



# Empowering Futures Evaluation 2024-25

prepared by the Empowering Futures Evaluation Team

**October 2025**

This and other reports related to the evaluation of aspects of the Empowering Futures initiative at Western Michigan University are available from [wmich.edu/evaluation/empowering-futures](https://wmich.edu/evaluation/empowering-futures)



**WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY.**  
Empowering Futures  
Evaluation Team

## Empowering Futures Overview

The Empowering Futures Gift (EFG) is a historic donation of \$550 million to Western Michigan University. \$200 million of the gift is funding various activities, positions, technologies, and initiatives at WMU, with the remainder going to WMU Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine and Bronco Athletics.

### **Purpose and Vision<sup>1</sup>**

Empowering Futures is a student-centered, transformative initiative to expand educational access for all and foster a holistic experience that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive, so students can craft their purpose, thrive in lives well lived, and succeed in meaningful careers. In support of the University's mission, "so that all may learn," the focus of Empowering Futures is to create pipelines for success and pathways to graduation, increase retention, and improve student resilience.

The vision for Empowering Futures is to close the student success gap by developing an integrated model of a thriving and diverse community, as defined by:

- *A sense of place and belonging* where students feel fully included and accepted so they may pursue their education and full potential.
- *A sense of health and well-being* where students can meet their physical, emotional, mental, and financial needs so they are more likely to complete college.
- *A sense of learning and fulfillment* where students pursue or create a meaningful future that improves their communities and makes the world better.

### **WMU's Retention and Graduation Goals**

In fall 2023, President Montgomery set the goal for WMU to rise to third in the state for student success. He laid out specific targets to achieve by the 2027–28 academic year:

- Increase the first- to second-year retention rate from 79.8% (2023) to 84%.
- Increase the overall six-year graduation rate from 57.8% (2023) to 62%.
- Increase the graduation rate for Black and African American students by 8 percentage points above the rate for the 2017 cohort (i.e., to 52.1%).
- Increase the graduation rate for Hispanic and Latino/a/x students by 4 percentage points above the rate for the 2017 cohort (i.e., to 52.7%).

Based on this background information, the evaluation workgroup developed a logic model to reflect Empowering Futures' activities and intended outcomes (see Figure 1 on page 3).

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<sup>1</sup>This Information about the purpose and vision is directly from the [Empowering Futures Charter](#).

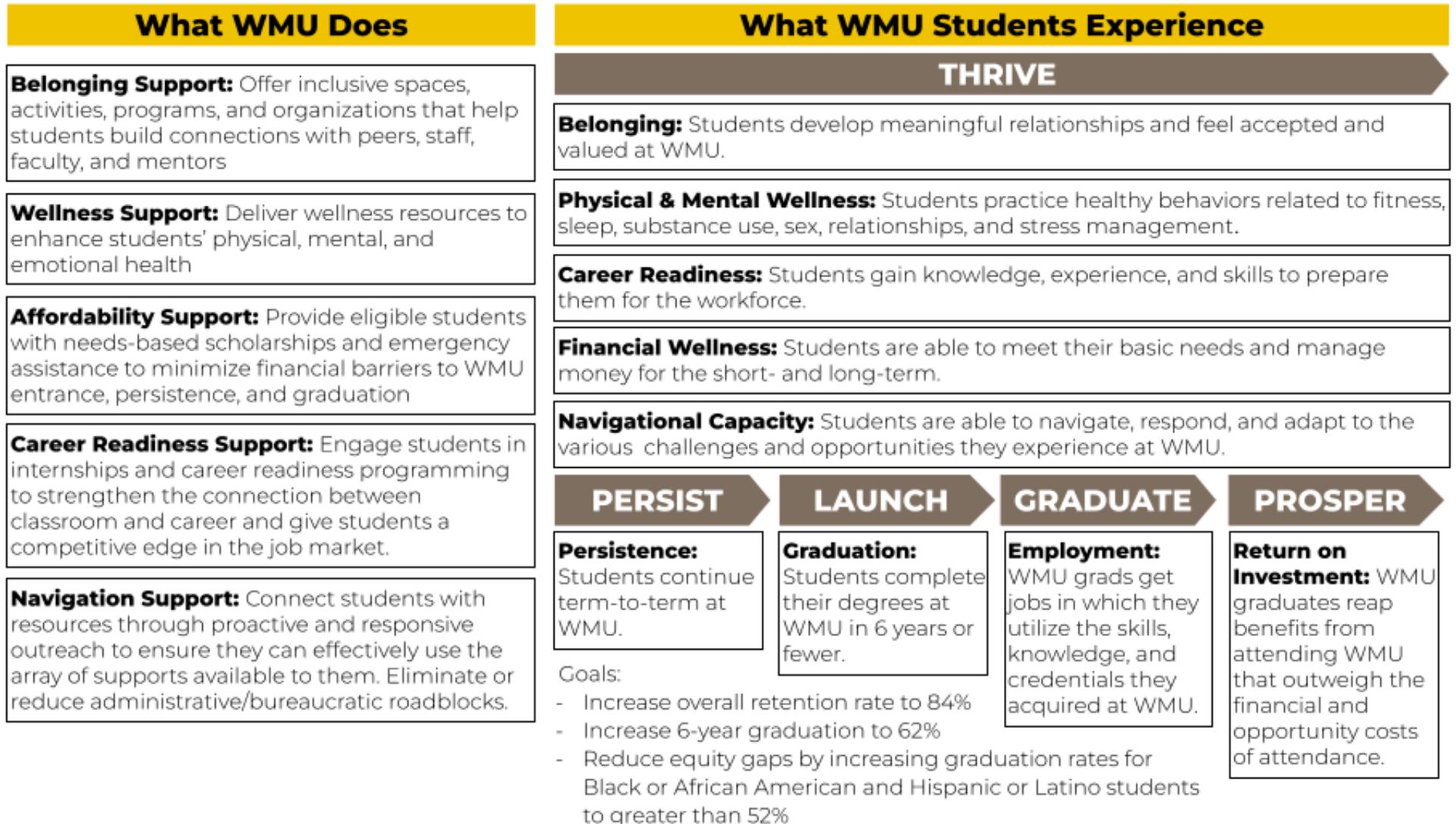
## Empowering Futures Gift-Funded Activities at WMU

Table 1 summarizes activities that are funded by the Empowering Futures Gift and the main types of support they provide, according to program documentation.

**Table 1. Overview of Empowering Futures Activities**

Activity	Type of Support				
	Belonging	Wellness	Affordability	Career Readiness	Navigation
<b>Bronco Connect</b> is designed to support belonging and enhance career exploration, engagement, and study skills for recipients of the Bronco Connect housing scholarship.	✓		✓	✓	
<b>Bronco Promise</b> provides a tuition-free WMU education for up to five years for eligible first-year students. (EFG covers 29% of the program's budget.)			✓		
<b>Broncos Lead</b> helps students explore career options through internships. Participation is need-based for employers but not for students. WMU reimburses employers the cost of interns' wages and taxes.				✓	
<b>Health and Well-Being</b> activities funded by EFG include Common Ground, a space to support belonging and stress management; mental health peer education; on-demand teletherapy; and two positions (assistant director for mental well-being and WMU Essential Needs program manager).	✓	✓	✓		
<b>Navigator Network</b> is intended to increase WMU's efficiency and responsiveness in anticipating and addressing students' needs. Activities include (1) individualized outreach to students, (2) student engagement events, and (3) crisis management.					✓
<b>Tenacity Scholarships</b> assist students in their third year or beyond with financial challenges that impact their ability to persist at WMU. The Tenacity award (up to \$1,000) can be applied to tuition and fees.			✓		
<b>Student Success Hub (SSH)</b> is an online portal accessible to all students that provides academic advisors, Navigator Network staff, and special program staff with information about each undergraduate student's needs and progress. It is intended to increase collaboration and simplify students' navigation of resources. (EFG covers about 15% of SSH's budget.)					✓

Figure 1. Empowering Futures Logic Model



## 2024–25 Evaluation Overview

To avoid redundancy with information provided by the various Empowering Futures initiatives in their annual initiative-level reports, this year’s evaluation report focuses on institutional-level data and special studies conducted by members of the Empowering Futures evaluation team. That is, we do not attempt to address every EFG-funded activity separately.

The main sections include the following:

1. **Retention and Graduation Trends:** Data on overall graduation and retention compared with institutional goals and disaggregated based on race/ethnicity.
2. **Indicators of Student Thriving at WMU:** Charts populated with data from various University sources to illustrate trends over time related to students’ sense of belonging, health and well-being, and career preparation.
3. **Special Empowering Futures Evaluation–Related Studies:** Two- to four-page summaries of methods, findings, and implications.
4. **Moving Forward:** Key takeaways based on the totality of evidence about Empowering Futures and recommendations for further evaluation.

