



WHITE PAPER

Navigating the Recovery

A Long-Term Perspective on Student Success Following the Pandemic—and What Actions You Can Take Now



Navigating the Recovery

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Mapping the Path Ahead

The public health crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic is abating and giving way to an education crisis that may only just be starting. Pandemic-era students learned and socialized differently than their predecessors, leaving many underdeveloped in one or both regards relative to what we would have expected in the past. Education and human development is cumulative over time, suggesting that colleges and universities could still be dealing with the lingering aftereffects for years to come as pandemic-era students work their way through the system.

What will this disruption look like, how long will it last, and what can student success leaders do to prepare? To answer these questions, we analyzed data from multiple independent sources to map out the years ahead.

As this picture came into focus, we found that student success leaders should anticipate at least five more years of elevated student needs. Lower K-12 test scores extend back to elementary school and foretell heightened demand on academic support staff. Dramatically elevated mental health concerns present an evolving challenge that most schools are not yet ready to meet. Meanwhile, labor market churn among student support staff hinders efforts to get ready, yet also creates an opportunity to implement bold new strategies.

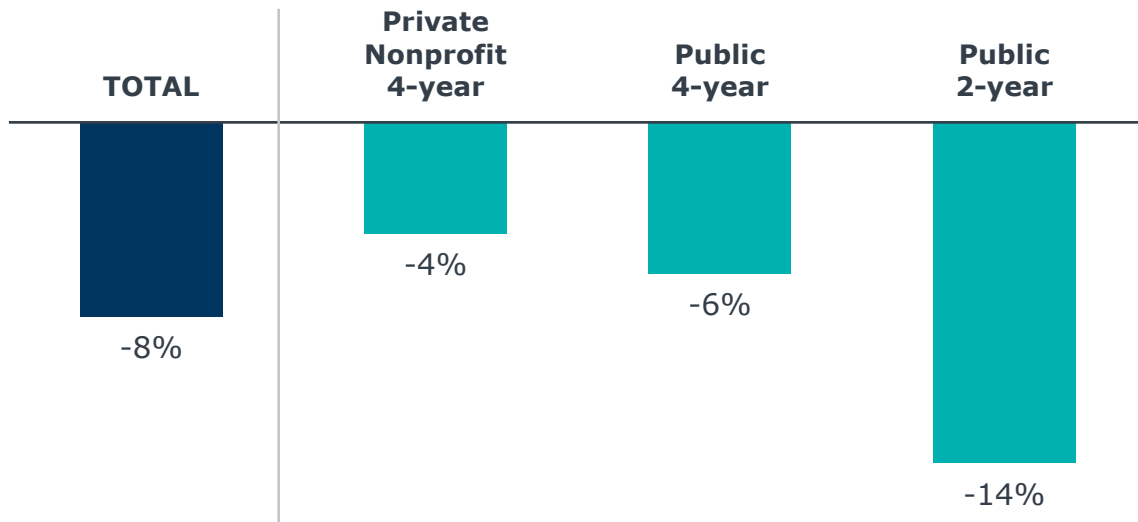
The pandemic exacerbated long-standing education equity issues and could ultimately reverse decades of work on access and completion. We should approach this challenge as an opportunity to finally eliminate many unfair barriers to college completion while strengthening our value proposition for tomorrow's students.

The stakes are high. Overall undergraduate enrollment declined by 1.2 million students from fall 2019 to fall 2022. Roughly 43% is attributable to a decline in returning enrollments. Retention secures tuition revenue and protects the sunk cost of recruitment. Leaders who follow the recommendations in this paper will get a leg up on the coming challenges and help ensure the financial health of their institutions.



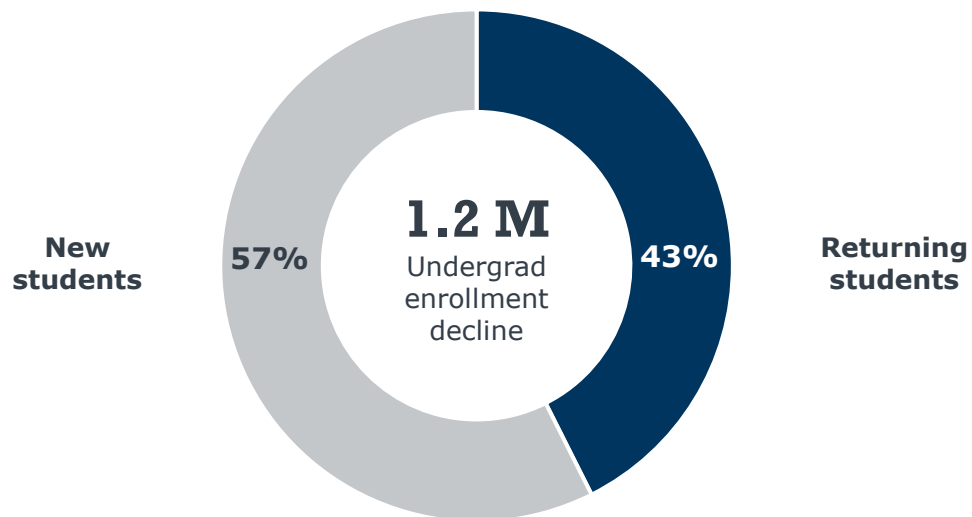
Estimated Undergraduate Enrollment, Fall 2019 to 2022*

