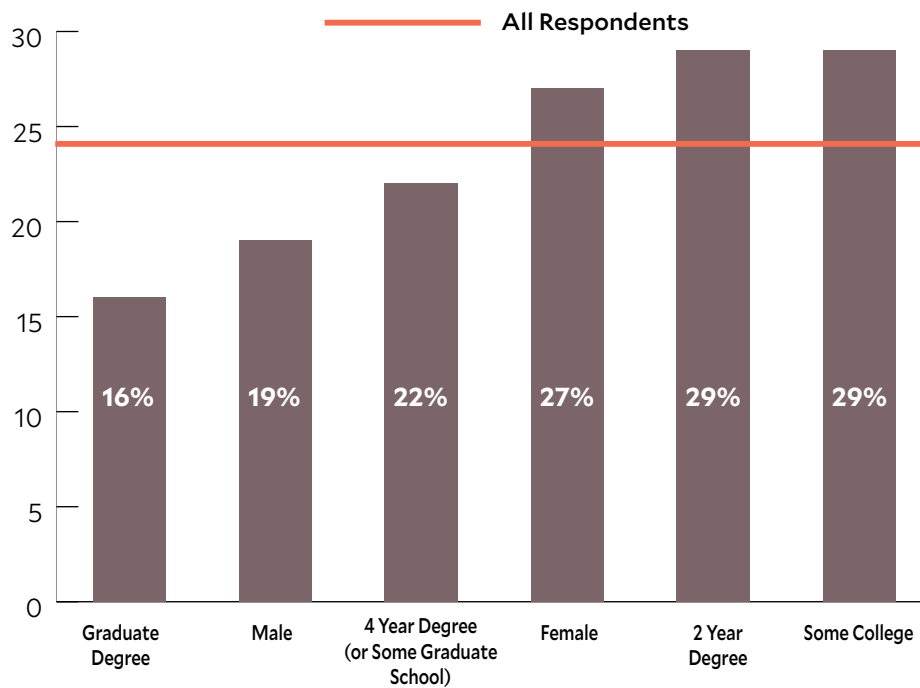
Financial aid played a bigger role in overcoming obstacles for two-year students and students who did not complete their studies compared to those with graduate or four-year degrees. This could be another indication that greater money management skills are important to college retention and completion.

WHICH RESOURCE MOST HELPED TO OVERCOME THE BARRIERS TO YOUR SUCCESS?

Comparative importance of family support among different student groups
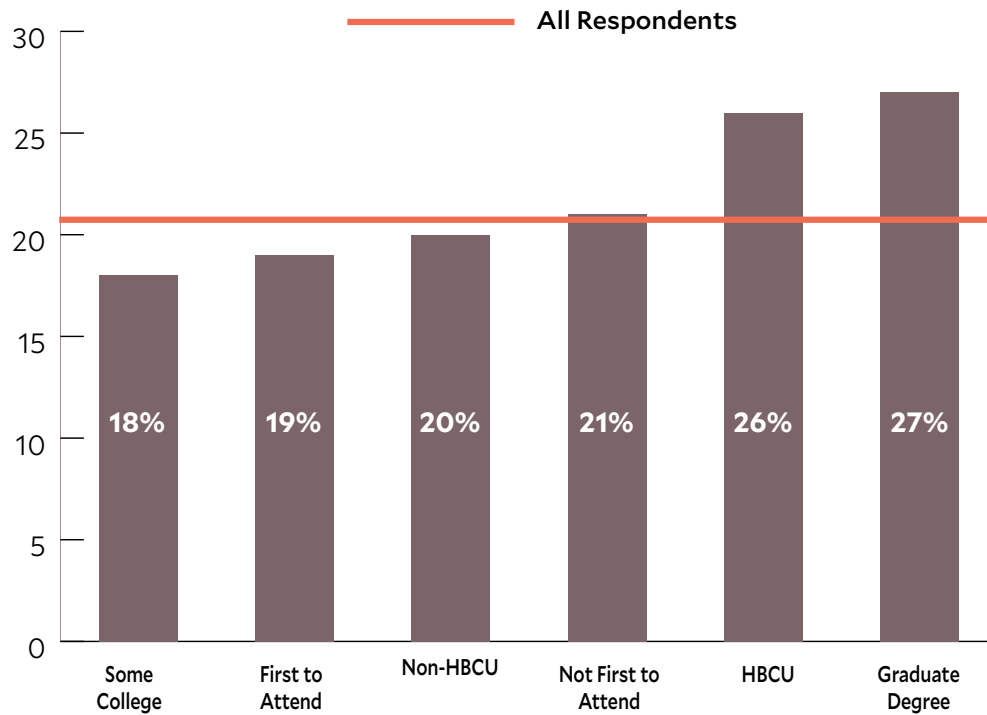
There was a notable contrast in the importance of family guidance and support between students who completed a graduate degree and students who did not complete any degree. First-generation students were less likely to report family support as a factor in overcoming barriers to success, while HBCU students were more likely to do so.