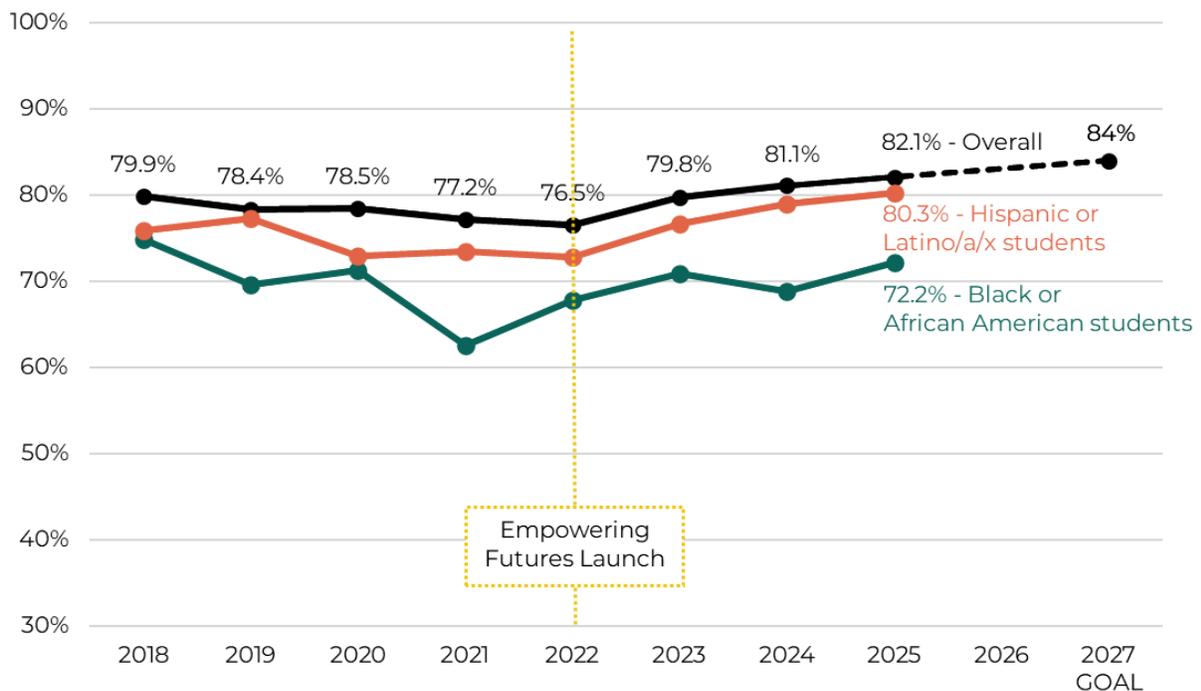
Readers may notice that in the logic model and overview of EFG-funded activities, we refer to “career readiness” rather than the “sense of learning and fulfillment.” We determined that the construct of “learning and fulfillment” is too broad and amorphous to address through evaluation. Since Empowering Futures funds career-readiness activities and career readiness is a priority for WMU, we deemed that to be a more appropriate term and topic for the Empowering Futures evaluation.

# Retention and Graduation Trends

## WMU Retention Rates

WMU's overall retention rates have been increasing since 2022. Figure 2 shows first-to second-year retention rates for incoming cohorts of FTIAC (first-time in any college) students for the past eight years. In addition to overall graduation rates, the chart shows rates for Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino/a/x students, since those groups are highlighted in the goals established by President Montgomery.

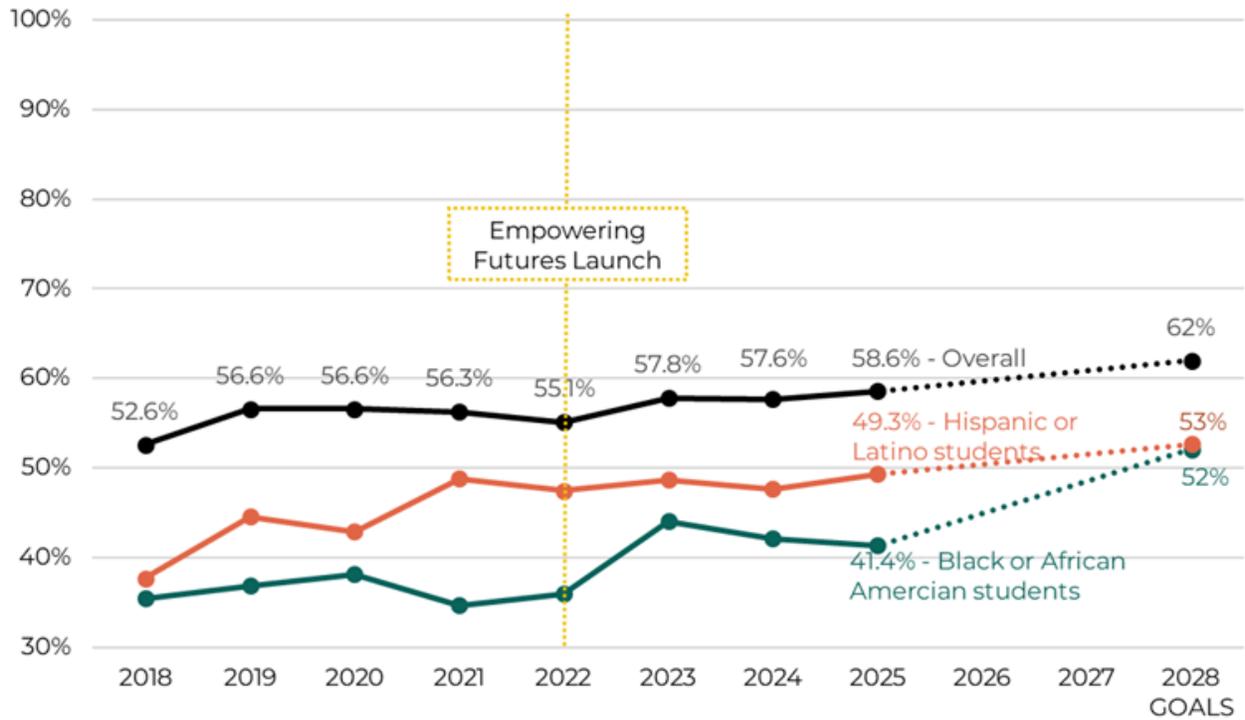
**Figure 2. First- to Second-Year Retention Rates for FTIAC Students**



## WMU Graduation Rates

WMU's overall six-year graduation rate has been increasing for the past three years. Figure 3 shows graduation rates for FTIAC students for the past eight years. One explanation of the declining rate for Black or African American students could be that these students were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2023–25 rates reflect cohorts that started at WMU from 2017 through 2019, which aligns with the height of the pandemic and its aftermath.

Figure 3. Six-Year Graduation Rates for FTIAC Students



## Student Thriving Indicators

The Empowering Futures logic model (Figure 1) highlights five key aspects of student thriving that are priorities for Empowering Futures (either explicitly stated or evident from investments): belonging, physical and mental wellness, career readiness, financial wellness, and navigational ability.

WMU regularly collects data from students related to various aspects of thriving. Examples include:

- Housing and Dining (H&D) survey, conducted annually by WMU's Office of Housing and Residence Life
- [National College Health Assessment \(NCHA\) Survey](#), conducted every other year by the National College Health Association
- [National Survey of Student Engagement \(NSSE\)](#), conducted periodically by the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University
- [Post-Graduation Activity Survey](#), conducted annually by WMU's Office of Institutional Research
- [WMU Climate Survey](#), conducted in 2020 and 2024 by WMU's Office of Diversity and Inclusion in collaboration with a consultant
- [WMU Undergraduate Student Survey](#), a survey designed by the Empowering Futures evaluation workgroup, administered for the first time in 2024 with the intent to repeat annually

We observed that the data collected through these surveys seems to have been underutilized to track students' experiences over time. Therefore, we compiled key data points that are especially relevant to Empowering Futures, going back to 2017 (five years before the start of Empowering Futures). Tracking these indicators over time should contribute to understanding Empowering Futures' impact.

It is important to begin tracking these data points to support understanding of student success at WMU beyond retention and graduation. For example, it's possible that graduation or retention rates may change slowly or, at first, not at all. If so, these data can act as near-term indicators of change, serving as either affirmation that the initiatives are effective or warning signals that the student experience needs immediate attention.

### Translating Disparate Data into a Common Metric

To allow for presenting, tracking, and comparing multiple types of metrics, we converted ordinal data (such as responses to questions with progressive levels of agreement, frequency, or satisfaction) to **percent of maximum possible (POMP) scores**.<sup>2</sup> POMP scores can be used for any type of ordinal data, using the formula

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<sup>2</sup> [Cohen et al., 1999](#); [Moeller, 2015](#)

shown in Figure 4. Converting to POMP scores makes it possible to view multiple indicators from different instruments that use different types of response options on an equal scale.

**Figure 4. Formula for Calculating a POMP Score**

$$\text{POMP} = \frac{\text{Observed Score} - \text{Minimum Possible Score}}{\text{Maximum Possible Score} - \text{Minimum Possible Score}} \times 100$$

For example, for a survey question that uses a five-point response scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5), where a respondent said they Agree (4), the POMP score would be calculated as illustrated in Figure 5.

**Figure 5. Calculation of a POMP score**

$$\text{POMP} = \frac{4 - 1}{5 - 1} = \frac{3}{4} = .75 = 75\%$$

While Figure 5 shows the calculation for an individual response, the same process is used with aggregate data.

Metrics that are already on a 0–100% percentage scale do not require conversion. Examples include the percentage of students retained or who answers “yes” to a yes-no question.

The advantages of POMP scores are that they are easy to calculate and easy to interpret, and they facilitate comparison over time using different data types and data sources. Additionally, a POMP score reflects all responding students’ answers, not just those who answered favorably, as happens with the common practice of reporting the percentage of respondents who gave the two most favorable responses (i.e., [top-two box score](#)). POMP scores work with any type of ordinal data, unlike [net promoter scores](#), which are intended only for responses related to promotion or detraction. A downside of POMP scores is the risk of audiences misinterpreting POMP scores as a percentages of respondents.

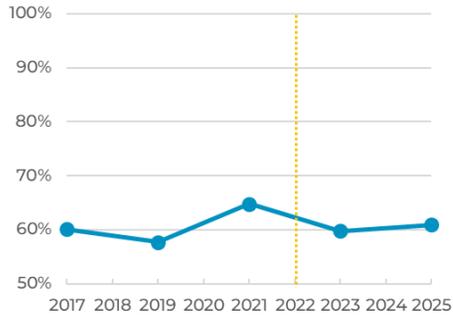
Figures 6–8 present the results of this data compilation. When a data point is missing for a given year, it is because either that survey was either not conducted that year or did not include that question.

A few of the metrics are based on multi-item scales with specific cut scores defined through previous research (follow links for more details). We did not recalculate these items.

# Health and Wellness

Figure 6. Health and Wellness Indicators: 2017–25 (Yellow lines mark the beginning of Empowering Futures.)

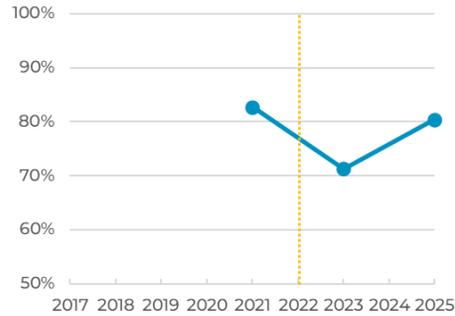
POMP Score for  
How would you describe your  
overall health?



