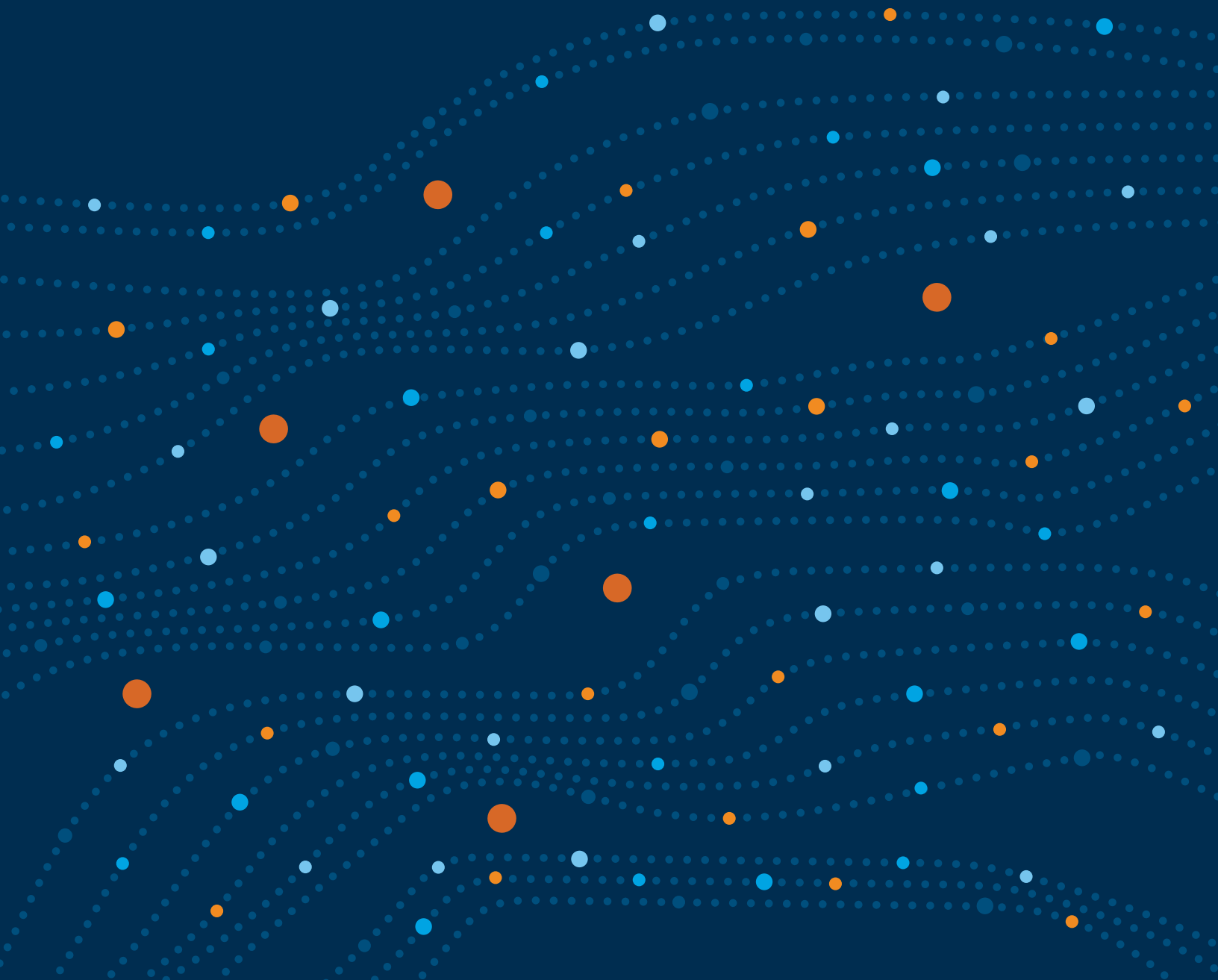




EAB

Six Drivers Shaping the Future of Student Success

Data and Trend Report



Executive Summary

Futurists study “drivers,” the key forces and trends that shape the future across various sectors and aspects of life. The **six drivers** outlined in this document reflect some of the most important forces shaping the future of student success. Understanding these drivers can help strategy setters make smart investments for the medium- and long-term future. To use this document, consider how each of these drivers manifests at your institution and which will have the most impact on your future:

1 College Value:

In an era of heightened scrutiny over the cost of higher education, the perceived value of a college degree is under the microscope. Institutions must effectively communicate the tangible benefits of higher education, not just in terms of personal growth and societal benefits but also regarding career prospects and earning potential. This involves debunking widespread myths about the value of college and providing clear evidence of the return on investment in education.

Surprising trend: *The college wage premium remains near an all-time high. Learn more on page 5.*

2 Evolving Demographics:

Colleges are witnessing a transformation in their student populations, with more diverse backgrounds, life experiences, and needs than ever before. This diversity enriches the learning environment but also necessitates a shift in support services, teaching methods, and campus culture. Institutions must become more adaptable and inclusive, ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, have equal access to opportunities and support systems that foster success.

Surprising trend: *More than 20% of Gen Z identifies as LGBTQ. Learn more on page 9.*

3 Student Mental Health:

The mental health crisis among college students is a growing issue, with many struggling with anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges that can hinder their academic and personal success. Prioritizing mental health is not only critical for the well-being of students but also for creating a supportive and productive learning environment. Institutions are exploring ways to expand mental health services, whether through in-house resources or partnerships with external providers.

Surprising trend: *Mental health is now the top cited reason why students consider leaving college. Learn more on page 13.*

Executive Summary

4 Academic Preparation:

The readiness of incoming students, particularly in foundational areas such as mathematics, has become a pressing concern, exacerbated by educational disruptions like the pandemic. Colleges need to develop and implement strategies that address these gaps, such as enhanced supplemental instruction programs, bridge courses, and innovative teaching methodologies that cater to varied learning styles and levels of preparation.

Surprising trend: *National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) math scores for the college incoming class of 2027 are the lowest in thirty years. Learn more on page 17.*

5 Sustainable Scope:

As enrollments fluctuate, colleges face the challenge of maintaining a wide range of programs and services sustainably. This driver emphasizes the importance of strategic decision-making about which programs to expand, maintain, or scale back, based on a combination of mission alignment, demand, and financial viability. Achieving sustainability may also involve exploring alternative revenue streams and more efficient operational models.

Surprising trend: *Just one-quarter of chief business officers think their colleges are “back to normal” after the pandemic. Learn more on page 21.*

6 Artificial Intelligence:

The advent of AI presents the opportunity to finally have the ability to personalize education at scale. AI can support tailored learning experiences, adaptive feedback, and administrative efficiencies. However, it also requires careful consideration of ethical implications and privacy concerns. Preparing for the integration of AI into educational practices involves not just technological upgrades but also a cultural shift toward embracing innovation while safeguarding academic integrity and equity.

Surprising trend: *Nearly 90% of workers anticipate using AI at their jobs by 2028. Learn more on page 25.*



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Understanding Our Future

The work of a futurist is to find and define the forces and trend, or “drivers,” that shape our future. These drivers can include technological advancements, demographic shifts, environmental changes, and societal trends. By analyzing these drivers, futurists aim to forecast how they will influence future developments, opportunities, and challenges, thus guiding strategic planning and decision-making processes.

This report explores these six “drivers.” Some have emerged as a direct or indirect result of the pandemic, while others are the continuation of trends that have existed since long before 2020. Together, these six drivers reflect the multifaceted challenges student success leaders and their institutions are facing. Understanding them is crucial to prevent student dropout because they deeply influence students’ ability to engage with and complete their college education successfully. Addressing these drivers requires a holistic approach that balances innovation with inclusivity, sustainability with adaptability, and tradition with a forward-looking vision.

