



Are we back to normal? First-year students' academic transition¹

This is one of two reports, written by the Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) Beginnings subcommittee related to the Fall 2022 Beginning Students Survey. This report discusses first-year students' [academic transition to college](#) and [use of campus resources](#), while the other focuses on [social transition to college and their well-being](#).

Both reports offer important comparisons of student perceptions before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, asking in effect, "Are we 'back to normal'?" These findings provide insight into the unique experiences of the Fall 2022 cohort, as the campus works to meet students' needs and help them succeed.

The reports look at longitudinal trends over three distinct periods: pre-pandemic (before 2020); the height of the pandemic (2020, when campus was only partially in-person); and the "new normal" (2021-2022, when campus transitioned to being back fully in-person). Cohorts in each period had unique experiences, each disrupted by the pandemic in different ways: For the Fall 2020 cohort, less than half of the cohort lived on-campus; the majority of their courses their first semester were online; and, social distancing measures were in place especially for the first weeks of the semester. The Fall 2021 and Fall 2022 cohorts experienced disruptions for much of high school.

About the Beginning Student Survey

The BSS22 was administered online to new, first-time undergraduates (including Freshmen Connection) in select courses from October 17 - November 4, 2022.² During the Fall 2022 semester, 2,545 (43%) out of 5,883 new undergraduates completed the survey. The distribution of respondents by race/ethnicity mirrored that of the population. Female students were slightly over-represented (54% of respondents compared to 51% of the population). Because the Beginning Student Survey (BSS) asks different questions each year, pre-pandemic data may come from surveys from different years.

Academic Transition

Fall 2022 respondents' perceptions of their academic transition to college remain consistent with longitudinal trends.³

While first-year respondents answered items related to academic transition relatively consistently, a few differences emerged across time. As expected, self-reported academic motivation varied due to COVID. Highlights are listed below, see Figure 1 on the next page for trends and the appendix for 2020 on vs off campus housing comparisons.³

- **Adjusting to college coursework:** In Fall 2022, 82% of respondents agreed they were adjusting to the academic work of college and 72% agreed they felt adequately prepared for the academic demands at UMD. It is important to note, the BSS is administered 8-10 weeks into the semester, before most students take midterms. These results are similar to previous years.
- **Motivation:** The largest shift in academic transition responses occurred in a question about motivation. Fifty-three percent of respondents indicated they stayed motivated in Fall 2020, compared to 60% in Fall 2022.

¹ This CAWG Beginning Student Survey Report is one of two produced from the Fall 2022 data. Also see [First-year students' social transition and well-being](#)

² The BSS survey was administered in ENGL101, UNIV100, FIRE120, IDEA101, BSCV181, TLPL288D, GEMS100, HNUH100, CPET100, CPJT100, CPMS100, CPPL100, CPSA100, HACS100, HBUS100, HLSC100, and PLCY201S. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

³ Fall 2020 data are skewed due to COVID densification of res halls, especially social transition responses for off-campus first-years. See Appendix at the end of this report, and [BSS20](#) and [BSS21](#) for details.

These numbers remain below pre-pandemic levels, where over 70% of respondents agreed they have stayed motivated. For a related topic, see the [social transition report](#) for results on well-being.

- **Balancing schoolwork:** Half of respondents (49%) said they found it **difficult** to balance schoolwork with other aspects of life, and 43% felt overwhelmed by the amount of schoolwork they had to do. These numbers have declined slightly from 2020, suggesting an improvement (see Appendix for 2020 on vs off campus housing comparisons).

The percent of first-year respondents who agreed/strongly agreed with items related to academic adjustment and preparedness has remained consistent from **pre-pandemic years** through **2022**. Conversely, first-year respondents reported being less motivated and more overwhelmed during the **height of the pandemic** compared to peers in our **“new normal.”**

