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Stressed Out and Stopping Out: The Mental Health Crisis in Higher Education

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Introduction

Researchers have long warned of a growing mental health crisis on U.S. college campuses, with students increasingly likely to report problems with depression and anxiety¹ and demand for campus counseling services rising past the capacity of many schools to keep up with it.² The situation was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic,³ which isolated students at a time when social relationships are particularly important to their ability to manage the stress of college life.⁴

However, results from the Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education 2022 study show that even with pandemic-era restrictions lifted and concerns about COVID-19 receding, students in associate or bachelor's degree programs were no less likely in 2022 than they were in 2021 to have considered stopping their coursework prior to completion. "Emotional stress" remains by far their most commonly cited reason for thinking of stopping out. *Stressed Out and Stopping Out: The Mental Health Crisis in Higher Education* draws on data collected in the fall of 2022 for the Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education 2023 report.

- 1 Colarossi, J. (2022, April 21). Mental health of college students is getting worse. The Brink. <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2022/mental-health-of-college-students-is-getting-worse/>
- 2 Thielking, M. (2017, February 6). A dangerous wait: Colleges can't meet soaring student needs for mental health care. Stat. <https://www.statnews.com/2017/02/06/mental-health-college-students/>
- 3 Elharake, J.A., Akbar, F., Malik, A.A., Gilliam, W., & Omer, S.B. (2022). Mental health impact of COVID-19 among children and college students: A systematic review. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-021-01297-1>
- 4 Lumpkin, L. (2021, March 30). A mental health crisis was spreading on college campuses. The pandemic has made it worse. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/03/30/college-students-mental-health-pandemic/>

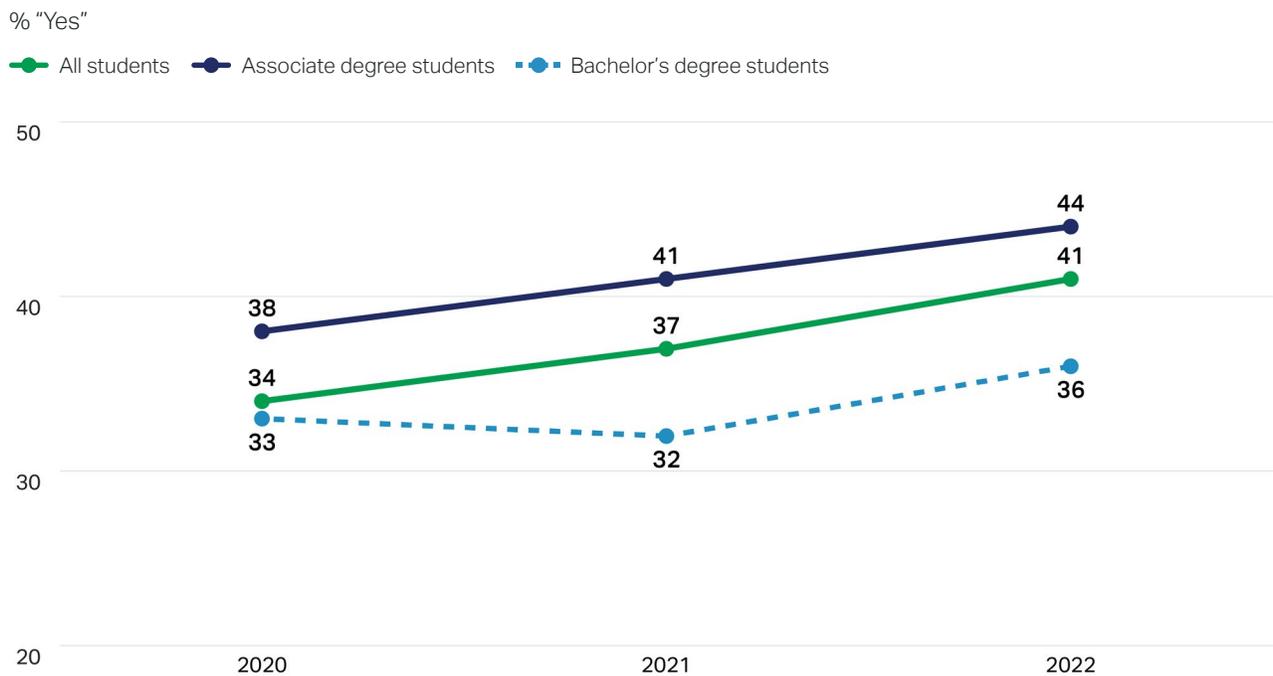


Findings

Forty-one percent of students currently enrolled in a postsecondary education program, including 36% of bachelor's students and 44% of associate degree students, say they have considered "stopping out" in the past six months. For each group, the current figures represent a slight rise from those seen in 2020 and 2021.

FIGURE 1

In the past six months, have you considered stopping your coursework (that is, withdrawing from the program for at least one term)?



Note: "All students" reported in this chart includes students pursuing an associate degree, bachelor's degree, certificate or certification. Results for certificate or certification students not shown.

