



## Are we back to normal? First-year students' social transition and well-being<sup>1</sup>

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' social transition to college and their well-being, while the other focuses on [academic transition](#).

Both reports offer important comparisons of student perceptions before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, asking in effect, "Are we 'back to normal'?" And while COVID-19 disruptions have eased, racial reckoning and political tensions remain factors to navigate. 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

### Fall 2022 respondents reported a more positive social transition to college than in Fall 2020, though their perceptions have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. It appears that living on campus was helpful for developing relationships and connections.

At first glance, respondents appear to have had a more positive social transition to college in Fall 2022 compared to Fall 2020 (see Figure 1 on Page 2). This difference, however, may be related to the relationship between living on campus and first-year students' social transition to college. Specifically, Fall 2020 respondents who lived on campus, despite its challenges, perceived a similar social transition as Fall 2022 respondents, who predominantly lived on-campus (see appendix).<sup>3</sup>

- **Friendships:** Most respondents reported making friends at UMD in Fall 2022, but the proportion lags behind pre-pandemic levels.
  - **Making friends:** In Fall 2022, 83% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they made friends at UMD, similar to 2021. This percentage increased from 58% in Fall 2020 (*recall the effect of the high proportion that lived off-campus due to COVID*).<sup>3</sup> In 2016, the last time this question was

<sup>1</sup> This CAWG Beginning Student Survey Report is one of two produced from the Fall 2022 data. Also see [First-year students' academic transition](#)

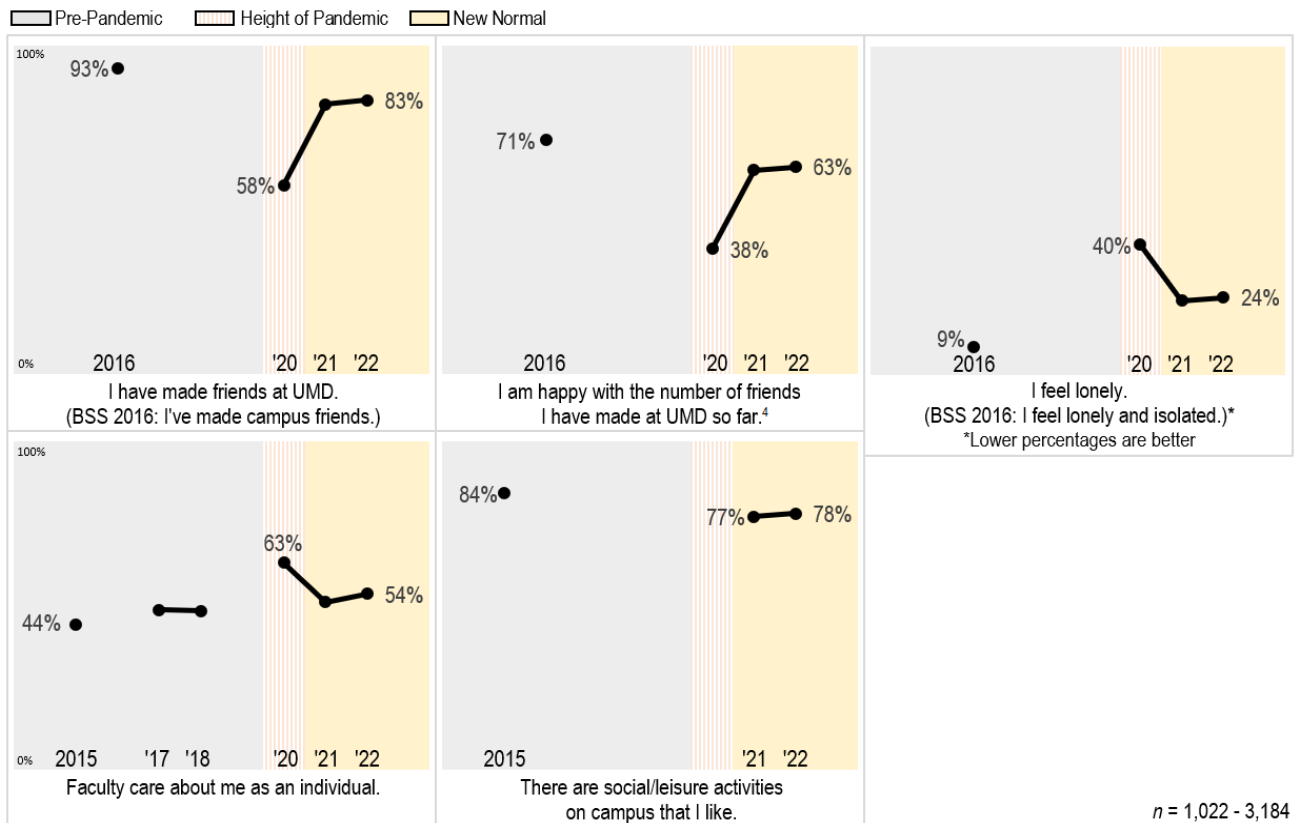
<sup>2</sup> The BSS survey was administered in ENGL101, UNIV100, FIRE120, IDEA101, BSCV181, TLPL288D, GEMS100, HNUH100, CPET100, CPJT100, CPMS100, CPPL100, CPSA100, HACSA100, HBUS100, HLSC100, and PLCY201S. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

asked before the pandemic, 93% of respondents agreed. These data—though six years old—suggest that students’ perceptions have not bounced back to the level they used to be.

