

Survey Shows Students Go to College to Gain Personal Growth as Well as Career Advancement

Experiences like having a mentor are highly valued and beneficial to wellbeing; yet access gaps exist.

WASHINGTON, D.C., DC, UNITED STATES, May 13, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A new survey, [“What Students Value in College,”](#) explored college students’ motivations for attending college and found that while more than a third of students cited career outcomes as their primary reason for attending college, a similar share (38 percent) cited factors related to intellectual and personal growth, identity formation, and giving back to their community. The findings help inform a national debate about the value of college, indicating that students are looking for more from their education than job placement alone.

“At a time when the value of higher education is often viewed solely through the lens of economic metrics, such as first year earnings or R.O.I., it is interesting to see that students themselves are looking for more enduring benefits, such as a sense of purpose, identity, and other elements of personal growth,” said Keith Buffinton, the executive director of the LearningWell Coalition, a nonprofit organization that conducted the survey in partnership with the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and Morning Consult.

Lower-income and first-generation students were less likely to prioritize career motivations than their higher-income peers (32 percent of students from households earning under \$50,000, versus 48 percent of students from households earning over \$100,000).

The survey also explored students’ engagement in high-impact practices, such as mentorship and internships, and the effect of those experiences on their wellbeing. According to the survey, relationships with faculty and staff are among the most powerful elements of the undergraduate experience, with 76 percent of students saying having a mentor was “very” or “extremely” valuable. Using the PERMA framework for wellbeing, students with a faculty or staff mentor reported higher wellbeing (7.12) than those without one (6.62)

Students also said they value opportunities to apply their learning to the real world. Internships were the second most valued experience in the survey, with 78 percent rating them as “very” or “extremely” valuable (second only to experiences that expose you to people with backgrounds, viewpoints, or cultures different from your own at 79 percent). Students who had participated in internships reported significantly higher wellbeing (7.22 versus 6.65 for those without

internships).

Importantly, the survey showed that the experiences students find most valuable and have the strongest wellbeing outcomes are often the least accessible. This pattern applies to all students regardless of socioeconomic or first-gen status. Only 39 percent of students reported participating in an internship, and while 53 percent reported having a faculty or staff mentor, nearly half of students reported not participating in one of the most influential experiences in college.

Key considerations for higher education:

This survey data informs how higher education may respond to a national narrative that evaluates the sector in terms of career outcomes only. While career success is important, this narrow framing does not reflect the numerous motivations students have for attending college. These findings raise important questions about how colleges and universities think about educational value and prioritize certain types of programs and experiences, including those that support the development of a sense purpose and meaning, identity development, and personal growth — alongside career preparation.

Two types of experiences consistently stand out as both highly valued and highly impactful: meaningful relationships with faculty and staff and opportunities to apply learning to real-world contexts. While these experiences are among the strongest contributors to student wellbeing, they are not reaching many students. The findings suggest a need to consider how these experiences can be more consistently embedded within the undergraduate experience.

About the survey:

The poll was conducted by Morning Consult and was fielded in January 2026 among 872 undergraduate students (ages 18 to 34) enrolled in two- or four-year degree programs.

About the LearningWell Coalition:

The LearningWell Coalition is a national network of colleges and universities committed to transforming higher education so that every student is prepared to flourish in work and in life. Through research, collaboration, and the sharing of best practices, the Coalition advances approaches that foster lifelong wellbeing, purpose, and engagement.

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