Money management and career counseling are increasing in importance

Money Management Education	School Career Counseling

Legend:
- More Than 2 Years Ago
- Not First to Attend
- Less Than 2 Years Ago
- First to Attend
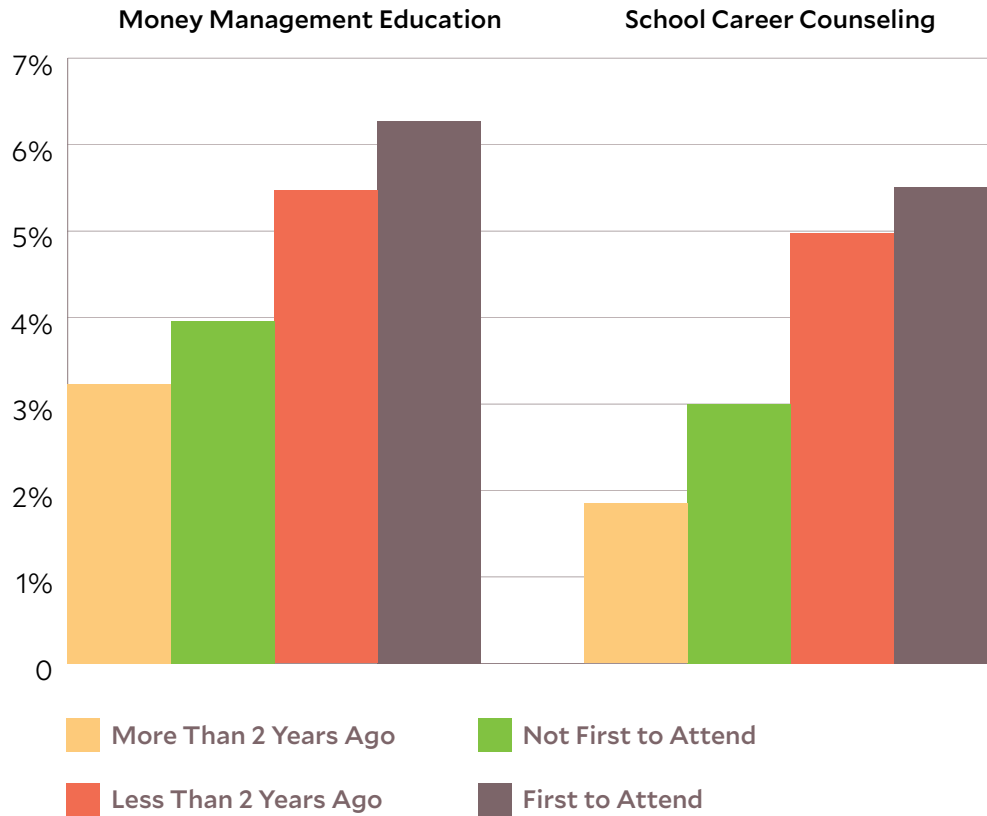
Money management education and school career counselling were ranked noticeably higher among recent graduates. First-generation students also valued these resources more than students whose family members have attended college.

What are the most important skills a student should obtain in school that will impact their long-term success?

Skill	Percentage
Critical Thinking/Problem Solving	58%
Goal Setting & Achievement	51%
Organizational Skills	40%
Money Management	34%
Career Planning	28%
Networking	24%
Public Speaking	21%
Writing	18%
Other	1%

More than half of former students believe that critical thinking/problem-solving skills and goal setting/achievement are critical for long-term success and should be acquired in school. More than one-third included organizational skills and money management in their responses.

