



INSIGHT PAPER

Three Quick Wins for Student Mental Health and Wellness

Adapting Student Success Technology to Meet Rising Demand





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Mental health and wellness” has surpassed “academic difficulty” and “financial challenges” to become our top student success concern. Higher education institutions often find themselves unable to meet the demand for care and therefore are at greater risk for seeing retention and graduation rates fall.

Fortunately, proven mental health frameworks give us a roadmap for engaging key stakeholders around your institution and expanding capacity for care beyond the counseling center. These efforts can be supported by existing student success technologies already in place at many college and universities.

This paper offers three “quick win” ideas for adapting Navigate and Starfish, EAB’s student success technologies, to support a broader range of student needs. These practices can help you better address student mental health and wellness immediately.



A Rising Challenge

The pandemic's impact on student mental health will be felt for years. The stress and loss profoundly impacted student well-being, while disruption and isolation altered their social development. As higher education leaders begin to better understand the long-term impact these mental health concerns could have on enrollment and success, they are also acknowledging that gaps exist in their institutions' ability to meet the demand for care. This conversation is long overdue, as student mental health concerns have been steadily rising for at least a decade.

We can't wait any longer. Emerging data tells us that mental well-being is now the top threat to student success—more so than even academic concerns or financial need. A Gallup survey in fall 2022 asked current students who considered stopping out about their reasons why.¹ They found that more than half of community college students and nearly 70 percent of bachelor's degree students who considered leaving cited emotional stress as the driver, the top response on the survey. What's more, 47 percent of students said they had recently considered leaving school due to an existing mental health concern, the second most common response to the survey which far exceeded traditional retention concerns such as cost of attendance and academic difficulty.

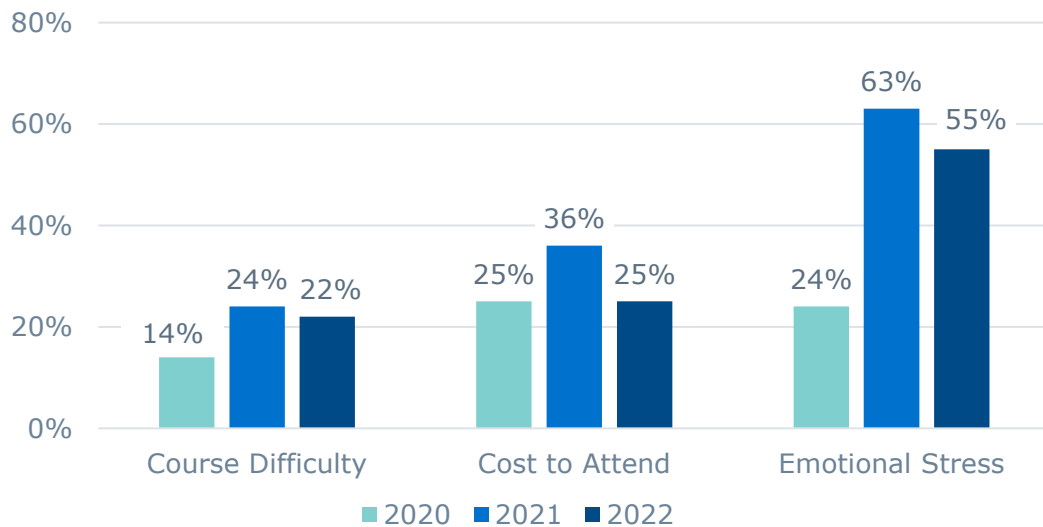
This represents a big shift in how we think about the factors that cause students to leave school. A comparison to the Fall 2020 Gallup survey shows that mental health concerns increased dramatically across 2021 and 2022, while other common attrition drivers held stable. We might have expected that concerns related to stress would have abated after pandemic restrictions were lifted, but the data shows the opposite trend. This suggests that these concerns will be endemic among college students for the foreseeable future. Mental health needs to be brought to the front and center of college retention strategies.