- **Satisfaction:** When respondents were asked if they were happy with the number of friends they made at UMD<sup>4</sup>, 63% agreed - almost identical to Fall 2021, but an increase from 38% in Fall 2020 when the majority of first-year respondents lived off-campus and social distancing was in place.<sup>5</sup>
- **Loneliness:** In Fall 2022, 24% of respondents said they felt lonely, similar to Fall 2021. Fewer felt lonely than in Fall 2020 (40%<sup>5</sup>). Whereas in Fall 2016, 9% agreed with the more extreme wording “I feel lonely and isolated.”<sup>6</sup>
- **Perceived faculty care:** The percent of respondents who said faculty care about them has been rising over the past decade, from 44% in 2015, and may have peaked in 2020 at 63%<sup>4</sup>. In Fall 2022, 54% of respondents agreed with this item.
- **Activities on campus:** In 2021 and 2022, similar percentages of respondents agreed there were social/leisure activities on campus that they like (78% in 2022). The last time this question was asked in 2015, 84% of respondents agreed.

While respondents in **2022 responded more positively** on items about social relationships and support compared to during the **height of the pandemic**, responses still lag behind **pre-pandemic** levels.



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

<sup>4</sup> The wording of this item has changed in 2022. Prior to 2022, it read, “I am happy with the number of friends I have made at UMD so far.” Starting in 2022, it read, “I am happy with the number of new UMD friends I have made so far.”

<sup>5</sup> As mentioned previously, 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.

<sup>6</sup> The wording of this item changed. Before 2020, it read, “I feel lonely and isolated.” Starting in 2020, it read, “I feel lonely.”

## A notable percentage of respondents continue to struggle with their well-being.

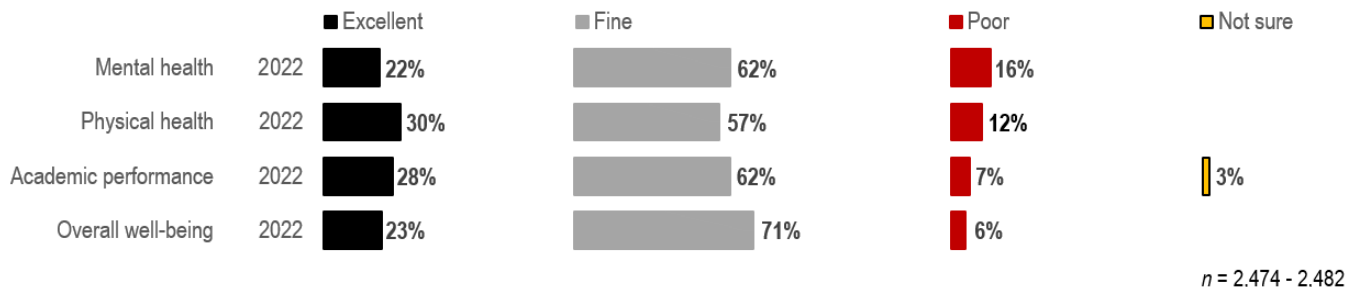
This section looks at items that were first asked before the pandemic in [2019](#), and repeated in [2021](#). In Fall 2022, as in previous years, a troubling number of respondents reported struggling with various dimensions of well-being.. For example, 16% (388) of respondents rated their mental health as poor. Figure 2 below provides Fall 2022 responses across items.

- Mental and physical health:** Despite the challenges of the pandemic, responses across the past three surveys showed similar proportions of first-year respondents 8-10 weeks into the fall semester have rated their mental health and physical health as fine or excellent. Between 82%-84% said their mental health was fine or excellent across surveys and 86%-88% said their physical health was fine or excellent.

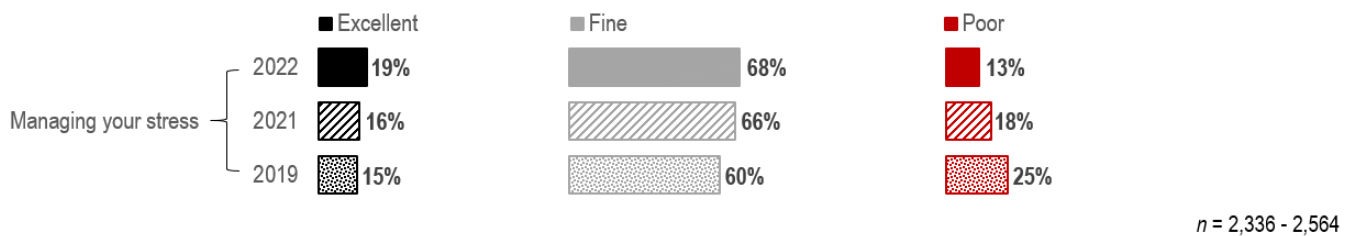
A higher proportion of respondents in both 2019 and 2022 rated their physical health as excellent (28% in 2019, 30% in 2022) compared to their mental health (23% in 2019, 22% in 2022).