Source: NCHA

5-point scale: Poor to Excellent

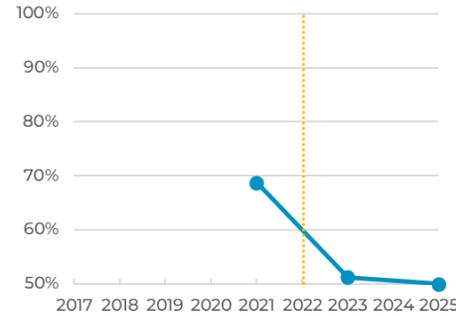
Percentage of students with **no or low psychological distress**



Source: NCHA

Based on the [Kessler 6 Non-Specific Psychological Distress Score](#)

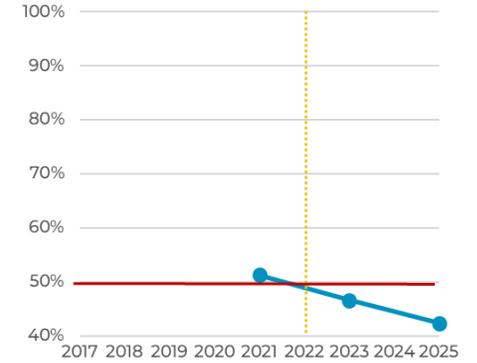
Percentage of students with high or marginal **food security**



Source: NCHA

Based on the [USDA Six-Item Food Security Scale](#)

Percentage of students who reported **no financial challenges** in past 12 months

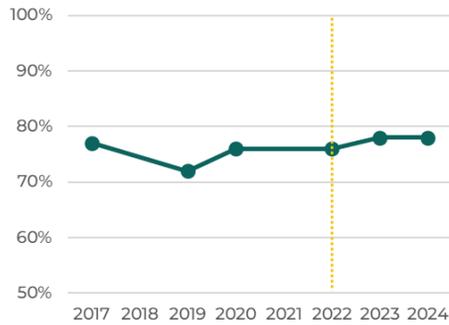


Source: NCHA

# Belonging

Figure 7. Belonging indicators: 2017–25 (Yellow lines mark the beginning of Empowering Futures.)

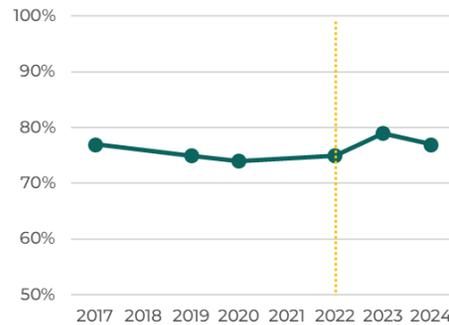
POMP Score for **I feel at home/comfortable on my floor/house/apartment.**



Source: WMU H&D survey

7-point scale: Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree

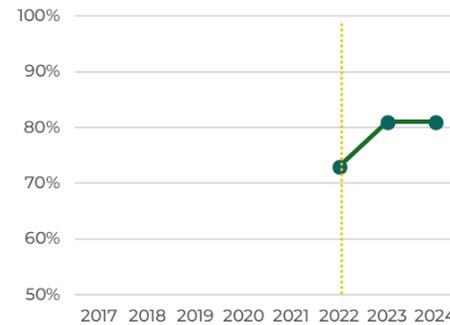
POMP Score for **I feel accepted by other students on my floor/house/apartment.**



Source: WMU H&D survey

7-point scale: Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree

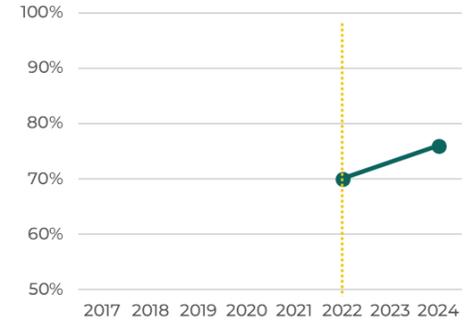
POMP Score for **I can be myself on my floor/house/apartment**



Source: WMU H&D survey

7-point scale: Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree

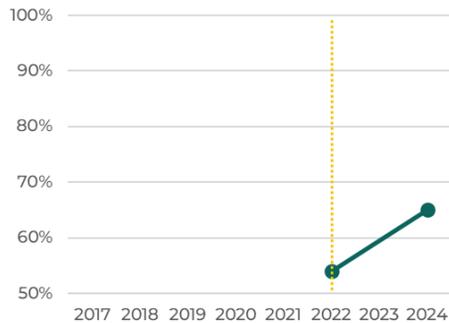
POMP Score for **I feel comfortable being myself at this institution**



Source: NSSE

4-point scale: Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree

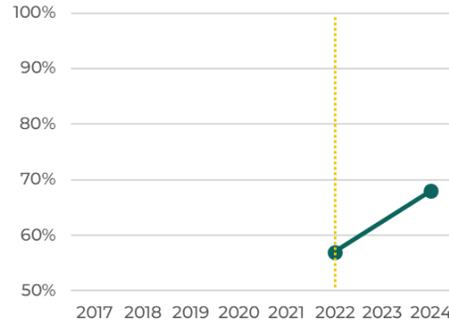
POMP Score for **I feel like part of the community at this institution**



Source: NSSE

4-point scale: Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree

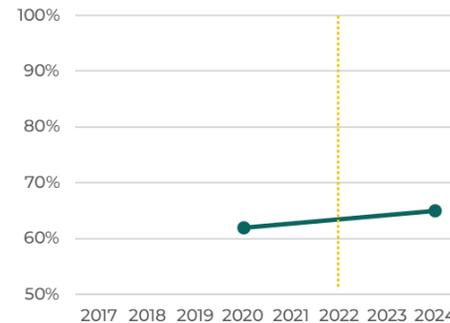
POMP Score for **I feel valued by this institution**



Source: NSSE

4-point scale: Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree

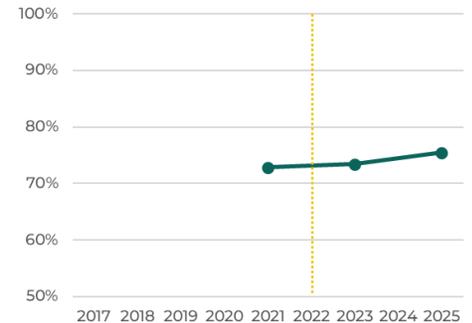
POMP Score for **There is a great sense of belonging here**



Source: WMU Climate survey

5-point scale: Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree

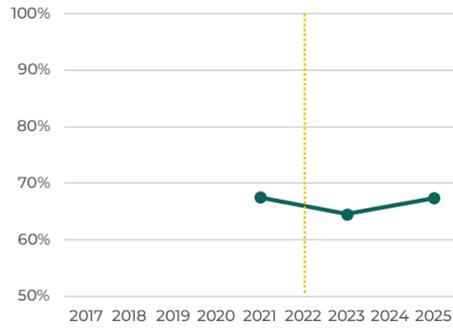
POMP Score for **I feel I belong at my college/university**



Source: NCHA

4-point scale: Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree

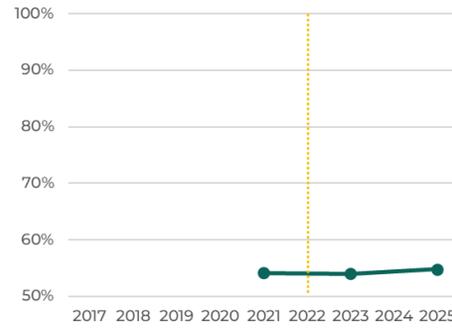
POMP Score for  
At my college/university, we are  
a campus where we **look out**  
**for each other.**



Source: NCHA

4-point scale: Strongly Disagree to  
Strongly Agree

Percentage of students  
not experiencing loneliness.



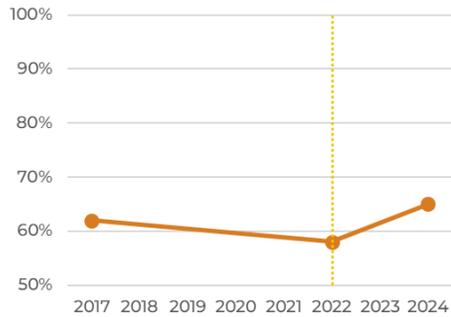
Source: NCHA

Based on the [UCLA Loneliness Scale](#)

# Career Preparation

Figure 8. Career Preparation indicators: 2017–25 (Yellow lines mark the beginning of Empowering Futures.)

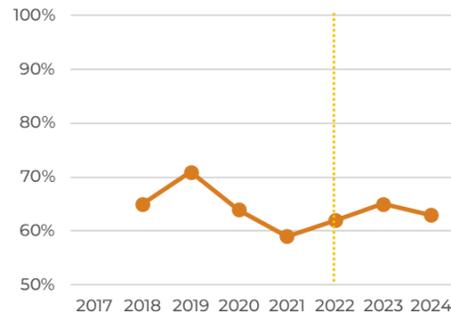
POMP score for  
How much has your experience  
at this institution contributed to  
**acquiring job- or work-related  
knowledge and skills?**



Source: NSSE

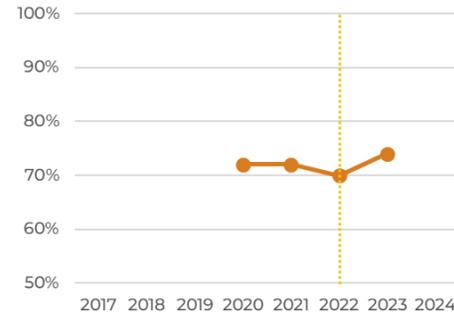
4-point scale: Very Little to Very Much

Percentage of graduates who  
reported having **internships**  
while at WMU



Source: PGAR

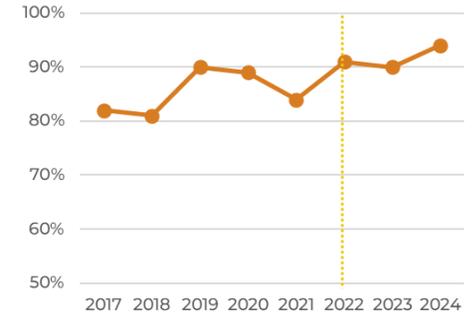
POMP score for  
My education and experiences  
as a student at WMU **prepared  
me for my profession.**



Source: PGAR

4-point scale: Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree

Percentage of graduates who  
said their **job was related to  
their degree**



Source: PGAR

## Special Studies

The following subsections summarize the background, questions, methods, findings, and implications for various special studies conducted as part of or in parallel with the Empowering Futures evaluation.