National Student Clearinghouse



Breakdown of Undergraduate Enrollment Gap, Fall 2019 to 2022*

National Student Clearinghouse



* Preliminary data for fall 2022 enrollment



Urgency Around Equity

The pandemic expanded equity gaps. Academic, social, and financial challenges have had a disproportionate impact on enrollment and academic success for students of color, first-generation students, and students from lower-income backgrounds.

Our long-term strength is at risk. Education is foundational to our growth as a nation. College graduates power the knowledge economy, generate more tax revenue, grow GDP, and cost the public less in assistance. Wider equity gaps and lower completion rates threaten our national competitiveness and hurt our long-term economic well-being.

Bold action is needed to mitigate the worst long-term impacts. The challenges discussed in this paper are already having an outsized impact on our most vulnerable students and communities. Fortunately, the last ten years have given us a clear blueprint of best practices proven to close equity gaps and the technologies needed to support them. All that is required now is strong leadership willing to make the necessary investments and work across institutions to address the systemic equity challenges facing our entire industry. EAB supports these leaders through our national initiative, the **Moon Shot for Equity**.

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Pandemic Ripple Effects



Three Trends Reshaping the Student Success
Landscape in the 2020s



Long-Term Impact of Unfinished K-12

K-12 assessments suggest five or more years of recovery

Fewer undergraduates have experience with pre-pandemic college modalities. More than two years have passed since the onset of the pandemic. During that time, we have welcomed three incoming fall classes representing more than six million undergraduates. Pandemic-era students will soon represent the majority of higher education enrollment.

We should approach this evolution with empathy and perspective. A traditional-aged first-year student in fall 2022 would have been a high school sophomore in the early months of the pandemic. For these students, pandemic-era learning modalities and accommodations are “normal.” Their experiences differ wildly from any previous cohort, and these differences are already manifesting as difficulties with course performance and academic engagement.

We could be grappling with these challenges for a long time. NWEA “MAP Growth” scores estimate that at the current rate of recovery, eighth- and ninth-graders will be behind on their math and reading skills for the remainder of their high school years. This suggests a minimum of five more years of incoming college classes with elevated academic needs.

Projections for K-12 Learning Recovery

NWEA “MAP Growth” Assessment

Current Grade	HS Grad Year	Projected Grade Year of Recovery	
		Math	Reading
9 th Grade	2026	Post-High School	Post-High School
8 th Grade	2027	Post-High School	Post-High School
7 th Grade	2028	8 th –9 th grade	10 th –12 th grade
6 th Grade	2029	9 th –11 th grade	9 th –11 th grade

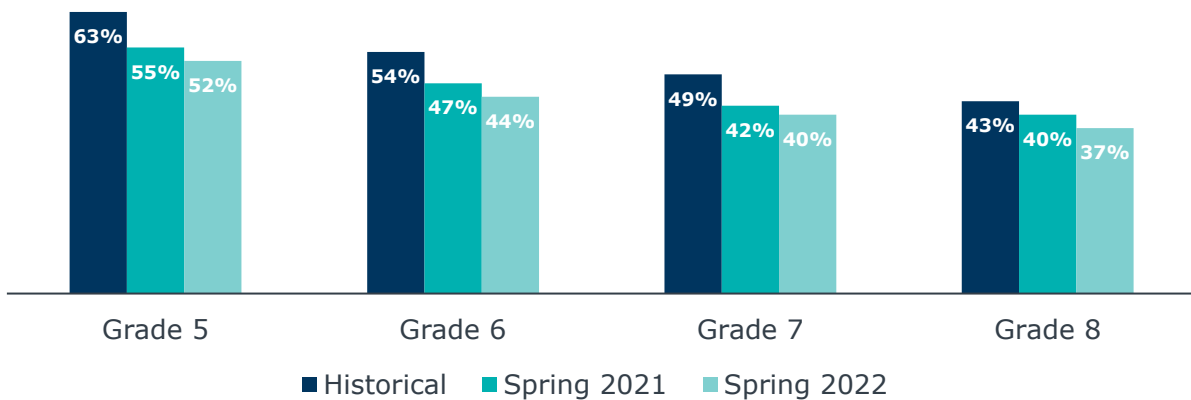


The disruption could last even longer than that. Curriculum Associates “i-Ready” assessments of elementary-age students found that foundational math skills in grades 5–8 fell even further in 2021–22 than in 2020–21, despite the return to in-person learning. This suggests that there may be a cumulative impact from the previous year’s unfinished learning that will persist with the cohort. If so, these cohorts may struggle with high school algebra, a key predictor of future academic success.