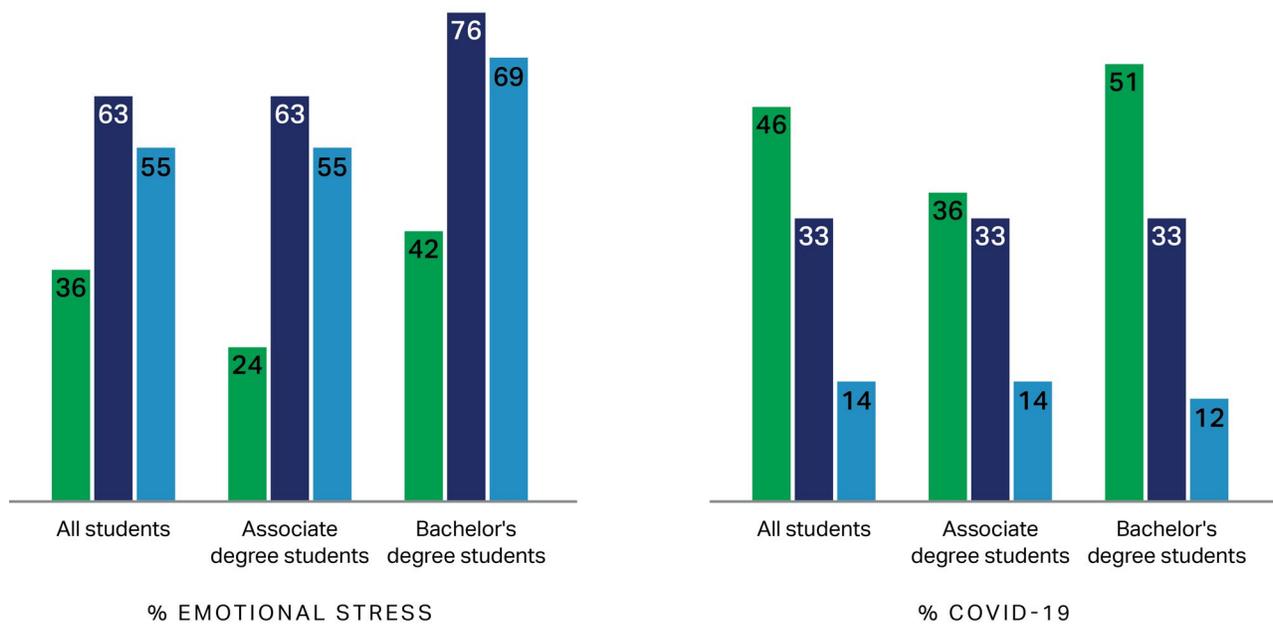
Among students who had considered stopping out, emotional stress surged dramatically as a reason between the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021. However, though COVID-19 has now fallen sharply as a reason for stopping out, there has only been a modest decrease in students' likelihood to cite emotional stress as the reason they have considered stopping their coursework. Among students who have considered stopping out, 55% give emotional stress as a reason, including nearly seven in 10 bachelor's students (69%).

FIGURE 2

Which of the following describes why you considered stopping your coursework?

Results among students who say they have considered stopping out in the past six months

■ 2020 ■ 2021 ■ 2022



Note: "All students" reported in this chart includes students pursuing an associate degree, bachelor's degree, certificate or certification. Results for certificate or certification students not shown.

When asked what emotional stress means to them, many students said that coursework can be overwhelming, particularly if combined with work and caregiving responsibilities or issues in their personal relationships. Some mentioned depression and anxiety specifically. Others said concerns about the ability to pay for college brought on emotional stress.

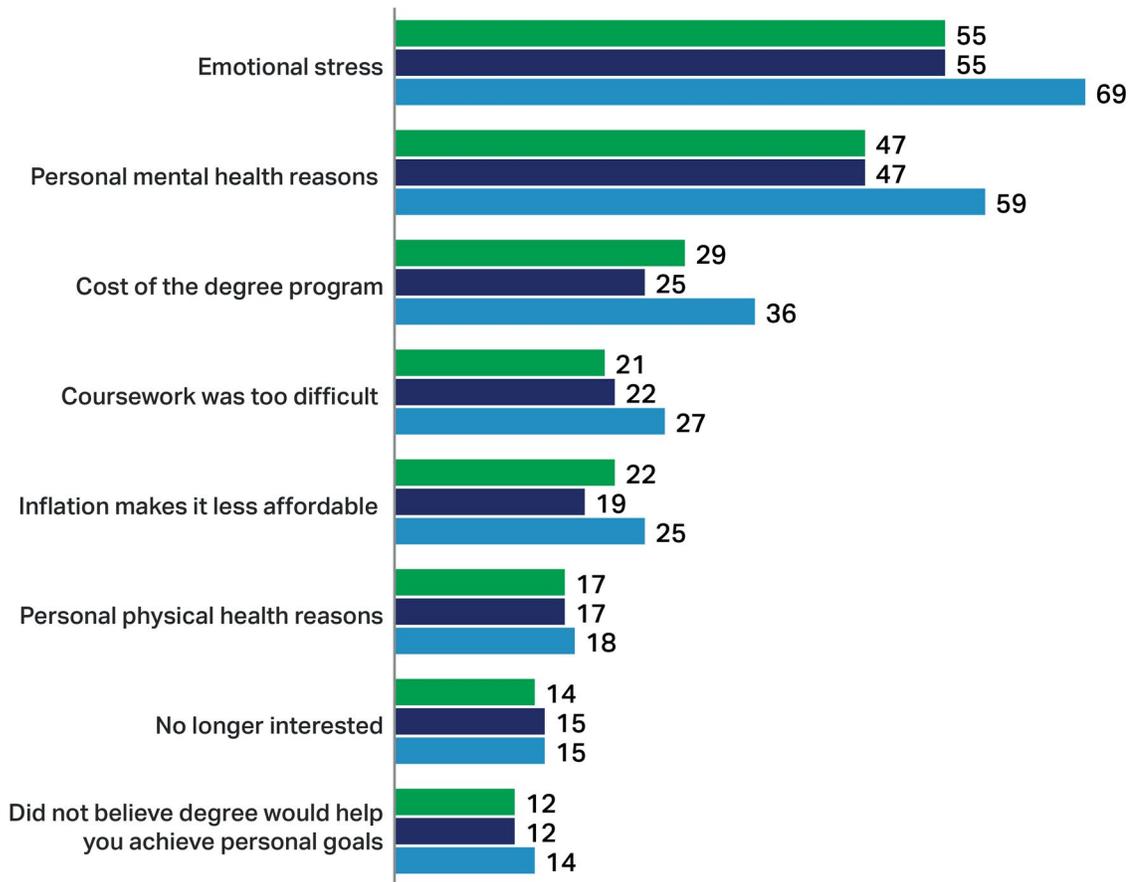
For the first time, the Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education 2022 study also included “personal mental health reasons” as a possible reason why students considered stopping their coursework. The item was second only to emotional stress, with 47% of students, including 59% of bachelor’s degree students, citing it. Both reasons far exceeded the next most commonly selected reasons, including program cost and difficulty of coursework.⁵

FIGURE 3

Which of the following describes why you considered stopping your coursework?