By focusing on enhancing the perceived value of education, accommodating the diverse needs of the student population, ensuring academic readiness, supporting mental health, and leveraging technology for personalized support, institutions can create an environment where students are more likely to persist and succeed. Institutions that navigate these drivers effectively will not only enhance their value proposition but also contribute to the broader goal of education as a catalyst for personal and societal transformation.

How to Use This Report

This report provides a summary exploration of each driver, highlighting each one’s significance in shaping the future of student success. We invite the reader to consider which drivers are the most relevant to their institution and its student success challenges. These should be priority considerations when deciding on your student success strategy.

At the end of this paper, you will find a summary of how EAB addresses each of these drivers with our partners. Like you, we are invested in the future of higher education, and we want to help you succeed. Please reach out to us to learn more.



DRIVER #1

College Value

College Value

In today's educational landscape, the value of a college degree is a hotly debated topic, magnified by rising tuition costs, student loans, and a strong non-college labor market. In this environment, postgraduate success has become a critical part of overall student success.

Gen Z has made it clear that career advancement is by far their top reason for pursuing a degree. Years of stories about graduates struggling with debt and underemployment have fueled widespread skepticism about the return on investment (ROI) in higher education. We see this skepticism play out in the declining share of high school graduates going on to college, a trend that began back in 2016 and continued through the pandemic.

Yet, beyond the headlines, a look at the fundamentals shows that the financial ROI and social dividend of a college degree are as valuable as ever. The societal benefits of higher education extend beyond individual financial gains. College graduates are more likely to engage in civic activities such as voting and volunteering, contributing positively to their communities. Furthermore, higher education is linked to improved health outcomes and a lower propensity for engaging in criminal activities, benefiting society at large.

Financially, the advantage of holding a college degree remains clear. Far from losing value, the wage premium for having a college degree is actually near a high. Net tuition has fallen by 4% since 2019, and most borrowers owe less than \$25,000 in debt. The long-term economic benefits of a college education remain intact, including greater job security and upward mobility. Beyond earnings, degree holders experience lower unemployment rates, providing a buffer against economic downturns. It is not a stretch to say that, **by the numbers, college is a better investment than it has been in years.**

The future of student success will depend on if and how colleges break through the noise to definitively prove the value to students and the public. To do this, they will need to better integrate career development with academic programs and ensure the curriculum remains relevant to the evolving job market.

Colleges that can redefine and communicate their value in a manner that resonates with a new generation of students will ensure not only that they can attract students but also that they can give them reason to follow through to graduation.

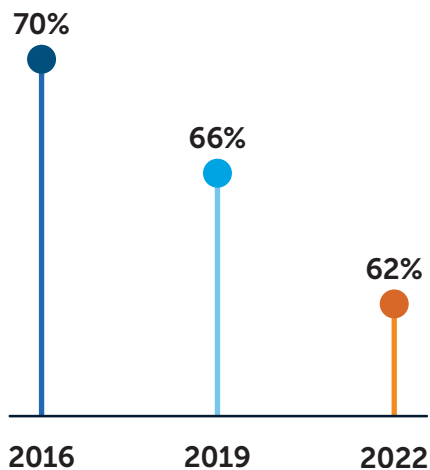


Key Insights

1. **Financial ROI:** A college degree significantly increases earning potential and job security compared to a high school diploma; the long-term financial benefits of a college degree outweigh initial costs.
2. **Societal Impact:** Degrees are not just about personal advancement; they contribute to societal well-being, including lower unemployment rates, higher civic engagement, and reduced public health and safety costs.
3. **Overcoming Misperceptions:** Institutions must actively address skepticism around the value of a college education by better integrating career development into their program offerings and overall experience.

Recent HS Grads Less Likely to Enroll

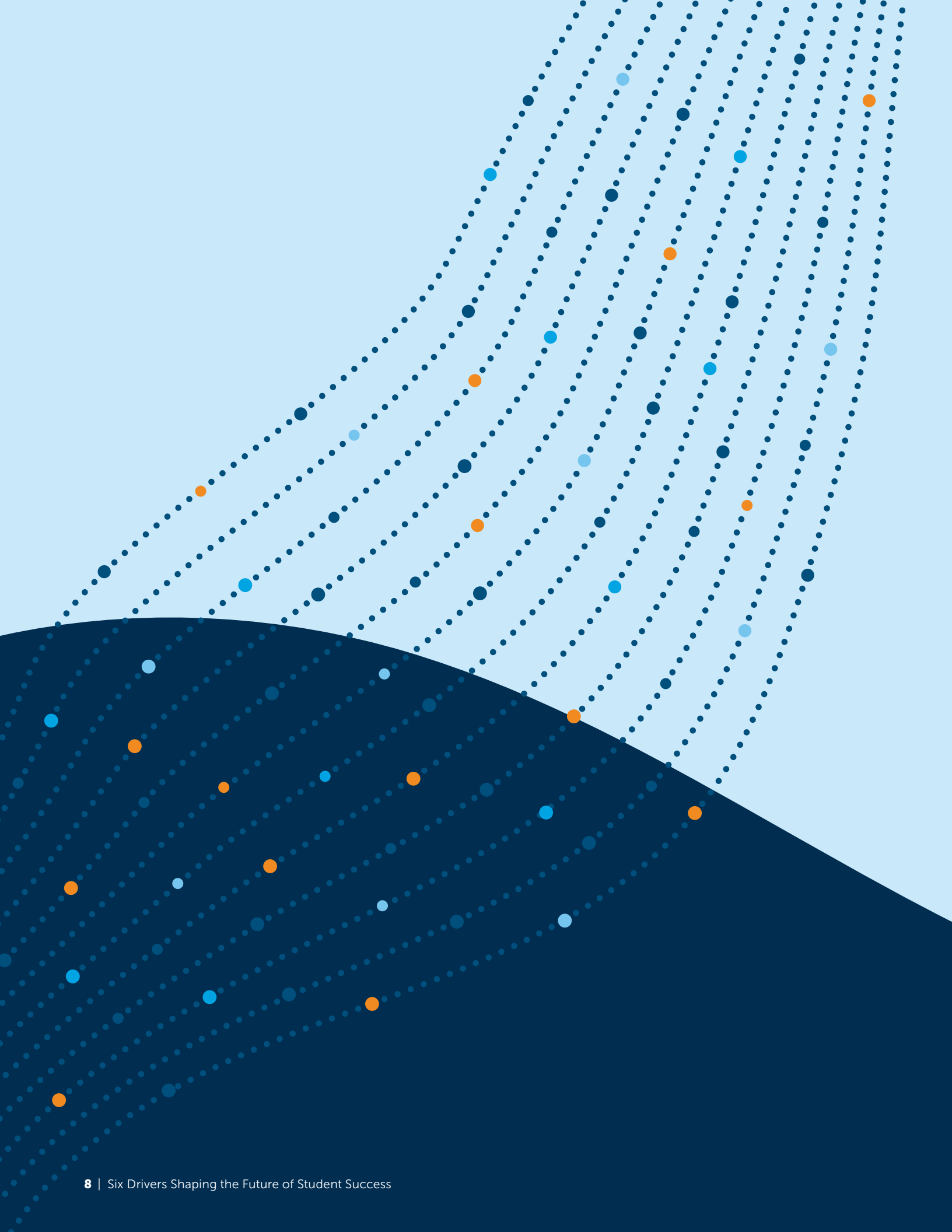
College Going Rate of Recent High School Grads¹



Beyond the Headlines, College Fundamentals Are as Strong as Ever



- ▶ Wage Premium Near a Decades-Long High²
- ▶ Net Cost Down 4% Since 2019³
- ▶ Most Borrowers Owe Less than \$25k⁴





DRIVER #2

Evolving Demographics

Evolving Demographics

Recent years have been characterized by a steady increase in students from diverse racial, economic, and cultural backgrounds, including more nontraditional students who may be older, working, or have family responsibilities. This diversity comes in part from tremendous improvements in college access for different learners and in part from the diversification of the learners themselves.

