

The Emotional Journey of Starting College

What Today's Students
Want, Need, and Expect

Introduction

For years, TimelyCare has walked alongside students in higher education, listening with care and curiosity. We've heard their stories, learned from their struggles, and celebrated their wins. They've shown us that success in college isn't linear. It's a winding journey, shaped by the mind, the heart, and the support systems students find (or don't find) along the way.

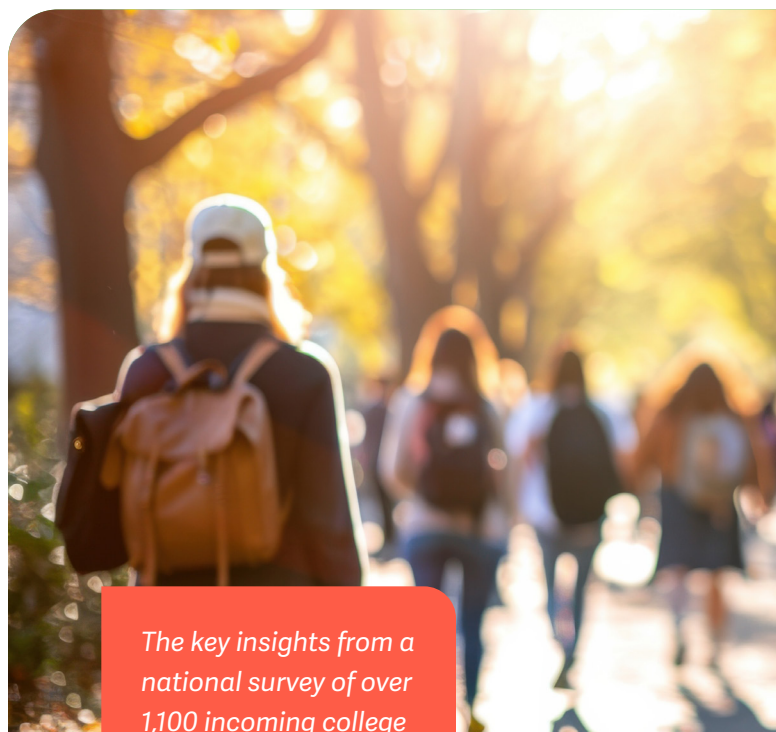
This year, we set out to understand the journey from the very beginning. For the first time, we asked incoming students – before their first class, before their first roommate, before their first late-night study session – to share what they're carrying as they prepare to embark on their next chapter.

This report charts how students hope to grow, what challenges they anticipate, and how institutions can meet them with the empathy, flexibility, and care that define a truly student-centered journey. The key insights from a national survey of over 1,100 incoming college students conducted in June of 2025 are outlined below to guide your next steps with confidence.

Questions explored the emotional readiness, needs, and expectations of the respondents.

Our goal was simple: to hear students' voices at mile marker one. To understand the mindset they bring, the worries they harbor, and the hope they hold onto, and to use those insights to better prepare for the road ahead.

Because the truth is, how students begin their college journey matters. And what we do to meet them there can shape whether they stay on course, find a sense of belonging, and ultimately thrive, not just during college, but long after.



The key insights from a national survey of over 1,100 incoming college students conducted in June of 2025 are outlined below to guide your next steps with confidence.



Beyond Academics: What Today's Students Are Really Carrying to Campus

Today's incoming students are stepping onto college campuses with more than academic ambition. They're carrying lived experience, mental health histories, and a deep desire to be understood and supported from day one. They don't just want to succeed, they want to grow into the fullest version of themselves, guided by connection, care and purpose.

Retention and persistence hinge not only on academic ability, but on the whole student. Their ability to manage stress, build meaningful relationships and maintain a sense of purpose directly shapes their path forward. Meeting their needs holistically should not be an afterthought; it's the foundation of a thriving student experience and a successful career launch.

“Something happens between what students think they're stepping into and what they actually experience on campus. The question isn't just are they ready for college, it's are we ready for them?”