- Overall well-being:** Fewer respondents said they were struggling with their overall well-being (6% said poor) compared to their academic performance (7%), physical health (12%), and mental health (16%).
- Managing stress:** In 2022, 13% of respondents said their stress management was poor, down from 25% in [2019](#).

While most first-year respondents consistently rated aspects of their well-being as **excellent** or **fine**, a sizable portion continued to respond that they were doing **poorly** eight to ten weeks into their college career. Longitudinal responses have been consistent for these items:



Longitudinal comparisons revealed a slight positive trend related to **stress management**.



**Figure 2.** Responses to items on respondents' well-being, [BSS19](#), [BSS21](#), BSS22.

### Questions to consider

- What does it mean that, despite the pandemic, in 2019, 2021, and 2022, first-year BSS respondents at the beginning of their college careers reported similar perceptions of their well-being? How well do survey data reflect the lived experience of faculty and staff who anecdotally describe responding to higher levels of student distress, and campus data that show increased trends in students' use of counseling, crisis-response, and disability support resources?
- How do we "move the needle" with regard to student well-being? What initiatives that we started during the pandemic should we continue? Which data points are useful to compare to pre-pandemic benchmarks? Alternatively, are there data points that are no longer directly comparable given the complexity of contextualizing the data due to COVID? What existing and new metrics and data are required to track student well-being?
- What national and world events might influence how students responded to these items in different years (e.g., in 2019, the year before a US presidential election versus in 2021, after the height of the pandemic)? How might the compounding effect of these events influence responses?
- The BSS is administered 8-10 weeks into the semester. How consistent are students' perceptions throughout the entire semester or into the spring semester?
- What role might social desirability play in how students respond to social transition and well-being questions?
- Student perceptions of faculty care have increased over the years and peaked during the pandemic. How do we maintain the practice of campus-wide deliberate care to students that was practiced in the 2020-21 school year?

We have created a discussion guide to accompany this Social Transition and Well-Being BSS22 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 well-being, it would be helpful to seek multiple sources of information.
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>.

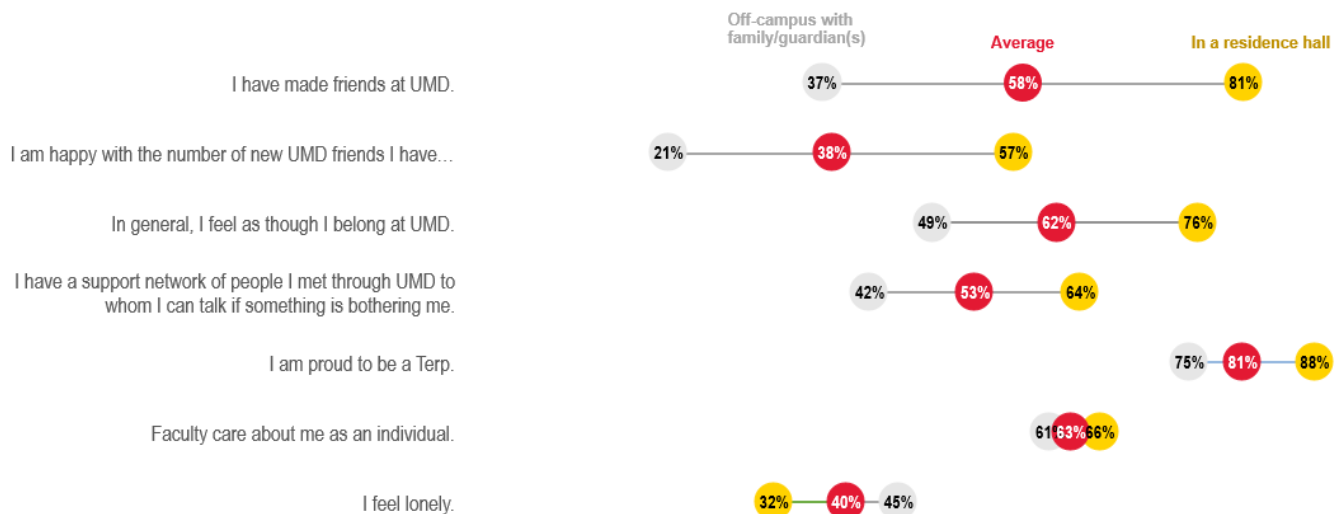
## Appendix

### How did survey responses differ for respondents living on campus and off campus in 2020?<sup>7</sup>

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 within this report, but mask the different experiences students had.

For academic transition and use of campus resources comparisons via housing type in 2020, see the appendix within the [BSS22](#) report and [BSS20](#) and [BSS21](#) reports for details.

**Social transition:** In fall 2020, respondents who lived in **a residence hall** and **off-campus with family/guardian(s)** had different experiences with the social transition to college.



<sup>7</sup> Fall 2020 data are skewed due to COVID densification of res halls, especially social transition responses for off-campus first-years. See the [BSS20](#) and [BSS21](#) CAWG Reports for details.