We have kept these summaries brief, providing links to materials with more details about each study.

### Bronco Promise's Impact on Retention

**Study Lead:** Will Stutz, Data Scientist and Associate Director, Institutional Research

**Key Takeaway:** Bronco Promise scholarship program very likely succeeded in boosting the retention rates of students with low family incomes.

**More Information:** [Effects of Financial Aid on Bronco Promise Eligible Retention](#)

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#### Background

The Bronco Promise scholarship is a last-dollar scholarship program that covers tuition and fees. To be eligible, incoming students must be Michigan residents with a household adjusted gross income of \$50,000 or less and household net assets under \$75,000.<sup>3</sup> The scholarship was initiated in fall 2022, with eligible students making up 15%–20% of subsequent incoming FTIAC cohorts. Between 80% and 90% of Bronco Promise–eligible students received scholarship funds in the first two years it was offered, with the remaining eligible students receiving other merit- or need-based scholarships that covered their tuition and fees. Eligible students received, on average, \$4,800 and \$5,800 in the first two years of the scholarship, respectively. Second-year retention of eligible students increased from 65.2% to 71.6% during the first year of the scholarship and to 77.6% in the second.

#### Questions

1. How did financial aid impact the second-year retention of eligible students in the years prior to the Bronco Promise scholarship program?
2. To what extent can the rise in retention for eligible students be attributed to the increased spending associated with the Bronco Promise scholarship?

#### Methods

Using the data from before the introduction of the scholarship (2017–21; 2,606 total eligible FTIACs), we constructed a logistic-regression model to predict the probability of returning as a function of a student's cost-of-attendance (COA) gap, which is the net amount remaining of a student's COA after their gift aid has been taken into account. A small or zero COA gap means a student is receiving aid sufficient to meet

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<sup>3</sup> These requirements were revised. See the [latest guidelines](#).

their COA needs; a large gap means the student is underfunded. Other factors included high school GPA, whether a student passed at least one AP course, and their county of origin.

## **Findings**

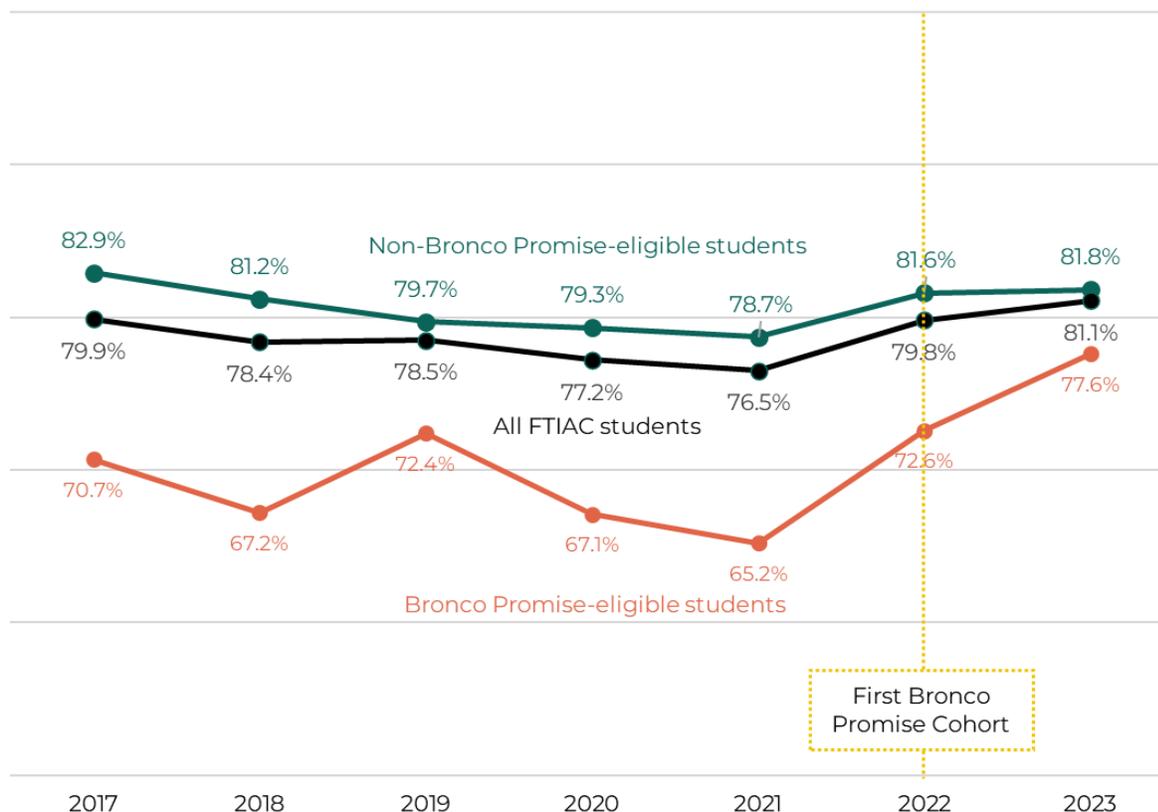
**Q1. Impact of Financial Aid on Retention Prior to Bronco Promise.** The final model showed that, in the years prior to the Bronco Promise scholarship, an additional \$5,000 spent on decreasing a student's COA gap was associated with, on average, a 9-percentage-point-higher probability that they would return the following fall. When the \$5,000 was limited to increasing only the last \$5,000 of a student's gap, the associated increase in retention was 5 percentage points, on average.

**Q2. Retention Increase Attributable to Bronco Promise.** Using the fitted model, we investigated how much of an increase in retention we would have expected to see given the actual money spent on Bronco Promise scholarships in 2022 and 2023. We found that, given the money spent, we would expect a 7-percentage-point increase in retention each year of the scholarship (with lower and upper bounds of plausibility being 2 and 13 percentage points). This increase is entirely consistent with the second-year retention increases for eligible students cited above.

Further, a final analysis showed that the historic increases in overall FTIAC retention between 2022 and 2024, illustrated in Figure 9, would have been extremely unlikely (<3% chance in 2023 and <13% in 2024) if no Bronco Promise funds had been awarded in those years.

The analysis lends strong support to the hypothesis that the increased need-based funds distributed through the Bronco Promise scholarship were largely responsible for the increase in retention for eligible students. The overall conclusion is that the Bronco Promise scholarship program very likely succeeded in boosting second-year retention among low-income students.

**Figure 9. Retention Among Bronco Promise–Eligible Students Compared With Non-Eligible and All FTIAC Students**



### Implication

Need-based financial aid is a key driver of retention and should be preserved or expanded to the extent possible.

### Student Success Hub Alert System’s Impact on Retention of Students with Low Midterm Grades

**Study Lead:** Shelby Hagle, doctoral student in evaluation, measurement, and research, under the supervision of Will Stutz, Data Scientist and Associate Director, Institutional Research

**Key Takeaway:** The study did not find an appreciable difference in the retention of students with low midterm grades before and after the introduction of the Student Success Hub alert system.

**More Information:** [Report: Retrospective Examination of Student Success Hub Effects on Student Success Pre- and Post-Implementation](#)

## **Background**

The Student Success Hub (SSH) is a centralized student support system that "brings together support services from across campus into one online platform, giving Broncos the team and the tools they need to succeed." One of the major components of the SSH is the centralized system for reporting, tracking, and responding to various alerts automatically created based on student data or concern forms. These alerts notify WMU staff (i.e., navigators, advisors, and other student success professionals) when students face academic, financial, personal, and other barriers to their success. In response, these staff members reach out to help students navigate or mitigate the issues signified by the alert system. This hopefully results in enabling students to succeed and thrive in situations that would have led to stop-outs, transfers, and dismissals prior to the implementation of SSH.

Low midterm grade alerts are one of the many types of alerts generated by the SSH system. Low midterm grades are a leading indicator of academic (or other) troubles that can eventually lead to dropout or dismissal. When an instructor assigns a student a low midterm grade (i.e., lower than a C), an alert is automatically generated in the SSH system. This allows WMU support professionals to reach out to students, help assess the situation, and offer help and support as needed. Though not all alerts lead to communication between students and staff, these proactive measures are expected to lead to fewer failed classes and ultimately higher persistence rates.

## **Questions**

1. How have midterm grade reporting rates changed over time?
2. What was the impact of the Student Success Hub alert system on the retention of students with low midterm grades?