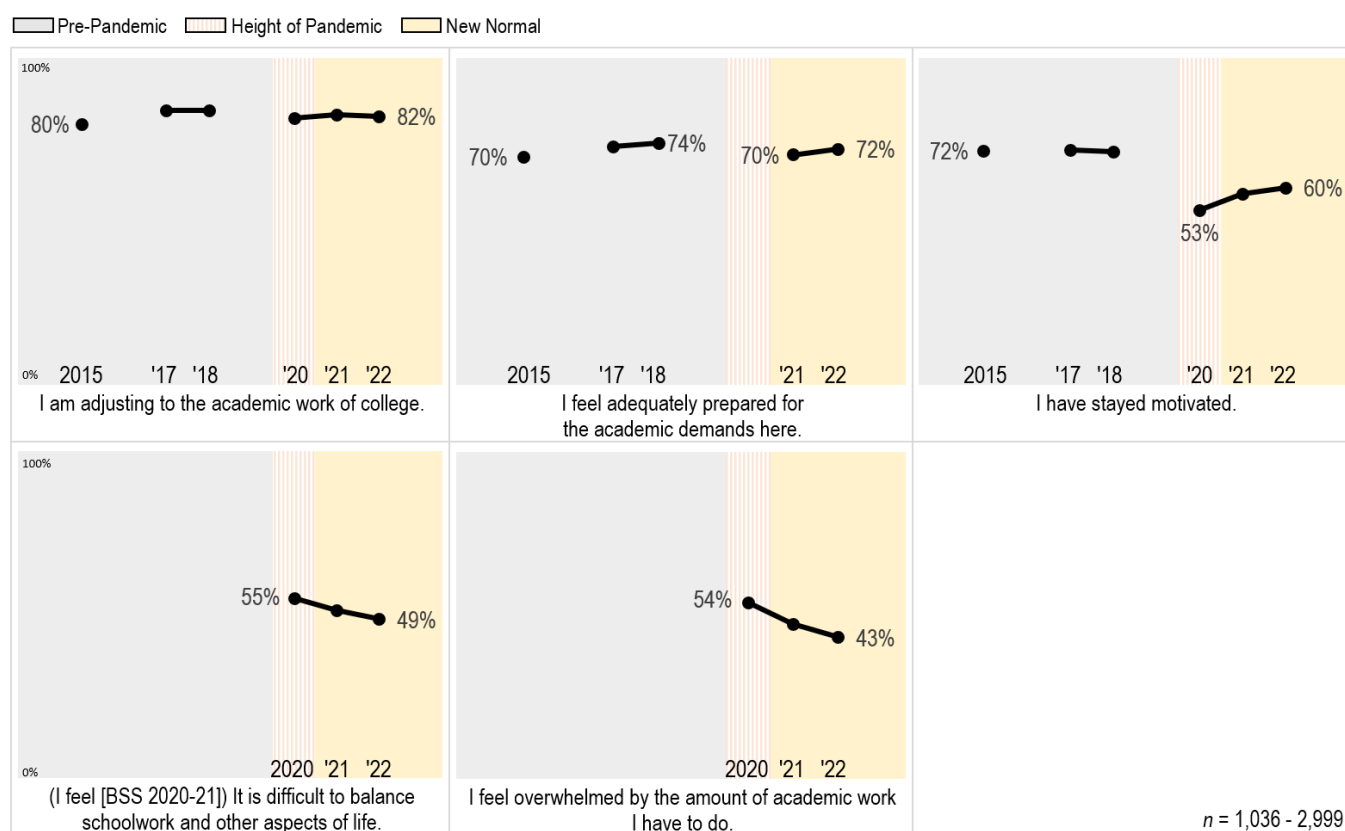


Figure 1. Percentage of respondents who agreed/strongly agreed in response to BSS longitudinal items on academic transition, BSS15-BSS22. Years without data indicate that the question was not included in that BSS administration.

Use of Campus Resources

No consistent pattern emerged in terms of how much respondents know about campus resources in Fall 2022 compared to before the pandemic.

- **Academic resources:** The percentage of respondents who agreed they knew where to get help on campus with reading and writing skills dipped during the pandemic, but has rebounded to pre-pandemic levels (around 70%). The percentage dropped to 52% in Fall 2020.
- **Respondents' willingness to ask for help:** Since Fall 2020, fewer respondents have agreed that they were willing to ask for help when they need it compared to before the pandemic. In 2016, 78% of respondents agreed with this statement. The percentage dipped to 72% in Fall 2020, where it has remained for the past three years.
- **Contacting advisors:** In our "new normal," a smaller percentage of respondents said they knew how to contact an advisor than before the pandemic—or even during the height of it: In 2017, 76% of respondents said they knew how to contact an advisor in their college/department. The number remained steady through 2020, but declined slightly in 2021 and 2022.
- Two survey items about campus resources were asked for the first time in Fall 2020. The same pattern emerged on both items: responses in Fall 2021 and Fall 2022 were similar, and increased from Fall 2020
 - In Fall 2021 and Fall 2022, 72% of respondents agreed they knew where to get help on campus with courses in which they were struggling. This increased from 56% in 2020.
 - In Fall 2022, 63% of respondents agreed they have a support network of people they met through UMD whom they can talk to if something is bothering them. This rose from 53% in 2020, but was almost the same as in 2021.