% Most commonly cited reasons among students who say they have considered stopping out in the past six months

■ All students ■ Associate degree students ■ Bachelor’s degree students



Note: “All students” reported in this chart includes students pursuing an associate degree, bachelor’s degree, certificate or certification. Results for certificate or certification students not shown.

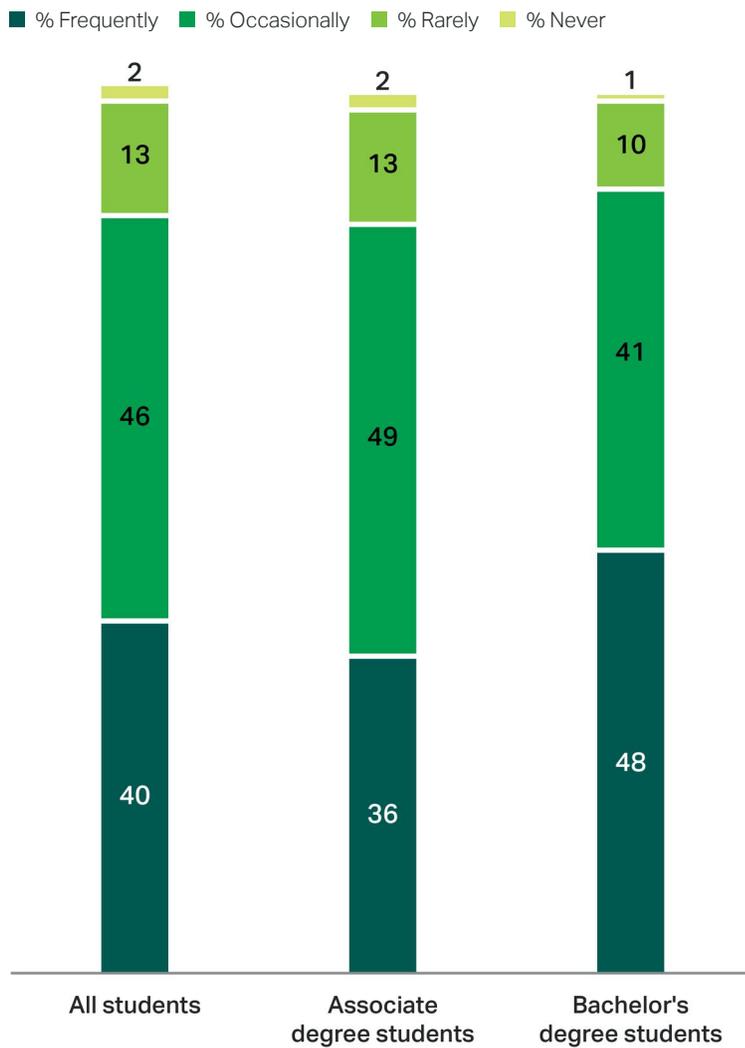
⁵ There is overlap in students who chose “emotional stress” and “personal mental health reasons” as reasons they considered stopping their coursework — about half who chose one also chose the other. Overall, 35% of students cited both reasons, 20% cited emotional stress only, 12% cited personal mental health reasons only and 33% did not cite either as a reason.

Almost half of bachelor's students "frequently" experience emotional stress

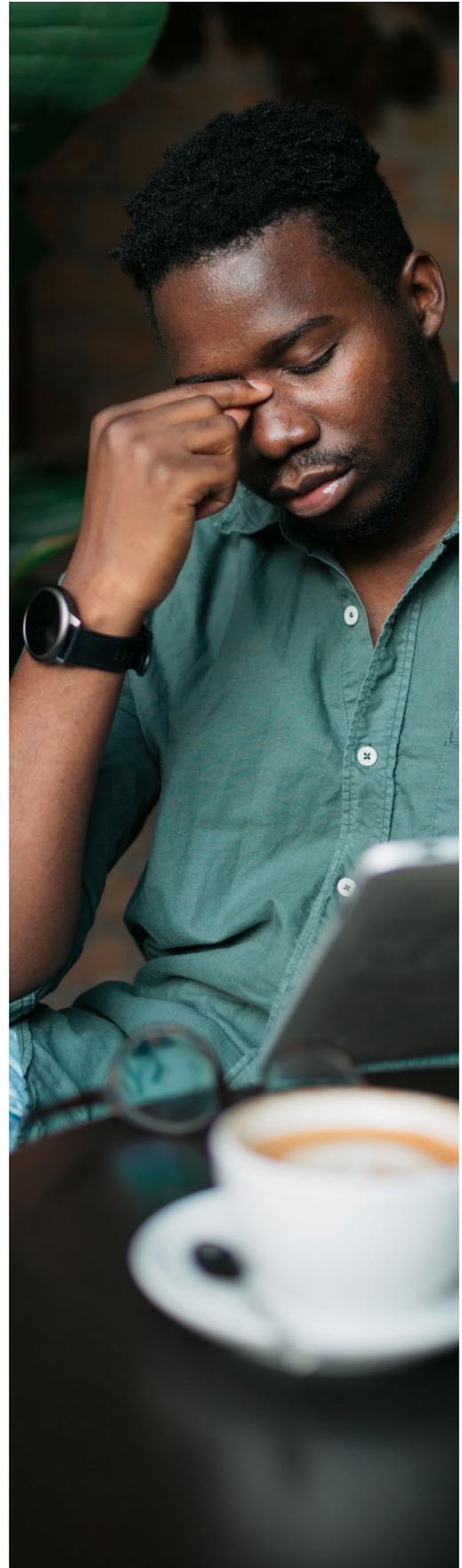
Forty percent of all students say they frequently experience emotional stress while attending college, and 46% say they do so occasionally. Almost half of bachelor's students (48%) say they feel such stress "frequently," as do more than one-third of associate degree students (36%).

FIGURE 4

How often do you experience emotional stress while attending college?