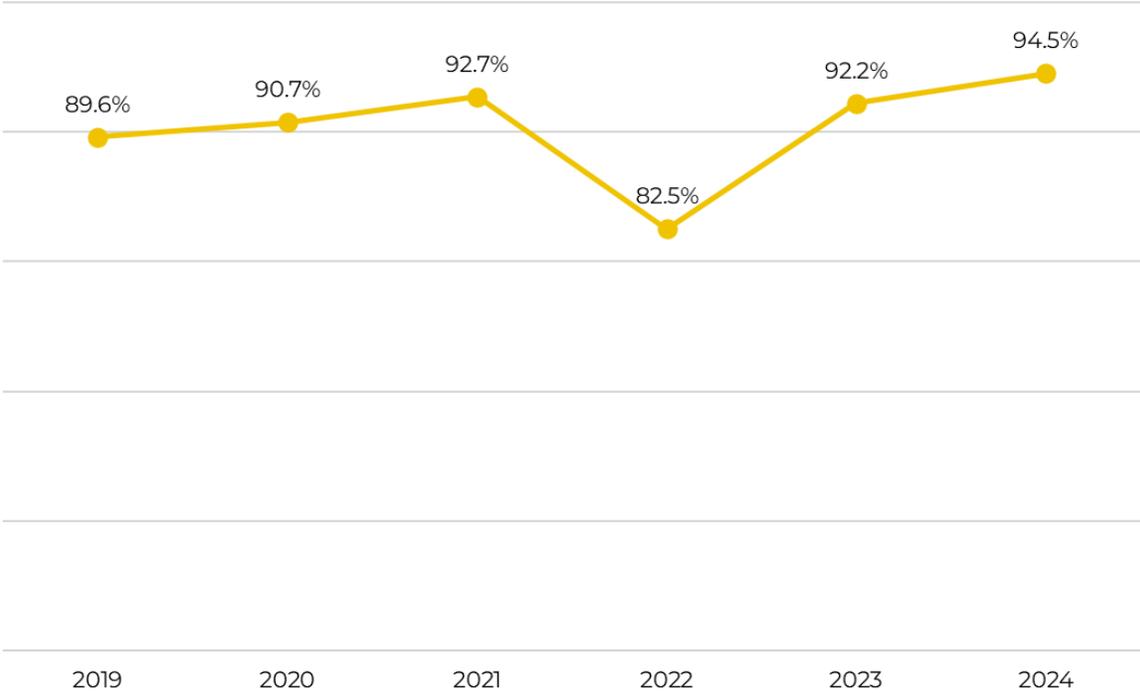
## **Methods**

We focused on midterm grade alerts in this study because we have midterm grade data from semesters prior to the implementation of SSH, thus ensuring we had comparable groups before and after SSH implementation. Grade data were sourced from the Banner student information system; retention data were calculated using census extracts of Banner enrollment data. We used logistic regressions to estimate the effect of receiving a low midterm grade in fall on the probability of a student remaining enrolled inspring—before and after the implementation of the SSH. For the purposes of this study we compared the 2019–2022 fall enrolled students (pre-SSH) to the 2023–2024 fall enrolled students. For conciseness, our language below 95% in 2024. That trend is consistent with the University's effort to encourage assumes all midterm grades given to students were reported in the University's student information system (i.e., Banner), though it is possible some instructors informally communicated midterm grades to students outside of the official grade reporting system.

**Q1. Midterm Grade Reporting.** Because increasing midterm grade reporting has been a primary goal of the University both pre- and post-SSH implementation, we examined how reporting rates have changed over time.

As Figure 10 illustrates, with the exception of an unexplained dip in 2022, the number of students with at least one midterm grade steadily increased from 90% in 2019 to instructors to assign midterm grades.

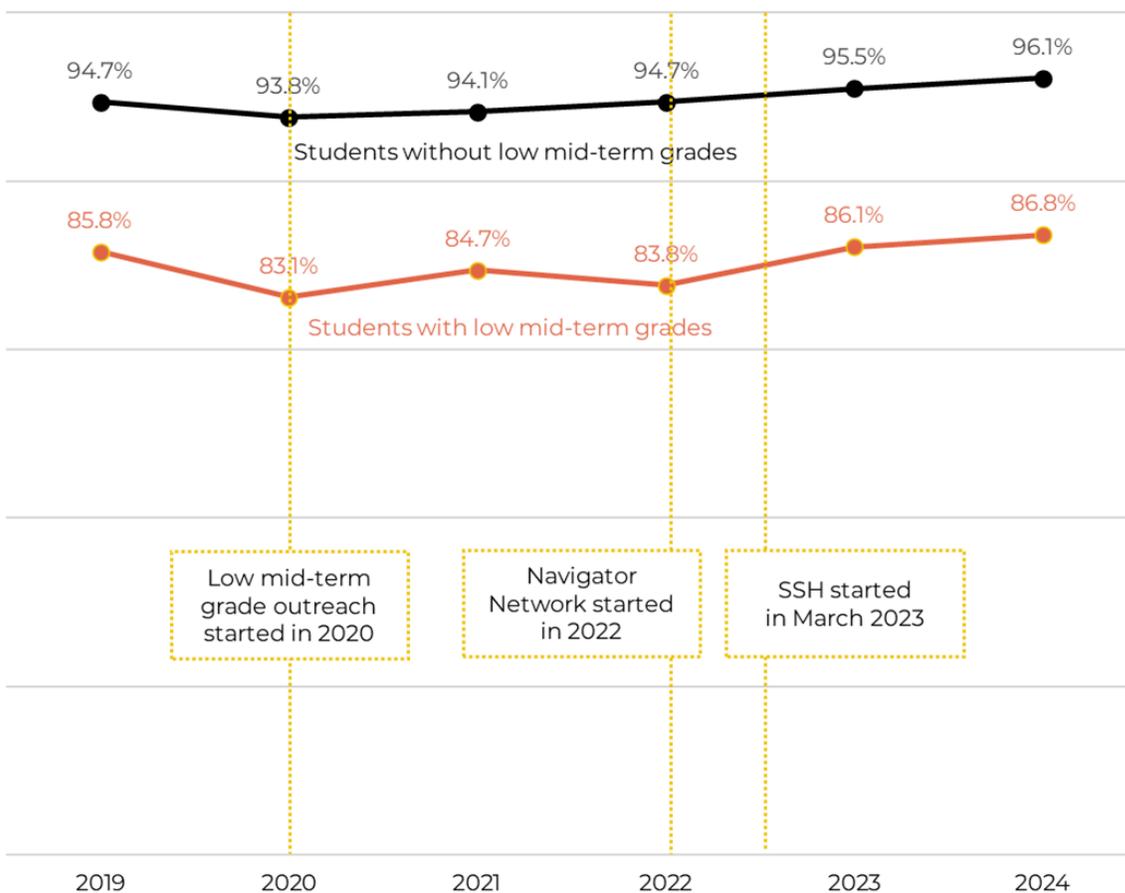
**Figure 10. Percentage of Students With At Least One Midterm Grade: 2019–24**



**Q2. Effect of SSH Alert System on Retention of Students With Low Midterm Grades**

The primary statistical analysis looking at the effect of having low midterm grades on second-year retention found no discernible difference before and after SSH implementation. Students with low midterm grades clearly were less likely to return across all years included in the study. Furthermore, students with low midterm grades were no more likely to return for the following fall term after the introduction of SSH than they were before the introduction (Before: beta = -0.67, se = 0.015; After: beta = -0.64, se = 0.023). Since 2019, the gap in retention between students with and without low midterm grades has varied between 9 and 10 percentage points. Figure 11 illustrates the lack of meaningful change over time, showing the year-to-year retention for students before and after the SSH introduction.

**Figure 11. Percentage of Students With Low Midterm Grades Who Were Retained in the Spring Compared to Those Without Low Midterm Grades**



Overall, we found no appreciable difference in the effect between the two time periods, suggesting that the SSH alert system has not meaningfully impacted spring retention for students who received low midterm grades. A parallel analysis on the impact of receiving low midterm grades on end-of-fall-semester GPA showed a similar lack of difference pre- and post-SSH implementation.

### Implications

While the results don't show an impact from the SSH alert system, the scope of the analysis is obviously limited to only a single type of alert, and thus it covers only a small slice of everything SSH offers students and staff.

Additional exploration is needed to understand the impact of the combined effects of the SSH and Navigator Network. Follow-up analyses could focus on specific subgroups of students (i.e., first-year vs. everyone, Pell-eligible, Alpha students, etc.). It's also possible that positive results vis-à-vis retention may take more years to manifest as processes and procedures improve upon the initial implementation stages analyzed in this study.

## Qualitative Study of Students' First Year at WMU

**Study Lead:** Lenore Yaeger, Director of Assessment, Marketing and Communications, assisted by Claudia Ligman and Emma Feather

**Key Takeaways:** In their first year at WMU, students' sense of belonging grows over time but is consistently stronger for those in formal or informal cohorts. Stress is common among students, and they value WMU's wellness resources. Instructor interactions are highly impactful; casual encouragement and engaging teaching leave a strong positive impression. Practical frustrations, such as those related to holds, parking, and Wi-Fi, affect the student experience.

**More Information:** Full report forthcoming.

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### Background

WMU has many quantitative data sources with which to investigate the student experience but has struggled to assess the less quantifiable aspects, such as students' anxieties, triumphs, and difficulties. As WMU invests heavily in enhancing the student experience both in and outside the classroom, it behooves us to ask students how they feel and what they experience during their first year. This study was initially planned to inform the work of Student Affairs; however, since it intersects with the interests of Empowering Futures, we leveraged the opportunity to use it to inform the Empowering Futures evaluation.

### Questions

1. What is the experience of students in their first year at WMU? Especially,
  - a. Do they feel connected to WMU, and, if so, how did that develop?
  - b. What is their experience of well-being?
2. What WMU programs or employees impacted their experience?
  - a. What were students' experiences with the Navigator Network?
3. What roadblocks or concerns did students have that impacted their experience at WMU?

### Methods

In the 2024–25 academic year, we interviewed 22 students up to three times over the course of their first year at WMU, in October, January/February, and April. Three students completed only the first interview; the remaining 19 completed all three. Only one of the students who started the study did not return to WMU in fall 2025.

Participating students included 14 FTIACs and eight transfer students. Students were selected at random from the new student population and recruited through email. Thirteen identified as White, four as Black or African American, two as Hispanic or Latino/a/x, two as Asian, and one as multiracial. They included 14 women and eight

men. Thirteen students had one or more SSH alerts, with an average of 1.96 per student, ranging from 0 to 9.

Two trained undergraduate students conducted the 20- to 40-minute interviews. Questions focused on students' perceptions of their college experience, roadblocks they experienced, and sense of belonging. There were three coders—the PI and the two undergraduate research assistants. We coded the interviews using NVivo qualitative analysis software and grouped coded interview segments according to their themes.