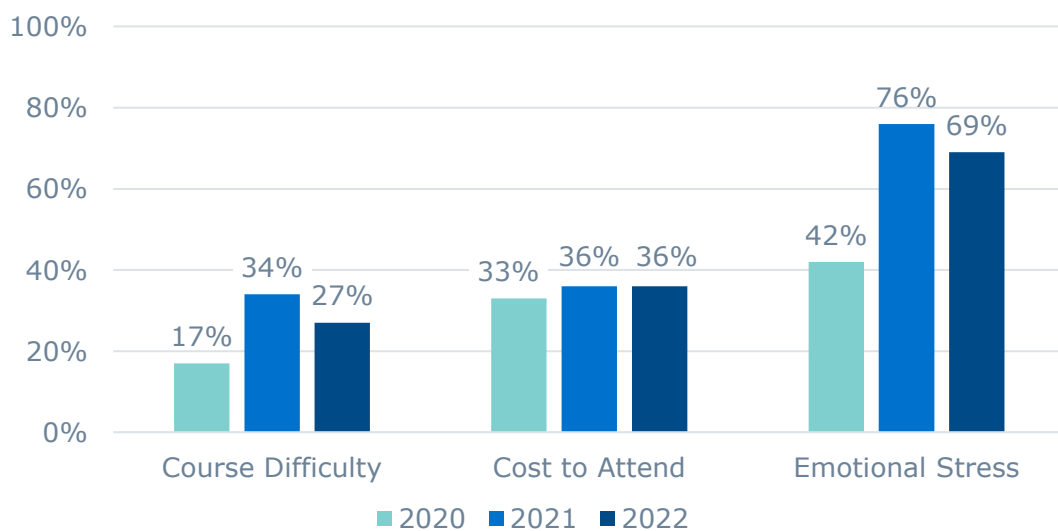
Top reasons cited by students for why they considering stopping out of school during the prior six months

Gallup The State of Higher Education 2022 and 2023

Students Pursuing Associate Degrees



Students Pursuing Bachelor's Degrees





Our current mental health strategy is insufficient and unsustainable

Few institutions feel that they are fully staffed to meet the current demand for mental health services. Most mental health strategies focus on directing students to trained mental health professionals who provide care in a clinical setting. While counseling is a critical part of mental health care, unfortunately mental health professionals are in short supply and often already over capacity. Eighteen percent of clinical positions turned over during the 2021-2022 academic year.³ Roughly three-quarters of counseling centers reported difficulty in hiring and finding qualified candidates. Half did not fill all their open positions. Hiring enough counselors to meet surging demand may simply be out of the reach of many schools.

Capacity isn't the only concern we need to address. Most college mental health strategies have three big limitations to the depth and breadth of their scope and effectiveness. First, they are reactive, relying heavily on referrals. Second, they tend to be "one size fits all" regardless of the severity of the concern. Finally, they often fail to engage the wider institution in participating and feeling ownership over mental health care. What's needed is a strategy that is proactive, layered, and broad enough to include stakeholders from around campus.

Quick wins are possible

Campus leaders may look at these two challenges—capacity to hire and depth of strategy—and see a difficult, lengthy, and expensive road ahead. While new investments will certainly be needed in the long run, there are some steps you can take right now to advance your strategy. These "quick wins" will help you immediately expand your capacity for care by using existing stakeholders and tools.

This paper lays out the background for how to use two established mental health frameworks, a **Stepped Care Model** and the **Eight Dimensions of Wellness**, to engage campus stakeholders in expanding and improving support for mental health and well-being. We then offer three suggestions of steps you can take immediately by using technology tools such as those found in our Navigate or Starfish platforms.

*Navigate and Starfish support success for **9.8 million students at 850+ institutions**. Our scope, track record, and established footprint provide us with a unique platform to apply technology to support holistic wellness.*

EVOLVING YOUR STRATEGY

Colleges and universities need to expand their ability to deliver mental health and wellness support without hiring large numbers of additional counselors. Their best bet for doing so is by turning to stakeholders outside of the counseling center who regularly engage with students. This group includes, but is not inherently limited to, faculty, student affairs, student success units and cross-functional teams, and key members of administration and institutional leadership.