Another key predictor is early reading competency. Foundational reading skills in grades K–3 fell during the first year of the pandemic before leveling off during the second. The curriculum becomes more reading-intensive during third grade. Students with underdeveloped reading skills get left behind, rarely catch up, and are far less likely to go to college. Absent a turnaround, we may still be feeling the aftereffects of the pandemic when these students are entering college in the early 2030s.

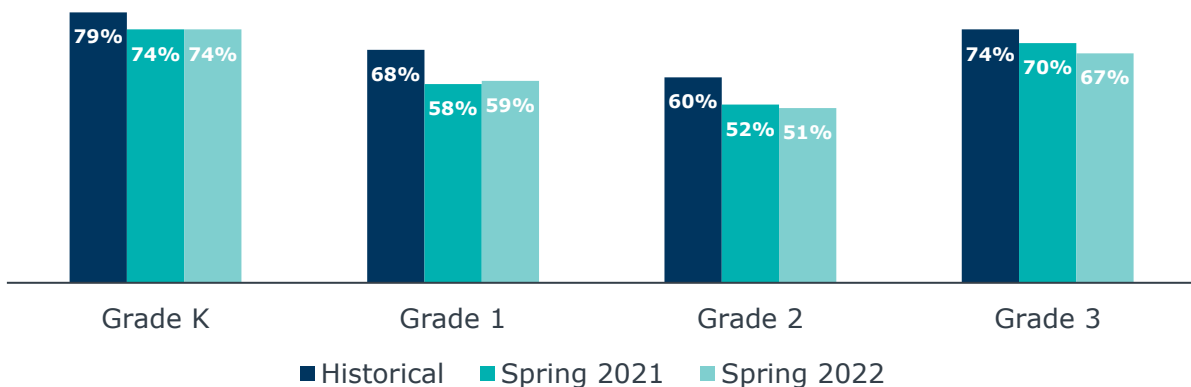
Foundational Math Further Declined in 2022

Percentage of Students Achieving Fundamental Math Skills



Early Reading Showed No Improvement in 2022

Percentage of Students Achieving Fundamental Reading Skills





High Staff Turnover

Staffing turnover makes it harder to respond but also creates an opportunity to finally make big changes

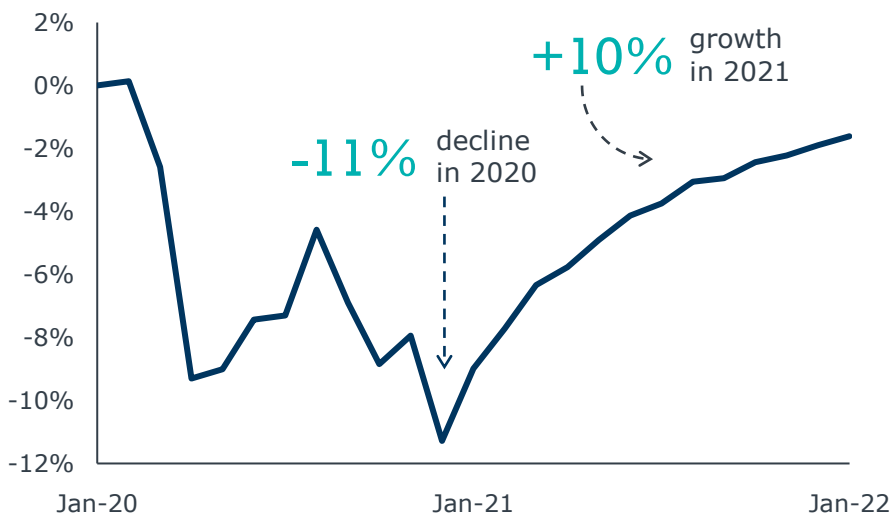
One of our biggest student success challenges may have nothing to do with our students. Higher education employees are turning over at an extremely high rate. The workforce shrank by 11% in 2020, followed by a 10% hiring surge in 2021. Job posting spiked by 280% in spring 2022.

Student success leaders are struggling to maintain the level of service provided by their teams. Student support staff have been among the hardest to keep in seat as they are lured away by industries that value their soft skills and are willing to pay more. These staff leave with years of experience and institutional knowledge that are hard to replace.