Use of Campus Resources: There was **no discernable longitudinal pattern** in what percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with items related to using campus resources.

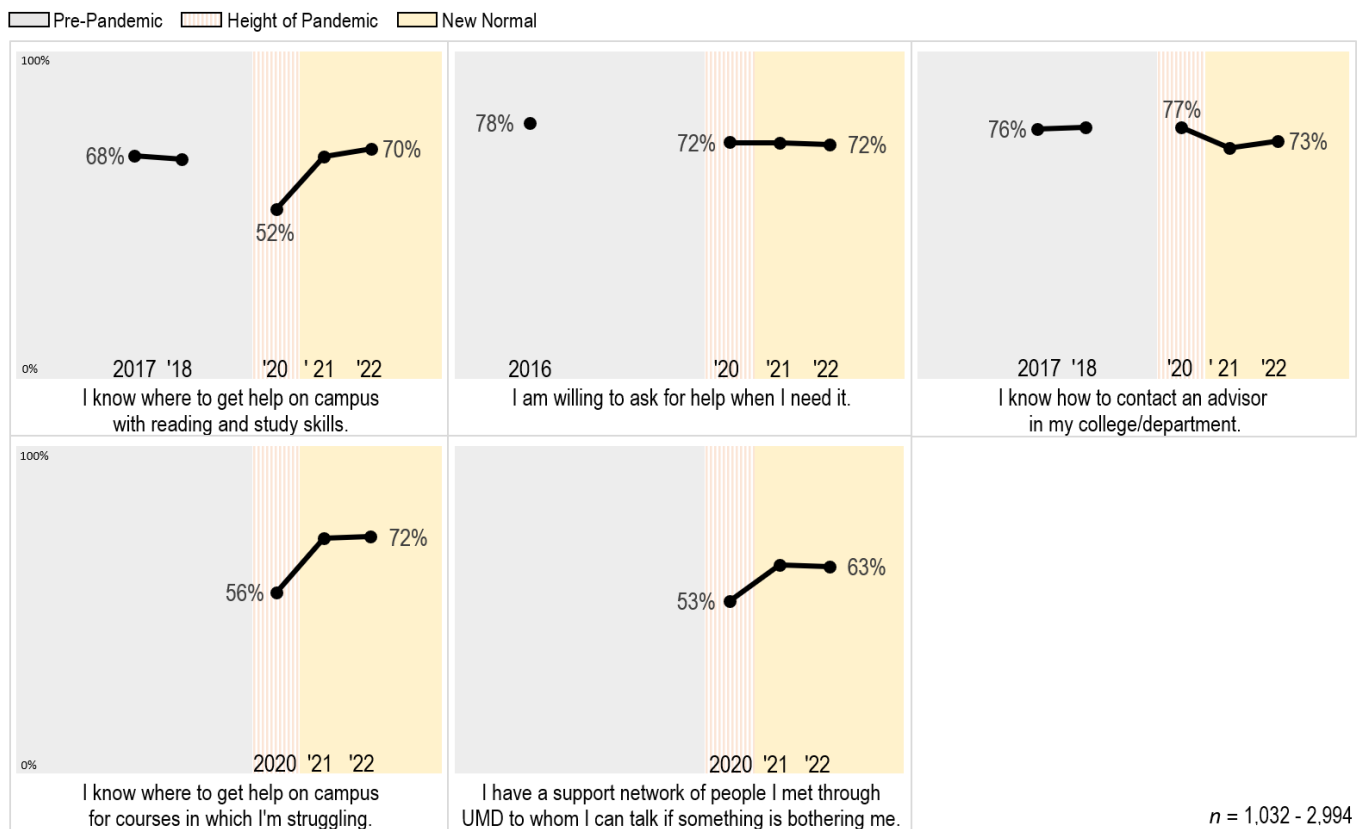


Figure 2. Percentage of respondents who agreed/strongly agreed to BSS longitudinal items on campus supports, BSS16-BSS22. Years without data indicate that the question was not included in that BSS administration.