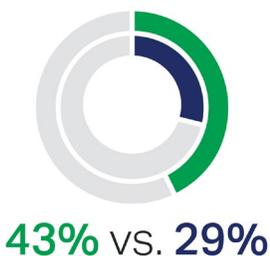
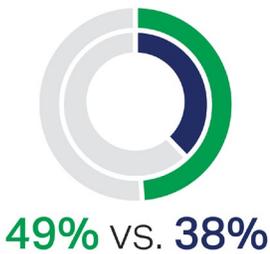


Note: "All students" reported in this chart includes students pursuing an associate degree, bachelor's degree, certificate or certification. Results for certificate or certification students not shown.



As might be expected, reports of emotional stress are substantially higher among students who have considered stopping their coursework (53% say they experience emotional stress frequently) and those who have considered quitting school *because* of personal mental health reasons (67%) or emotional stress (64%).

Female students and those from low-income households are most likely to say they frequently experience emotional stress.



Gender

Among the most evident differences in those who experience emotional stress is the gap between female and male students. **Close to half of female students (47%) say they frequently experience emotional stress, compared with 30% of male students.** This finding is consistent with other recent studies showing gender gaps in mental health incidence among young people.^{6,7} Whether women are more likely to experience emotional stress than men, or are just more likely to acknowledge it, is unclear.

Socioeconomic background

About half of students (49%, including 66% of bachelor's students) who say their family was poor and often struggled to pay monthly bills say they frequently experience emotional stress. In contrast, 38% of students from more financially secure socioeconomic groups say they feel emotional stress that often.

Race and ethnicity

Non-Hispanic white students are most likely to say they frequently experience emotional stress in their programs, at 44%, followed by Hispanic (38%), Black (31%) and Asian (30%) students. However, between 80% and 87% of students of each racial and ethnic group say they feel stressed at least occasionally. Perceived stigma, and differences in the way racial and ethnic groups define and recognize mental health challenges, may disproportionately influence the willingness of students from some racial/ethnic groups to be open about mental health struggles. Prior studies have shown that Black and Asian students who experience mental health issues are less likely than white students to discuss or seek treatment for such issues.^{8,9}

Age

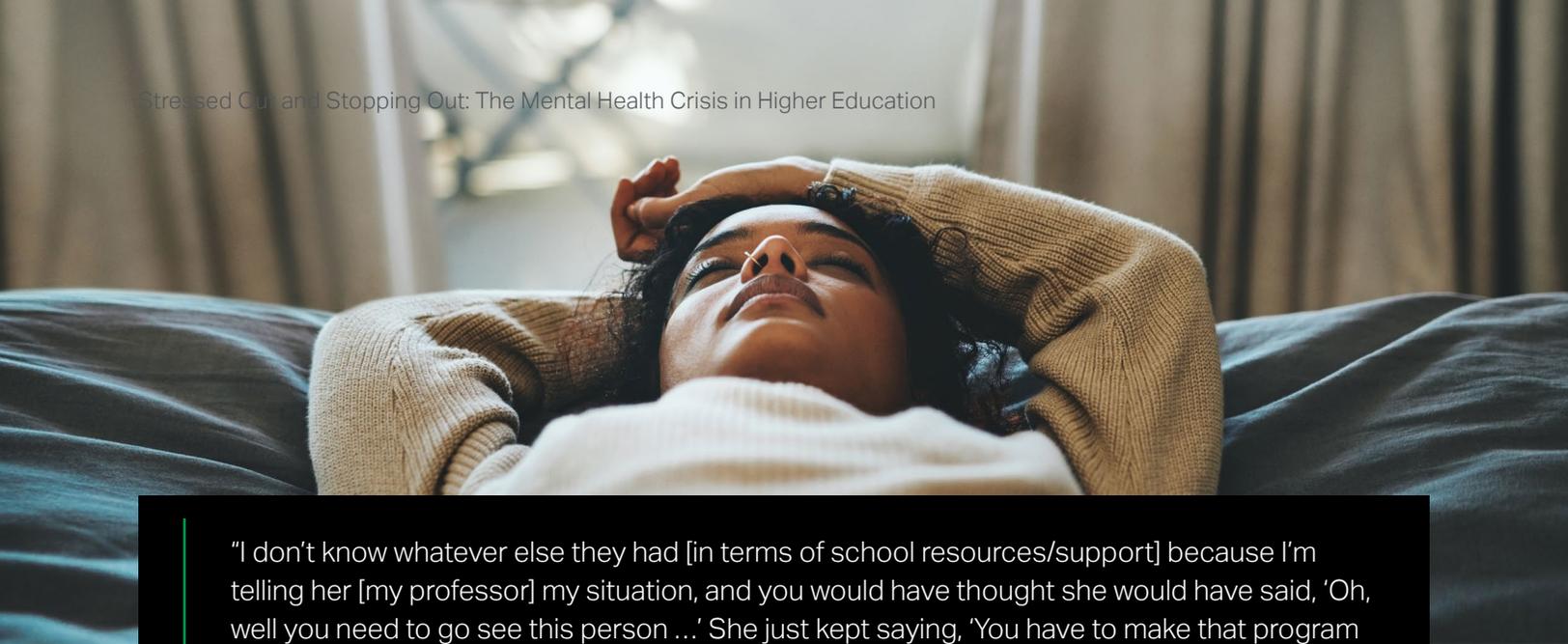
Younger students, defined as those of the traditional college ages of 18 to 24, are much more likely to indicate they are frequently stressed, with 43% saying they experience stress this often, compared with 29% of students aged 25 and older. As is the case for men and women and people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, younger students may have a different orientation to mental health struggles than older students do.