Extreme turnover is a challenge but also presents a unique opportunity to do things differently. Student success managers who find themselves leading new and inexperienced teams should take this opportunity to make major process and technological improvements that might not have been possible when working with more tenured teams who are set in their ways.

Employee Turnover in Higher Education

Percentage change in total employees, seasonally adjusted



More Turnover on the Way

280%

Increase in job postings, Mar-May 2022

6 million

Estimated decline in US working-age population by 2028



Student Mental Health

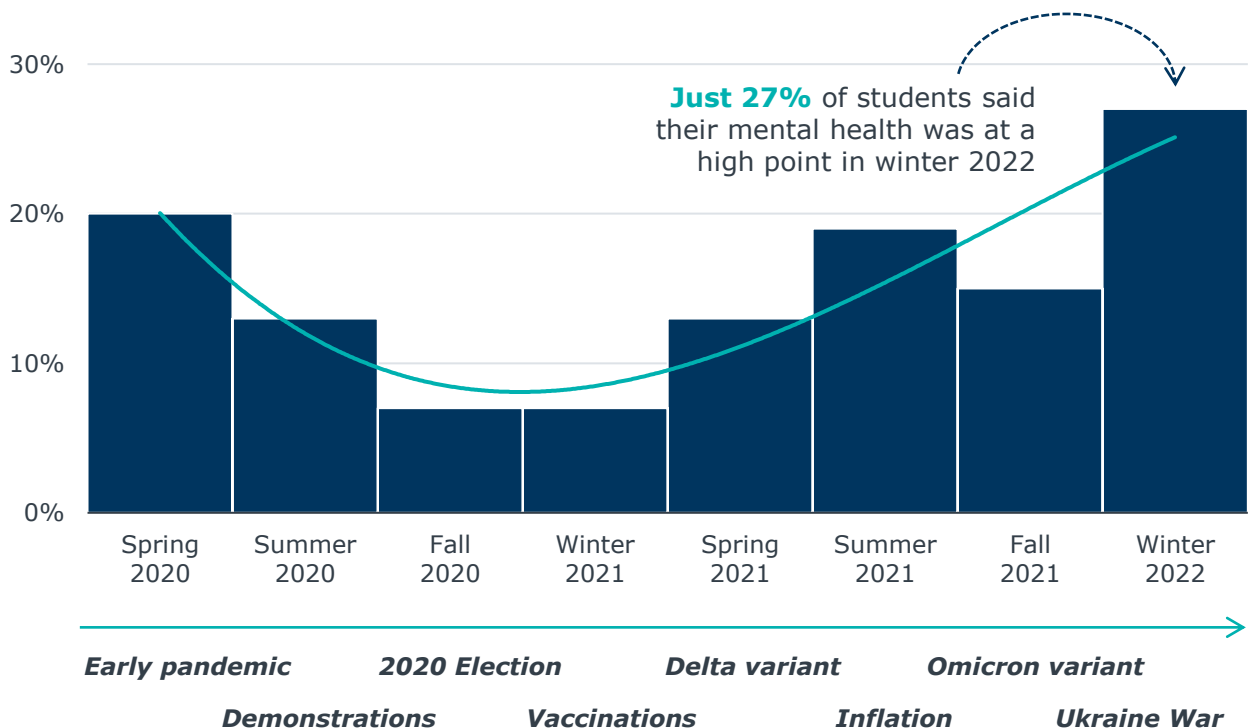
Mental health is the new top student success priority

Pandemic-era student success challenges are not limited to academic preparation. Student mental health, a rapidly growing concern across the last decade, has become a full-blown crisis since the onset of the pandemic. Economic, political, and social stressors have profoundly impacted students and their communities.

Students are not recovering from pandemic stresses as quickly as we might have hoped. A recent College Pulse survey asked students when their mental health had been the strongest during the first two years of the pandemic. Mental health hit a low point in the winter of 2021 followed by a gradual and steady improvement, yet just one-fourth of students said that they were feeling their best at the time of the survey in March 2022.

When Has Your Overall Mental Health Been the Best?

