



A SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Students who feel like they belong are much more likely to think their education is meeting their needs and worth the money, according to the Digital Learning Pulse Survey.

By Jeff Seaman and Julia Seaman

"I have had a great experience so far, and I felt fully supported and encouraged by my school!"

"My school does not support students during times of trouble and trauma."

"The community is very uplifting and positive, and it's a good environment to study in."

"I would love more of a relationship with my school in terms of meeting people and feeling a part of a community."

AS THE STUDENT QUOTES ABOVE DEMONSTRATE, feeling supported and part of a community can be essential to achieving academic success. But do community college students feel they are part of a larger community? And, more importantly, does this impact their views about other aspects of their relationships with their colleges?

Good news, bad news

The Digital Learning Pulse Survey polled more than 1,100 community college students during the fall of 2022 about the nature of students' relationships with the institutions they were attending. The good news is that nearly one-half (49%) of all students agree that they are part of their school's community, a number far greater than the 17% who do not agree. The bad news, however, is that half of all students are either neutral or negative about feeling they are part of a community at their school.

Students who identified as female were somewhat more likely to feel a part of their school's community (51% compared to 47% for males), and those receiving financial aid were more likely (52%) to feel part of a

community compared to 42% who were not receiving financial assistance). Hispanic students reported the highest level of being part of the school community (56%), with Black students next at 51% and 48% identifying as white agreeing.

The impact of community

Being part of a community can lead to better outcomes for students — the relationship between feeling that you are part of a supportive community and how you judge the education and services of your institution are strongly linked. If, for example, you feel that your institution has gone above and beyond in supporting you, you are more likely to feel supported and part of the community. Likewise, if you already think you are part of a school community, you may be more generous in grading the services and support you receive.

To explore the potential impact of community on students' views of their institutions, we split the students based on their response to whether they feel part of the community. These groups are 1) those who agreed that they felt part of the school community ("community" group), 2) those

who disagreed (“not community” group), and 3) those who were neutral (“neutral” group). We then compared the results for these groups across several key questions.

Meeting student educational needs

“Overall, my time is well spent being around my community while also making sure I have time for myself to prepare for jobs.”

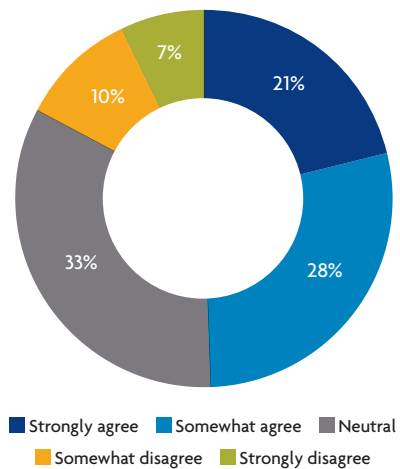
We found a direct relationship between whether students believe they are in a community and how well they thought their courses met their educational needs.

Students provided a letter grade of “A” through “F” on how well they thought their fall 2022 courses met their education needs. Most students gave good grades for this question, with 82% of all community college students reporting a “B” or an “A.” However, the results were significantly

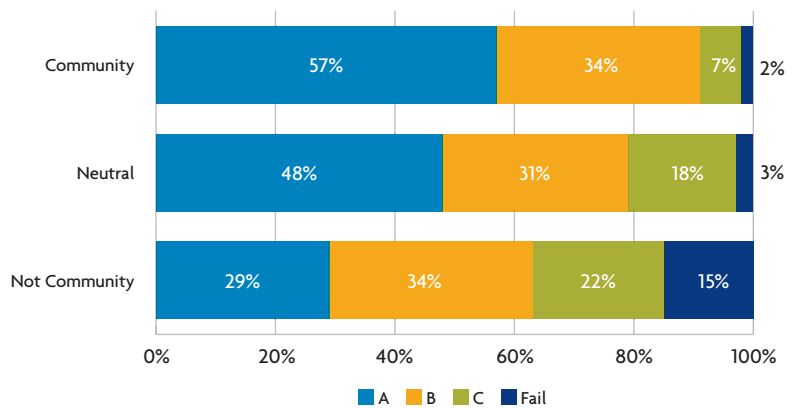
different between those who felt part of a community and those who did not.

Students who agreed that they were part of their school’s community gave far higher grades to their courses, with 57% reporting an “A” and another 34% a “B.” In contrast, only 29% of students who disagreed that they were part of the school community gave an “A” grade, with a similar 34% providing a grade of “B.” Only 2% of the “community” students gave a failing grade, while 15% of the “not community” group reported a failing grade. Most students who believe that their institution is failing them come from the small group who also do not feel that they are part of a community. The neutral student group grading fell between the community and not community groups, though closer to the better community grades.