These stakeholders can make invaluable contributions to wellness, but some may not necessarily see themselves as part of the campus mental health strategy. Others may be concerned that they will be asked to exceed their job descriptions, abilities, or capacity. We recommend using the two established mental health strategies outlined on the following pages to show stakeholders where they fit in and assure them that they can support well-being within the existing parameters of their work with students.



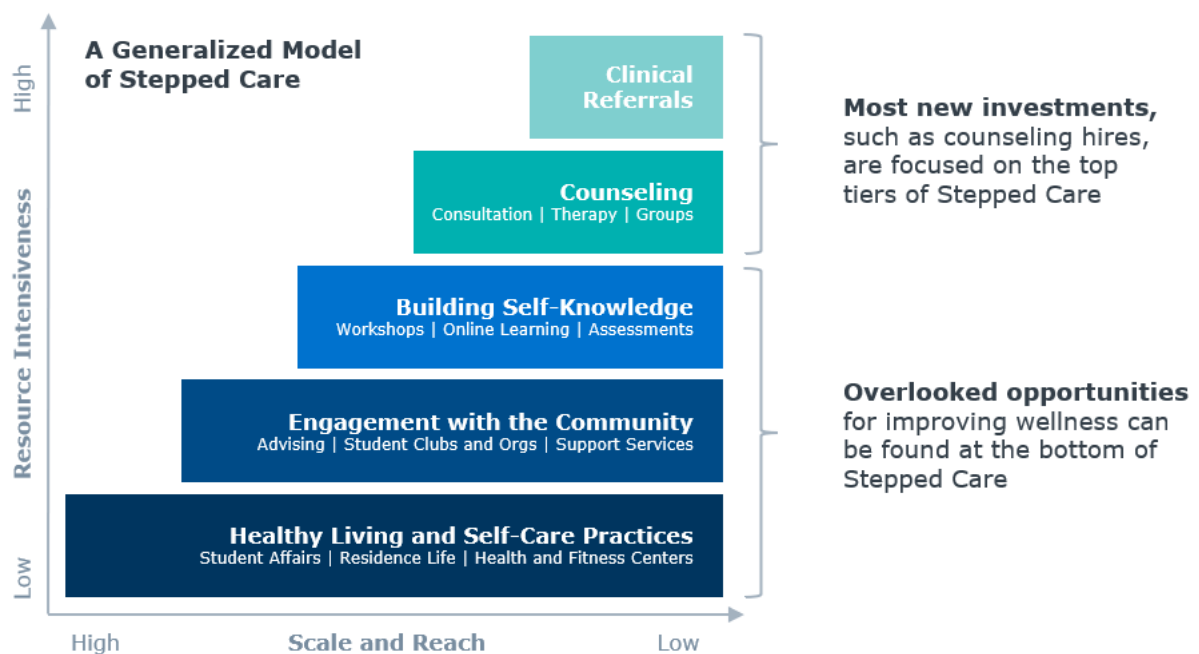
Grounding Strategy in ‘Stepped Care’

A **Stepped Care Model** increases the capacity and sophistication of your mental health strategy by organizing services in a continuum based on intensiveness. More than 40 percent of colleges and universities have adopted this framework.⁴

The upper tiers represent high-intensity options such as 1:1 counseling, while the bottom tiers represent lower-intensity programs and services. These bottom tiers often include scalable, preexisting services such as advising, residence life, health and fitness, campus ministries, and student groups.

The lower tiers of stepped care provide a roadmap for using many of our preexisting student-facing services to deliver a broader base of wellness care. These services fall outside the clinical infrastructure, yet they play an important role in expanding your capacity for supporting mental health and well-being.

Directing student engagement with these wellness-supporting services can lighten the load on counseling and prevent many issues from escalating to the point of needing acute care. Coordinating wellness services can help schools provide much better support for students without the need for major new investments.