— **Bob Booth**, MD, Chief Care Officer, TimelyCare

Demand for mental health and student success resources is growing. The incoming class of college students is far more likely to seek therapy than in the past.

65%

**have already
received therapy
before starting
college***

*Compared to 58% in a 2024
TimelyCare survey

83%

**are open to
using campus
mental health
resources**



These findings reinforce a decade of **Healthy Minds Study reports**, which have **demonstrated a decrease in the stigma surrounding mental health and an increase in students seeking professional support.**

Organized around five defining emotional themes—**Possibility, Independence, Connection, Discovery, and Preparation**—the report reveals a class that is both **hopeful and heavily burdened, socially aware and emotionally attuned.**

Possibility – A Fresh Start with Weighty Context

Many students arrive on campus with joyful anticipation. In fact, **31% describe themselves as “thrilled and optimistic”** about the journey ahead. They’re envisioning possibilities of new people, new places, and a new chapter in their lives. But like any journey worth taking, the road ahead holds both promise and pressure.

“College isn’t just about academic readiness; it’s emotional, social, financial, and physical. Students need more than orientation. They need support in building their village.”

— **Seli Fakorzi**, Director of Mental Health & Client Liaison, TimelyCare

Behind the hope, there’s a quiet awareness of what students are up against, like financial stress, societal uncertainty, and emotional overload. These realities don’t cancel out their excitement, but they do shape the terrain they’re walking into.

87% plan to work while enrolled

60% are concerned or very concerned about the political climate

35% feel overwhelmed by digital notifications and social pressure

And for many, the road gets bumpy after arrival. According to a **2025 TimelyCare survey** of currently enrolled students:

53% have considered taking a break from school

17% have considered dropping out entirely

95% identified at least one major obstacle to graduation

- 53% cited mental health
- 49% cited finances



As mentors and partners in this journey, we must honor students’ aspirations while addressing the barriers that so often get in their way.

“Students are showing up with hope, but also with pressure from all sides. They’re not just navigating academics; they’re managing expectations from home, financial uncertainty, and the silent question of, ‘Do I really belong here?’ We can’t wait until they ask for help—we have to meet them early, where they are.”

— **Dr. Ryan Richardson**, VP of Student Life, Abilene Christian University

Independence – Freedom Meets Real-World Gaps

The transition to college often feels like a milestone moment for students, symbolizing freedom, adulthood, and agency over their own lives. The opportunity to make decisions, manage time, and take steps toward independence is exhilarating.

“I am looking forward to the independence college brings from living away from family.”

“I’m really looking forward to college because it’s a chance to gain more independence, meet new people from different backgrounds, and study something I’m passionate about. I’m excited to experience a new environment, grow as a person, and start working toward my future goals.”

“I’m looking forward to being able to choose my classes.”

However, for many, that excitement is tempered by the weight of new responsibilities, beginning with achieving financial independence. **Only 25% will be fully financially supported by their family while attending college, and 28% expect to be independently supporting themselves, with the remaining 47% leaning on a combination of resources.**

The road to independence, for this generation, is often unpaved. It raises questions about how to budget, navigate healthcare, how to ask for help, and learn how to manage their time, all while juggling classes and work. Recent research reports highlight the need for support.

- Compared to high schoolers, **college students report higher rates of depression, anxiety/stress, and suicidal ideation**, yet parents’ perceptions of these increases often don’t change.
- Many students **lack access to practical life skills** and seek support in “Adulting 101” areas like budgeting, navigating healthcare, and managing responsibilities independently.
- Just **1 in 4 students** feels confident **navigating the healthcare system on their own**.



And for many students, the emotional load of independence isn't just internal, it's relational.

“They’re not only managing their own transition, they’re also managing their parents’ transition. Parents send messages like ‘I miss you so much.’ It’s loving, but it can also make it harder for students to do well. They feel guilty for enjoying college, especially first-gen or low-income students whose families have sacrificed so much to get them there.”

— **Timothy Miller**, Vice President of Student Affairs at James Madison University

These added layers of pressure from within and from home compound the challenge of transitioning into adulthood. With thoughtful guidance, we can provide students with the structure and safety nets they need to practice adulthood and flourish.

