

# In Pursuit of Happiness

## How We Better Care for the Whole Student

What contributes to a college student's happiness? That question carries more weight than ever. Mental health issues have become increasingly prevalent on campuses nationwide, as students struggle under pressures from both internal and external sources.

Many students today grew up during the 2008 financial crisis, and after watching family members lose jobs and homes, they feel added pressure to excel academically. Others seek degrees later in life and must balance schoolwork with personal and professional obligations. And some begin this journey as the first in their families to receive a college degree, navigating academic and financial pressures with little to no guidance from family. It's clear that most students, though unique in their experiences, are struggling to cope. Most students, though unique in their experiences, are struggling to cope.

To understand students' state of mental and physical well-being, Barnes & Noble Education (BNED) surveyed 762 college students. The survey found that most students report high levels of stress – especially first-generation students, freshmen and sophomores.

Stakes are high. To ensure student success and well-being, universities must take a holistic approach that addresses the pressing academic, financial and personal concerns of their students.

### Stress and Anxiety Dominate Student Life

College is a turbulent time for many students, who report high levels of stress, anxiety and even depression. Beyond academics, many struggle with adjusting to life outside of home, paying for college, making friends and more. Stigma around mental health concerns, as well as lack of familiarity with how to access school resources, might prevent students from seeking the help they need.

#### Mental health suffers during college.

Overall, just over two-thirds (68 percent) of students say they are somewhat/extremely happy with where they are currently in life. And **76 percent of students say they have experienced mental health issues** (i.e. significant stress, anxiety, depression) – issues that are more prevalent among women and first-generation students.

Sophomores report significantly higher levels of depression than freshmen, suggesting that these problems do not vanish after an initial period of adjustment or homesickness.

#### Support networks are key.

When asked how they manage mental health issues, 77 percent cite talking with family and friends. Sixty-eight percent say they cope by spending time on hobbies/interests. A small number of students report coping through social drinking (17 percent) and recreational drug use (9 percent). This underscores the need for universities to help students create support networks which can include forging stronger connections with professors. More than a third of students said having open conversations with professors about mental health would better assist them in managing their own mental health and well-being.

#### Students aren't taking advantage of university resources.

While **85 percent said their school provides resources for mental health/student well-being, only 24 percent have used these resources.** Women were more likely to use these resources than men, while freshmen were less likely to use them than upperclassmen. This might be because schools are over-relying on counseling services alone to provide support, when they should be offering a more diverse range of options, including university courses on adjusting to college, health and wellness programs, student-led support groups and more.

#### Among students who experience mental health issues,



report high levels of stress



experience anxiety



experience depression

## Grades, Finances and Politics...Oh, My

In addition to academic performance, tuition payments and political issues are also a source of anxiety and stress for college students – particularly among first-generation students.

### Academic concerns rank high.

Getting good grades (79 percent) and balancing different areas of their lives (74 percent) cause the most stress for college students. The second “tier” of stressors include having friends and a social life (42 percent) and finding a job post-grad (40 percent).

### Political issues weigh heavily.

Political issues contribute to college students’ stress. At least three-fourths of students worry about the current state of our country/government (78 percent) and about global current events and political/social issues (76 percent).

### Money talks.

The high cost of tuition serves as another source of stress for students. Thirty-two percent of students say paying for tuition and/or room and board is a significant stressor, with first-gen students more likely to say so.

### Top political issues that cause personal stress among college students:



Health of the environment



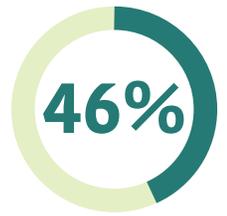
Gun violence/mass shooting



The ability to go to and pay for college



Racial injustice and equality



Division within our nation

## Students Struggle to Adopt Healthy Habits

Being mindful of lifestyle choices, including eating habits and sleeping schedules, plays an important role in reducing stress and improving well-being. But not all students have mastered this approach.

### Exercise takes a back seat.

While the majority (78 percent) of students consider themselves to be somewhat/ extremely **physically healthy**, nearly two-thirds (64 percent) feel they don’t exercise or work out enough.

### Students lack time for healthy diets.

Just over half (52 percent) of students report they have somewhat or extremely healthy eating habits. New students seem to struggle more, with freshmen slightly less likely to report they ate well. Fifty-five percent of students say this is because they lack time to commit to maintaining a balanced diet.

### It’s hard to catch zzz’s.

Most students (91 percent) feel that a good night’s sleep is important or extremely important. But 55 percent feel they don’t get enough, and **63 percent experience sleep deprivation**. Freshmen and first-generation students were even more likely to say they weren’t sleeping enough. Over one-third (38 percent) of students nap at least once a day because they feel drained.

## Summary

Today’s students experience pressure from a myriad of sources, both internal and external. They struggle with balancing school work, social lives and the rising cost of a college education. They find difficulty maintaining healthy eating, sleeping and exercise habits to help cope with these stresses. On top of that, the turbulent political climate weighs heavily on their minds. Students attend college for academic fulfillment, but the role of post-secondary institutions cannot end when students leave the classroom. It is imperative that colleges and universities acknowledge **the whole student**, providing tools and resources that not only support academic success, but also ensure mental and emotional well-being. There’s no silver bullet – the needs of students are changing and complex, and one size does not fit all. But students need to know that support is available to them when they need it most. Universities must unite staff and faculty in adopting a holistic strategy that will foster success and well-being for their students.

To learn more about today’s student and the new college experience, visit [insights.bncollege.com](https://insights.bncollege.com)