

# Student Wellness Factors Related to Sense of Belonging & Retention

Partners in Prevention (PIP) is Missouri's higher education substance misuse consortium dedicated to creating healthy and safe college campuses. The coalition is comprised of 24 public and private colleges and universities in the state. The campuses in the coalition work to prevent high-risk behaviors by implementing evidence-based strategies. These strategies include education, social norming campaigns, policy review and enforcement, and more. To measure progress and obtain data needed for the implementation of programs, PIP created the Missouri Assessment of College Health Behaviors (MACHB) Survey. The MACHB is an annual, online survey that has been implemented each spring since 2007. The survey assesses the roles that alcohol, drugs (illegal and prescription), tobacco/nicotine, interpersonal violence, and mental health have on student health and wellness. 23 campuses that completed both 2020 (N=7833) and 2021 (N=8769) MACHB surveys were included in this brief. The 2020 survey was conducted before the disruptions in college and university operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas the 2021 survey was conducted after some of the campuses resumed their classes in-person. This brief examines the relationship between student wellness factors related to sense of belonging/retention. This brief also offers an appendix which probes potential implications of disruptions in college operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, by comparing 2020 and 2021 data.

## **Sense of Belonging and Thoughts of Quitting/Transferring**

The percentage of students who reported a lack of sense of belonging increased by 4% from 2020 to 2021 (12% to 16%). Similarly, the percentage of students who thought of discontinuing their education increased by 2% from 2020 to 2021 (19% to 21%). Interestingly, the percentage of students who thought of transferring decreased from 2020 to 2021 by 4%.

In both 2020 and 2021, students who identify as trans-spectrum or LGBQQAP consistently had low rates of having a sense of belonging, coupled with high rates of thinking of discontinuing their education. Students involved in Greek organizations and those who identify as being involved in leadership experiences, on the other hand, reported high rates of having a sense of belonging and low rates of thinking of discontinuing their education.

For further information regarding subpopulations (race/ethnicity, LGBTQ+ identities, year in school,

socioeconomic status, and campus involvement) and their lack of sense of belonging, thoughts of discontinuing their education, and thoughts of transferring, please refer to Table 1 in the Appendix.

## **Relationship between Retention and Substance Use, Mental Health, and Help-Seeking Behavior**

In general, the students who reported lacking a sense of belonging, thinking of discontinuing their education, and thinking of transferring reported higher rates of substance use than their counterparts. However, this trend did not remain consistent when examining alcohol binge drinking and frequent binge drinking among students when examining sense of belonging. No difference in daily tobacco use was observed between those with and without thoughts of transferring. Please note that these trends do not indicate any causal relationships nor their causal directions.

Students who engage in:	Have sense of belonging or neutral	Lack sense of belonging
Binge drinking**	22%	21%
Frequent binge drinking* (3+ times in past 2 weeks)	5.2%	4.9%
Cannabis use**	26%	35%
Frequent cannabis use** (3+ times/week)	6.6%	12%
Rx drug misuse**	7.8%	11%
Tobacco use**	24%	28%
Frequent tobacco use (daily)	11%	14%