Gen Z, to which most college students belong, is the most diverse generation in American history. They are a racial plurality, and more than 20% identify as LGBTQ. More than any previous generations, these students enter college with heightened awareness and expectations around social justice, inclusivity, and diversity. They expect their institutions to share these values. Keeping up with this expectation could become a challenge, especially in states where student success teams must contend with recent anti-DEI legislation proposals.

These changes may be felt most acutely at the nation's most selective institutions. Some elite privates are countering the repeal of affirmative action by offering unprecedented tuition discounts, resulting in huge changes to the demographic and economic profile of their incoming students. Some large flagships are getting even larger by expanding incoming classes and recruiting in new areas. Both strategies put more of a demand on support services, often in new and unfamiliar ways.

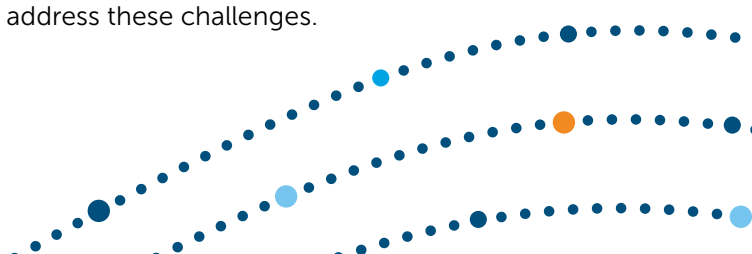
On the flip side, open access colleges are already geared to support large numbers of adult undergraduates. Yet coming out of the pandemic, the recovery in enrollment of older students has lagged that of younger cohorts due to the strong labor market. This is seen most notably in enrollment at two-year colleges, which traditionally serve many of these adult students.

The decline in adult undergrads is partially offset by a major increase in high school dual enrollment. High school students vastly prefer dual enrollment to Advanced Placement classes if for no other reason than they get the college credits without taking a test. Unfortunately, most colleges offer dual enrollment at a loss. Nevertheless, this is a trend worth monitoring in the event of a profitable dual enrollment model emerging one day.

The future of student success will depend on how well colleges can keep up with understanding and serving the needs of their evolving student populations.

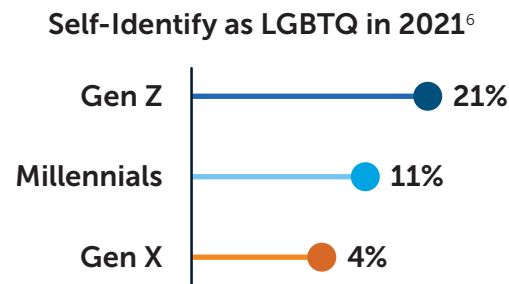
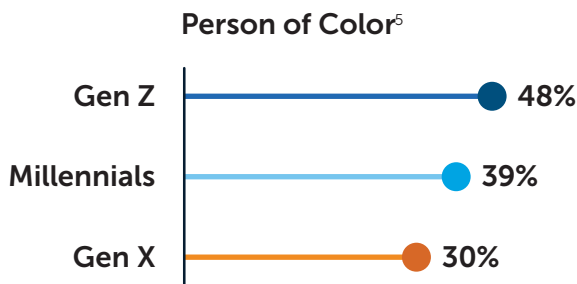
Progressive colleges are investing in culturally competent advising and mentoring programs, recognizing the importance of representation and support systems that reflect the diverse backgrounds of their student population.

Institutions are also focusing on data-driven approaches to understand and address the gaps in enrollment, retention, and graduation rates among different demographic groups. By leveraging data, colleges can identify patterns and barriers specific to certain populations and develop targeted interventions to address these challenges.




Key Insights

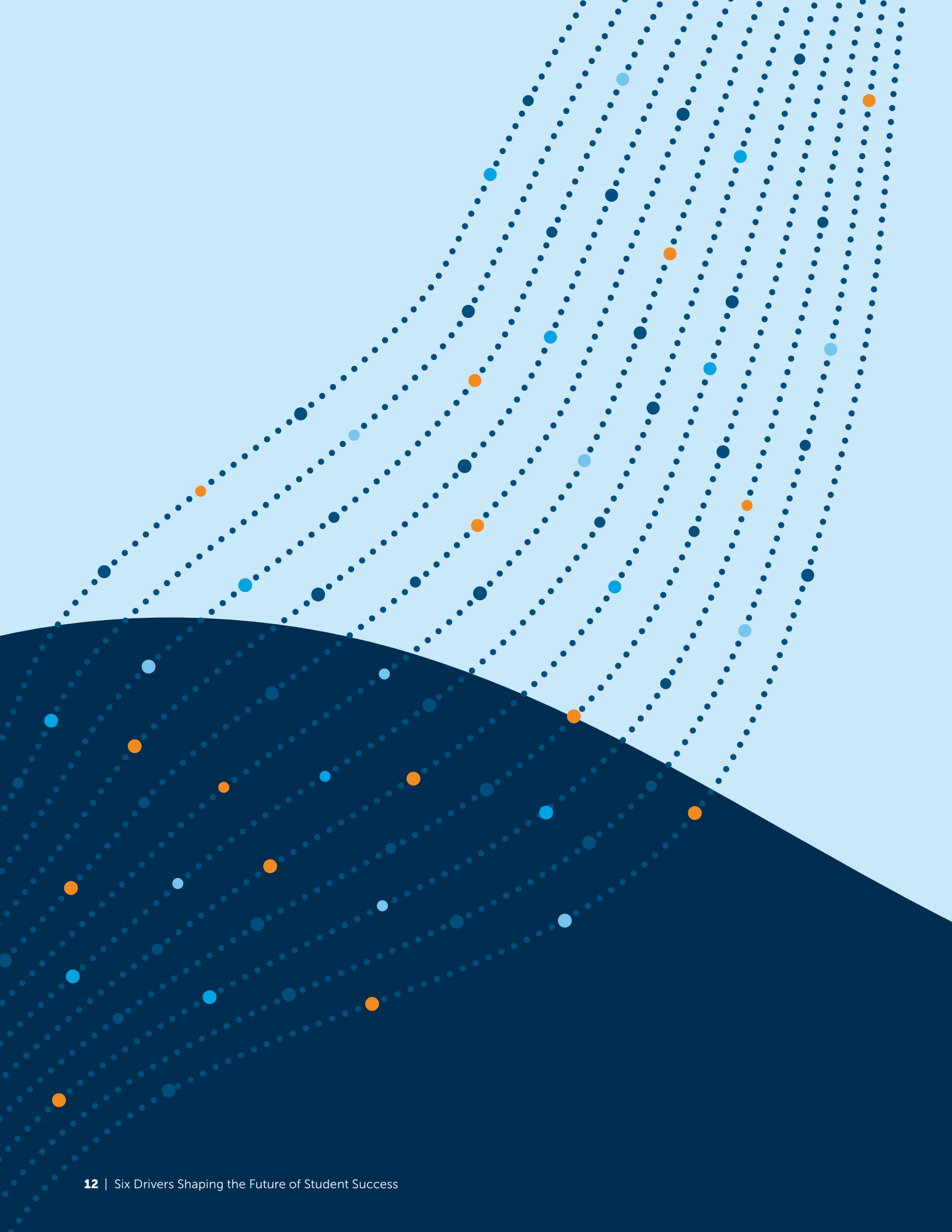
1. **Access and Equity:** With more diverse student bodies, colleges must focus on eliminating barriers to access and success for all students, especially those from historically underserved communities.
2. **Tailored Support and Programs:** Recognizing and addressing the unique challenges faced by diverse student populations through tailored support services and academic programs is essential to foster equity and inclusion.
3. **Cultural Competency and Representation:** Implementing culturally competent advising, mentorship, and support structures, as well as ensuring representation within faculty and staff, can significantly impact the sense of belonging and success among underrepresented students.
4. **Strategic Use of Data:** Employing a data-driven approach to identify and tackle disparities in student outcomes allows institutions to make informed decisions and allocate resources more effectively to support all students.