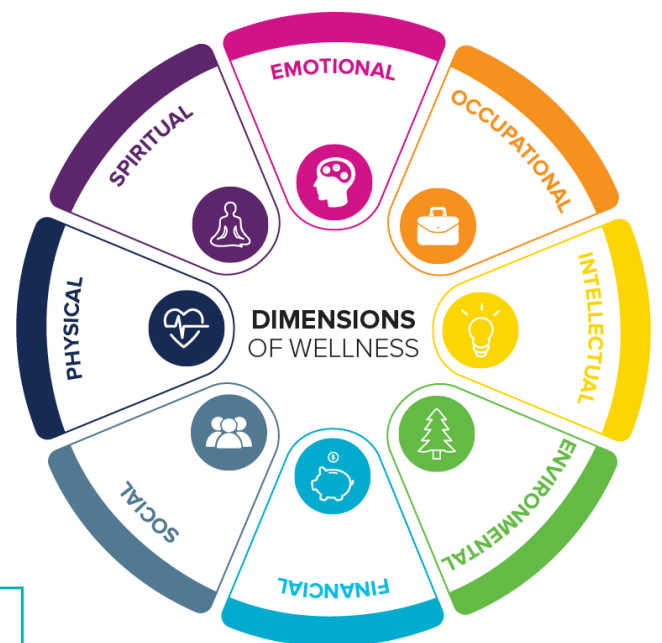


Providing Holistic Support with the Eight Dimensions of Wellness

The **Eight Dimensions of Wellness** is a strengths-based model for promoting comprehensive mental health and well-being that is endorsed by the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. It is based on the idea that wellness is a holistic concept that encompasses multiple dimensions of a person's life: **Physical, Emotional, Intellectual, Social, Occupational, Environmental, Spiritual, and Financial.**

Each of the eight dimensions is important to achieving a state of overall wellness and balance. The dimensions often interact with and influence one another, and thus an imbalance in one area can have effects elsewhere. By addressing all eight dimensions together, individuals can work toward achieving a state of overall wellness and balance in their lives.

The eight dimensions show us that nearly any campus stakeholder can support wellness in some way, often by simply doing what they already do best. Campus stakeholders can be aligned to each of the eight dimensions to reveal strengths and gaps in your current strategy. Coordinating their efforts helps ensure you are providing wellness support that is holistic, comprehensive, and grounded in established theory.



Use the worksheet on page 14 to begin organizing your stakeholders along each of the dimensions.



A Role for Technology

One of the big lessons from Stepped Care and the Eight Dimensions of Wellness is that colleges and universities can make progress against their mental health challenge by engaging the stakeholders and abilities they already have in place. The same can also be said for some of your preexisting technologies.

Student success stakeholders are most effective when they have technological tools that allow them to communicate with students, receive alerts, refer cases to support, and analyze the effectiveness of their efforts. Your well-being stakeholders need the same tools.

Counseling offices use specialized software that is highly oriented toward patient privacy. While this is great for patients, it limits the ability of these technologies to support cross-campus mental health initiatives. Fortunately, many of the stakeholders involved will already be familiar with and using technologies that can be adapted and extended to support your efforts.

Navigate and Starfish, EAB's student success technologies, are already established at nearly 900 colleges and universities across North America. Partner institutions have up to a decade of experience contributing to Intellectual wellness by using these systems to communicate with and coordinate the goals and actions of students, advisors, faculty, and academic support.

Many partners are also using these technologies to support the Financial, Social, and Occupational wellness of their students via stakeholders across their Enrollment and Student Affairs divisions. Seeing this breadth and depth of use gave us the confidence that our platforms could be used to do more to advance all eight dimensions of student wellness.

The following page lists the top Navigate and Starfish features that could be adapted to support wellness. As you think about the eight dimensions and their associated stakeholders, we encourage you to think about how each of these features could be used by these offices to promote wellness.