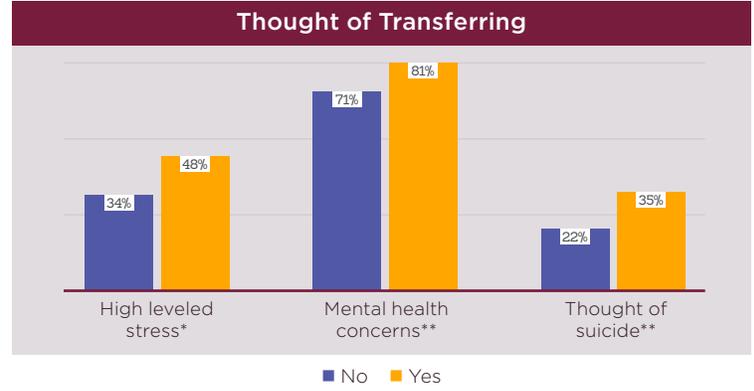
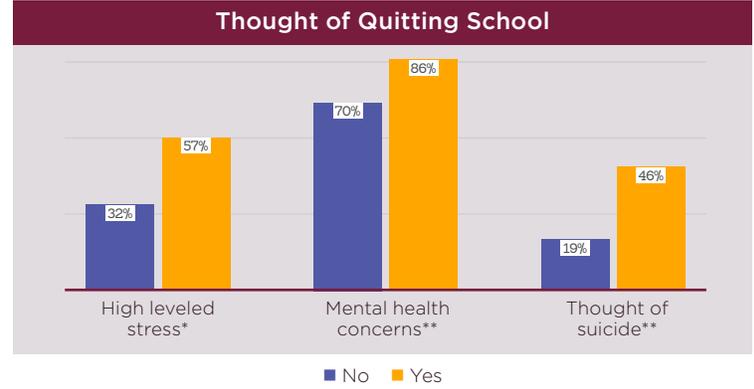
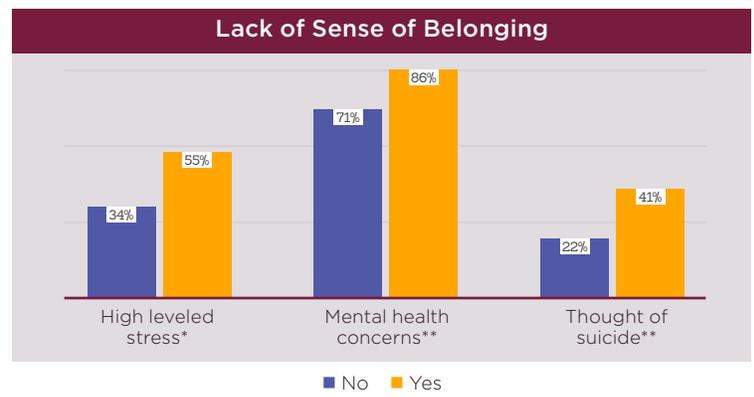
Students who engage in:	Did not think of quitting school	Thought of quitting school
Binge drinking**	21%	24%
Frequent binge drinking* (3+ times in past 2 weeks)	4.9%	6.2%
Cannabis use**	25%	38%
Frequent cannabis use** (3+ times/week)	6.0%	12%
Rx drug misuse**	7.4%	12%
Tobacco use**	24%	29%
Frequent tobacco use (daily)	11%	14%

Students who engage in:	Did not think of transferring	Thought of transferring
Binge drinking**	21%	24%
Frequent binge drinking* (3+ times in past 2 weeks)	4.9%	5.9%
Cannabis use**	26%	33%
Frequent cannabis use** (3+ times in past 2 weeks)	6.6%	10%
Rx drug misuse**	8.1%	10%
Tobacco use**	24%	27%
Frequent tobacco use (daily)**	12%	12%

Binge Drinking is defined as consuming 5 or more drinks in a 2-hour period  
 \*Past two weeks \*\*Past year

## Mental Health

Students who lacked a sense of belonging, thought of discontinuing their education, and thought of transferring, reported greater rates of experiencing high leveled stress during the past two weeks (feeling overwhelmed or experiencing unbearable stress) compared to their counterparts. These students also reported experiencing at least one mental health concern in the past year or having thoughts of suicide in the past year at higher rates than their counterparts. These trends also do not indicate any causal relationships nor their causal directions.



\*Past two weeks \*\*Past year

## Help-seeking Behavior

In the MACHB, students are asked to report which on- and/or off-campus resources they utilize when personal concerns arise, such as parents, friends, the school counseling center, etc.

The data suggest a stark difference in help-seeking behavior, especially for on-campus resources: 41% of those who report a lack of sense of belonging, 29% of those who thought of quitting education, and 26% of those who thought of transferring responded that they would not seek help from anyone on-campus, while only 14%, 16%, and 16% of their counterparts reported the same, respectively.

For more information, visit [mopip.org](http://mopip.org)

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For off-campus resources, 7.8% of those who report lacking a sense of belonging, 7.5% of those who thought of quitting education, and 6.7% of those who thought of transferring responded that they would not seek help, while only 3.8%, 3.6%, and 3.8% of their counterparts did, respectively. Again, these findings do not indicate any causal relationships nor directions.

## **Conclusion**

Comparing 2020 to 2021 and the potential implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, students' lack of sense of belonging and thoughts of discontinuing their education increased, while thoughts of transferring decreased. Certain student subpopulations such as trans-spectrum and LGBQQAP students may have experienced higher rates of these concerns, particularly in comparison to Greek students or students with leadership experiences.