Post-pandemic Change in Age Profile⁷ *Enrollment, Spring 2019–2023*

 **-10%**
Undergrads over 24

 **15%**
Dual Enrollment (under 18)





DRIVER #3

Student Mental Health

Student Mental Health

Many student success leaders are making student mental health their new top priority. There is a good reason for this: diagnoses and demand for counseling have doubled over the last ten years, driven by the increase in stressors affecting young people combined with the de-stigmatization of therapy.

We intuitively understand that there is a critical feedback loop between well-being and academic success. Now, surveys are showing us that mental health factors such as “emotional stress” are the main reasons students consider leaving school, overtaking more traditional explanations such as finances, poor grades, and a lack of direction.

Institutions are trying to respond by providing more counselors and mental health resources while also integrating mental wellness into the broader educational experience. Counseling remains the core component of this strategy, and the ongoing shortage of college mental health counselors poses a critical challenge to adequately meeting the increasing demand for mental health services on campuses.

Mental health teams are exploring various strategies to address this shortfall, including leveraging technology for teletherapy services, training faculty and staff in basic mental health first aid, and creating peer support networks for students in need. “Stepped Care” models have become a popular approach to organizing a range of mental health and wellness services that are matched to students’ varying levels of need. This approach starts with the least intensive, most accessible support and steps up to more specialized services as required. It enables efficient resource allocation and promotes preventive care that can relieve pressure on the entire system.

Other institutions are turning to third-party providers to supplement or even take over their mental health services. A wide range of vendors have sprung up, most of which seek to add capacity to the counseling center through online or teletherapy options. Leaders who are evaluating a potential partner should carefully consider the efficacy of the service and how well the providers are matched to the needs and backgrounds of your students.

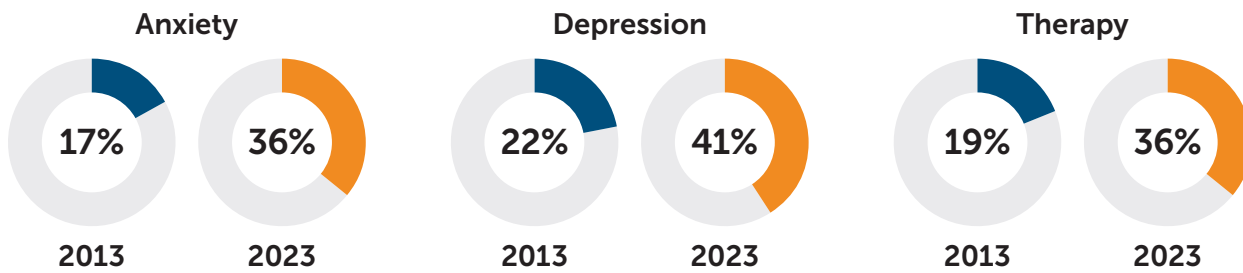
The future of student success will depend on keeping up with demand by making smart, scalable decisions. The demand for counselors will continue to rise until at least the end of the decade. For most institutions, this will mean some combination of Stepped Care models and outside support from third parties. We also anticipate the repurposing of existing support structures to promote mental health. For example, we have already seen how schools can take immediate action on their wellness strategy by leveraging student success technologies to communicate preventive measures, surface concerns, and direct students to self-learning opportunities.



Key Insights

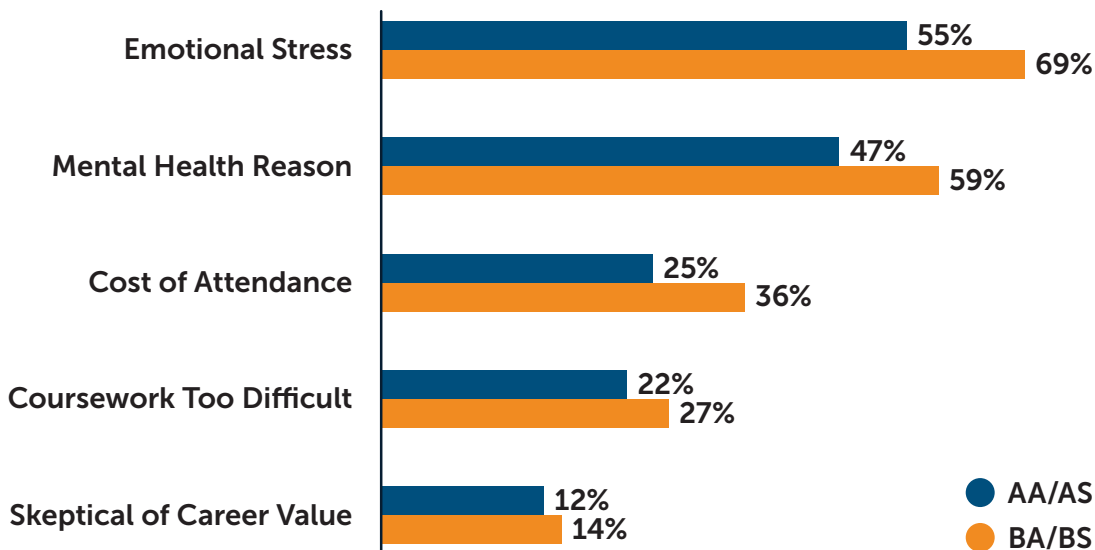
1. **Expanded Services:** Provide a broader range of mental health services and ensure easy access for all students to address growing demand.
2. **Preventive Approaches:** Implement preventive and early intervention strategies to mitigate issues before they escalate.
3. **Community Partnerships:** Leverage partnerships with external mental health organizations to supplement on-campus resources and expertise.