## Findings

**Q1a. Connection.** Overall, students' sense of belonging, fitting in, or being connected to campus grew over the course of the year. Students who struggled academically (i.e., had a GPA less than 2.0 after their first semester) were more likely to report difficulty making connections early on. Students reporting feeling strongly connected after their first semester were likely to belong to either formal or informal cohorts. These were students either in official WMU cohort programs (e.g., formal cohort from Lee Honors College) or in highly structured programs with concentrated course locations (e.g., informal cohorts such as aviation or theater).

Students in the fine arts and aviation colleges commented about connecting with peers through consistent interaction during classes; for example: "I made quite a few friends a lot through classes just by proximity."

**Q1b. Well-Being.** Stress frequently emerged as a challenge for students. They discussed worrying daily and experiencing panic and anxiety, leading to procrastination. One student explained, "Stress makes me panic. And worry every day."

There was a consistent positive response to questions about health and well-being services. Students appreciated the amount of information shared early in the year. "I didn't know how heavy of a focus there would be on wellness for those first couple months, but I can't say it wasn't appreciated."

Some students reported an increase in well-being and stress management over the course of the year. "I manage myself—stress, I think well and in a healthy way, and I think it's definitely gotten better over this full year."

**Q2. Impactful WMU Professionals or Experiences.** When asked if there were any professionals at WMU who impacted them, students overwhelmingly identified instructors. However, the type of impact was mixed, with students describing these instructors as either sources of encouragement and positivity or roadblocks.

Positive experiences were often somewhat mundane. For example, students remarked, "They'll come up and ask me how I'm doing," and "It was just good vibes." These casual positive interactions seemed to leave strong impressions. In other cases, students explained how instructors' styles impacted their engagement in the

classroom, such as the student who explained, “She [the instructor] did activities every day to help us engage ... kinda made us interact and made us talk and stuff like that. It was like the class was so engaging, we didn't even want to be on our phone.”

Negative experiences were often about disorganization or lack of clarity about requirements or expectations. For example, one interviewee said, “Like giving us a bunch of assignments and then get mad, like when people didn't know how to do it, but she wouldn't explain it in class.”

**Q2a. Navigator Network.** We asked students about their experiences with the Navigator Network, since it is a major Empowering Futures activity that hasn't received a corresponding level of evaluative attention. We asked students whether they had been contacted by a Student Navigator, Success Navigator, or Navigation Specialist this year and, if so, whether it was helpful. Interviewers gave a brief explanation of those roles. Of the 21 students who participated in the third interview, 13 had been contacted by a navigator according to Student Success Hub. Twelve students recalled being contacted via text or email, and four reported they met with or spoke to a navigator. Students were mostly neutral about the helpfulness of these interactions; for example, “I mean, it wasn't bad. But didn't really make any difference,” with a few mildly positive responses, such as, “It was nice to know someone cared.”

**Q3. Roadblocks or Concerns.** During the interviews, four topics surfaced as especially salient in terms of the roadblocks or sources of frustration that students experienced in their first year:

- **Holds:** Students struggled with holds on their accounts that impacted their ability to register and sign up for housing. Students were not always aware they had holds and what they were for, and they were unclear on how to remedy the issue.
- **Engagement Intensity:** Some students found the activity and crowds early in the semester challenging. One person reported, “I didn't like some crowds for those first couple weeks.”

Multiple students noted the decrease in activities during the winter, early in the spring semester. One student said, “You do feel like those hints ... melancholy creeping through.” Another said, “I wish we had more fun stuff in the winter so that everyone wasn't so sad all the time.”

- **Parking:** Students expressed concerns about parking—specifically what they perceived as overly aggressive or strict parking enforcement. “Parking Services needs to chill out. That is my suggestion.” Students also struggled to interpret and apply Parking Services rules. One person explained, “I didn't know how to connect my parking pass to my car license plate. So they kept on giving me tickets even though I bought it.”

- **Technology:** Students reported difficulty with the Wi-Fi, including connection issues, lag, and problems accessing WMU Secure. As one student said, “I feel like the Wi-Fi hates me.”

## Implications

Based on these findings, WMU may want to consider:

- New approaches to facilitating belonging that include more groups, intentional community-building, and alternative events that are quieter and more casual for students who struggle in crowds or high-energy spaces.
- Including faculty and instructors more directly in the work of Empowering Futures. Given their impact on student experiences, building motivation and interest in participation among faculty could be a driver of positive change.
- Continuing to streamline hold processes and ease other logistical roadblocks.
- Investing in a deeper study to learn how the Navigator Network affects students, especially in light of students’ mild responses to interactions with the network.

## Undergraduate Survey

**Study Lead:** Lori Wingate, Executive Director of the Evaluation Center, assisted by Samin Al Mahi, Evaluation Associate I in the Evaluation Lab

**Key Takeaways:** The majority of students rated their health, belonging, and progress toward degree favorably (i.e., 7 or higher on a scale of 1–10). A significant minority—18–24%—reported less positive ratings, and attending to their experiences is critical.

More students are satisfied with what WMU does to support them in these areas than not. Regardless of satisfaction level, students generally pointed to similar things when asked what WMU was doing well or needed to do better. This convergence suggests general agreement about the University’s role in shaping these aspects of student life. However, it also indicates that different students are experiencing these areas of campus life differently.

**More Information:** [2025 Undergraduate Student Survey Report](#)

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## Background

The survey’s purpose was to learn about students’ experiences at and perceptions of WMU, especially related to issues that intersect with the aims of the Empowering Futures initiative.

## Questions

1. How are WMU students doing overall in terms of their sense of belonging, health and wellness, and progress toward their educational or career goals?
2. How satisfied are students with what WMU is doing to support them in those areas?

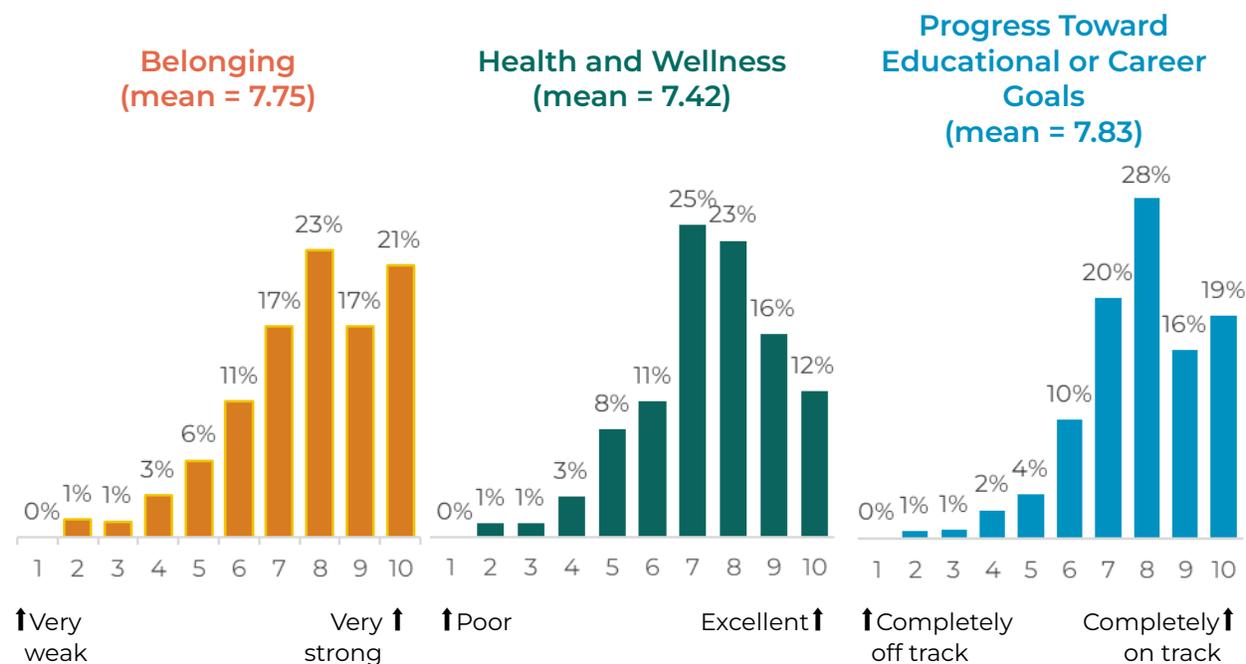
## Methods

The Evaluation Lab staff members recruited undergraduate students to complete the survey in person at various locations across WMU campuses. The students completed the web-based survey anonymously. Respondents received \$10 in Dining Dollars as a thank-you for their participation (Western Identification Numbers were collected separately from survey responses). More than 600 students ( $N = 626$ ) completed the survey, and respondent demographics generally reflect WMU's overall undergraduate student demographics, with a few deviations—most notably an underrepresentation of seniors and overrepresentation of freshmen.

## Findings

**Q1. How are students doing?** Across the three areas, students rated their progress toward their educational or career goals most favorably, followed by sense of belonging and health and wellness. Figure 12 presents the mean rating and the percentage of students who selected each numerical rating for all three areas.

**Figure 12. Students' Self-Ratings ( $N = 626$ )**



**Sense of Belonging.** On average, respondents rated their sense of belonging at 7.75 on a scale of 1 (Very Weak) to 10 (Very Strong). The average ratings for different

identity groups (i.e., based on race, ethnicity, and international status) ranged from 7.11 to 8.13.

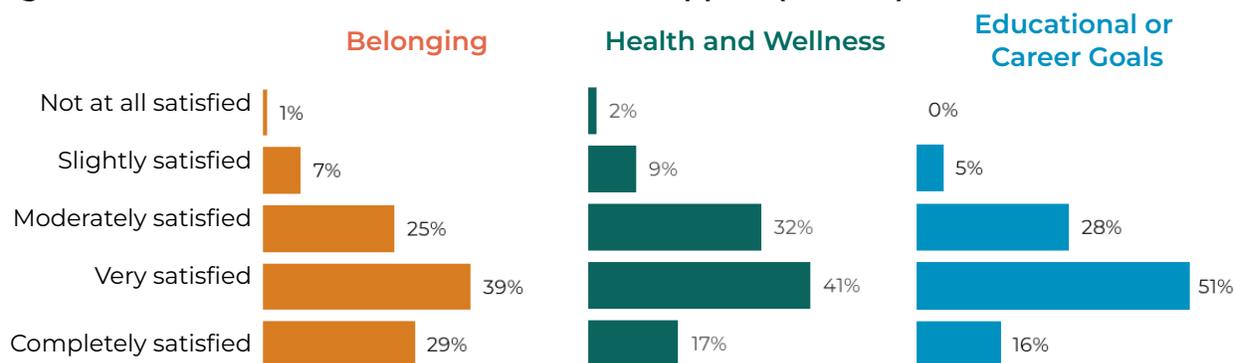
Respondents were also asked whom they would ask for help if they were to experience a serious challenge at WMU. Eighty-four percent identified someone at WMU, with academic advisors, friends, and professors topping the list.