“Students want to be independent, but not invisible. They’re looking for relationships that make them feel seen and spaces that make them feel safe.”

— **Seli Fakorzi**, Director of Mental Health & Client Liaison, TimelyCare

Connection – Belonging Isn’t Automatic

Students are hungry for connection, but many aren't sure how to find it.

“What I’m most looking forward to about starting college is the chance to meet new people and make lifelong friends.”

“I would feel more connected to my campus community if there were more social events and clubs where I could meet people with similar interests. Having opportunities for group projects, volunteer activities, and open discussions would also help me build stronger relationships and feel like I belong.”

“I believe student groups dedicated to making meaningful connections or offering any kind of support would benefit me and others to feeling more connected.”



While they want to build friendships and feel a sense of belonging, they also carry social doubts and invisible fears.

38%

report feeling
lonely occasionally
or more

42%

feel only somewhat
confident in their
ability to make
friends

20%

don't know where
to begin

Making those meaningful connections is not automatic, and many current college students are struggling, based on feedback from students who have already spent time on campus. According to the Active Minds and TimelyCare report, "Loneliness, Resilience, and Mental Health: A Call for Campus Action,"

- **Nearly 65% of current students report experiencing frequent loneliness.**
- **Students who feel lonely are over four times more likely to experience severe psychological distress.**

Loneliness is a strong predictor of depression and other poor mental health outcomes. Meanwhile, building meaningful connections for students is key to their personal and academic health. A peer-reviewed study published in Science Advances shows **that students with strong feelings of belonging are more likely to persist and experience increases in their GPA.**

But connection is not a passive experience. It must be intentionally nurtured through spaces that are safe, programs that are inclusive, and interactions that remind students they matter. Yet for many students, especially those experiencing high social anxiety, simply showing up isn't enough.

Travis Apgar, VP of Student Affairs at Case Western University, described a familiar scene. Several hundred students attended a campus event—complete with music, games, food, and giveaways—but meaningful interaction was missing.

“They attended, enjoyed the food, picked up a shirt, and observed the activities. The environment was lively, with games and music creating a welcoming atmosphere. Yet, many hesitated to fully participate, uncertain about how to engage. This reflects a common pattern: our students genuinely desire meaningful and enjoyable experiences, but they will benefit from additional guidance and support in navigating social interactions.”

Recognizing this gap, faculty and staff are beginning to build more intentional opportunities for interaction.

At Emmanuel College, psychology professor Linda Lin has incorporated a classroom assignment that encourages students to connect with three people

they don't know. Though many are hesitant at first, the outcome is often surprising: students report not only completing the task, but making new friends along the way.

Discovery – Growth Beyond the Classroom

For Gen Z, college is about more than content mastery; it's about self-discovery. They want to learn, but they also want to grow emotionally, socially, and ethically.

- 45% say they use AI to enhance learning, not replace it.
- Students express a desire for courses that feel relevant and empowering.

While 63% of students say they are confident using AI tools like ChatGPT responsibly, an essay published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* warns against the “illusion of competence” and “cognitive debt,” suggesting that heavy reliance on AI may weaken memory, creativity, and critical thinking.

As educators and innovators, we must support this exploration with environments that foster curiosity, creativity, and emotional resilience, where students can safely learn not only what they want to do but also who they want to become.

Preparation – Career Readiness Requires Emotional Readiness

Students understand that well-being is essential not just to their education, but to their future careers. They're thinking ahead to life after college. Here's how some students are shaping their future paths in their own words:

“I’m looking to better prepare myself for my future career and get into the field I want.”

“I plan to network and take advantage of opportunities such as internships and job openings.”

“I want to start my own business.”

Their aspirations are clear, but unmet needs and missed opportunities often mark the journey from campus to career.

The Disconnect Between Ambition and Reality

As students look ahead with ambition and drive, many encounter a harsh disconnect between their aspirations and the reality of the workforce. While their goals are focused on growth and impact, the support systems around them can fall short in preparing them for what comes next.