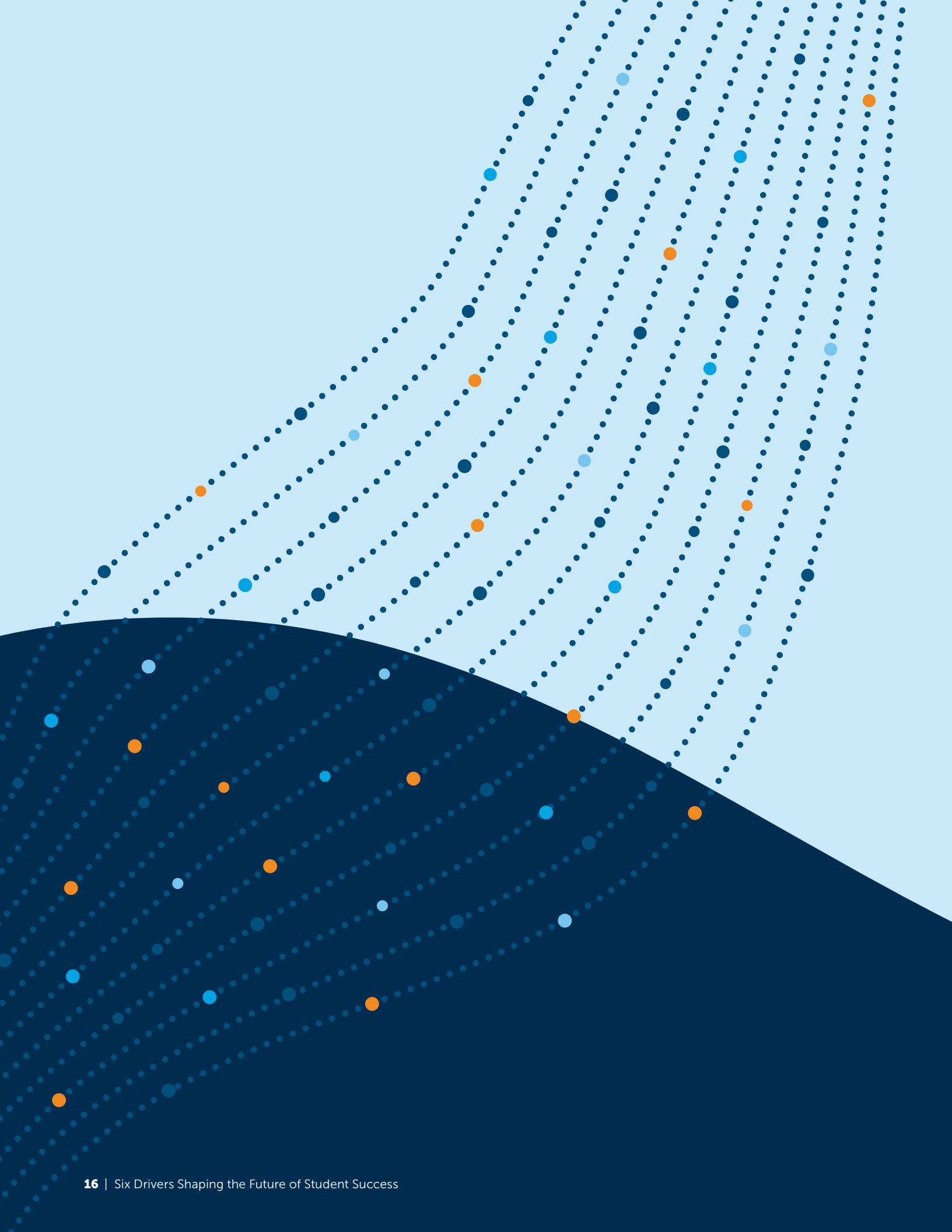
Needs Doubled in the Last Decade⁸



Why Are Students Considering Stopping Out?⁹

Fall 2022, multiple responses allowed







DRIVER #4

Academic Preparation

Academic Preparedness

Until recently, precollege learning had been steadily rising for decades, as measured by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), also known as “The Nations Report Card.” NAEP test scores began to turn downward at the end of last decade before taking a major plunge during the pandemic, falling back to levels not seen in years. Two years of disrupted learning and high teacher turnover took its toll.

Unfortunately, more recent testing suggests that students are not recovering their missed learning fast enough to be caught up before college. Indeed, most colleges are already seeing a dip in preparation levels among incoming students. This issue will get worse before it gets better, and most colleges should expect to feel the effects of unfinished learning for several more years if not longer.

This has widespread implications for student success teams and for their institutions. Of particular concern is the dip in math learning among current high school students. Quantitative reasoning is foundational to many high-demand programs, and math courses are often a requirement of graduation within these programs. Unfinished learning could result in a dip in production and quality of graduates in the fields that employers often value the most, feeding skepticism over the value of college.

While all communities and students were affected by the impact of the pandemic, affluent communities fared better than less affluent communities. Test scores for elementary-aged students show dramatic disparities between predominantly white communities and communities of color. If these disparities are not addressed, they will perpetuate and even expand education equity gaps as we progress into the next decade. The good news is that we can change this fate if we act now.

Colleges will need to make rapid updates to their curriculum and pedagogy to bring their students up to speed. Student success teams will be called on to adopt multiple-measure diagnostic assessments that allow for more accurate course placement and the development of personalized learning plans. Academic early-alert systems will need to be rolled out or expanded, as will tutoring and academic support.

The future of student success depends on how quickly colleges can get in front of this challenge. Some necessary changes could take years to implement and need to be started on immediately. Others will need to wait for advances in artificial intelligence. In the meantime, savvy student success teams can get to work now using the tools and technology already at their disposal.



Key Insights

1. **Tailored Remediation Strategies:** Customized support initiatives based on diagnostic assessments can address individual academic gaps effectively.
2. **Foundation Course Enhancement:** Strengthening foundational courses is essential to build a solid academic base for all students.
3. **Learning Analytics:** Utilize data analytics to identify and support at-risk students based on their academic backgrounds and performance trends.

College Entering Classes^{10,11,12}

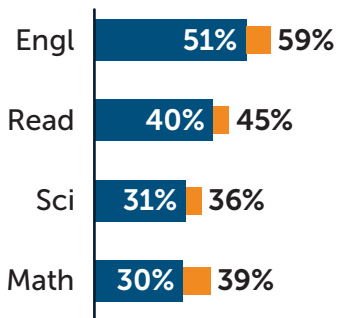
Fall 2023
College first-years

Fall 2027
Ninth-graders

Fall 2031
Fifth-graders

ACT College Readiness Among 2023 HS Grads

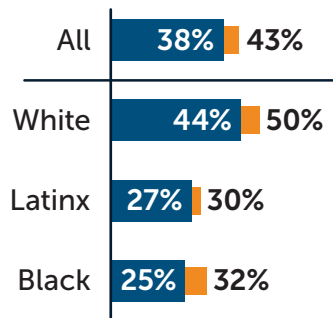
2019 2023



ACT Subject Areas

On Pace for College Math in 8th Grade (i-Ready)