**Health and Wellness.** Regarding their health and wellness, the average rating among respondents was 7.42 on a scale of 1 (Poor) to 10 (Excellent). As with belonging, the ratings across identity groups were within about one point of each other, ranging from 6.83 to 7.75.

**Progress Toward Educational or Career Goals.** On average, respondents rated their progress toward their educational or career goals at 7.83, on a scale of 1 (Completely off Track) to 10 (Completely on Track). The differences among identity groups were statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating there was true variation in students' experiences. The lowest average rating was among Black or African American students (7.26); the highest were among Hispanic or Latino/a/x students (7.89) and White students (8.02).

**Q2. Satisfaction with WMU.** Most students said they were Very or Completely satisfied with what WMU is doing to support their belonging. Ratings for support of their health and wellness were the least favorable, with 43% saying they were Moderately or even less satisfied. Support for educational or career goals had the fewest extreme ratings, with about half (51%) indicating they were Very Satisfied in this area. Figure 13 presents the responses in each area.

**Figure 13. Students' Satisfaction with WMU Support (N = 626)**



**Satisfaction with WMU Regarding Belonging.** More than two-thirds of respondents (68%;  $n = 409/606$ ) said they were Very or Completely Satisfied with what WMU is doing to support their belonging. When asked what WMU was doing especially well in this area, these respondents frequently mentioned student organizations, events and activities, a diverse and inclusive campus, help in making connections, a welcoming campus community, and caring and supportive faculty. The example responses below illustrate students' views of why these supports matter:

*Having multiple clubs and student organizations to help students find the right people that they can trust and feel good.*

*All of the teachers and professors want you to succeed! I feel like I am wanted at the school, and it is really important to me.*

*I see a lot of different events and cultural talks all over the campus, and even the cafes and dining center cater to many different cuisines, so it really helps feel at home.*

The remaining respondents (32%;  $n = 197/606$ ) said they were Not at All, Slightly, or Moderately Satisfied. When asked what WMU could do better, they highlighted four of the same six factors identified by the more satisfied students (i.e., organizations, events, diversity and inclusion, connections) but described them as lacking. A unique contribution from this group was a suggestion that WMU improve communication to ensure students know about opportunities to get involved. The quotes below are examples of students' suggestions about what WMU could do better to support their belonging:

*Provide more ways to meet friends for introverted people.*

*Offer more ways to find what is going on within campus so that it is easier to see what is happening every day.*

*I think that as a Black American in a PWI [predominantly white institution], I don't expect the population of Black people to suddenly just rise, but I think the marketing of POC [people of color] spaces would be super appreciated.*

**Satisfaction with WMU Regarding Health and Wellness.** More than half of the respondents (57%;  $n = 338/592$ ) said they were Very or Completely Satisfied with WMU's support of their health and wellness. When asked what the University was doing especially well in this area, these respondents cited health care services at Sindecuse Health Center, mental health support and programming, the Student Recreation Center, dining options, and outreach. The example quotes below provide a sense of what students appreciate when it comes to the University's support of their wellness:

*Having mental health week events helps a lot with de-stressing and helps me relax.*

*The RA's are always posting resources that are available to help you.*

*Having the rec center helps a lot for my health and wellness as it provides a place to improve my physical health while being a social setting, which helps my mental health.*

Respondents who reported lower levels of satisfaction in this area (i.e., the remaining 43%;  $n = 254/592$ ) were asked what WMU could do better. They cited the same factors as highly satisfied students, but with less favorable framing. There was one distinct theme among the less satisfied group, which was a request for greater flexibility and

accommodation related to course workloads and when students are sick. The responses below are examples of how students framed some of these suggestions:

*Figure out an affordable cost to see Sindecuse. It's not fair that they don't take some insurance and how I have to go an hour back home whenever I need to see a doctor.*

*Offer parking for the rec center to those without a parking pass.*

*Many teachers fight against student accommodations to the point where getting needs met is an exhausting battle even if one has all the right paperwork and official accommodations through the school. There has not been one semester I have not had to struggle and fight to get profs to follow my university accommodations.*

**Satisfaction with WMU Regarding Educational or Career Goals.** About two-thirds of respondents (66%;  $n = 414/623$ ) said they were Very or Completely Satisfied with WMU's support of their educational or career goals. When asked what the University was doing especially well in this area, these respondents praised WMU's efforts to prepare them for careers and the real world, academic advising and degree planning, effective and caring faculty, and the array of helpful academic support services and resources. The following quotes exemplify the responses about what WMU is doing especially well in supporting students to meet their education or career goals:

*Classes right off the bat that are already preparing me for my future career.*

*Providing academic advisors who care about my success not only as a student but as a person.*

*Certain professors are so kind and genuinely care about my life.*

Less satisfied respondents (34%;  $n = 209/523$ ) were asked what WMU could do better. They identified the same issues as highly satisfied respondents, but they framed these aspects of WMU's performance as needing improvement. In addition, they cited a need for (1) lower costs and (2) improvements in course offerings, scheduling, and transfer credits to support more timely completion of their degrees. The verbatim comments below illustrate how students expressed their suggestions:

*There is not a lot of support for transitioning into a career outside of the STEM or business colleges.*

*I would love to see more engineering required classes offered more often or in the summer semesters. Having classes being only in the fall or every other year has disallowed me from graduating in 8 semesters rather than 10.*

*Avoid raising prices so that I don't have to work as much and combat the high prices of tuition.*

## Implications

The degree of overlap between what students said WMU was doing well and what it needs to improve suggests that these areas are central to the student experience and have a strong influence on perceptions of the University. Based on their open-ended responses, the following aspects of campus life appear to be especially salient:

1. Student organizations
2. Career preparation support
3. Academic advising and degree planning
4. Faculty and staff
5. Student health facilities and services
6. Campus activities and events
7. Student recreation facilities and services
8. Academic support services
9. Diversity and inclusion

Some students (20/209 respondents) who were less satisfied with WMU's support of their educational or career goals identified a unique factor: challenges related to course offerings, scheduling, and transfer credits. It may be worth exploring the extent to which these are common roadblocks to students' timely completion of their degrees at WMU.

## 2024–25 Broncos Lead Intern Survey

**Study Lead:** Lori Wingate, Executive Director of The Evaluation Center, assisted by Samin Al Mahi, Evaluation Associate I at the Evaluation Lab

**Key Takeaways:** Broncos Lead interns had very favorable opinions regarding their internship experiences and reported multiple positive outcomes. They were less favorable about the professional development sessions.

**More Information:** [2024-25 Broncos Lead Survey Report](#)

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## Background

Broncos Lead staff invited the Empowering Futures evaluation team to help improve the survey they used to gather limited data from Broncos Lead interns about their internship experiences. Together, we developed a new survey to capture systematic data about students' internship experiences and impacts.

## Questions

1. What types of experiences did Broncos Lead interns have during their placements?
2. What were the short-term outcomes of Broncos Lead internships, as perceived by participants?

3. What are participants' opinions of the value of the Broncos Lead professional development workshops?
4. Overall, how satisfied are Broncos Lead interns with their experiences?

## Methods

Broncos Lead staff asked all interns to complete the survey near the end of each session (fall, spring, summer). Two-thirds (67%;  $n = 105/157$ ) completed it.

## Findings

**Q1: Internship Experiences.** The survey presented respondents with a list of possible internship experiences and asked them to identify all that applied to them.

Two-thirds or more reported that they experienced the following things during their internships:

- Engaged in meaningful work (77%)
- Worked with people with diverse identities (72%)
- Used something they learned in their classes (66%)

**Q2: Internship Outcomes.** Respondents also reacted to a list of possible outcomes and indicated whether they experienced any of them because of their internships. More than half of the respondents said they:

- Developed a stronger connection to the community where their internship took place (74%)
- Learned or improved soft skills (66%)
- Expanded their professional network (64%)
- Learned or improved technical skills (55%)

Some respondents also reported that they clarified their plans for after graduation (29%) and received a job offer from their internship employer (18%).

In two open-ended follow-up questions, respondents who indicated they developed soft or technical skills were asked to explain. The most common soft skills were communication, followed by problem-solving, time management, cultural competence and inclusion, and teamwork. Regarding technical skills, they highlighted learning specific software applications, data analysis and management skills; creative, design, and artisan skills; and skills specific to agriculture.

In an open-ended format, respondents shared what they believed were the biggest impacts of their Broncos Lead internships. The most common responses were about gaining professional and resume-building experiences. Other key impacts included making interpersonal and community connections, developing confidence, gaining clarity about future careers, being paid, and developing specific skills. The example responses below illustrate how the interns described these impacts:

*It will give me a lead above others while trying to get my first job out of college. The single biggest impact that Broncos Lead has had on me is helping me build confidence in myself both personally and professionally by*

*showing me that I have the potential to lead, grow, and make a real difference.*

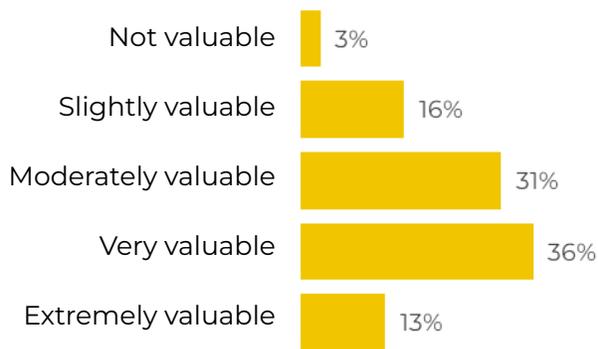
*The people I met in this program—I will continue to keep in touch with and learn from after.*

*My internship encouraged me to think about my career direction in a new light, and I have become inspired to aim for a leadership role in my field or even start my own business/nonprofit.*

*I've been excited to further my knowledge in an area of sustainability that I previously held little to no experience in. I've gained further technical skills to incorporate into future jobs that correlate with my field of study.*

**Q3: Workshops.** Nearly all respondents said they attended Most (44%) or All (47%) of the workshops. In terms of value for career or professional development, most rated them Moderately or Very valuable, as illustrated in Figure 14.

