THE 'DIGITAL PULSE'
OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Students, faculty, and administrators agree — stress among students is the greatest barrier to achieving their educational goals.
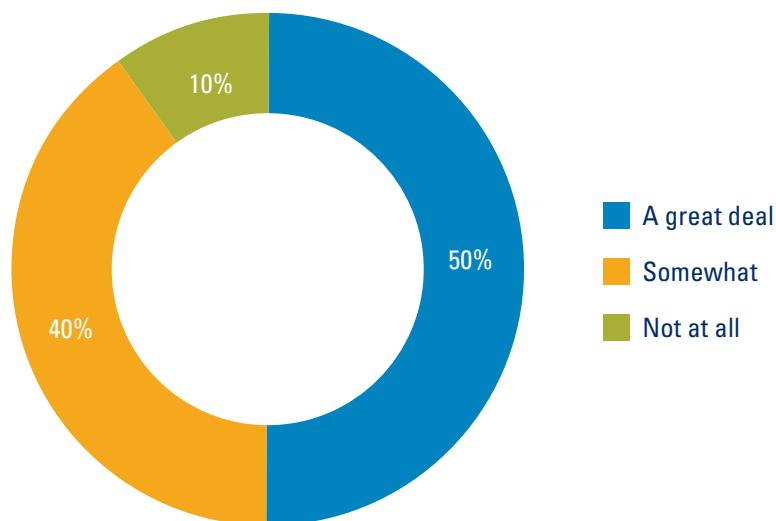
BY JEFF SEAMAN AND JULIA SEAMAN

THE DIGITAL LEARNING PULSE SURVEY IS AN ONGOING research project conduced by Bay View Analytics to understand how the pandemic is changing higher education. Bay View conducted its most recent survey in partnership with a broad array of higher education partners, including Cengage, the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), Achieving the Dream (ATD), Phi Theta Kappa (PTK), the Online Learning Consortium (OLC), the Higher Education Research & Development Institute (HERDI), and College Pulse.
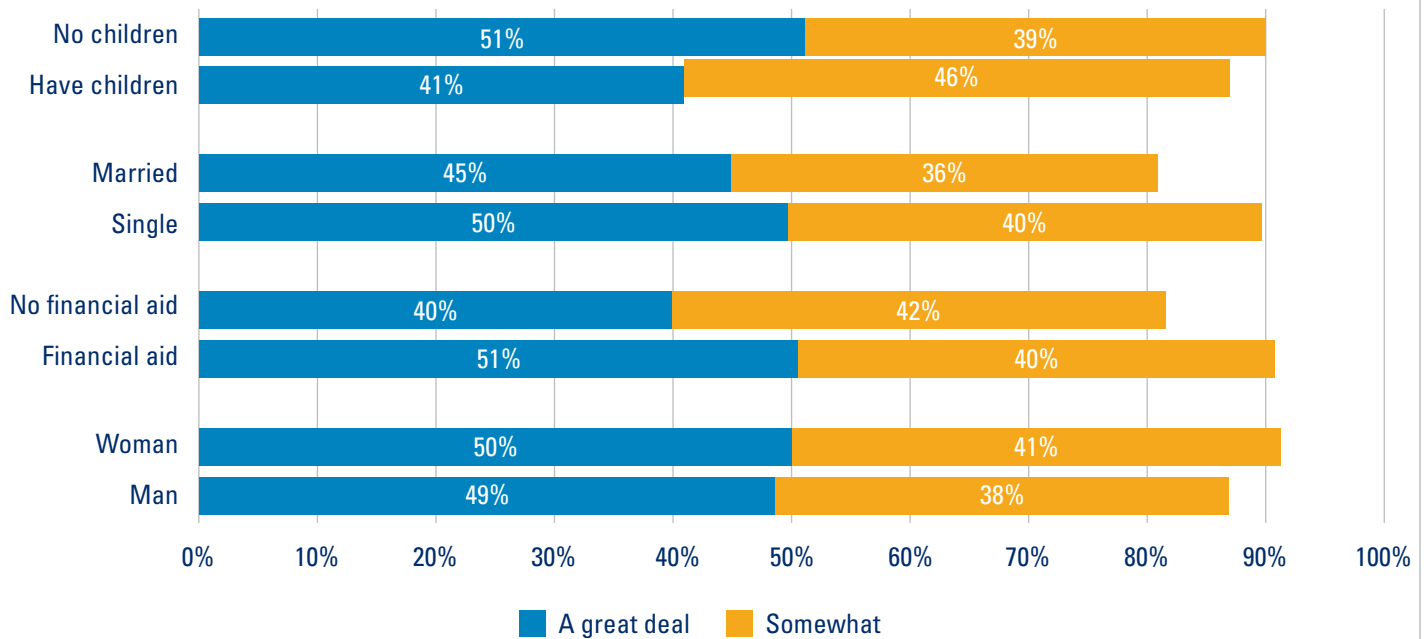
The project surveyed 1,277 community college students. Half — 50 percent — reported that stress posed "a great deal" of a problem during their spring 2021 term, with an additional 40% saying it was "somewhat" of a problem.