6 Geiger, A.W. & Davis, L. (2019, July 12). A growing number of American teenagers — particularly girls — are facing depression. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/12/a-growing-number-of-american-teenagers-particularly-girls-are-facing-depression/>

7 Fink, S. (2021, March 29). 5 tips to improve women's mental health in college. TimelyMD. <https://timely.md/blog/womens-mental-health-in-college/>

8 Younghans, J. (2018, September 10). College stress: Study finds 1 in 5 students surveyed reported thoughts of suicide in last year. Harvard Medical School. <https://hms.harvard.edu/news/college-stress>

9 Russell, T. (2021, June 17). What to know about depression in Black college students. PsychCentral. <https://psychcentral.com/depression/what-to-know-about-depression-in-black-college-students>



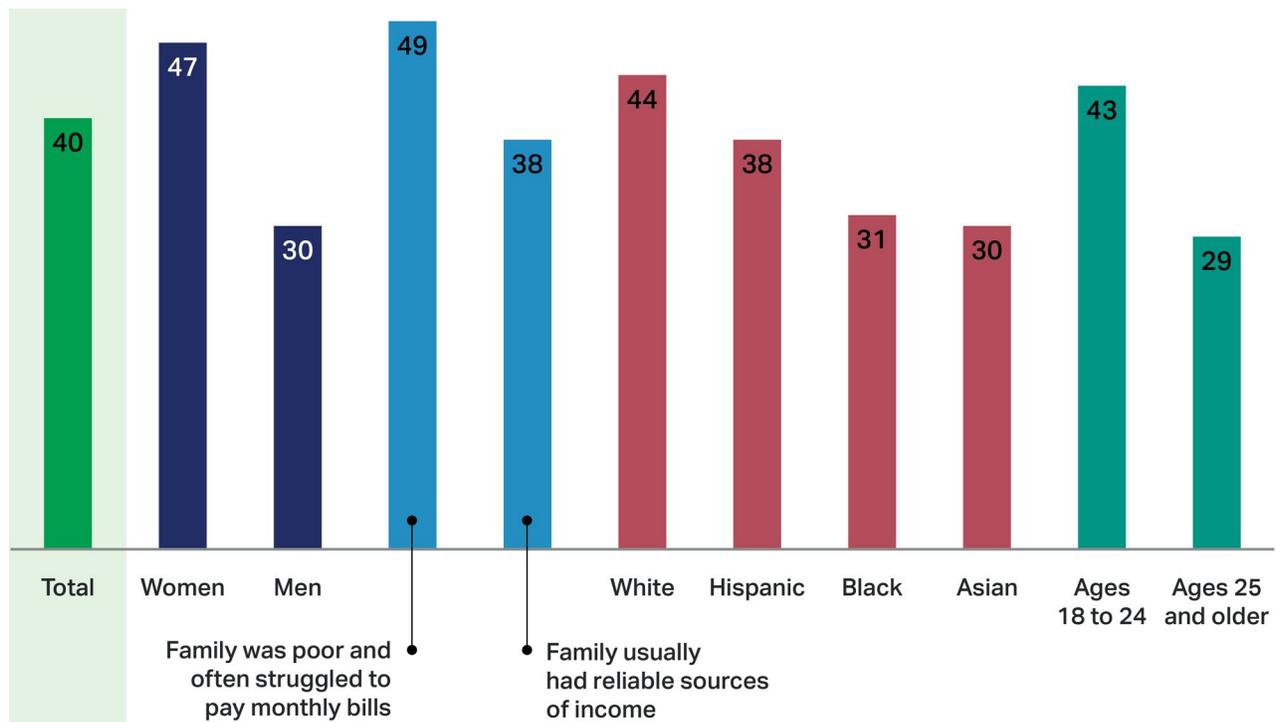
"I don't know whatever else they had [in terms of school resources/support] because I'm telling her [my professor] my situation, and you would have thought she would have said, 'Oh, well you need to go see this person ...' She just kept saying, 'You have to make that program work in order to get your degree.' She just kept saying that. And, 'I can't help you with that.'"

— **Brenda J., Black woman, 45-59**

FIGURE 5

How often do you experience emotional stress while attending college — frequently, occasionally, rarely or never?

% "Frequently" among postsecondary students



Frequent stress less common among bachelor's students with positive on-campus relationships

Bachelor's students are more likely than other students to say they experience emotional stress at college. But those who report having positive relationships with faculty members, mentors and peers are much less likely to report frequent emotional stress than students without such supportive relationships. These findings are only apparent among bachelor's students; among all postsecondary students more generally, supportive relationships have little effect on reports of stress.

Most notably, 44% of bachelors' students who agree that they are treated with respect by faculty members say they frequently experience emotional stress, vs. 63% among those who do not agree. Also, bachelor's students who agree that they have a mentor who encourages them, that their professors care about them, and that they are treated with respect by fellow students are also less likely than those who do not agree to frequently experience emotional stress.

FIGURE 6

Bachelor's students who feel supported by faculty, mentors and peers less likely to frequently experience emotional stress

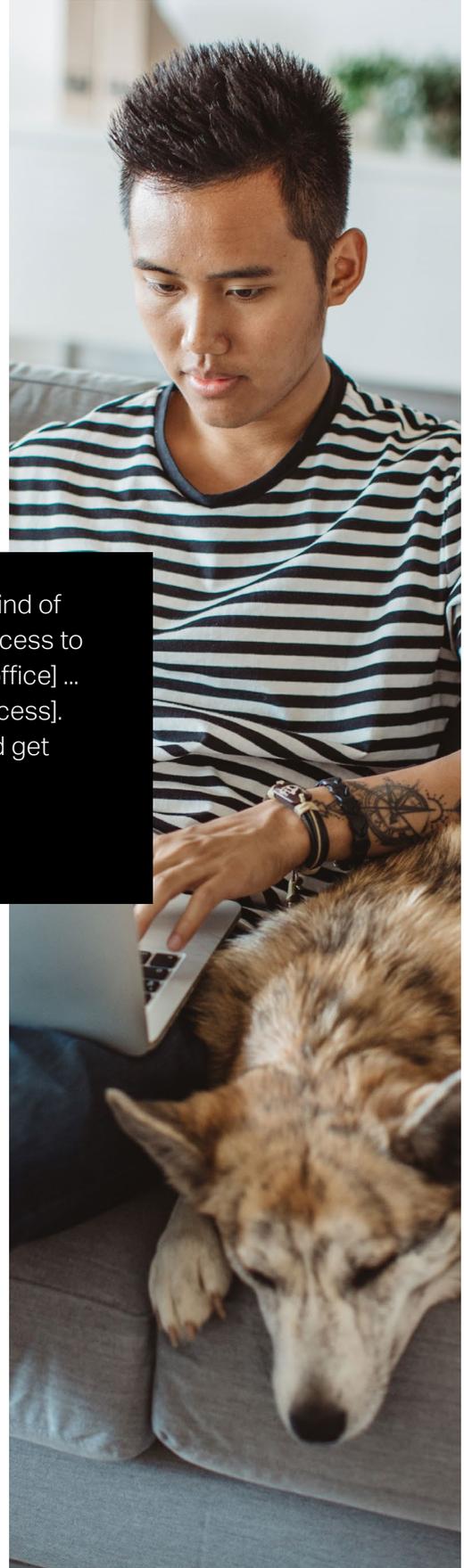


* Students indicate agreement with a rating of "4" or "5" on 5-point scale where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree.