College Pulse Survey, Spring 2022

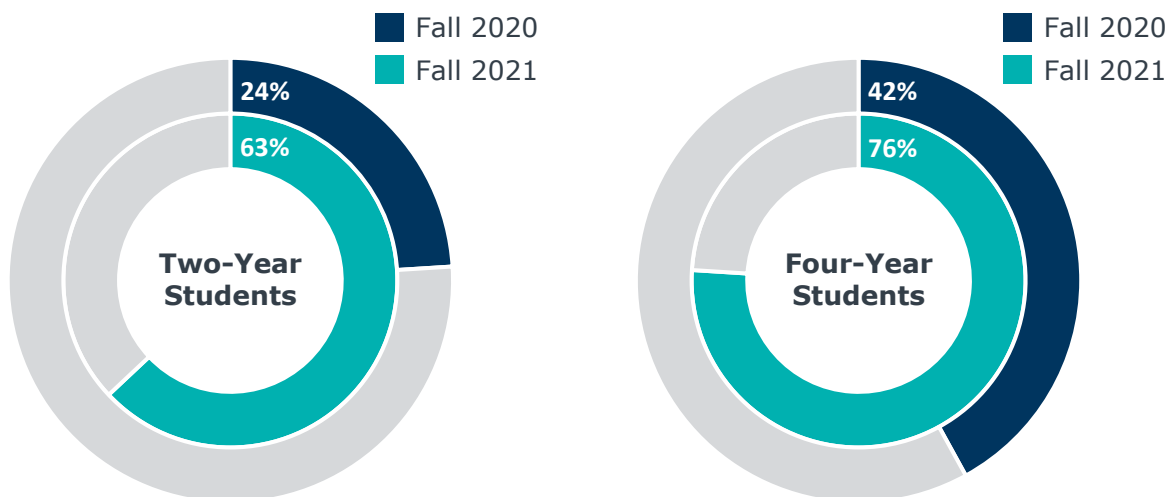




The mental health crisis has important implications for student success. A Gallup survey in fall 2021 found that two-thirds of community college students and three-fourths of bachelor's degree students had considered leaving school in the previous six months due to emotional stress. These responses doubled those of the prior year's survey, and they far exceeded other common retention threats such as cost (24% for two-year students and 36% for four-year students) and academic difficulty (24% and 34%, respectively).

Student success leaders should take note of these two trends and consider what it means for their student success strategy. Most colleges and universities are not set up or resourced to be mental health providers, yet they may be the first place their students turn to for support. It seems likely that students will continue to have elevated support needs for at least the next few years, and some may leave college if these needs are not met.

Percentage of Students Who Considered Stopping Coursework During the Prior Six Months Due to Emotional Stress *Gallup/Lumina Survey*



What Can We Do About It?



Recommendations for Student Success
Leaders as They Prepare for the Years Ahead



RECOMMENDATION 1

Rebalance Support and Free Capacity

Many student success offices are struggling to meet increased demand, reduced capacity, or both. We anticipate that these struggles will continue for the foreseeable future. Fortunately, most student support offices can rebalance their efforts in order to operate more effectively while saving time and money.

Not all students need the same amount of support. A one-size-fits-all approach underserves students who need intensive support while wastefully overserving other students who do not need quite as much assistance.

This doesn't mean that any students should go unsupported or unadvised. Instead, we recommend pre-sorting students into three tiers, with each tier receiving a preplanned level of support facilitated by your Student Success Management System (SSMS):

Most students receive **Baseline Support** covering the basic advising that all students need. Managers who redesign this level of support should pay close attention to eliminating processes that consume staff time but don't add much value for most students, thus freeing time for other activities. We recommend you start by asking staff for feedback on what they think has value. This will surface hidden opportunities while securing staff buy-in for change.

A subset of students should be designated for **Active Monitoring** to catch problems before they arise and become more costly and time-consuming for staff to address. These students receive baseline support plus additional touchpoints with support staff. They are also prioritized for SSMS interventions, such as following up on early alerts and clearing registration barriers.

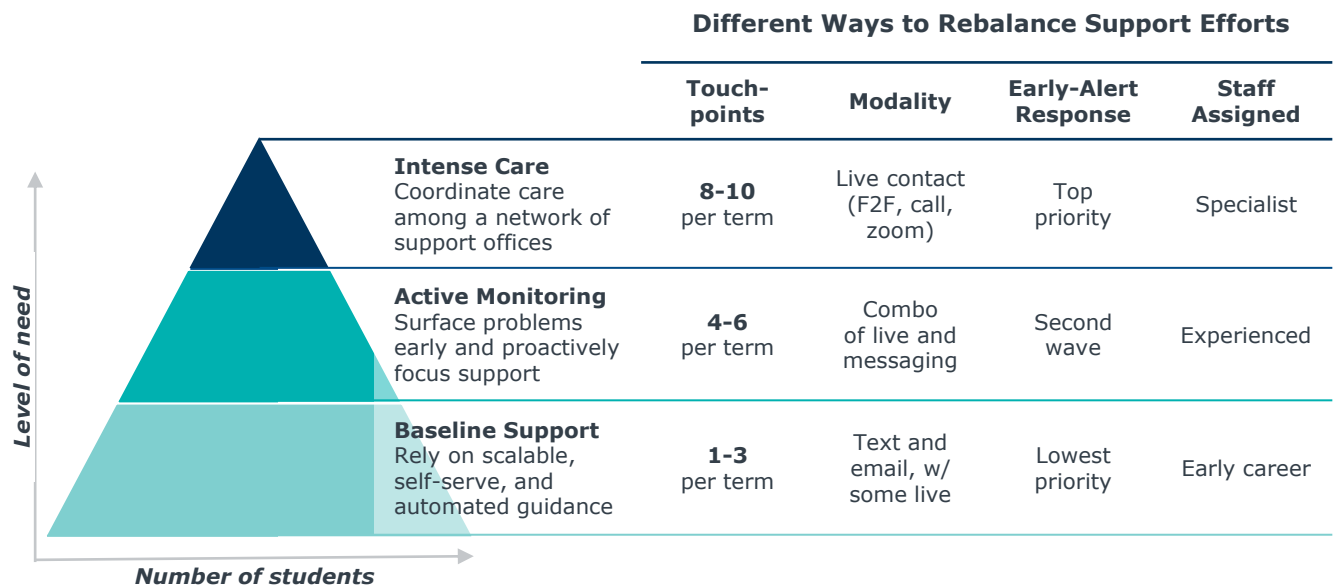
Finally, a small group of high-need students should be designated for **Intensive Care**. This group requires a high degree of staff attention and may already be part of special support programs such as TRiO. Staff can become more efficient in providing this care by using the SSMS to set up case management processes, allowing advising to collaborate with the other support offices that these students commonly need.