In fact, **85% of recent college graduates say they wish their school had better prepared them for the workplace** in a Hult International Business School survey of 1,600 full-time employees in the US. Employers feel this gap as well, considering that **96% of HR leaders believe higher education institutions should do more to equip students with real-world career skills.**

According to a 2025 survey by Resume.org, **57% of hiring managers reported that new graduates are unprepared for the realities of work**, particularly in essential soft skills such as communication, adaptability, and emotional resilience. Employers cited concerns ranging from excessive phone use and entitlement to low motivation to difficulty responding to feedback.

And for some students, the opportunity to even start their intended career feels out of reach. According to research by the talent connection platform Tallo, **one in four young adults reports struggling to find a job in their chosen field**, a stark reminder that academic achievement alone isn't enough.

“Career success doesn’t begin at graduation; it’s shaped by every lived experience along the way. When students are well-supported, emotionally strong, and socially connected, they leave college not just credentialed, but ready to contribute.”

— **Nicole Trevino**, Vice President for Student Success at TimelyCare

Conclusion: Rethinking “Ready”

This generation is not underprepared. They are emotionally fluent, digitally literate, and socially aware. But they need colleges to meet them with empathy, flexibility, and support that reflects who they already are.

Let’s expand what it means to be “college-ready” by building foundations. When we lead with care, partner with purpose, and champion the whole student, we don’t just raise retention, we elevate futures.

“Students today don’t just want services; they want to be understood. When we meet them with compassionate care, we unlock their potential,” said Luke Hejl, CEO and Co-Founder of TimelyCare. “What we give students during their time with us, we’re really giving them tools for the rest of their lives.”

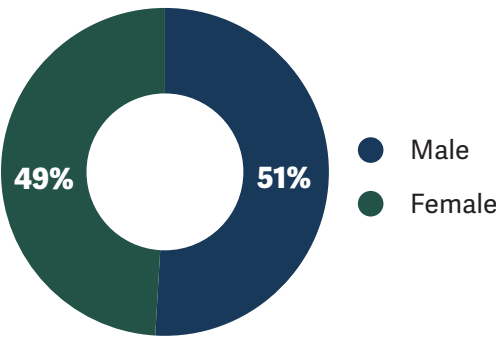
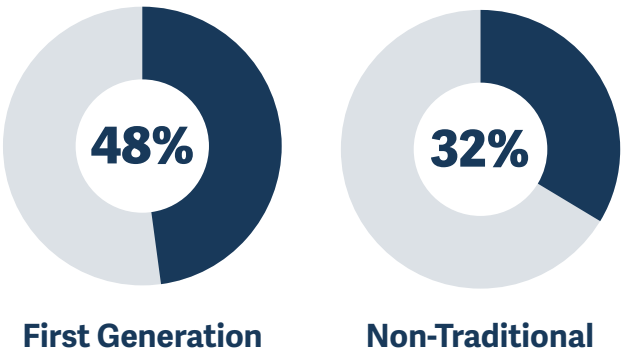
Methodology:

TimelyCare conducted the online survey during the week of June 16, 2025 with more than 1,100 people ages 18-29 who were beginning college for the first time this fall. The survey included 25 multiple-choice questions and three open-ended questions.

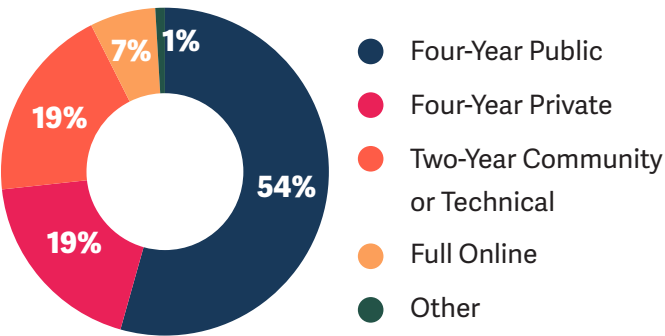
Survey Sample

1,100+ incoming
U.S Students

entering higher education (ages 18-29)



Type of institution respondents will attend:



Online survey fielded week of June 16, 2025

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