Goal setting/achievement

All Respondents

Some College	57%
2 Year Degree	52%
4 Year Degree (or Some Graduate School)	51%
Graduate Degree	45%

Money Management

All Respondents

Some College	39%
Under 30	39%
2 Year Degree	38%
4 Year Degree (or Some Graduate School)	32%
Over 30	29%
Graduate Degree	29%

Students who had advanced less in their postsecondary education tended to think goal setting and money management were important to success and should be obtained in high school or college, indicating that schools can encourage college retention and completion by ensuring students have access to resources that develop skills like financial literacy and time management. Money management was also more important to younger students.

When is the best time for students to be exposed to these skills?

Exposure to skills in an educational setting

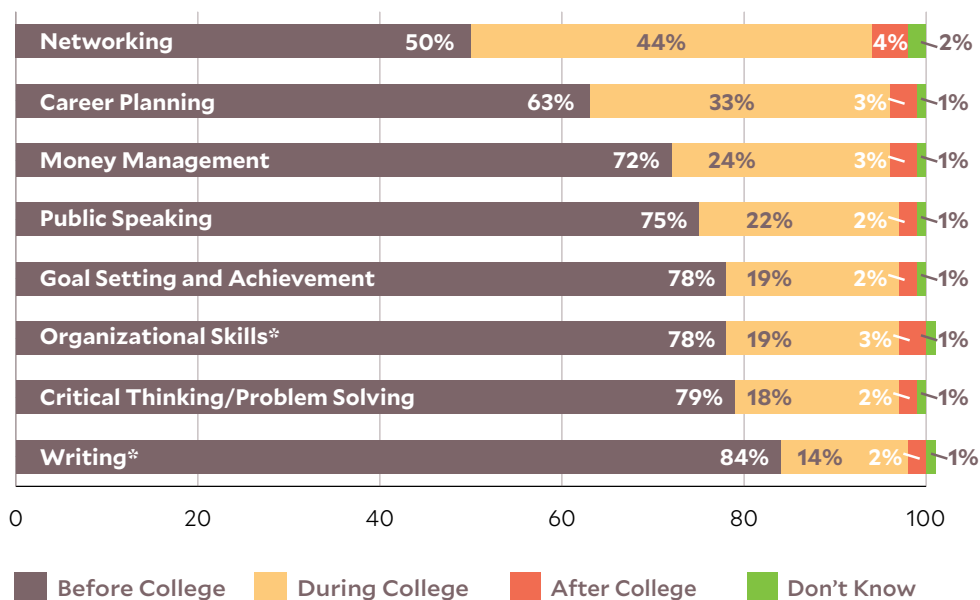| Skill	Before College	During College	After College	Don't Know
Networking	50%	44%	4%	2%
Career Planning	63%	33%	3%	1%
Money Management	72%	24%	3%	1%
Public Speaking	75%	22%	2%	1%
Goal Setting and Achievement	78%	19%	2%	1%
Organizational Skills*	78%	19%	3%	1%
Critical Thinking/Problem Solving	79%	18%	2%	1%
Writing*	84%	14%	2%	1%

■ Before College   ■ During College   ■ After College   ■ Don't Know

*Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Most students believe skills that affect their long-term success should be taught prior to college. The earlier students can learn the skills, the better off they will be, according to respondents. For example, 72 percent said the best time to learn money management was before college; this contrasts sharply with the National Financial Wellness Study, which found that almost 70 percent of students have not attended personal finance classes or workshops in high school and 77 percent have not done so in college[3].

3 http://cfw.osu.edu/posts/documents/nsfws-national-descriptive-report.pdf

Which of the following soft skills are most important to achieve success?