Navigate and Starfish Features That Can Be Used to Support Wellness



Proactive Communication

Send customizable wellness content to students at critical points in the term



Surveys

Get feedback directly from students that can be used to inform their care and support



Alerts

Allow the community to identify and flag students for follow-up with support



Progress Reports

Make it seamless for faculty to submit alerts or flags for students in their courses



Hand Raise

Empower students to raise alerts on themselves and ask for help



Cases and Referrals

Manage and track interventions resulting from alerts or flags



Mobile App

Improve your connection to students by interacting directly with them on their phones



Worksheet: Align Your Stakeholders to the Eight Dimensions of Wellness

Use this worksheet to organize your community along each of the eight dimensions. Denote the people and services corresponding to each dimension. Then add ideas for how student success technology could extend their efforts to support student wellness.

Eight Dimensions	Which People and Services? <i>Customize this to your institution. (We have provided some suggestions in italics.)</i>	How Can Technology Help? <i>Refer to the list of features on p. 13</i>
Emotional Understanding and managing one's feelings	<i>(Student Affairs, Counseling, Student Success, Accessibility Services)</i>	
Intellectual Pursuing lifelong learning and personal growth	<i>(Faculty, Student Success, Advising, Mentoring/Tutoring, Accessibility Services)</i>	
Physical Maintaining a healthy body through exercise, nutrition, and sleep	<i>(Health and Wellness Center, Recreation Center, Residence Life, Auxiliary Services, Accessibility Services)</i>	
Social Forming and maintaining healthy relationships with others	<i>(Student Affairs, Student Success, Student Organizations)</i>	
Occupational Deriving satisfaction and fulfillment from one's work and achieving a balance with personal life	<i>(Faculty, Career Services, Experiential Learning)</i>	
Environmental Appreciating one's surroundings and making positive contributions to the environment	<i>(Student Affairs, Residence Life, Auxiliary Services)</i>	
Spiritual Developing a personal belief system and values that provide a sense of purpose, meaning, and direction	<i>(Campus Ministry, Student Organizations)</i>	
Financial Managing one's finances responsibly and sustainably to achieve a sense of security and stability	<i>(Financial Aid, Bursar, Career Services)</i>	

THREE QUICK WINS

Partners that have implemented Navigate or Starfish can immediately begin using the tools in these systems to engage students with wellness stakeholders. Here our experts offer three quick win ideas that you can implement quickly. Reach out to your Strategic Leader to have a conversation about moving forward with any or all of these ideas.

If you don't already have Navigate or Starfish, talk with your EAB representative to request a demonstration and a discussion of how these systems can support your student success teams. If you don't already have an EAB contact, you can request additional information via eab.com



QUICK WIN #1

Proactive Wellness Messaging

Proactive messaging is the foundation of stepped care. Navigate and Starfish are already widely used to deliver just-in-time student nudges for administrative processes and milestones. You can use these same tools to deliver messaging that promotes connections to people, opportunities, and services aligned with all eight dimensions of wellness.

Use a growth mindset in your scripting and have a clear call to action at the end of your messages instead of a vague takeaway or passive offer of support. The best messages are short and to the point, and they close with a link to the action you want students to take.

Navigate comes preloaded with 24 sample wellness messages, three for each dimension. Consider using these as a starting point for your wellness communication strategy.

Examples of Preloaded Wellness Messages

Dimension	Subject	Body	Action
Occupational	Attend the Career Fair	Discover your passion and explore career options! Attend our career fair on [DATE] at [TIME] in the [CAMPUS LOCATION] to network with professionals in your field of interest.	Register Here
	Meet with a Career Counselor	Get ahead and plan for your future! Meet with a career counselor to discuss your goals and plan your next steps.	Schedule an Appointment Here
	Learn About the Career Center	Our Career Office has resources that can help you as you start to think about jobs after school. We host resume workshops, exploratory conversations, mock interviews, and more. Learn more about our free resources on our website.	Learn More Here



Additional Guidance from EAB Experts on Proactive Messaging

The formative years we spend with our students help shape them into the adults they'll become. We can ensure we're graduating more well-resourced and "well" adults by using the same behavioral economic principles we leverage today via Navigate and Starfish to educate about academic and administrative processes.