There are many ways to sort students into tiers. Many schools will sort their tiers according to GPA (cumulative GPA for returning students and high school GPA for new students). Others may choose to use a more sophisticated methods, such as the predictive model included with Navigate. Still others may choose to sort their tiers according to nonacademic factors that convey level of need, such as financial circumstances, residential life experience, admission criteria, or demographic characteristics. There is not one right answer. Choose a method that makes sense for your particular students and their circumstances.

Tiers are not fate. Students can and should be moved between tiers as their needs, performance, and behavior change. Indeed, many advisors will set a goal to help students improve their circumstances and performance so that they can move to a lower intensity of support.

The size of each of these groups should be determined by the institution’s ability to provide each level of care. Some examples of the workload demands for each tier can be found below. Use a framework like this to scale the size of your tiers accordingly.



Further Reading

- [The Student Success Strategy Playbook](#)
- [What Can Health Care Teach Us About Student Success?](#)



RECOMMENDATION 2

Fully Implement Early-Alert Systems

We should anticipate that student support needs will increase across the 2020s. Students may not be accustomed to seeking help if they haven't needed to do so in the past, and instructors may need more help supporting student concerns that arise in and around the classroom.

Most schools have some sort of early warning system, but few are getting as much value out of them as they could. EAB has a decade of experience implementing the Navigate and Starfish alert systems at hundreds of institutions. We have identified five stages of adoption maturity, from initial pilot through to full campus-wide case management in support of institutional goals, and we use these stages to show schools how to deepen their use. We encourage you to complete the self-assessment on the following page to understand your current stage.

A fully expressed early warning system can take several semesters to implement. Schools that have previously put off an early-alert implementation, or stalled partway through, should strongly consider making these investments now.

Stages of Maturity in Early-Alert Implementation



- Alerts prioritized based on student needs
- Triage system and case management adopted
- Limited use in isolated advising units
- Limited faculty buy-in

- Alerts aligned to strategic goals
- Widespread use across institution
- Alerts preplanned and stakeholders informed
- Faculty bought-in and reminded to participate

- Stakeholders celebrated for their impact
- Assessment drives continuous improvement
- Closed feedback loop with alert referrers
- Cases are coordinated with other support units



Early-Alert System Implementation Self-Assessment

Use this diagnostic to assess the maturity of your early warning system adoption. Unchecked line items are potential areas for next steps. Decentralized institutions should run the diagnostic for individual academic units as well as the whole institution.



Level 4 Transformative	The early-alert and case management process consistently aligns to focus populations and strategic goals for student success.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Assessment plan in place that ties back to both process and outcome metrics, with a focus on student outcomes.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Evaluation used to inform changes to process in subsequent terms.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Successes of system are shared more broadly across campus to ensure ongoing buy-in and focus on the efforts.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Level 3 Strategic	Focus populations, tracking items, and intervention pathways informed by student data and institutional student success goals.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Clear and consistent intervention pathways outlined and in use, leading to holistic collaboration across support office.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	The feedback loop is closed with those issuing the flags, ensuring ongoing buy-in and high response rates.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Basic assessment plan outlined, focused mostly on process metrics and some outcomes metrics.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Level 2 Expanded	Established tracking items based on institutional knowledge but not aligned to strategic goals or areas of greatest need.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Triage system established for assigning interventions to support offices, using case management.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Strong staff and faculty buy-in for submitting and responding to early alerts.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Communication and collection timeline intentionally established and shared with key stakeholders.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Faculty response rates are monitored and tracked, providing nudges as needed.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Level 1 Limited	Tracking items in use by some campus units, but not all, and not consistently.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Connection to specific support services not happening directly from tracking items, and coordination is difficult to achieve.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	No protocol for use of referrals or flags in place or official triage process.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Faculty buy-in for submitting early alerts or providing feedback via progress survey is spotty, with lower than ideal response rates.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Level 0 Absent	Few or zero early alerts being used across campus units to indicate students in need of support.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Case management system not in use to coordinate student support across various campus units.	<input type="checkbox"/>