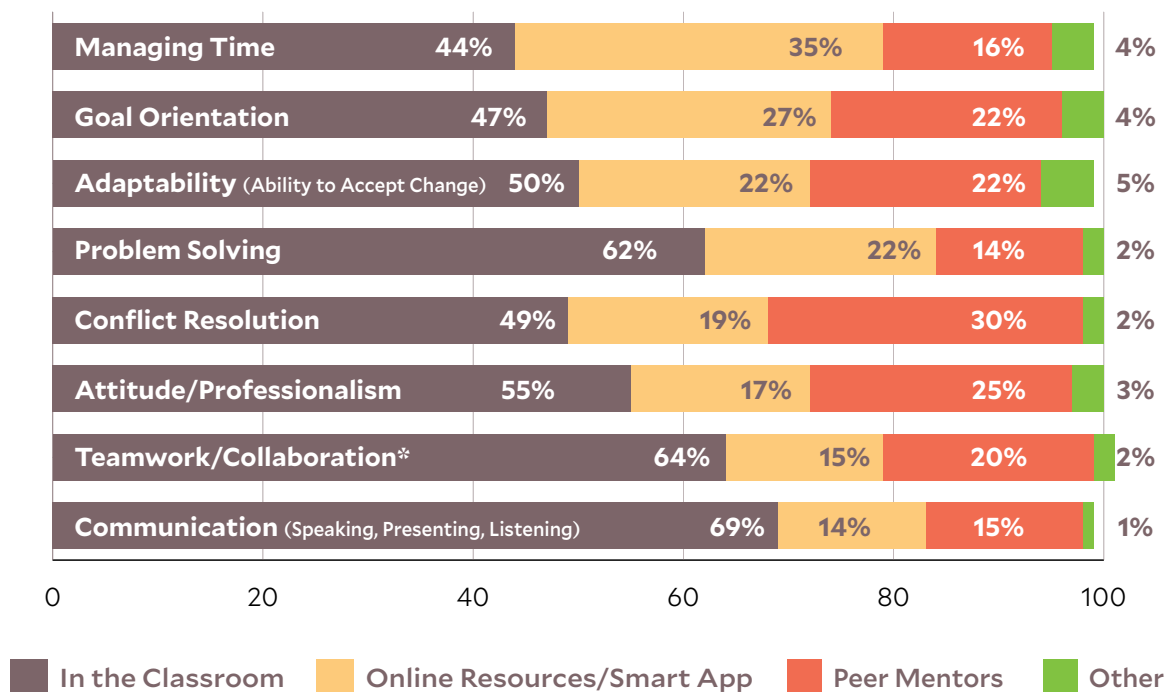| Soft Skill	Percentage
Attitude/Professionalism	45%
Communication (Speaking, Presenting, Listening)	40%
Adaptability (Ability to Accept Change)	40%
Managing Time	37%
Problem Solving	36%
Goal Orientation	34%
Teamwork/Collaboration	20%
Conflict Resolution	11%
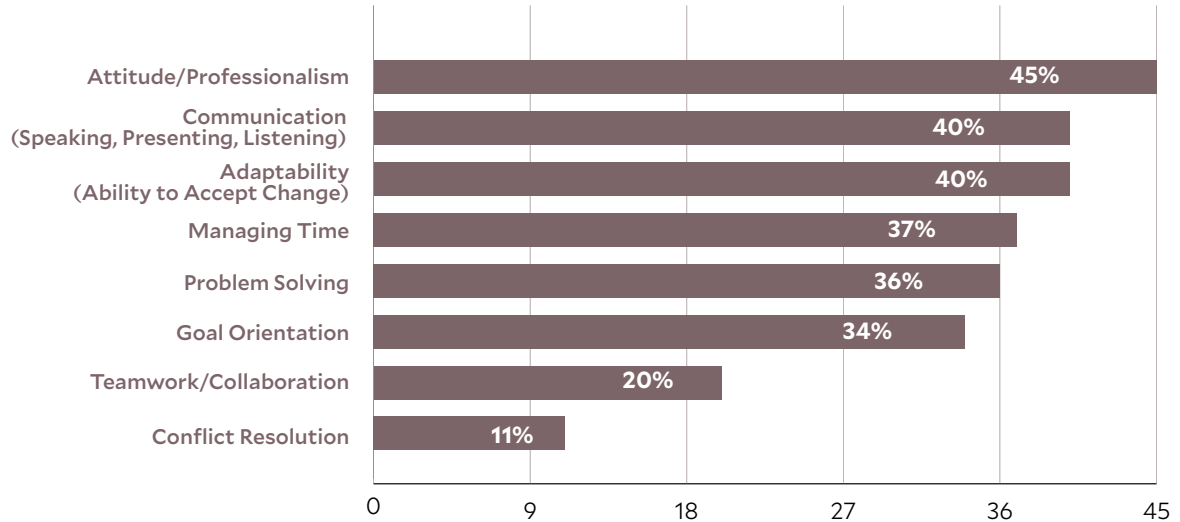
Developing a sense of attitude/professionalism was viewed as the top soft skill students can acquire. Respondents valued effective "soft" communication skills despite the low ratings given earlier to "hard" skills, such as writing. They did not feel conflict resolution is a soft skill necessary for success.