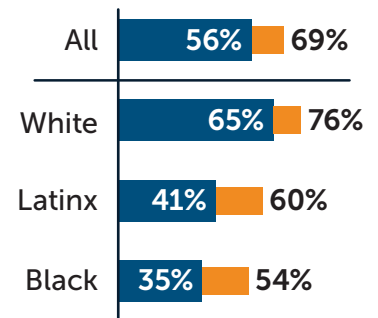
2019 2023



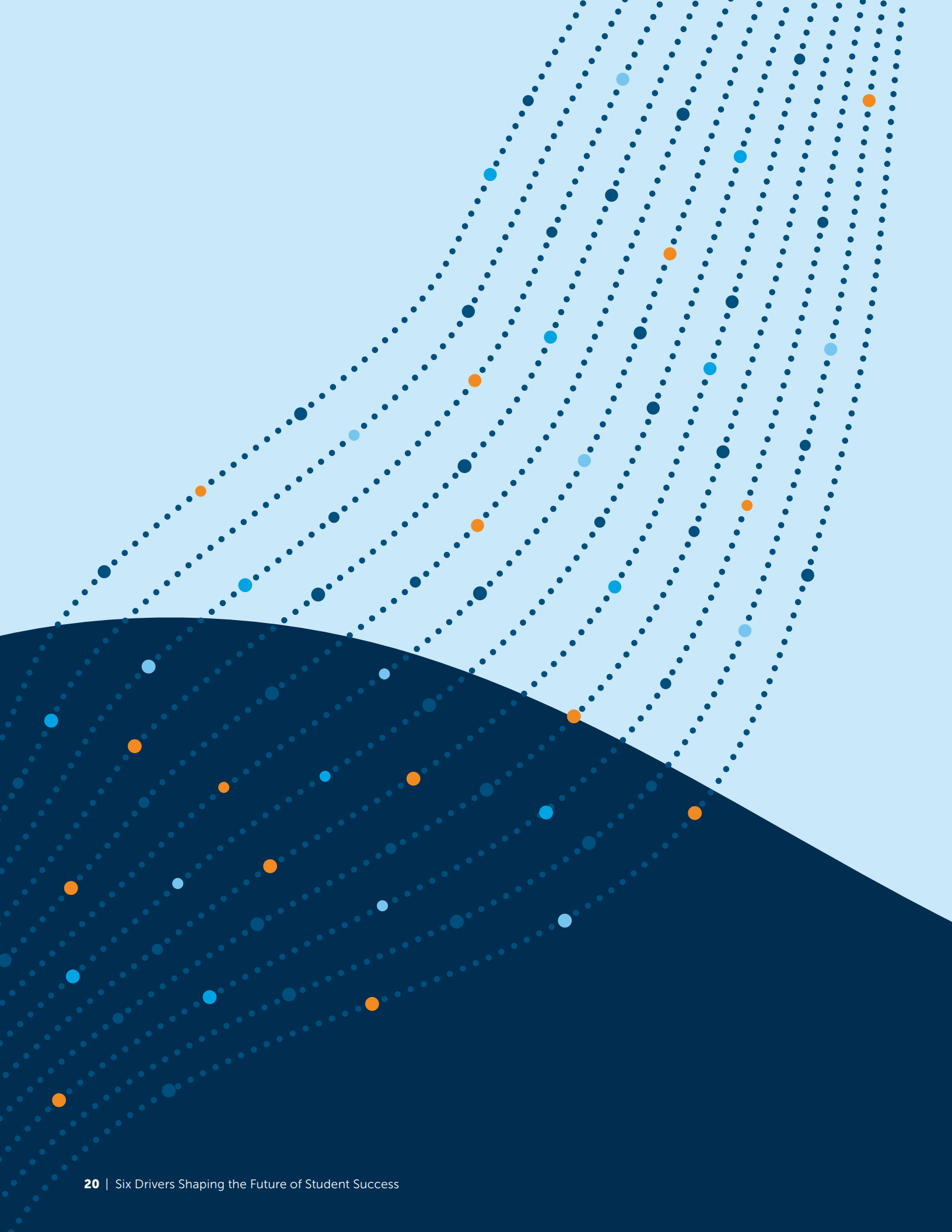
Majority Enrollment at School

On Pace for College Math in 4th Grade (i-Ready)

2019 2023



Majority Enrollment at School





DRIVER #5

Sustainable Scope

Sustainable Scope

Higher education is poised for an extended contraction for the first time in living memory. Shrinking enrollments have left the sector overbuilt for the level of current demand as eight decades of relatively uninterrupted growth finally come to an end.

College budgets are feeling the pain. Just one in four chief business officers thinks their institution is back to normal after the pandemic. Many CBOs report that they are resetting their growth strategies or intentionally getting smaller to double down on what they do best.

A reduction in scale might not necessarily be bad for some colleges. Like many sectors of the economy, higher education is struggling to hire staff in a strong labor market. Colleges are particularly disadvantaged in that they can rarely outcompete on salary, and many are place-bound and located outside of high-density areas. This leaves student success teams with open seats and not enough capacity to continue with duties as normal.

In this environment, last decade's mantra of doing "more with less" is giving way to this decade's new mantra of doing "less with less." The concept of "less with less" acknowledges the necessity to prioritize and focus on core strengths, even if it means reducing the breadth of offerings. This approach ensures institutions can continue to deliver significant value and maintain high standards of education even as resources become more limited.

The future of student success depends on how student success teams navigate this difficult staffing and budget environment. For many, "less with less" will be a welcome relief. Staff will no longer be stretched thin, and many will be able to do more of the things that they love and do best. However, "less with less" also means actually doing less in terms of scope, and that requires skillful leadership. Making smart choices about what to let go of will allow student success leaders to make sure they are hanging on to the support and services that are most needed by their specific students.

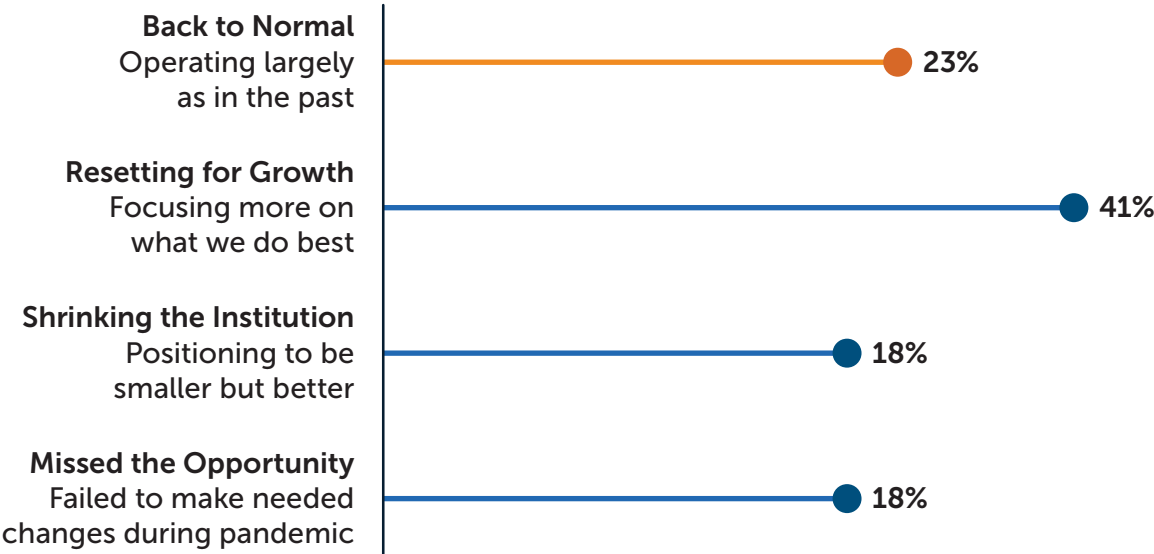
The rise of artificial intelligence will play a key role in how student success teams are staffed and resourced. If the optimists are correct, thinly staffed teams may soon find that they can still operate efficiently and effectively with the help of AI-enabled workflows. The potential of AI makes it the subject of our final section.