We can and should be living up to our educational promises to students by normalizing the things they're exploring across all eight dimensions during these critical gateway years. Most critically and beyond the educational imperative, the average age of onset for most mental illnesses falls between 18 and 24. We have a prime opportunity to help our students understand the things they or their peers may struggle with and ensure we're connecting them to key resources as early as possible.

You'll find the content available to partners in the app is structured to give students three entry points to our services and each dimension of wellness: to engage in self-directed study, to explore a resource on or off campus, or to attend a group event and form connections with other students while engaging in active or experiential learning. Help ensure your students are exploring and internalizing these lessons by exposing them to the concepts and opportunities they need today!



QUICK WIN #2

Hand Raise

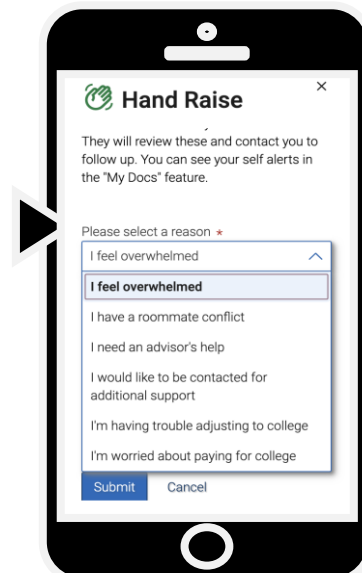
Your wellness stakeholders will have greater impact and operate more efficiently when students reach out to them rather than the other way around. Students who develop strong help-seeking skills can recognize when they need support, feel comfortable asking for it, and know where to find it.

Of these, the third issue is where Navigate and Starfish can have the most impact. Do students know where to find help, and can they access it when it is needed? College can be overwhelming, and we cannot expect students to know where to find help if they are unfamiliar with what their school offers them or they are encountering a problem they haven't sought help for before. This is especially acute among incoming students who have the most questions and the smallest base of knowledge.

To help address this need, Navigate and Starfish have a "Hand Raise" feature that allows students to proactively ask for help 24 hours a day. They simply select a reason from a drop-down to get connected with any support services live within our platforms. The support office associated with the reason will be notified to follow up with the student, or the Hand Raise can be configured to instantly send an automated response with useful in-the-moment guidance. Navigate partners can go a step further and make Hand Raise available on their student-facing app.

Enabling Hand Raise in Navigate and Starfish Is Easy:

1. Create list of Hand Raise reasons for students to select
2. Determine follow-up and intervention pathways
3. Easily track student outcomes based on interventions





Additional Guidance from EAB Experts on Help-Seeking Behavior

Access isn't the only barrier to developing help-seeking behaviors. Seeking help does not come naturally to all students. They may feel concern over stigma, have perceptions about personal weakness, or simply not know how to identify and express concerns.

Even if a student is comfortable asking for help, they may not believe that their school is willing to help them. Some students will have an ingrained skepticism about institutions that have failed them in the past. Others will have internalized the "weed-out" messaging that is part of the legacy culture within postsecondary education and still comes through in our messaging to students today.

These types of barriers are typically addressed through counseling, coaching, and education. The great news is that help-seeking behaviors can be learned and reinforced. Even something like the wellness messaging in the prior section can play a role in convincing students to seek help.

It is worthwhile to invest in promoting help-seeking behaviors. Help-seeking creates a feedback loop that pays dividends to the school. Developing help-seeking behaviors builds a student's confidence and feelings of empowerment, which further contributes to their wellness and reduces their demand on the overall system over time.



QUICK WIN #3

Belongingness Surveys

Partners might consider putting a special focus on promoting feelings of belongingness as part of their well-being efforts. Students who feel that they don't belong or who don't feel a connection to the community are less likely to return. These feelings can be more common and intense among traditionally marginalized groups and can be a contributing factor to equity gaps.

