



First-year students' transition and well-being

This report, written by the Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) Beginnings subcommittee, discusses first-year students' social and academic transition to college, their well-being, and their awareness of academic resources in Fall 2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this cohort began their college career with vastly different high school experiences (i.e., remote). This report discusses students' transitions in their first semester, and when possible, provides longitudinal comparisons. The BSS asks different questions each year, so longitudinal data may come from different surveys. When making comparisons to the Fall 2020 cohort, keep in mind that less than half of the Fall 2020 cohort lived on-campus, the majority of their courses their first semester were online, and social distancing measures were in place; as a result, their transition to college was a very different experience. As the campus transitioned back to being fully in-person in Fall 2021, these findings and comparisons provide insight into the unique experiences of the Fall 2021 cohort, especially as the campus works to meet students' needs and help them succeed.

The 2021 Beginning Student Survey (BSS) was administered online to new, first-time undergraduates (including Freshmen Connection) in select courses from October 18 - October 29, 2021.¹ During the Fall 2021 semester, 2,396 (39%) out of 6,107 new undergraduates completed the survey. The distribution of respondents by race/ethnicity mirrored that of the population. Female students were slightly over-represented (55% of respondents compared to 53% of the population).

Respondents reported a more positive social transition to college than in Fall 2020. However, it appears that living on campus was crucial for developing relationships and connection. Additionally, student perceptions of their social transition to college have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels.

At first glance, overall responses to the eight social transition items appear to have improved over the past year (see Figure 1). However, Fall 2020 respondents who lived on campus, despite its challenges, perceived a similar social transition to college as Fall 2021 respondents (see Figure 1, percentages for Fall 2020 respondents living on campus in yellow).² Additionally, longitudinal data suggests that students' perceptions of their social transition have not fully returned to pre-pandemic levels.

- **Friendships:** Most students reported making friends at UMD in Fall 2021, but the proportion lags behind pre-pandemic levels.
 - **Making friends:** In Fall 2021, 82% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they have made friends at UMD, compared to 58% of respondents in Fall 2020. However, a similar proportion of respondents who lived in residence halls in Fall 2020 agreed with this statement (81%). The last time students were asked this question, in 2016, 93% of respondents agreed they had made friends, suggesting that students' perceptions of their friendships have not rebounded to pre-pandemic levels.
 - **Satisfaction:** When students were asked if they were happy with the number of friends they made at UMD, two-thirds (62%) agreed—a large increase from 38% in Fall 2020.³ Again, the

¹ The BSS survey was administered in ENGL101, UNIV100, GEMS100, BSCV181, HNUH100, IDEA101, and TLPL288D. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

² For the Fall 2020 BBS report, visit https://irpa.umd.edu/CAWG/Reports/2021/memo_june21.pdf. Historically, around 90% of first-year students live in residence halls their first year. In Fall 2020, the halls were at 42% occupancy for de-densification. Fall 2020 provided a unique analysis opportunity, since the sample sizes of respondents were large enough for us to compare students who lived on campus with those who lived at home with family.

³ The wording of this item changed. In 2020, it read, "I am happy with the number of new UMD friends I have made so far." In 2021, it read, "I'm happy with the number of friends I have made at UMD so far."

disaggregated data showed comparable experiences for those who lived on-campus between Fall 2020 and Fall 2021 (57% living on campus agreed vs. 21% living off-campus).

- **Engagement with faculty:** The percent of respondents who said faculty care about them has been rising slowly over the past decade, from 42% in 2012, and may have peaked in 2020 at 63%. In Fall 2021, about half of respondents (51%) agreed with this item. Unlike other items in this section, the 2020 responses were consistent regardless of housing location.
- **Loneliness:** In Fall 2021, one in four respondents (23%) reported feeling lonely. Fewer agreed than in Fall 2020 (40%). When broken out by living situation, 45% of respondents living off campus in Fall 2020 said they felt lonely, compared to 32% living on campus. This item was not asked before Fall 2020.