** Students indicate lack of agreement with a rating of "1," "2" or "3" on the same 5-point agreement scale.

Most students rate their college's mental health resources positively — but ratings are lower among students facing mental health issues

Many colleges and universities have struggled to provide effective and accessible counseling services amid the rising number of students seeking help. In recent years, students at many institutions have been forced to wait weeks or months for appointments,^{10,11} and universities have struggled to hire new counselors amid a nationwide shortage of mental health professionals.¹²



"A problem that we have at my university, which I guess kind of goes for other universities too, is that they need more access to mental health resources. ... Someone there [counseling office] ... guided me a bit in this [accommodations application process]. He said, 'You just submit your document, and they should get back to you in a couple of weeks.'"

– **Tony Y., Asian man, 18-29**

10 Thielking, M. (2017, February 6). A dangerous wait: Colleges can't meet soaring student needs for mental health care. Stat. <https://www.statnews.com/2017/02/06/mental-health-college-students/>

11 Abrams, Z. (2022, October 12). Student mental health is in crisis. Campuses are rethinking their approach. *Monitor on Psychology*, 53(7). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/10/mental-health-campus-care>

12 Kreidler, M. (2022, January 31). Colleges struggle to recruit therapists for students in crisis. California Healthline. <https://californiahealthline.org/news/article/college-student-mental-health-therapist-shortage/>

About seven in 10 postsecondary students rate their college’s resources for helping students deal with mental health issues as “excellent” or “good.” The ratings were similar in three specific aspects of mental health services measured in the survey: ease of accessing resources, having different types of resources and services available, and the quality of resources provided. Further, the ratings of mental health resources were similar among college students by type of degree program.

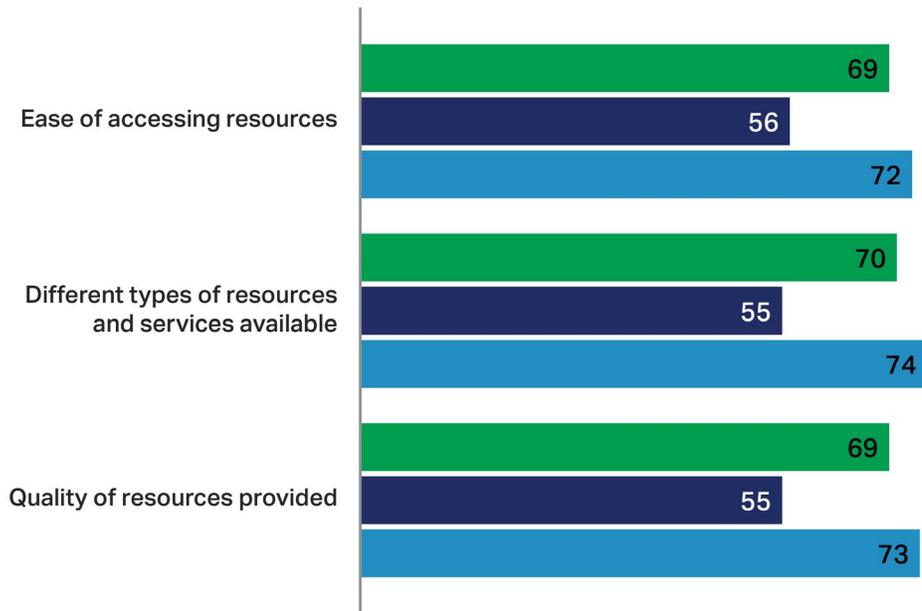
However, students who have considered stopping out for mental health reasons — who may be most likely to need such resources — are significantly less likely to give positive ratings. About 55% of students who say they have considered stopping out for personal mental health reasons rate their school’s resources positively in all three areas, compared with more than 70% who haven’t considered stopping their studies because of mental health concerns.

FIGURE 7

How would you rate your college or institution’s resources for helping students deal with emotional stress or other mental health issues in each of the following areas — excellent, good, fair or poor?

% “Excellent” or “good” among postsecondary students

- All students
- Students who have considered stopping out for personal mental health reasons
- Students who have not considered stopping out for personal mental health reasons



“I think a lot of kids get burned out or they feel stressed out. But I think they [colleges/ universities] need to help more people to cope with their anxiety or cope with their stress or cope with their workload. I know a lot of kids that go to school and they end up having a nervous breakdown because it’s so much that they’re trying to do at the same time just to achieve their goal.”

– **Danamarie E., Black woman, 30-44**

Emotional stress in degree programs also common among younger adults who stopped out

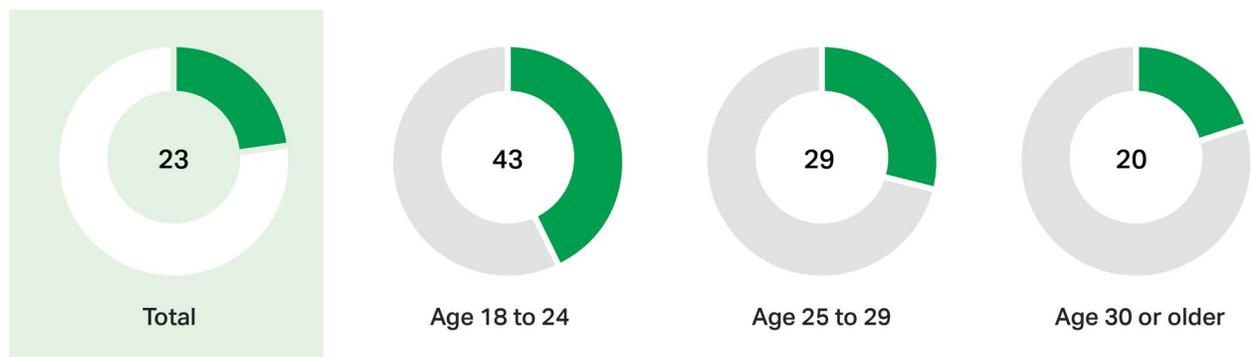
Younger adults (those of the traditional college ages of 18 to 24) who have discontinued their studies commonly say they experienced emotional stress while in college. Forty-three percent of this group felt emotional stress frequently, and 33% did so occasionally. That compares with 53% frequent stress among currently enrolled students who have considered stopping out and 40% of all currently enrolled students.