Wellness stakeholders can promote belongingness by fostering social connections and ensuring that their written and verbal interactions with students are inclusive and positive. We have two recommendations for how Navigate and Starfish can be used to support these efforts:

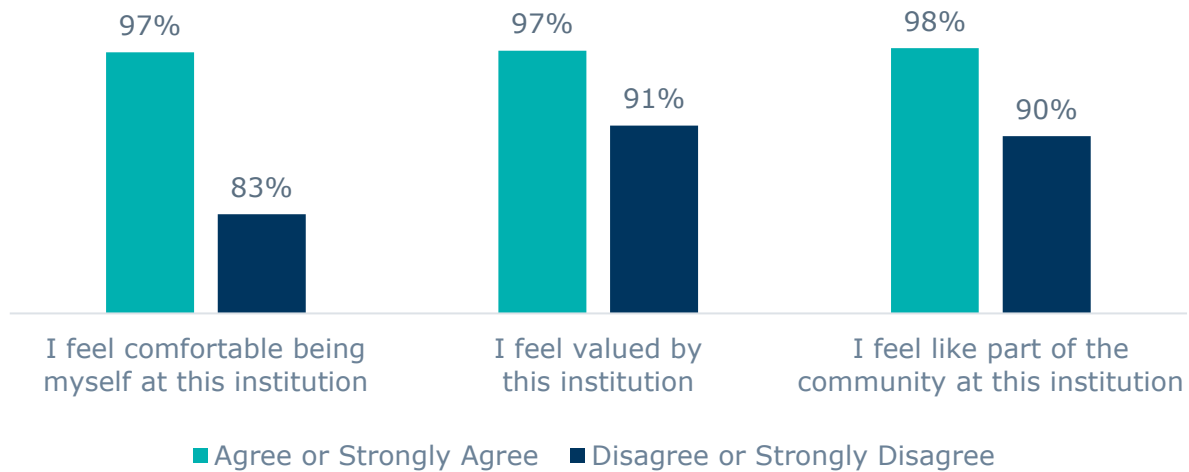
1. Use quick polls and surveys to gauge individuals' feelings of

belongingness. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has found that belongingness questions are a reliable indicator of a student's intention to return. We recommend using your NSSE data or Navigate and Starfish student surveys to find individuals who may need extra support. Try to build polling touchpoints into the onboarding process to surface concerns as early as possible, and then periodically resurvey students to catch new issues as they arise.

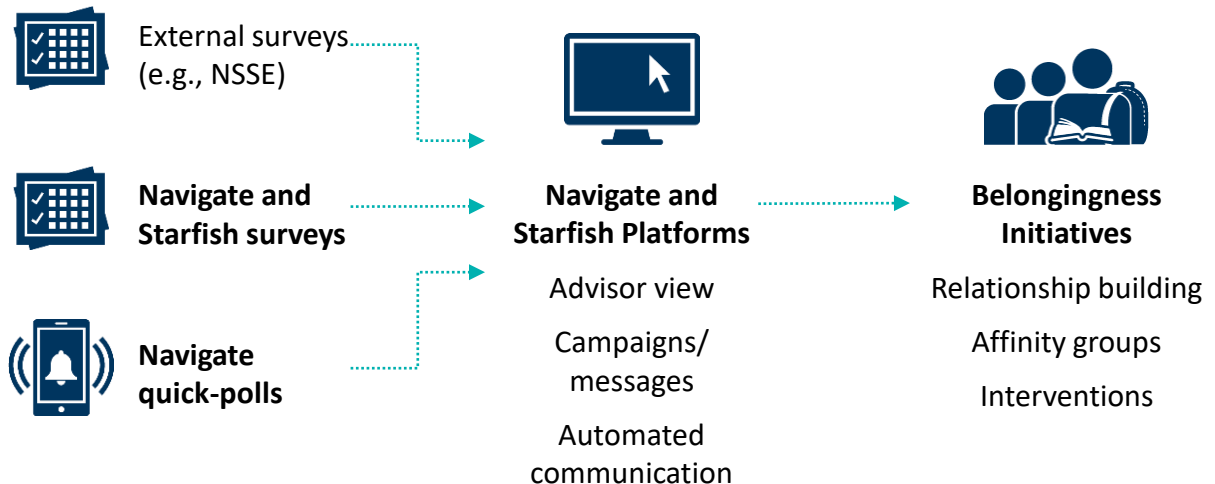
2. Analyze how your message is being perceived. You can help students feel a greater sense of belonging by using positive, growth mindset messages that normalize seeking out social support. An understanding of the tone, language, and medium you use is very important, as they can be encouraging or discouraging depending on the audience. You can use the Effectiveness Analytics tools in Navigate to assess how well your messaging is being received by different groups. Disaggregate message responses across groups to look for gaps in engagement that could indicate an issue with how the messaging is being received. If you aren't sure why, you might ask students for their feedback on how to improve your messaging.