First-year respondents perceived many of their social relationships and support more positively overall in 2021 than 2020, which may be due to the larger percentage of on-campus residence in 2021 (88% vs 42%).

Indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following: | % Agree / Strongly Agree

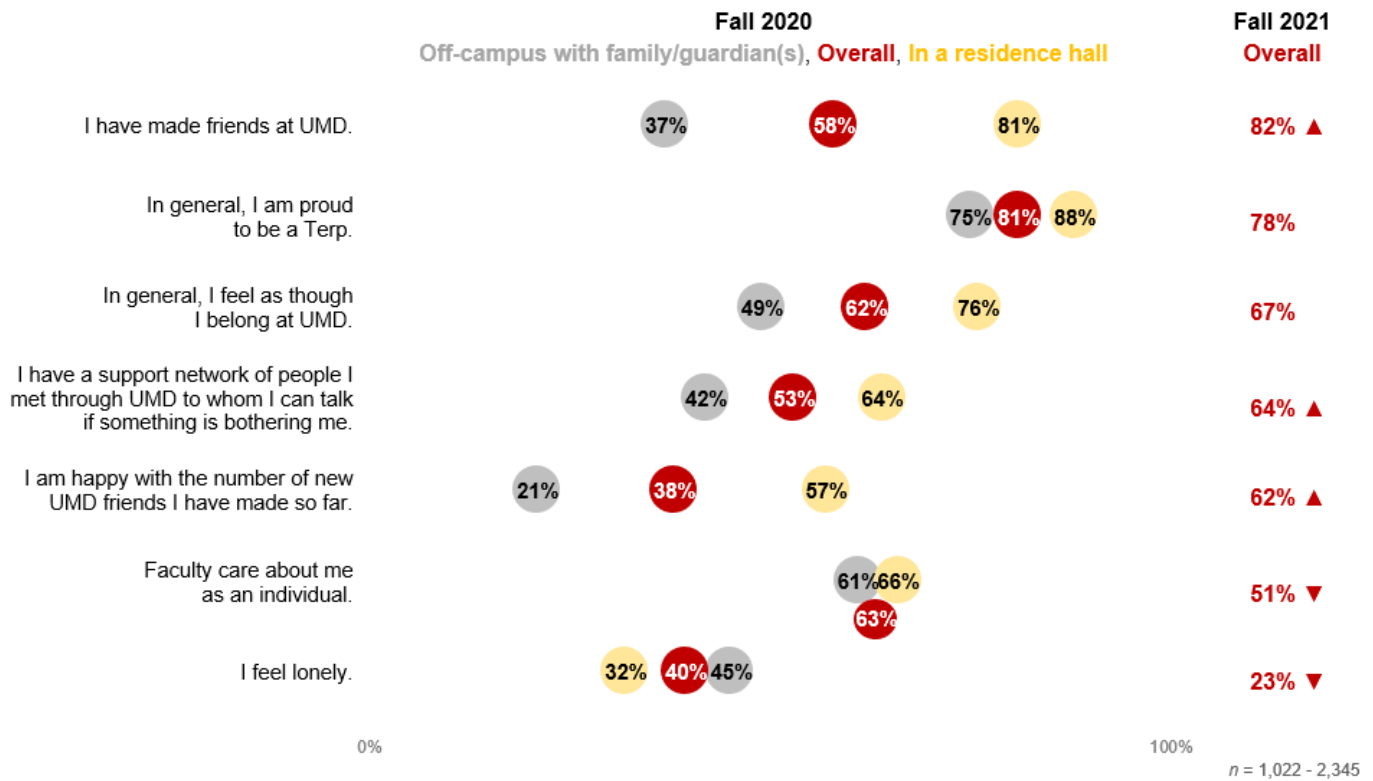


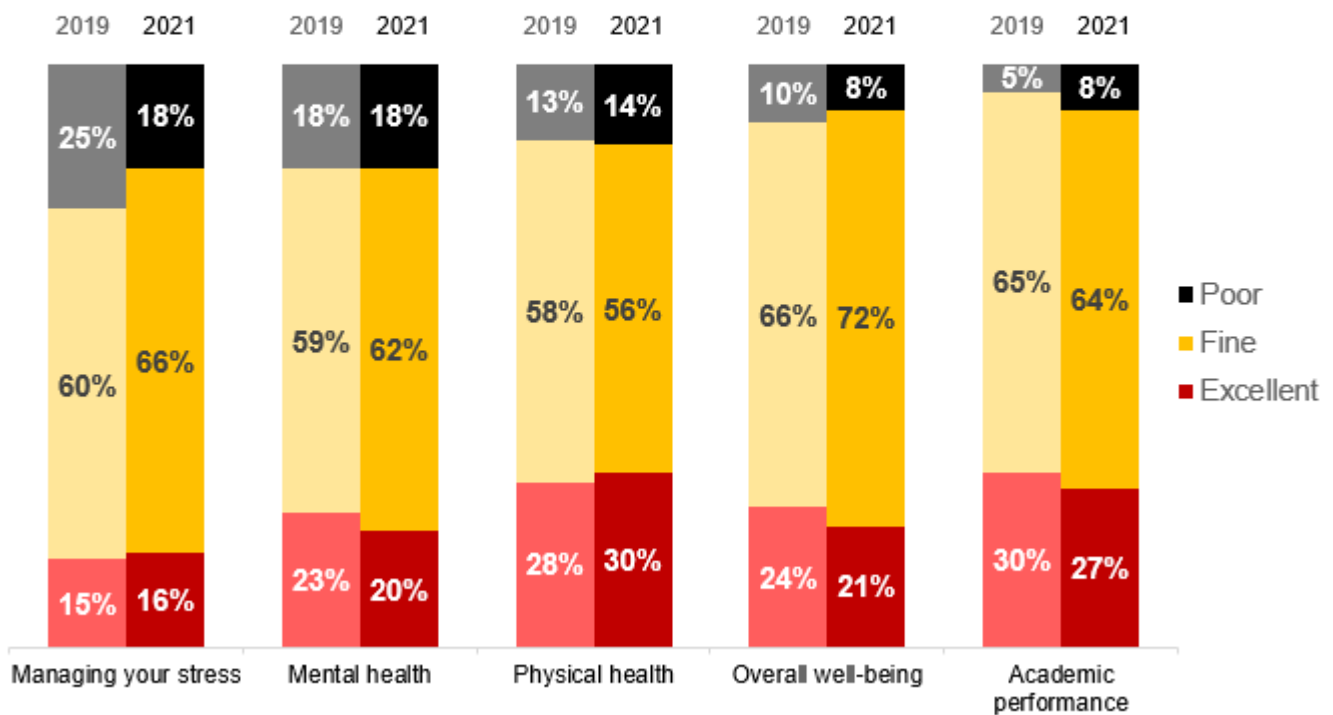
Figure 1. BSS longitudinal items on social relationships and support in Fall 2020 (left) and Fall 2021 (right). Fall 2021 overall percentages are listed in red to the right of the graph. Changes larger than 10 percentage points since Fall 2020 are highlighted using up and down arrows. Fall 2020 data are shown in the dot plot. Because about half of respondents lived at home in Fall 2020, the sample size was large enough to disaggregate by housing type; this was not possible in Fall 2021, as a much smaller proportion of students lived off campus.

As in 2019, a concerning percentage of the incoming class of 2021 struggled with their well-being.

- This section looks at items that were first [asked in 2019](#), before the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, a concerning percentage of respondents reported struggling with various dimensions of their well-being. Almost one-fifth (18%) of respondents rated their mental health and ability to manage stress as poor.
- Despite the challenges of the pandemic over the last two years, responses were similar to Fall 2019.
 - Similar proportions of respondents rated their mental health (82% in 2019 and 2021) and physical health (86% in 2019 and 2021) as fine or excellent.
 - Respondents in both 2019 and 2021 rated their overall well-being (90% fine or excellent in 2019, 93% in 2021) higher than their physical health (86% in 2019 and 2021), mental health (82% in 2019 and 2021), and managing their stress (75% in 2019, 82% in 2021).
 - A higher proportion of respondents in both 2019 and 2021 rated their physical health as excellent (28% in 2019, 30% in 2021) compared to their mental health (23% in 2019, 20% in 2021).