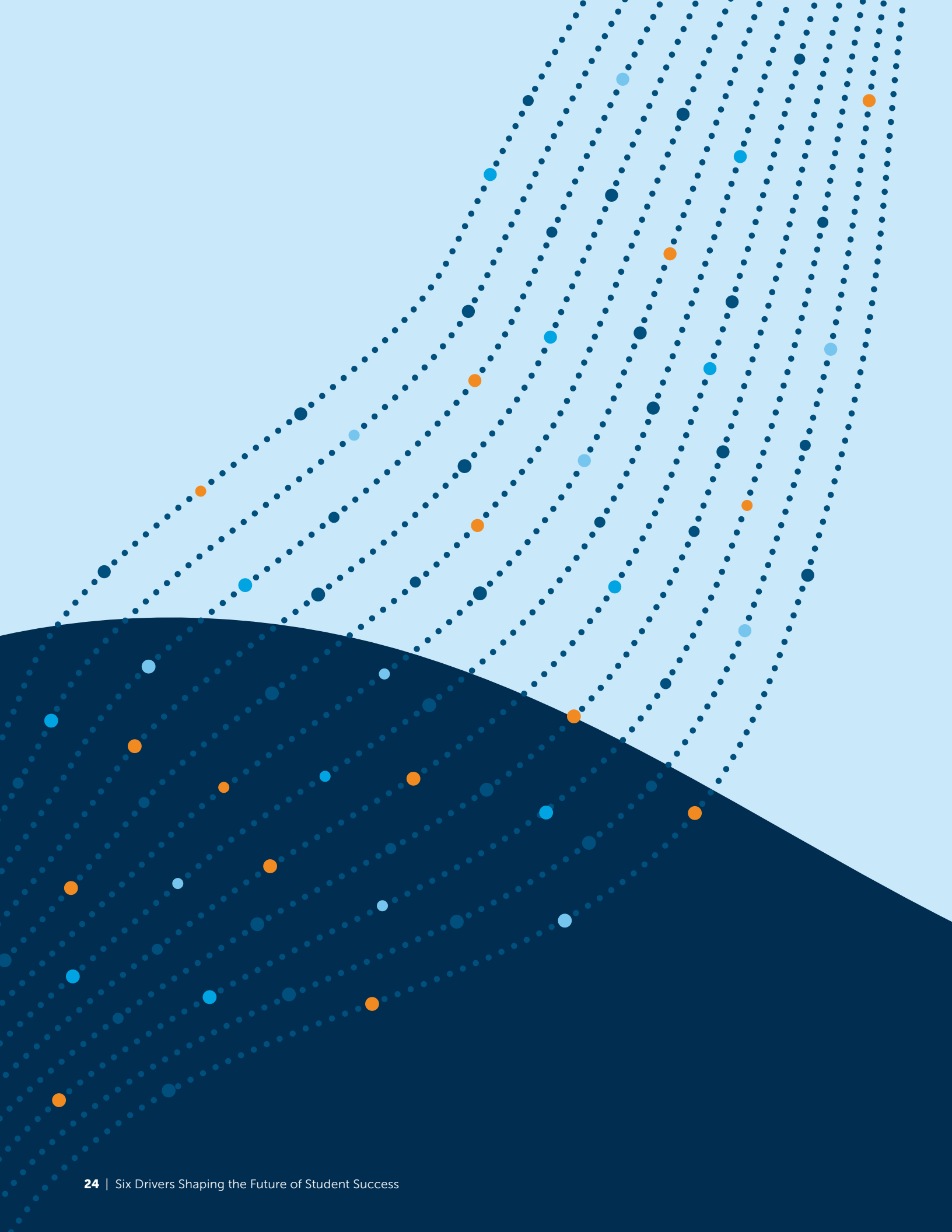


Key Insights

- 1. **Operational Efficiency and Innovation:** Navigating financial sustainability requires a commitment to operational efficiency and the adoption of innovative practices that can reduce costs while preserving the quality of education.
- 2. **Pragmatic Resource Allocation:** Embracing a “less with less” philosophy helps institutions focus on their core strengths, ensuring sustainability through strategic prioritization and resource management.
- 3. **Innovation in Delivery:** The adoption of online and hybrid learning is part of many institutions’ strategies to enhance accessibility and cost-effectiveness.

How CBOs Describe Their Situation and Positioning¹⁵







DRIVER #6

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence

Generative artificial Intelligence (AI) has the potential to revolutionize personalized learning, enhance administrative processes, and contribute to groundbreaking new ways to support student success. By integrating AI technologies, institutions can offer highly tailored learning experiences that adapt to the individual needs of students, thereby improving engagement and outcomes.

AI use will become an important skill for students to learn and to perfect in college as they prepare for the future job market. Nearly 90% of workers anticipate using AI by 2028. Most students who are in college right now will need AI skills to land their first jobs. This means that AI not only will be how students learn; it will be what they learn.

Outside the classroom, AI is streamlining administrative tasks, from admissions processes to student services, enabling staff to focus on more strategic initiatives that directly benefit the student experience. Automation and AI-driven systems are not only increasing efficiency but also reducing the potential for human error in these critical areas.

However, the rollout of AI in higher education also raises important considerations regarding ethics and privacy. Institutions are navigating these challenges by establishing guidelines that ensure AI technologies are used responsibly and equitably.

Many student success teams already have experience with AI through their use of predictive analytics to analyze vast amounts of data for insights about their students. Generative AI has the potential to further advance these teams by making it finally possible to offer individualized, personalized support at scale. The first innovations will likely be in the areas of communications and reporting. That said, it is not hard to imagine a near future where student support AI is able to assess and understand students' individual needs and propose solutions.

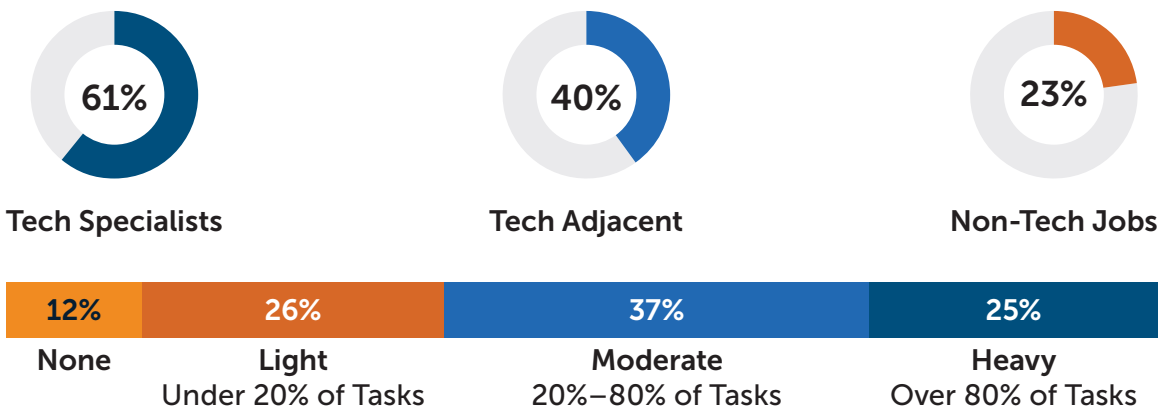
The future of student success depends on the readiness of college IT staff and infrastructure to handle the waves of student support AIs that are about to hit the market. Many colleges are at a disadvantage due to the proliferation of databases in an environment with lax data governance policies and practices. AI depends on inputs from these databases, and schools that have strong data governance are naturally going to be in a better position to get the most out of these new tools.



Key Insights

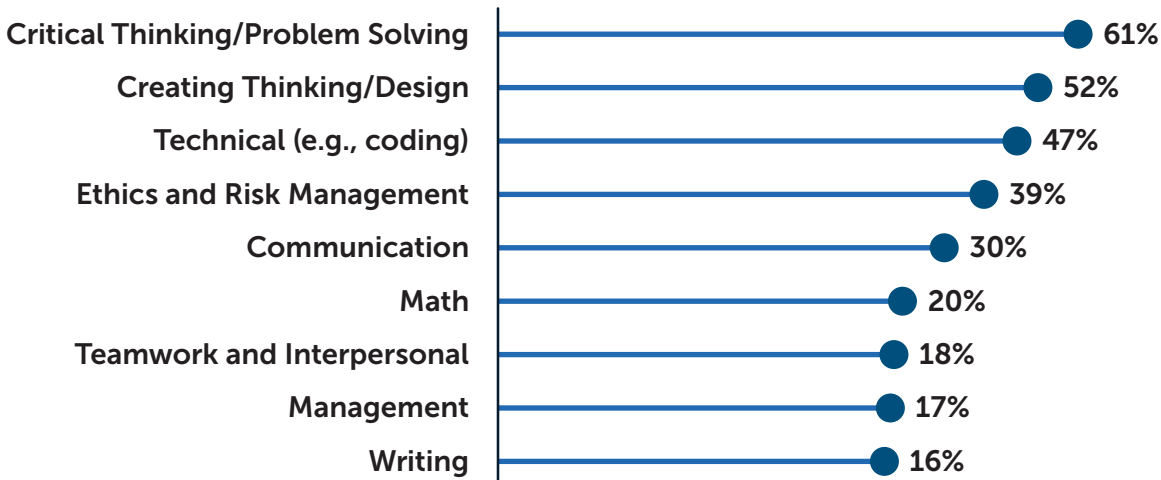
1. **Personalized Learning:** AI technologies offer potential for customized learning experiences that adapt to individual student needs and learning styles.
2. **Operational Efficiency:** AI can streamline administrative processes, allowing institutions to allocate resources more effectively to support student-facing services.
3. **Ethical and Access Considerations:** As AI plays a larger role, addressing ethical concerns and ensuring equitable access to technology becomes paramount.