Percentage of First-Year Students Who Intend to Return, Disaggregated by Response to Survey Questions National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)



Using Belongingness Surveys in Navigate and Starfish





Additional Guidance from EAB Experts on Belongingness and Equity

Belongingness is a universal human need. We are social creatures who benefit from deep connection to communities, collective experiences, and even physical places. We thrive on acceptance. And while the need for belonging is universal, the concept of belongingness is also highly personal. Individuals have varying requirements and different thresholds for fulfillment of that need.

Terrell Strayhorn, one of the leading academics on this issue, defines belongingness in a college context as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers).”⁵

Feeling an unmet need for belonging and social connections reduces an individual’s social well-being and negatively impacts their ability to take on challenges, including new learning. For this reason, belongingness must be a central part of our conversations around supporting student mental health for student success.

All students can feel a lack of belongingness, but the experience is even more acute for students who already feel marginalized and unseen, which is why belongingness is a key focus of many equity and inclusion initiatives. By the time students arrive in college, they’ve received and often believed many messages about their worth and inclusion in many communities. Those messages linger, creating doubt about if they truly belong or can succeed in college. These feelings are amplified if they already feel like outsiders and don’t have a community they draw on for support.

For this reason, belongingness needs to be a critical consideration for your equity work. Doing this right will in turn elevate overall mental health and wellness among your students.

CONCLUSION

Everyone has a role to play in supporting student wellness. Mental health has become our top student success concern as we emerge from pandemic, and it is likely to remain so for years to come.

Because the demand for mental health support is outpacing counselor availability, schools will need to evolve their strategies to add capacity and differentiate the type of care provided.

Frameworks such as Stepped Care and the Eight Dimensions of Wellness offer a roadmap for broadening your support network by including a wide range of campus stakeholders to stay relevant and useful to our students.

Technology can play a key role in helping these stakeholders support student wellness. Familiar student success technologies such as Navigate and Starfish can be adapted to support a broader and more holistic set of student concerns. Adaptive use cases, such as the three presented here, provide an opportunity for partners to get quick wins on mental health and wellness while building out more robust strategies. We hope you will find these ideas useful for better supporting your students and their success.



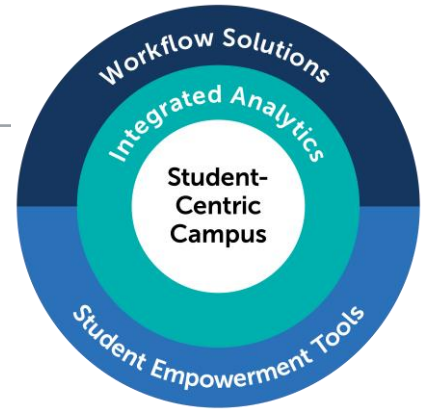
Endnotes

1. <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/468986/state-of-higher-education.aspx>
2. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/gallup-lumina-state-of-higher-education-2022-report.pdf>
3. <https://www.aucccd.org/assets/documents/Survey/2021-22%20Annual%20Survey%20Report%20Public%20FINAL.pdf>
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5. Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Routledge

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A Comprehensive Student Success Management System

Navigate is the first enterprise-level technology for student success, built based on a decade of research and direct feedback from college and university leaders and users. Navigate brings together students, administrators, advisors, faculty, and other staff in a collaborative network to holistically support students across the college journey.



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Three Quick Wins for Student Mental Health and Wellness

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