RECOMMENDATION 3

Embrace Mass Communication

Mass communication has the potential to alleviate capacity concerns by scaling advising and support capacity, but many institutions lack the right strategy for doing this effectively. An SSMS can mass-message groups of students to inform or prompt action. We see four areas for how an SSMS can be used to improve your communication strategy:

Pre coordinate communication. Noisy messaging makes it easy for students to miss what's important, and uncoordinated communication runs the risk of confusing them. Build a communications calendar that preplans what and when you will message students. Coordinate messaging across multiple support offices to ensure your messages are not overlapping. Use growth-mindset language and avoid jargon that is unfriendly and difficult for students to understand. Your goal should be to reduce the total number of messages and focus on those that are most essential.

Focus on onboarding and the first year. New students need a lot of guidance, which is why orientation, onboarding, and first-year advising take up a disproportionate amount of advising capacity. A highly focused and effective communication plan targeted to incoming students can free up support capacity to deal with more challenging cases.

Automate outreach. SSMS can be preprogrammed to send messages triggered by changes in a student record. While this feature can be used in an almost unlimited number of ways, we recommend that schools begin by automating prompts focused on common transactional barriers, such as registration holds. Doing so saves the time needed to set up mass messages from manual triggers and decreases the number of transactions that need to be resolved during advising meetings.



Provide students with self-service tools. Many mass messages contain a “call to action” prompting students to take a positive step in support of their own success. Many of these prompts can be resolved by students on their own if they are given the proper tools and a clear understanding of how to use them. Ideally, advisors are spending a minimal amount of time during advising meetings on transactions, freeing as much time as possible for developmental conversations. Of note, encouraging students to use the SSMS academic planning tools prior to advising meetings can free up meeting time that would otherwise be spent on course selection, creating a record that can be referred to in subsequent advising meetings.

Further Reading



[White Paper](#)

Missed Connections: Recommendations to Improve the Success of Early Alerts Through Equity-Based Communications



[Communications Toolkit:](#)

How to Optimize Your Student Communications Strategy



RECOMMENDATION 4

Develop a Mental Well-Being Strategy

Mental health services are traditionally siloed in Student Affairs and thought of as the exclusive responsibility of the counseling center. Counselors are overwhelmed by the increased demand brought on by the extreme emotional and psychological toll of the pandemic. Many have become burned out or have left for higher-paying offers outside of higher education. To keep up, your mental health strategy needs to supplement counseling services with nonclinical support embedded throughout the student experience.

As with academics, mental health services must be viewed through a lens of equity. Students of color often have elevated mental health needs reflecting the impact of systemic and individual racism, yet White students are more likely to seek out counseling. A strong mental health strategy acknowledges and addresses these differences. Critically, schools must apply an equity lens when hiring and training a counseling staff. They must also understand and address how stigma around seeking help manifests differently among students with different identities.

Schools can support these efforts with their SSMS. Navigate can send students prompts and polls that help guide them to mental health support services and programs. This is especially useful if these services have been underused. Those schools that have capacity in their counseling centers can use the SSMS to set up a referral system that allows faculty and staff to raise flags on students showing signs of distress and are in need of assistance.



Four Points of Emphasis to Guide Your Strategy

- 1 Focus on connecting students with services beyond the mental health counseling center.** Students often don't take full advantage of the wide range of your mental health and well-being programs and services. Use your website and student success communication tools to connect students with the resources that make most sense based on their specific needs and concerns.
- 2 Integrate well-being touchpoints throughout the student experience to proactively ensure each student receives well-being support.** Invite faculty to openly discuss mental health issues in the classroom and provide them with clear pathways for assisting students in distress. Schools with large residential populations can similarly embed mental health services into the housing experience.
- 3 Apply a DEIJ lens to mental health services to ensure all students have access to support and care that is responsive to their identities.** Students of color do not engage with mental health services at the same rate as White students. Hiring diverse, culturally aware staff can help more students find someone they feel comfortable connecting with for care.
- 4 Collect and use data to assess the ROI of new mental health initiatives.** Assess impact in terms beyond utilization and student satisfaction surveys. Cross-walk mental health initiatives to institutional goals, such as retention or academic success, and then assess the contribution that these initiatives make to these goals. Use this data to promote successful initiatives and encourage additional investment.