Anticipated Workforce Use of AI in 2028 by Sector and Intensity¹⁴



What Skills Will AI Workers Need?¹⁴

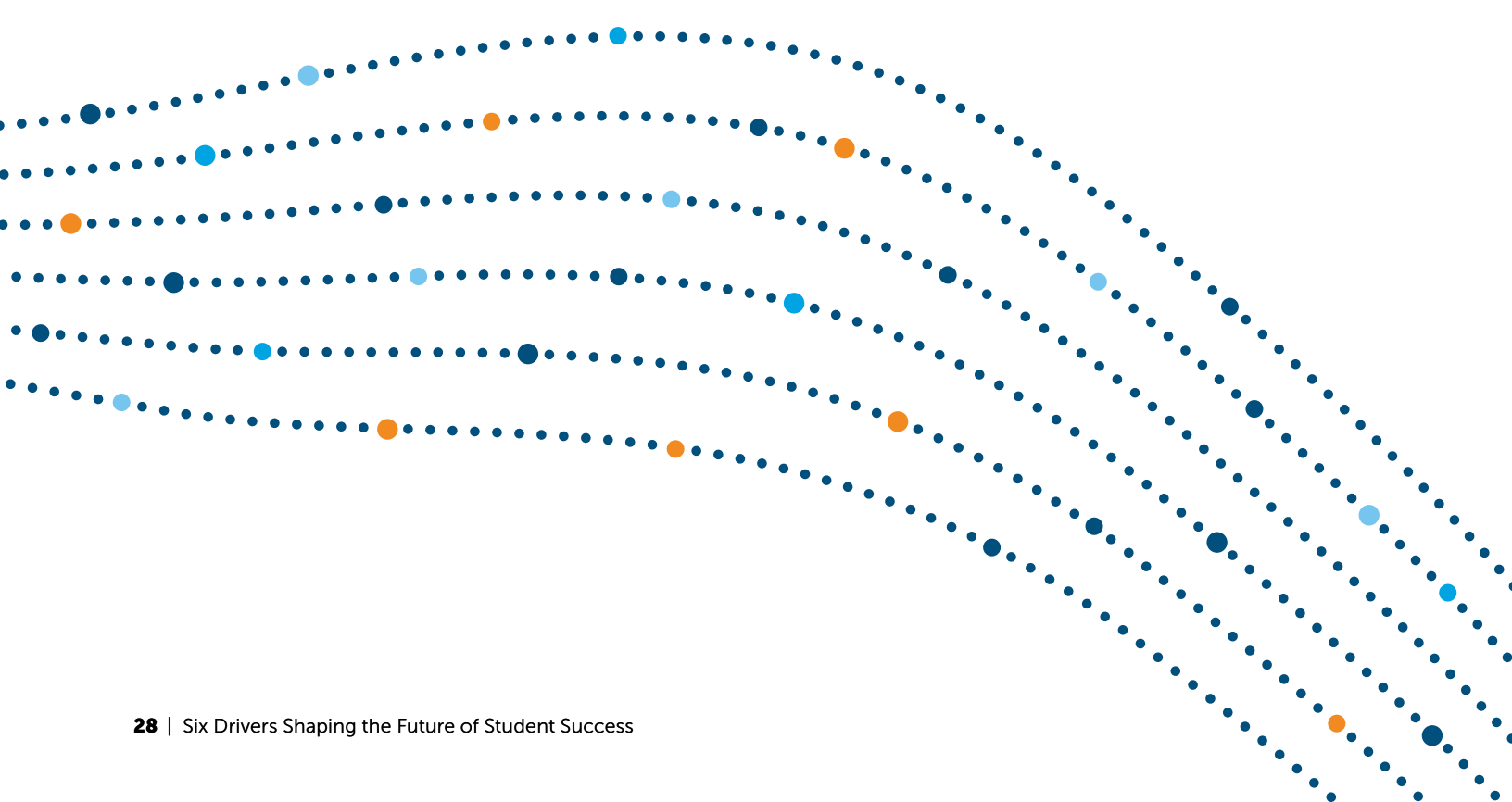
Share of Employers Ranking Skill in Top Three for AI



Closing

The future of student success suggests a landscape where institutions are increasingly focused on demonstrating value, adapting to diverse and changing demographics, ensuring financial and programmatic sustainability, addressing varying levels of academic preparedness, supporting mental health, and integrating artificial intelligence. This future will require colleges to be more adaptive, innovative, and student-centered, with an emphasis on inclusivity, personalized learning, and the ethical use of technology to enhance educational outcomes and operational efficiency.

The key takeaway from all six of these drivers is “urgency.” The pace of change is faster than at any time in higher education’s history. Legacy decision-making structures will keep many colleges from adapting fast enough. Student success teams that can meet the urgency of the moment will find themselves ahead of the pack and in far better positions to support the students of tomorrow.



How EAB Can Help

EAB's comprehensive approach to serving our partners combines technology, research, and consulting to address the complex challenges faced by colleges today. We can help colleges and universities build the infrastructure for fast and confident decisions:

1 College Value:

EAB can help institutions articulate their value proposition through market research, branding strategies, and alumni success tracking, enhancing public perception and recruitment efforts.

2 Evolving Demographics:

EAB offers data analytics and consulting services to understand and meet the needs of a diverse student population, aiding in the development of inclusive policies and targeted support services.

3 Student Mental Health:

Through best practices research and strategic planning support, EAB guides colleges in expanding and optimizing mental health services and preventive care for students.

4 Academic Preparation:

EAB's research and technology solutions can identify gaps in student preparation and support the development of support programs and innovative approaches that boost student readiness and success.

5 Sustainable Scope:

By providing insights on market demand and operational efficiency, EAB supports colleges in making informed decisions about program offerings and resource allocation to ensure financial sustainability.

6 Artificial Intelligence:

EAB can advise on integrating AI technologies into academic and administrative processes, offering personalized learning experiences and improving institutional efficiency while considering ethical implications.

Navigate the future of student success with EAB

Built on a decade of research, Navigate360 is higher education's leading student CRM. Navigate360 unites administrators, faculty, staff, and students in a collaborative network to measurably improve student outcomes. Recruit, retain, and empower students in college and beyond with Navigate360.

Staff Workflow and Automation

Empower staff to proactively engage with prospective and current students

- AI-Powered Messaging
- Complete Student Profile
- Coordinated Care Network
- Cases and Referrals
- Automated Alerts and Messaging
- Two-Way SMS
- Campaigns and Template Library
- To-Dos
- Appointments and Surveys
- Events
- Notes and Attachments
- Faculty Progress Reports
- Prospect Application Management

Student Engagement Hub

Provide your students with a one-stop shop for self-service resources

- AI-Powered Knowledge Bot
- iOS and Android Apps
- Student Success Network
- Campus Resources
- Appointment Scheduling
- Class Schedule
- In-App Messaging, Notifications, and Surveys
- Career Match and Journeys
- Study Buddies
- Financial Planner
- Prospect Portal

Reporting and Analytics

Proactively identify opportunities for better student support

- AI-Powered Report Builder
- Advanced Query Builder
- Data Visualizer
- Templated and Scheduled Reports
- Automated Workflow from Reports
- Population Health Analytics
- Activity Analytics
- Intervention Effectiveness Analytics
- Historical Analytics
- Predictive Model
- Analytics Data Export



Speak to an Expert

Ed Venit, Ph.D.
Managing Director,
Strategic Research

EAB's team of experts is available to discuss this insight paper with you and your campus leaders. If you would like a virtual presentation or meeting to discuss how your campus can prepare for digital transformation, please email EdVenit@eab.com.

Our Partners

850+

Partner institutions

10M+

Students served

Our Impact

3.5%

Typical improvement
in graduation rate

5:1

ROI based on 500
partner value stories

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College Value

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