Overall, lacking a sense of belonging, thinking of discontinuing one's education, and thinking of transferring, seem to be associated with higher rates of cannabis use, prescription drug misuse, and tobacco use, while thinking of discontinuing one's education and thinking of transferring seem to be related to binge-drinking. In regard to mental health, these same students are also more likely to experience high levelled stress, experience at least one mental health concern in the past year, and have thoughts of suicide in the past year. These students are also less likely to seek support from both on- and off-campus resources during these times of personal distress.

Partners in Prevention continues to monitor critical health behaviors of college students including high-risk alcohol consumption, cannabis and other drug use (including tobacco), and mental health. While discussed trends in this brief do not indicate causal relationships nor their directions, past literature consistently suggest the associations among substance use, mental health, and retention among college students. Future studies should elucidate on the exact mechanisms and understanding of risk factors to best provide tailored support for student wellness, especially as many campuses resume their pre-pandemic class operations in the coming months. For more information about Partners in Prevention and to explore our research, visit [mopip.org](https://mopip.org).

## **Resources**

Institutions of higher education in Missouri have worked to prevent impaired driving using statewide initiatives funded by the Missouri Department of Transportation delivered through Partners in Prevention.

### **Ask. Listen. Refer.**

Ask. Listen. Refer. is a free, statewide online suicide prevention training program designed to train and educate students, faculty, staff, and other members of college and university campuses across Missouri. The program trains individuals to 1) identify people at risk for suicide 2) recognize the risk factors, protective factors, and warning signs of suicide, and 3) respond to and get help for people at risk. Learn more and complete the training at [asklistenrefer.org](https://asklistenrefer.org).

### **Students in Distress Videos**

These short videos can help individuals navigate difficult conversations with students (or other individuals) who may need help and are available to share with faculty, staff, or other members of the campus community. They can be found at [mopiptraining.org](https://mopiptraining.org).

### **Motivational Interviewing**

Motivational Interviewing (MI) training is online and free for campuses in Missouri. MI training is designed to train individuals on a client-centered method for enhancing intrinsic motivation to change by exploring and resolving ambivalence (Miller & Rollnick, 2002).

### **Tobacco and Nicotine Training and Resources**

Partners in Prevention provides training and resources to help address tobacco/nicotine use among students. Register for one of our virtual trainings, 'Delivering Tobacco Cessation Services on College Campuses: Evidence-Based Approaches and Best-Practices' at [mopiptraining.org](https://mopiptraining.org). Trained practitioners can also access nicotine replacement therapy and quit kits items at the following link: [mopip.wufoo.com/forms/xkmp9r10ihlo55](https://mopip.wufoo.com/forms/xkmp9r10ihlo55)

Contact Partners in Prevention at (573) 884-7551.

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## Appendix

Table 1. Retention by Subpopulation and time comparison (before and during COVID-19)

	Lack of sense of belonging			Thought of quitting			Thought of transferring		
	2020	2021	Difference	2020	2021	Difference	2020	2021	Difference
<b>All Students</b>									
	12%	16%	4%	19%	21%	2%	27%	23%	-4%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>									
White	12%	16%	4%	19%	21%	2%	24%	21%	-3%
Black	15%	13%	-2%	27%	25%	-2%	45%	35%	-10%
Asian	10%	12%	2%	18%	19%	1%	30%	26%	-4%
Multi-racial/ bi-racial	14%	18%	4%	23%	29%	6%	34%	32%	-2%
Hispanic	14%	13%	-1%	24%	23%	-1%	26%	25%	-1%
<b>LGBTQ+</b>									
Trans-spectrum	27%	29%	2%	40%	36%	-4%	29%	29%	0%
LGBQQAP+	19%	21%	2%	32%	33%	1%	31%	29%	-2%
<b>Year in School</b>									
1	10%	12%	2%	16%	18%	2%	30%	27%	-3%
2	12%	14%	2%	21%	23%	2%	32%	29%	-3%
3	13%	16%	3%	20%	23%	3%	24%	22%	-2%
4	14%	19%	5%	19%	20%	1%	19%	16%	-3%
<b>Socioeconomic Status</b>									
Pell grant eligible	14%	18%	4%	24%	24%	0%	28%	22%	-6%
First generation	14%	16%	2%	24%	25%	1%	29%	24%	-5%
Parents	18%	20%	2%	24%	21%	-3%	17%	13%	-4%
<b>Involvement</b>									
Greek membership	5.9%	9.0%	3%	17%	20%	3%	25%	26%	1%
Leadership Position	8.2%	11%	3%	17%	20%	3%	25%	24%	-1%