How do you think students should be exposed to these soft skills in an educational setting?

Respondents were more partial to learning soft skills in the classroom; however, many indicate that current students should build these skills with online or app-based resources -- in particular, for time management and goal orientation. In several cases, an online/app-based resource was valued as much as or more than peer mentoring. An online/app-based platform was the preferred choice for HBCU respondents for acquiring skills in goal orientation, adaptability and attitude/professionalism. It was also the top method for part-time students for learning to manage time.

Exposure to soft skills in an educational setting

	In the Classroom	Online Resources/Smart App	Peer Mentors	Other
Managing Time	44%	35%	16%	4%
Goal Orientation	47%	27%	22%	4%
Adaptability (Ability to Accept Change)	50%	22%	22%	5%
Problem Solving	62%	22%	14%	2%
Conflict Resolution	49%	19%	30%	2%
Attitude/Professionalism	55%	17%	25%	3%
Teamwork/Collaboration*	64%	15%	20%	2%
Communication (Speaking, Presenting, Listening)	69%	14%	15%	1%

*Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Recent graduates were more likely to favor online or mobile platforms for learning important soft skills. The chart below shows the disparity between students who graduated less than two years ago vs. more than two years ago. The percentages indicate responses that selected online resources or smart apps over classroom, peer mentoring and "other."

How do you think students should be exposed to these soft skills in an educational setting?

Skill	Less Than 2 Years Ago	More Than 2 Years Ago
Communication (Speaking, Presenting, Listening)	17%	9%
Teamwork/Collaboration	17%	10%
Attitude/Professionalism	20%	11%
Conflict Resolution	23%	11%
Problem Solving	24%	18%
Adaptability (Ability to Accept change)	25%	18%
Goal Orientation	30%	23%
Managing Time	38%	31%

Less Than 2 Years Ago   More Than 2 Years Ago
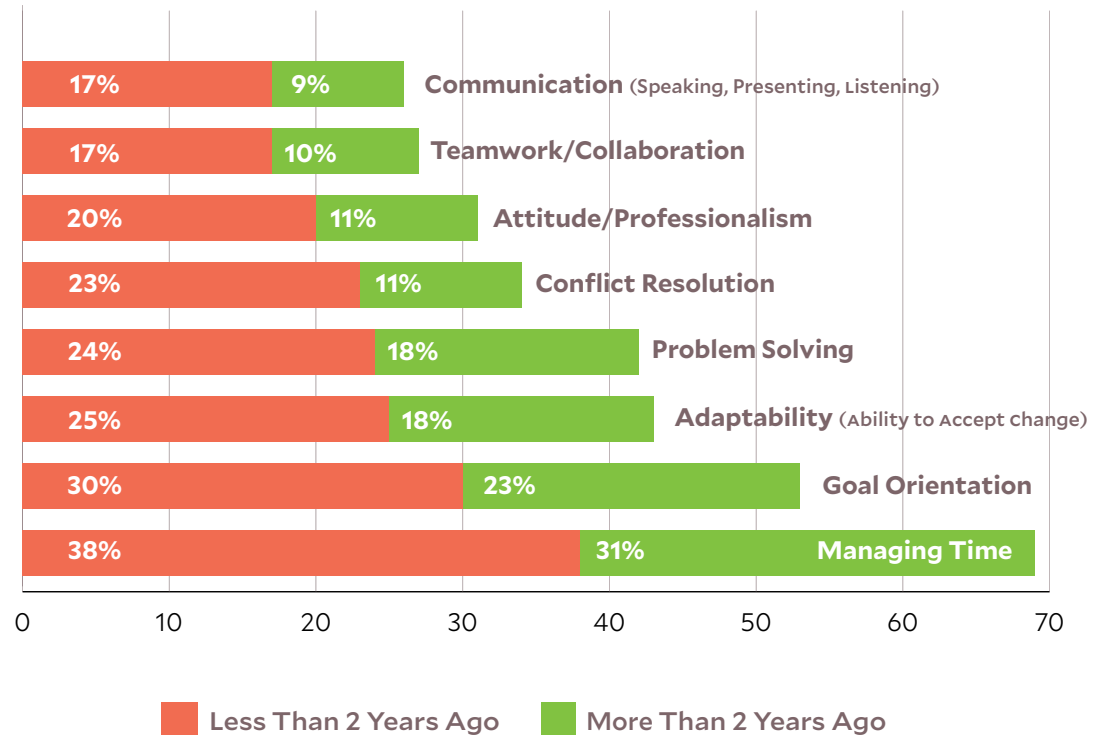
Conclusions

Former students say that setting goals, independent learning, and money and time management are the most important ways they can set themselves up for a successful future. Goal setting and time and money management clearly correlate with the main challenges students identified in this study (see part two), including financial stresses and balancing the demands of school with external obligations such as employment. While institutions may not be able to change the fact that higher education places heavy demands on students' time and finances, these results confirm that institutions can support student success by investing in resources that develop financial literacy and time management skills.