First-year respondents struggled with stress and health similar to before the pandemic in 2019.

Rate yourself on each of the following for this semester:



n = 2,333 - 2,377

Figure 2. Responses to items on students' well-being, BSS19 and BSS21.

Students had similar perceptions of their academic transition to college in Fall 2021 as in Fall 2020, consistent with longitudinal trends.

- In Fall 2021, 83% of respondents agreed they were adjusting to the academic work of college and 70% agreed they felt adequately prepared for the academic demands at UMD.
- On the other hand, half of respondents (51%) said they found it difficult to balance schoolwork with other aspects of life, and 47% felt overwhelmed by the amount of schoolwork they had to do.
- Despite the dramatic shifts in students' living and learning experiences since Fall 2020, these responses were fairly consistent from the BSS20. There were slight differences in the percentage of students who agreed with these items, but the differences were 7 percentage points or fewer (see this [Fall 2020 report](#) for details).

While many respondents felt academically prepared for college, about half found the workload and balancing school with other responsibilities challenging.

Indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following: | % Agree & Strongly Agree

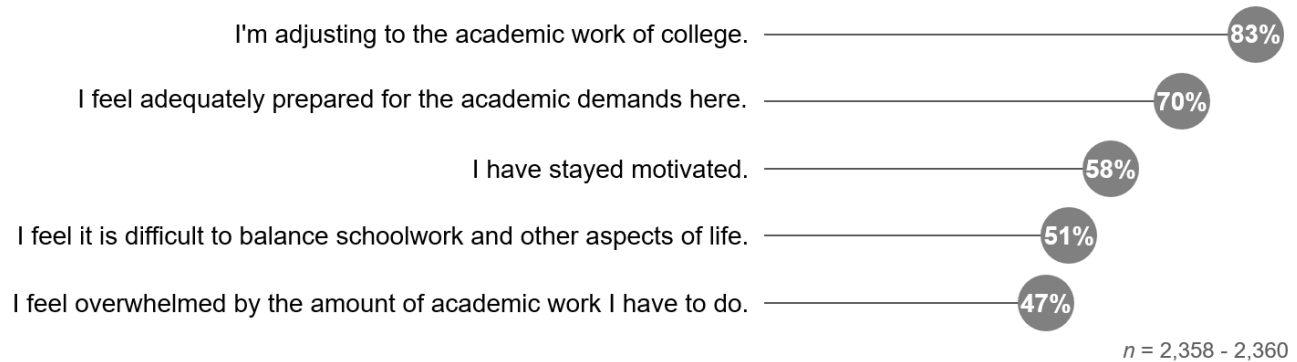


Figure 3. Percent of respondents who selected agree/strongly agree, BSS21.

More respondents said they knew how to access campus resources, compared to Fall 2020.

- In Fall 2021, 72% of respondents agreed they knew where to get help on campus with courses in which they were struggling, an increase from 56% in 2020.
- Similarly, the percent of respondents who knew where to get help with reading and study skills rose from 52% in 2020 to 68% in 2021—a 16 percentage point jump. This seems to indicate a “bounce back” to pre-pandemic responses: in 2018, the last time this item was asked before the pandemic, 67% of respondents agreed.
- In both Fall 2020 and Fall 2021, about three-fourths (72%) of respondents said they felt willing to ask for help when they needed it. This is consistent with longitudinal data from before the pandemic.

More first-year students know where to get help and have a support network compared to Fall 2020, and over two-thirds know how to contact an advisor or are willing to ask for help.

Indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following: | % Agree & Strongly Agree

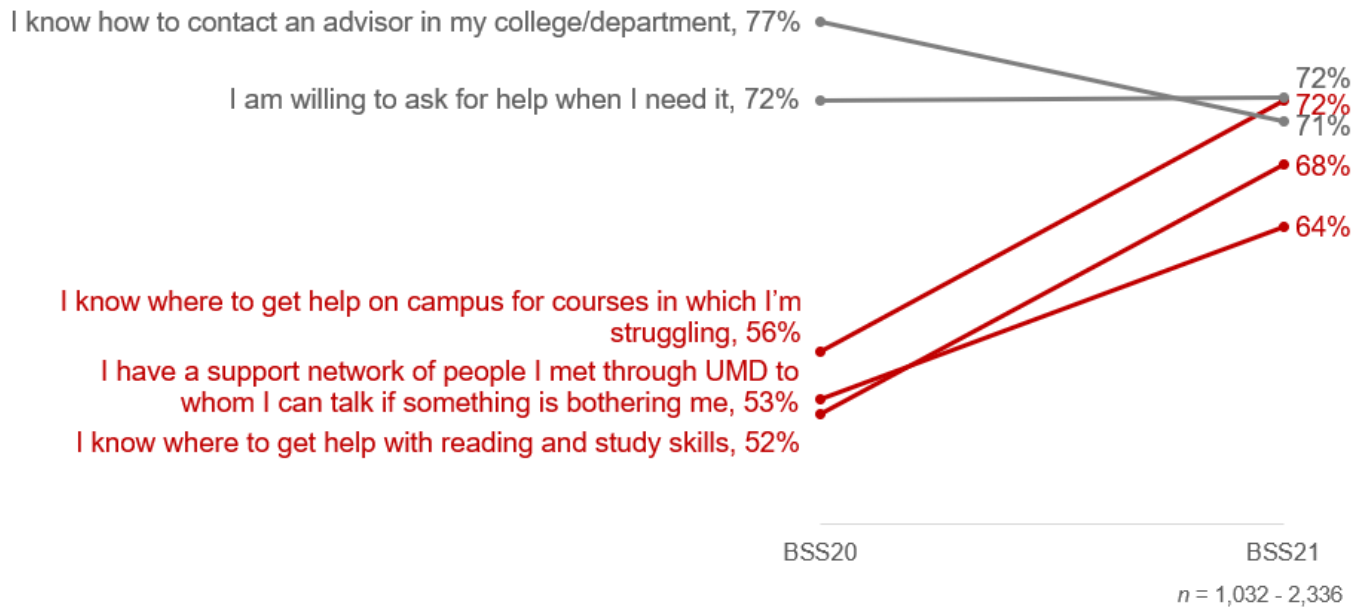


Figure 4. Percent of respondents who selected agree/strongly agree, BSS20 (left) and BSS21 (right).

Moving Forward:

- Given that living on campus appears to play an important role in first-year students' development of social relationships, what are the most important aspects of that experience that contribute to students' social transition?
- What does it mean that in 2019 and 2021 students had similar perceptions of their well-being? How do we "move the needle"? What initiatives that we started during the pandemic should we continue? Which data points are useful to compare to pre-pandemic benchmarks?
- Why did a higher percentage of students 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?
- What did we learn about living and learning at UMD during the pandemic that we want to keep?

Implications for Practice:

- 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, Resident Life; Leigh Dunewood, Libraries; Jamie Edwards, Institutional Research, Planning & Assessment (IRPA); Danielle Glazer, IRPA; Melissa Hyre, Letters & Sciences; Lindsay Inge Carpenter, Libraries; Alia Lancaster, Academic Technology Experience; Alice Mitchell, Counseling Center; Nick Orban, Enrollment Management; Nicole Roop, School of Engineering; Alan Socha, IRPA; Imani Spence, Libraries; Sophie Tullier, Stamp Student Union. For more information, to view past reports, or to join a CAWG subgroup, visit <http://ter.ps/CAWG>.