Likely reflecting both the effects of the pandemic and greater awareness of the importance of mental health, younger people who stopped their studies are much more likely than older people who left school to say they frequently experienced emotional stress while in college. Reports of frequent stress while in college fall to 29% among those aged 25 to 29 and 20% among those 30 or older.

FIGURE 8

How often did you experience emotional stress while attending college or a postsecondary credential program?

% "Frequently" among adults who have stopped out of postsecondary education programs



Former students who left before completing their degree or credential program are not very positive about the mental health resources offered at their former institution. Forty-three percent rate the ease of accessing resources as having been excellent or good, 44% say the same about the variety of resources available and 43% about the quality of resources provided.

To some degree these ratings are influenced by former students who attended their program many years ago when there was less attention to mental health and colleges were less likely to provide extensive mental health resources. But younger students, who would have been in school more recently, give ratings barely better than the overall ratings. Between 45% and 47% of 18- to 24-year-old adults who no longer attend postsecondary education rate the access, variety and quality of mental health resources at their former institution positively.

It is unclear from the survey how many of these former students may have been able to remain enrolled if their institution had better mental health support. However, 74% of traditional college-age young adults who are no longer enrolled say personal mental health reasons are a very (46%) or moderately (28%) important reason why they are not currently enrolled, and 82% say emotional stress is a very (48%) or moderately (34%) important reason.

Most adults aged 18 to 24 who have never enrolled in postsecondary education cite emotional stress and personal mental health as important reasons

Adults who never enrolled in a degree or credential program are most likely to regard three items related to financial considerations — cost, affordability due to inflation and the need to work — as “very” or “moderately” important reasons for not currently being enrolled.

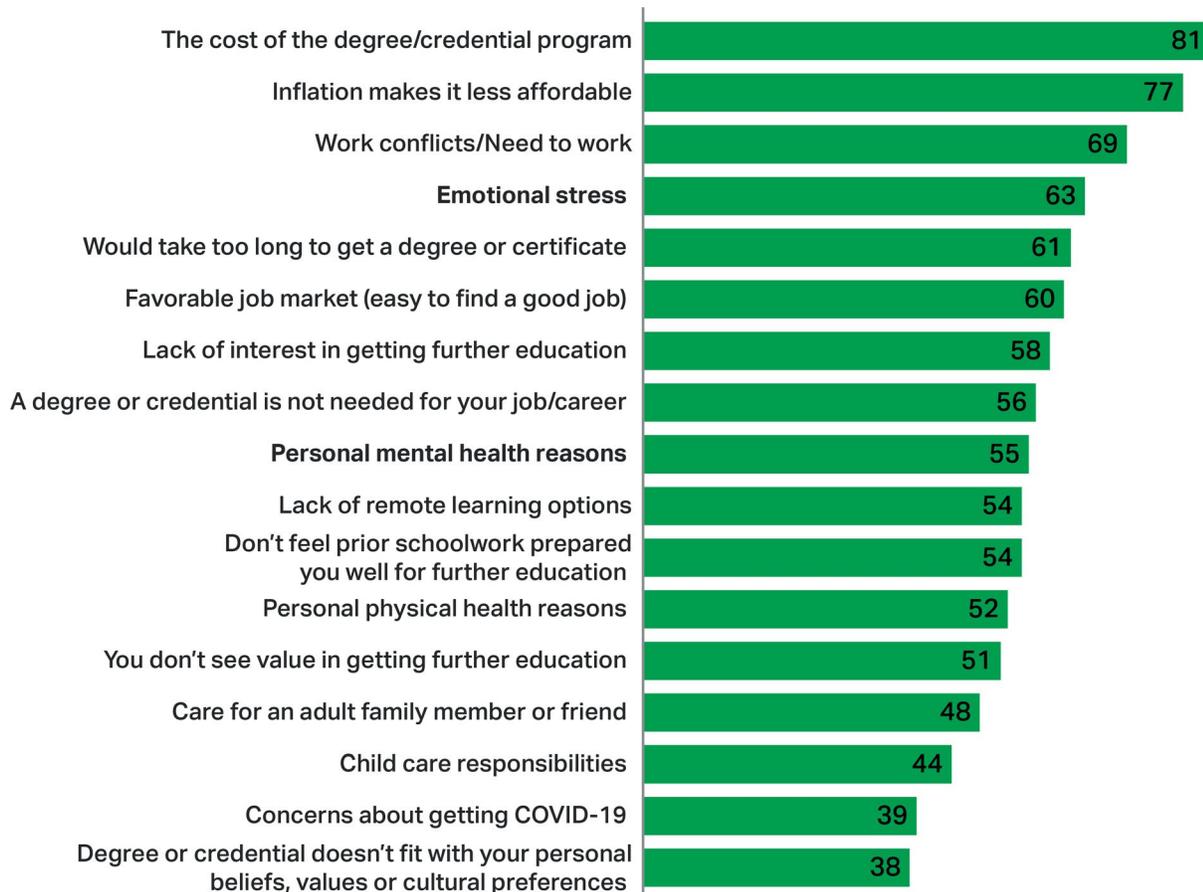
Emotional stress also presents a barrier to entry to postsecondary education for some adults who have never pursued it. In fact, 63% of never-enrolled adults say emotional stress is a very (31%) or moderately (32%) important reason they are not currently enrolled, and 55% say the same about personal mental health reasons.