Independent learning's importance to student success has substantial implications for the "on demand" advantages of m-learning platforms. Available when and where it is convenient for students, an m-learning approach is an obvious way institutions can offer students an independent-learning option for acquiring and improving key nonacademic skills. In fact, although students continue to value the traditional classroom forum, our survey reveals that students are increasingly open to online/app-based resources, especially for building skills like time management and goal orientation, skills tied to the top success factors students identified in this survey. The increasing momentum of this trend is confirmed by the responses of recent graduates, who were more likely to favor online or app-based methods to build competency in nonacademic skills. This marks a clear opportunity for institutions that do not find it practical to address nonacademic skills gaps through classroom or other face-to-face intervention. Instead, they can pair subjects like financial literacy and time management with flexible learning platforms, such as app- or web-based solutions, to empower students with key practical skills within the independent learning environment they value.

In terms of timing, students generally want to learn important nonacademic skills like financial literacy before college. Too often, however, their educational experience does not fulfill this expectation. This presents postsecondary institutions with a significant opportunity to meet a critical need and add new value to higher education. At the same time, our research shows that substantial numbers of students do regard college as the ideal time to learn certain nonacademic skills in college, especially networking, career planning and goal setting. Even when it comes to resources that help build money management skills, something students generally feel should be available before college, one quarter of our respondents felt college was the best time to be exposed to this skill. Regardless, respondents generally felt that the earlier students can learn these skills, the better off they will be. Institutions should take this into account when planning orientation and other programming that supports student success.

The survey reconfirms the importance of financial literacy as a factor in completion. Students who did not complete college were most likely to indicate that money management was an important skill that should be obtained during school (preferably prior to college), while those who completed graduate degrees were least likely to do so. The perceived impact of this skill also skewed toward younger students, indicating a growing awareness of the value of this skill. By offering financial literacy resources, schools can positively affect the tangible outcomes of retention and completion as well as student satisfaction.

HBCU students placed much more importance on mentoring/coaching and networking opportunities than non-HBCU students, which is reflected in HBCU students' tendency to report that a lack of encouragement was a threat to their success (see part two of this series). The survey revealed similar splits between first-generation students and those from families with previous college experience.

Similar contrasts are evident in how different segments of students weighted the importance of personal determination. This is a reminder that institutions can increase the positive impact of the resources they offer by ensuring that content and availability is matched appropriately to varying student circumstances. For example, since HBCU and first-generation students were less likely to indicate that good planning, focus, and goal setting had helped them overcome barriers to success (page six), institutions should consider ensuring that all students have had the opportunity to build these aptitudes.

Regardless of the supplementary, nonacademic curricula an institution determines is best for its student population, online or app-based solutions offer clear advantages. Properly configured, affordable content can be delivered in a way that is most compatible to students' chaotic schedules, offering them an independent yet interactive learning experience at the times most convenient for them. The dynamic advantage of digital resources also offers greater customization and adaptability, allowing institutions to be more responsive to the evolving needs of students and proactive about the latest challenges and opportunities. By maximizing the value created for students, postsecondary schools can help minimize the revenue losses of lost tuition and the expenses of attrition-driven recruitment.

Given the demographic trends our research has identified, while different students may continue to encounter different obstacles and expect different resources, more of them will expect this "virtual" approach to support them in the future. At the same time, the digital nature of this approach will allow schools to collect usage data, continually refining the student experience so that it remains relevant and effective across a range of student experiences. In effect, as students learn, institutions should be learning more than ever from students – including how today's and tomorrow's students define success.

Student Connections, a Strada Education Network company, is a nonprofit corporation passionate about helping students overcome the barriers that can get in the way of attending college, completing their programs of study and achieving success while in school and after graduation.

STUDENT CONNECTIONS℠