Further Reading

- [EAB Mental Health Resource Center](#)
- [Meeting the Escalating Demand for Mental Health and Well-Being Support](#)
- [The Rise of the Chief Wellness Officer](#)
- [3 Peer Support Models for Mental Health](#)



CONCLUSION

Hope for the Future

The data in this paper suggests that the impact of the pandemic on student success will last for at least five more years. Disruption to K-12 learning and elevated mental health concerns will put added demand on inexperienced and understaffed student success teams.

We should not panic. Instead, we should view the challenges ahead as an opportunity to finally address student success barriers that have existed for years. Innovations developed across the last decade have proved that the right mix of people, process, and technology can leverage finite resources to improve student outcomes. Best practices such as early alerts, differentiated caseload advising, and strategic mass communication will be even more important in the decade ahead.

EAB is proud to be your partner on this journey. Please connect with us for more guidance on how to redesign your advising and support strategy around technology to better serve tomorrow's students.

Connect with the author



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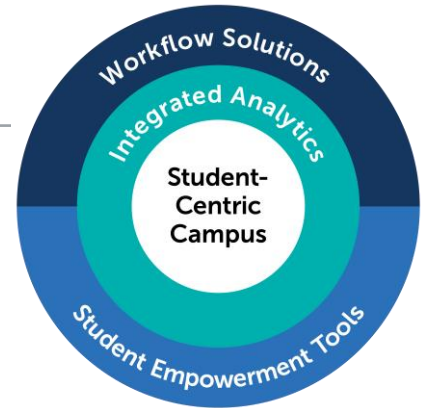
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A Comprehensive Student Success Management System

Navigate is the first enterprise-level technology for student success; it was 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.



Student

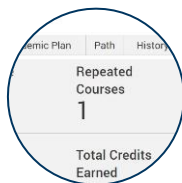
Empowerment Tools

Workflow Solutions

Integrated Analytics

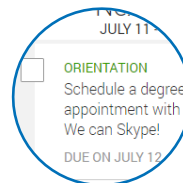
Smart Student Profile

Actionable academic, financial, and behavioral data to support holistic coordinated care



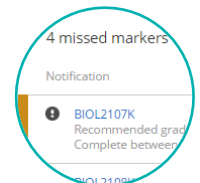
Pivotal Moments Path

In-app onboarding and ongoing guidance organized by due date



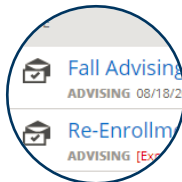
Predictive Analytics

Identify and prioritize student interventions based on likely need for support



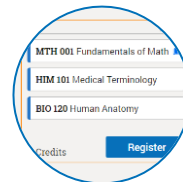
Campaign Management

Mass outreach and multimodal communication at scale



Collaborative Academic Planner

Degree maps, course catalog, requirements, and credit tracking with advisor oversight



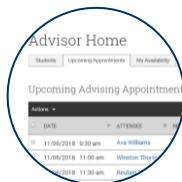
Effectiveness Analytics

Impact assessment of interventions across student groups



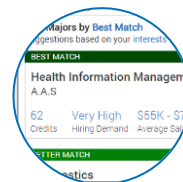
Appointment Scheduling

Flexible timetable for students to schedule within the availability of faculty and staff



Student Surveys

Interactive surveys and polls for new student intake, exploring majors, sharing needs and interests, and more



Population Health Analytics

Key academic progress and performance indicators identify and assess interventions



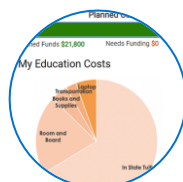
Coordinated Care Network

Case management tools and shared documentation help stakeholders coordinate to deliver better support



Financial Planner

Help students discover likely expenses and identify funding to mitigate excess debt



Historical Trend Analytics

Analyze historical data to support institution-level and program-level decision-making



Our Partners

Our Impact

Your Next Steps

850+

Partner institutions

10M+

Students served

3-15%

Typical improvement in retention rate

3-5%

Typical increase in applicant to enrollee conversion

Schedule a student experience consultation by contacting eabsscommunications@eab.com or visit us online at eab.com



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At EAB, our mission is to make education smarter and our communities stronger. We work with thousands of institutions to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities. From kindergarten to college to career, EAB partners with leaders and practitioners to accelerate progress and drive results across five major areas: enrollment, student success, institutional strategy, data analytics, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We work with each partner differently, tailoring our portfolio of research, technology, and marketing and enrollment solutions to meet the unique needs of every leadership team, as well as the students and employees they serve. Learn more at eab.com.