Questions to consider

- Most respondents knew where to get help for courses in which they are struggling, but fewer said they were likely to ask for help if they needed it. What might explain this disconnect? Are there new barriers students face to getting help? Have students' preferences for how and where they get help changed?
- Why did a higher percentage of respondents report feeling that faculty cared about them at the height of the pandemic? What practices did we initiate during the pandemic that should be continued?

We have created a discussion guide to accompany this report. We hope it helps make our findings more applicable to your work and it easier to talk about the data with your colleagues.

Moving Forward

As we use survey data to inform our work with students, it is critical to consider whose voices are missing. The BSS is administered within introductory college courses. Students struggling with mental health issues may not be attending classes and may not be part of our sample/dataset. Some respondents may feel uncomfortable self-disclosing their personal struggles. Given enough of these instances, results might be skewed in a positive direction.

1. For fuller examinations of student academic adjustment, it would be helpful to seek multiple sources of information. For example, there are other groups on campus looking at the complexities involved with understanding the impact of COVID on academic performance.
2. What other sources of information do you have available that might paint a fuller picture of the first-year student experience?
3. What can you do next week, next month, and next year based on these findings that would make a difference to the students you interact with?

This report was written by the Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) Beginnings subgroup: Joann Prosser, Chair, Division of Student Affairs; Abby Do, Institutional Research, Planning & Assessment (IRPA); Traci Dula, Honors College; Jamie Edwards, IRPA; Danielle Glazer, IRPA; Melissa Hyre, Letters & Sciences; Lindsay Inge Carpenter, Libraries; Alia Lancaster, Academic Technology Experience; Alice Mitchell, Division of Student Affairs; Nick Orban, Enrollment Management; Tiffany Pao, Academic Technology Experience; Nicole Roop, School of Engineering; Tori Shay, Office of Orientation; Khris-Ann Small, Resident Life; Alan Socha, IRPA; Sophie Tullier, Stamp Student Union. For more information, to view past reports, or to join a CAWG subgroup, visit <http://ter.ps/CAWG>.

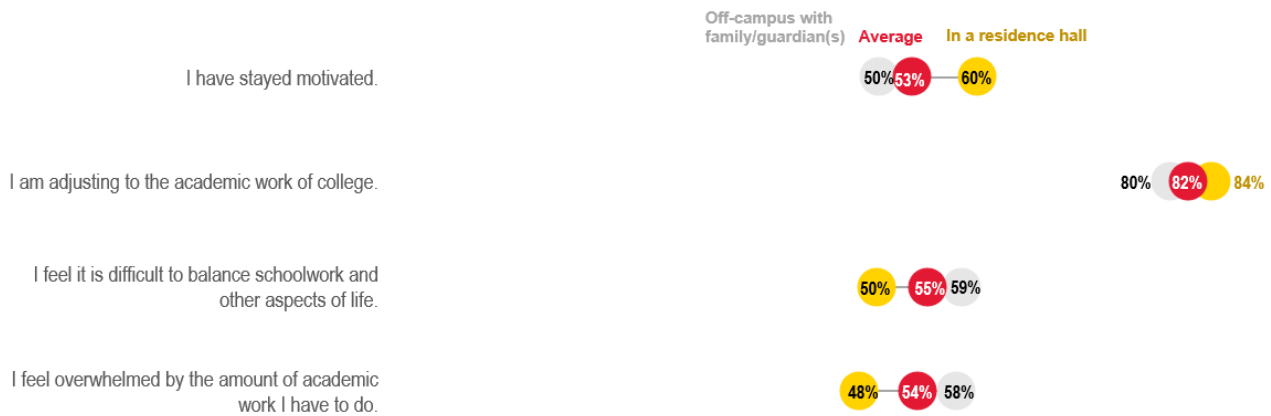
Appendix

How did survey responses differ for respondents living on campus and off campus in 2020?

In Fall 2020, less than half of survey respondents lived on campus in a residence hall. Respondents who lived on-campus and off-campus had different responses to items about their social and academic transition to college, though similar responses when asked about campus resources. These data provide additional context for understanding longitudinal trends: data from 2020 on the whole are presented above, but mask the different experiences students had.

For social transition and well-being comparisons via housing type in 2020, see the appendix within the [BSS22](#) report and [BSS20](#) and [BSS21](#) reports for details.

Academic transition: In fall 2020, respondents who lived in a residence hall and off-campus with family/guardian(s) reported somewhat different academic transitions to college.



Campus resources: In fall 2020, respondents had similar responses to questions about campus resources, no matter where they lived.