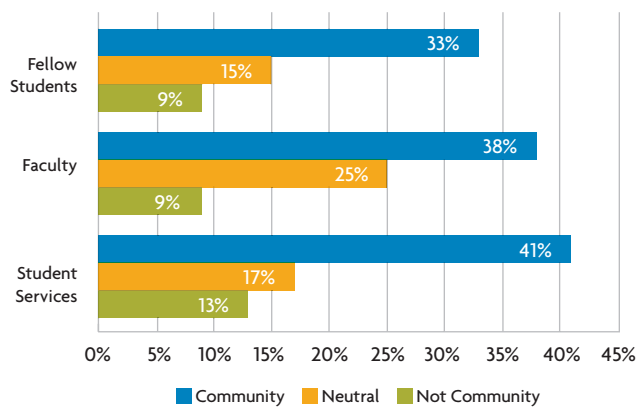
I feel like part of the community at my school



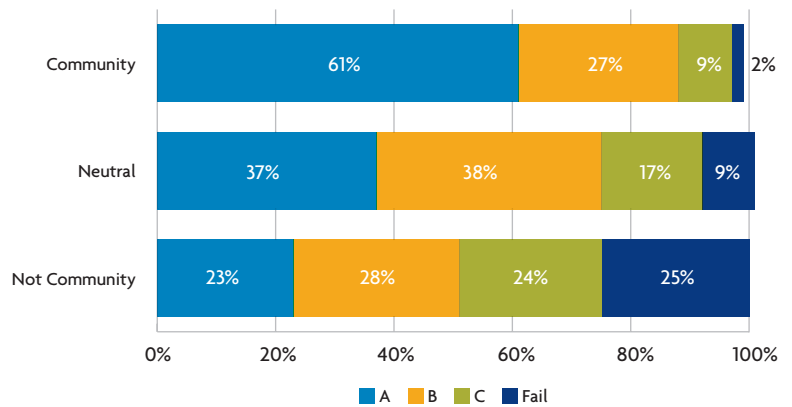
How well your Fall 2022 courses met your educational needs



I have an excellent relationship with:



How well your education is worth what you’re paying



Students who feel part of a community at their school have a much more positive view of a wide range of issues. In addition to thinking their education is better at meeting their needs and getting their money's worth, they are also much more optimistic about various other factors, including using digital course materials and taking online and hybrid courses.

Worth the money

"So far, classes are academically much more difficult than in my prior education, but I feel well-supported by school resources to succeed."

"This college does not set you up for anything. I feel like I wasted my tuition and money."

A feeling of community for students is also linked to the feeling that they are getting their money's worth at school.

The project asked students to grade if they received their money's worth from their institution. The results are even more striking than the question about meeting educational needs. Of students who considered themselves part of a school community, 61% gave a grade of "A," and only 2% reported a failing grade. Conversely, only 23% of students who did not consider themselves part of the school community gave an "A" grade, with even more (25%) giving a failing grade. Again, the neutral group gave grades between the two other groups.

Community = people

"I feel teachers value the success of students."

"Everyone from the staff to the students and even visitors are all so friendly and helpful!"

A sense of community is related to the nature and quality of interpersonal interactions. Community college students were asked about the quality of their interactions with other groups at their institution. The proportion of students who reported being part of the school's community were much more likely to say they had "excellent" relationships with others. In contrast, those who did not feel part of the community had the lowest proportion of reporting excellent relationships.

Does feeling that you are part of a community lead to better-quality interactions with others, or is it the other way around? Most likely, both are true. The results show a solid relationship between interpersonal interactions and a sense of community, but not if one causes the other.

Summary

"This institution is clearly built for 18- and 19-year-olds who do not work and are not parents. Non-traditional students are not supported or accommodated."

"My experience has been great other than when I try to find help with student services. They are often no help at all and just send me to a different department."

What conclusions can we draw from these results?

Students who feel part of a community at their school have a much more positive view of a wide range of issues. In addition to thinking their education is better at meeting their needs and getting their money's

worth, they are also much more optimistic about various other factors. For example, they are much more positive about using digital course materials and taking future online and hybrid courses from their institution.

Feeling part of the community is strongly related to the quality of interactions with fellow students, student services, and faculty. However, many additional elements can build a community for students.

Open-ended comments from students cite multiple factors supporting their view that they feel part of the institution's community. Likewise, those who do not think they are part of a community cite various factors. Both groups note how flexible and caring the faculty are as critical. The presence or lack of clear institutional communications is also often mentioned. The quality of services has a significant role as well. Services that are ineffective, hard to access, or just missing are commonly mentioned as a problem. In contrast, others cite responsive and caring services as an essential reason for feeling like a valued community member.

"I tried to attend a different school, but I chose to go back here as I feel valued, and the school provides excellent study materials and prepares students to be ready for the real world."

No single factor makes students feel they are part of their institution's community. The truth is much more nuanced. However, students who feel part of a community have better opinions about their education and institution. Therefore, building communities for students is a vital support step that can lead to improved academic outcomes and better overall well-being.

About the Digital Learning Pulse Survey

The Digital Learning Pulse Survey is an ongoing research project to understand how the pandemic is changing higher education. Bay View Analytics conducted the project in partnership with Cengage, the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), Phi Theta Kappa (PTK), and College Pulse. The project surveyed 1,177 community college students during the Fall of 2022.



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