The concern with stress was not limited to a particular class of students. While there are some differences in marital status, having children, and whether the respondent is receiving financial aid, stress was a significant problem for every subgroup of students.

To what degree was stress a problem for you during your Spring 2021 term?

50% A great deal
40% Somewhat
10% Not at all

To what degree was stress a problem for you during your Spring 2021 term?

Category	A great deal	Somewhat
No children	51%	39%
Have children	41%	46%
Married	45%	36%
Single	50%	40%
No financial aid	40%	42%
Financial aid	51%	40%
Woman	50%	41%
Man	49%	38%

It is no surprise that community college students feel stressed, as colleges have long understood that students require support beyond academic delivery and achievement issues. However, the current numbers are unprecedented: the Healthy Minds Network found that anxiety and depression reached record levels among students during the fall of 2020.

Critically for institutions, faculty and administrators are in broad agreement of the relative rankings of what factors negatively impacted students — and every group surveyed agreed that stress is the most critical factor.

RANK	STUDENTS	FACULTY	ADMINISTRATORS
	RANKING OF FACTORS IMPACTING STUDENT SUCCESS FOR SPRING 2021		
1	Feelings of stress	Feelings of stress	Feelings of stress
2	Level of motivation	Level of motivation	Financial issues
3	Financial issues	Work issues	Level of motivation
4	Family or health issues	Financial issues	Work issues
5	Work issues	Family or health issues	Family or health issues
6	Technology issues	Technology issues	Technology issues
7	Lack of non-academic support	Lack of non-academic support	Lack of non-academic support
8	Lack of academic support	Lack of academic support	Lack of academic support

> The most critical lesson goes well beyond support structures. Students need courses, programs, and support networks designed to encourage engagement among students and between students and the institution.

Analysis of the open-ended comments from hundreds of students highlighted two common areas that institutions need to address: engagement and early and easy access to support.

Engagement

The most critical lesson goes well beyond support structures. Students need courses, programs, and support networks designed to encourage engagement among students and between students and the institution. In response to the Digital Pulse survey, students repeatedly mentioned the lack of interpersonal engagement in online courses leading to a sense of isolation.

The most common issue was the limited engagement with fellow students:

- *"Not being able to connect with other students and only staring at names on a screen was intolerable at times."*
- *"Compared to in-person courses, online courses make it tough to get to know my classmates."*
- *"The one thing I was lacking both semesters was a study buddy. It would be nice if there were some optional virtual meetings where we can study for a test together."*
- *"I personally think it would be worth having a channel where you can communicate to your peers in regards to an assignment that you are unsure about."*

This complaint was most pronounced among those who preferred in-person courses, but also common among those who liked online delivery:

- *"I have found that I generally prefer online courses, but of course, this comes at the cost of greatly reduced interactions with other students."*

Student-to-student engagement was not the only concern. The lack of engagement with faculty in online courses was also a common refrain:

- *"I felt like fully online made me feel more unproductive and felt that communication with the professors and TAs was hard to reach out."*
- *"More interaction between students and teachers should be implemented."*
- *"I would like more communication with the school."*

The effort required for a faculty member to move an in-person course online is substantial. Moving that course and optimizing it for online delivery requires even more time and training. However, faculty members and institutions need to build mechanisms to encourage and support the communication among students that "just happened" during in-person classes. Approaches mentioned by students included a student-only communications channel, sharing student pictures and bios among classmates, and better student-to-student communication in the learning management system.

Easy access to quality support

While less common than complaints about the lack of engagement, students also mentioned the need for easier access and better support services. Among their comments:

- *"I would like someone other than an advisor to help with career advice and mental advice with growing depression and losing the sense of self. Advisors are cool, but they aren't people who can make us feel at ease."*
- *"I just want more help financially and a better advisor who would actually listen to me and not make fun of me asking questions."*
- *"It's hard to actually talk to someone, and when I do get assistance it's like pulling teeth."*
- *"I feel that there should be career counselors and advisors in place to regularly meet with those students who are lost and in need of navigation of their interests and careers related to their major/degree."*

Students also realize that they bear some responsibility as well: *"I think that if I had sought help earlier, it would be a lot better."*

Very little of this is likely to be news for those on the front lines of student support. Having quality services that are well-known and easy to reach is at the core of any institution's support program. These student quotes only reinforce this lesson. The approaches for dealing with student stress are not always straightforward, with a combined burden of greater demand for support services and the additional effort required to provide services remotely. The student message is that the need is real and growing.

Jeff Seaman, Ph.D., is director of Bay View Analytics. Julia E. Seaman, Ph.D., is research director for Bay View Analytics. Visit bayviewanalytics