FIGURE 9

Thinking now about some reasons why people may not enroll in a degree or certificate program, how important are each of the following?

% “Very important” or “moderately important” among those who have never enrolled in a postsecondary certificate or degree program

■ All never-enrolled adults



Among the never-enrolled population, women (71%) and young adults aged 18 to 24 (77%) are particularly likely to say emotional stress is a very or moderately important reason for not enrolling in postsecondary education. For young adults, emotional stress is on par with rising costs due to inflation and work considerations among the top barriers to enrolling. Young adults are also particularly likely to say personal mental health reasons are an important factor in why people may choose not to enroll, at 73%.

TABLE 1

Thinking now about some reasons why people may not enroll in a degree or certificate program, how important are each of the following?

% "Very important" or "moderately important" among those who have never enrolled in a postsecondary certificate or degree program

	GENDER		AGE	
	Women	Men	Ages 18 to 24	Ages 25 and older
The cost of the degree/credential program	85	79	84	81
Inflation makes it less affordable	80	74	79	77
Work conflicts/Need to work	67	70	72	68
Emotional stress	71	57	77	60
Would take too long to get a degree or certificate	62	60	63	61
Favorable job market (easy to find a good job)	61	60	58	61
Lack of interest in getting further education	58	57	58	57
A degree or credential is not needed for your job/career	56	55	55	56
Personal mental health reasons	61	49	73	51
Lack of remote learning options	58	50	60	52
Don't feel prior schoolwork prepared you well for further education	56	53	62	53
Personal physical health reasons	54	50	54	52
You don't see value in getting further education	48	53	50	51
Care for an adult family member or friend	48	49	52	47
Child care responsibilities	48	40	45	43
Concerns about getting COVID-19	41	38	40	39
Degree or credential doesn't fit with your personal beliefs, values or cultural preferences	36	39	41	37

Implications

Though COVID-19 undoubtedly added to the stress facing U.S. college students, it only exacerbated a longer-term trend among teens and young adults. A 2019 study using data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that “serious psychological distress” increased 71% among Americans aged 18 to 25 between 2008 and 2017. The authors posit that certain cultural trends during that period — including possible negative effects of smartphone and digital media use and declines in sleep duration — are likely to have had disproportionately large effects on young people.¹³

Regardless of the causes, findings from *Stressed Out and Stopping Out: The Mental Health Crisis in Higher Education* underscore the urgency of the issue by highlighting the frequency with which college students — particularly those in bachelor’s programs — report experiencing emotional stress and the extent to which issues related to mental health dominate students’ reasons for potentially stopping their coursework.

In August 2022, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy called on college leaders to ramp up support for students through additional counseling services and programs that allow students to support one another.¹⁴ Facing limited one-to-one counseling resources, some institutions are adopting approaches such as group therapy and peer counseling while better equipping faculty and staff to support students in distress.¹⁵ Moreover, recent research points to the important role higher education has in preparing young adults mentally and emotionally for the workforce. More than one-third of recent college graduates who are employed said their college did not prepare them well, mentally or emotionally, for the challenging transition to the workplace.¹⁶

Given the lower incidence of emotional stress among bachelor’s students who feel they have supportive, respectful relationships with faculty and peers, such strategies for bolstering students’ support networks may be effective supplements or alternatives to traditional counseling services at four-year colleges.

Finally, the frequency with which adults aged 18 to 24 who have never enrolled in college say emotional stress is an important reason for not doing so suggests the rising incidence of mental health issues among this age cohort may be a factor in their declining overall enrollment rates.¹⁷ Further research that includes adolescents’ experiences with mental health issues as a potential influence on their decision to pursue postsecondary education may lead to a better understanding of the problem.

13 Twenge, J.M., Cooper, A.B., Joiner, T.E., Duffy, M.E., & Binau, S.G. (2019). Age, period, and cohort trends in mood disorder indicators and suicide-related outcomes in a nationally representative dataset, 2005-2017. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 128*(3), 185-199. <https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000410>

14 Adedoyin, O. (2022, August 30). As more stressed-out students consider dropping out, Surgeon General pushes college leaders to ramp up support. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/as-stressed-out-students-consider-dropping-out-u-s-surgeon-general-pushes-college-leaders-to-ramp-up-support>

15 Abrams, Z. (2022, October 12). Student mental health is in crisis. Campuses are rethinking their approach. *Monitor on Psychology, 53*(7). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/10/mental-health-campus-care>

16 Mary Christie Institute. (2023, January 11). The mental health and wellbeing of young professionals. <https://marychristieinstitute.org/reports/the-mental-health-and-wellbeing-of-young-professionals/>

17 Gallup. (2022). The State of Higher Education 2022 Report. <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/391829/state-of-higher-education-2022.aspx>

Methodology Statement

Results for this report are derived from the Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education 2022 study. The study was conducted via web surveys on Oct. 26 to Nov. 17, 2022, with U.S. adults aged 18 to 59 who have a high school degree/diploma or equivalent and have not yet completed an associate or bachelor's degree. Gallup surveyed 12,015 total U.S. adults, including 3,949 who were currently enrolled in an associate or bachelor's degree program, 2,059 who were enrolled in a certificate or certification program, 3,004 who have some college experience but no degree and are not currently enrolled, and 3,003 individuals who have never enrolled in higher education. Respondents were interviewed via Dynata's web-based panel.

The data are weighted to match national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education and region. Demographic weighting targets are based on the most recent American Community Survey figures for the aged 18 to 59 U.S. population.

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Gallup delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 80 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of employees, customers, students and citizens than any other organization in the world. Gallup has served more than 1,000 education organizations with advice and analytics based on over 85 years of research, including nearly half a million interviews with education leaders and their teams about their workplace experiences and the perspectives of more than 6 million students and alumni captured by the Gallup Student Poll and Gallup Alumni Survey. Gallup assists districts, schools, universities and institutions nationwide with research-based strategies to provide a culture shift in education to help students on their path toward great careers and great lives.

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