**Figure 14. Perceived Value of Professional Development Workshops (N = 97)**



When respondents were asked to identify the most valuable aspect of the workshops, the most common responses were (1) the people and networking opportunities, followed by (2) learning about Clifton strengths and other self-reflection activities, and (3) learning soft skills. Regarding the least valuable aspects, some respondents noted that the content was too basic or redundant with what they had learned elsewhere. Others said some sessions were not engaging, that they would have preferred to spend that time on the job, and that the numerous ice-breaking activities were not valuable.

**Q4: Overall Satisfaction.** Nearly all respondents (87%) said they would recommend their internship to other students. Their main reasons included supportive people and positive environments, the opportunity to learn new skills, engaging in meaningful work, gaining work experience, and engaging with the community. Only five respondents said they would not recommend their internship, with the most common reason being that the work wasn't meaningful.

## Implications

The Broncos Lead survey respondents were almost unanimously positive about their internship experiences, citing multiple positive experiences and outcomes. They were less enthusiastic about the value of the time spent in the professional development workshops. There may be an opportunity to reduce the amount of time required for professional development, using the time more strategically to focus on high-value topics (e.g., Clifton strengths, essential soft skills) and maximize peer-to-peer engagement.

Given WMU's priority of ensuring students are career-ready, it is worth exploring how the Broncos Lead internship program may be expanded to reach more students, perhaps by determining a cost-sharing structure with employers or seeking additional corporate or charitable support.

## Bronco Connect Participant Survey

**Study Lead:** Brandon Youker, Director of the Evaluation Lab, assisted by Evaluation Lab staff Grace Osafo, Deborah Williams, Justin Varda, Blagoja Naskovski, Samin Al Mahi, Charlie DeGraves, and Leslie Pérez

**Purpose:** To gather information for improving Bronco Connect and learn about the program's impact on participants.

**Key Takeaways:** Most Bronco Connect participants valued the social opportunities, the information and resource support, and the financial benefit of Bronco Connect. Participants' responses were mixed in terms of the overall value of the Bronco Connect events, and many of their suggestions for improving Bronco Connect focused on adding variety and enhancing engagement during events. First-year participants consistently reported stronger outcomes across all measured domains when compared to second-year and former participants. Additionally, Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino/a/x participants consistently reported higher ratings than their White peers.

**More Information:** [2024–25 Bronco Connect Survey Report](#)

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## Background

This year's survey, requested by the Bronco Connect director, was a follow-up to the Evaluation Lab's survey and interviews with Bronco Connect students in the 2023–24 academic year.

## Questions

1. To what extent do Bronco Connect participants attend and value the Bronco Connect events?
2. What are Bronco Connect participants' perceptions of the program's impact on them?

3. What are the program participants' perspectives on ways to improve Bronco Connect?

## Methods

We based the survey on the interview protocols used in the prior year's evaluation. We collaborated with the Bronco Connect director to revise and add additional content relevant to the purpose of this year's survey.

The Bronco Connect director emailed the anonymous Qualtrics survey to students, and it was open for about a month toward the end of the spring 2025 semester. Participation was voluntary, and after completing the survey students received \$10 in Dining Dollars.

## Findings

**Respondents:** We received completed surveys from 56 of the 110 combined first- and second-year Bronco Connect participants, for a 51% response rate. Respondents included 40 out of 67 first-year participants and 16 out of 43 second-year participants. We also received surveys from 22 former participants, but we are not aware of how many of this group were sent the survey by Bronco Connect staff. Details about respondents' racial/ethnic identity, gender identity, and first-generation status are in the full report.

A little more than half of the respondents (57% of first-year and 53% of second-year) resided in a living learning community other than Bronco Connect). Nearly three-quarters of first-year participants (29 of 40) reported that they plan to return to Bronco Connect next fall.

**Q1. Event Attendance and Perceived Value:** According to attendance records provided by Bronco Connect, on average, 11 participants attended each first-year event, and three, on average, attended each second-year event. First-year participants most frequently attended events about identity exploration, self-care, and socializing, while second-year participants most often attended events that covered financial aid and planning for the future.

Survey respondents rated each event they reported attending on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = Not Useful, 10 = Incredibly Useful). The most useful events for first-year participants were those that focused on identity, interpersonal relations, and academic planning. The second-year participants rated events focused on financial aid and future planning as most useful. Students valued the opportunity to engage with peers more than formal sessions. For example, when asked how Bronco Connect could be improved, one person responded, "If the events focused on talking to others, not so much listening to a speaker talk at us."

**Q2. Impact of Bronco Connect:** In an open-ended format, we asked respondents to identify Bronco Connect's two most significant impacts on them. The most common responses related to three topics:

- Socialization: Thirty-eight percent of the responses highlighted building community, developing friendships, and making connections.
- Program support: Twenty-one percent of the responses expressed appreciation for the support from learning community assistants, learning about campus resources, and receiving guidance for their academics and career planning from both staff and peers.
- Financial assistance: Sixteen percent of the responses referenced the financial impact of Bronco Connect.

We asked respondents to rate Bronco Connect's impact on their sense of belonging, academic and personal success, and personal connection on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = No Impact, 10 = Strong Positive Impact). After combining respondents' ratings across all three domains, we found that first-year participants perceived the greatest positive impact (mean = 7.8), followed by former participants (mean = 7) and second-year participants (mean = 6.5). Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino/a/x respondents consistently gave higher impact ratings than their White peers.

**Q3. Suggestions for Improvement:** The most common suggestions for improving Bronco Connect were offering more varied and engaging events, emphasizing the social aspects, enhancing guidance and support, and increasing housing options. Second-year respondents recommended that the program improve the second-year experience overall, but specifically suggested enhancing event engagement through increased variety, social interactions, and social activities.

As we learned from last year's focus groups, there isn't a clear shared interest or identity to support the development of a sense of community within Bronco Connect. Some comments made in last year's focus group sessions with Bronco Connect students indicated that they sense what they have in common is financial need:

*It brings people together that kind of have a similar financial problem, I mean, obviously, but for the most part, the scholarship really helps.*

*Other [living learning] communities, their thing in common is kind of a core part of them being here, your major or they have a living learning community for international students. These are things that are part of their identities or are going to directly impact their college. And while Bronco Connect, it does give us money, which is really important, but other than that, it's like you go to your seven events and that's really it. And so, I feel like the most community part about it was the social aspect, but besides that, it was like, oh, we all are getting money*

## Implications

In addition to attending to the survey respondents' suggestions for improvement, we offer two key considerations for Bronco Connect. These are based on this year's survey, as well as last year's survey and interviews with participants:

- Given that Bronco Connect participants value the opportunity to connect and engage with their peers, there may be ways to strengthen this aspect of the program while de-emphasizing programming that they find less worthwhile.
- Because less than half the Bronco Connect scholarship recipients live in the Bronco Connect living learning community, it is not clear which impacts are specific to Bronco Connect programming or are attributable to other living learning communities in which participants reside. It is worth clarifying what the program’s design and intended outcomes should be and aligning the program’s structure and resources with that vision.

## Moving Forward

As members of the Empowering Futures evaluation team, we asked ourselves, considering all the evidence, *What do we know about Empowering Futures, and what don’t we know?*

The two subsections in this part of the report present and discuss (1) seven claims we feel confident making based on the totality of evidence and (2) five important questions about Empowering Futures that can be addressed through additional evaluation.

In order to make the information in this section as actionable as possible, we have framed the claims and questions as directly as possible. However, we recognize that our perspective is limited—we don’t have full knowledge of institutional plans, priorities, resource availability, or initiatives occurring in all areas of the University.

## What We Know So Far

Some of the conclusions in this section will confirm what may have been known or suspected based on observation, common sense, or anecdotal evidence. Now backed with evidence, these insights deserve careful consideration to drive decision-making to support transformation at WMU.

### 1. Financial aid is a proven driver of retention.

Bronco Promise has had a substantial impact on retention among low-income students (who account for about 20% of incoming students), with second-year retention rising from 65.2% to 77.6% in two years. Need-based, last-dollar scholarships directly support WMU’s equity and social mobility goals and are helping the University make progress toward its retention goals, which should impact graduation rates as well.

**Action to Consider:** Preserve (or expand) last-dollar scholarship programs.

### Questions:

- Are there ways to help more students locate and obtain other types of scholarships?
- Is there an opportunity to attract even more Kalamazoo Promise students to WMU? Can we attract even more students from other Michigan cities with location-based scholarships?

## **2. Students notice uneven attention to engagement across different groups and throughout the year.**

The undergraduate survey and first-year study revealed perceptions among students that certain groups, especially freshmen, get more attention when it comes to engagement than others. They also noticed that engagement efforts are front-loaded in the school year, with a significant drop-off after Fall Welcome.

Students who find affinity groups—whether intentionally designed or organically formed cohorts—experience stronger belonging. WMU has a high degree of influence over some key facilitators of belonging, including student organizations, living learning communities, campus events, and activities designed to help students make connections. Some students miss the opportunity to connect when the University’s engagement efforts are concentrated early in the academic year, are focused on freshmen, or cater to students who tend to be more extroverted. Some students may need more outreach to become aware of relevant opportunities.

**Action to Consider:** To ensure all students have ample opportunities to connect with peers and “find their people,” sustain engagement and outreach efforts year-round, and communicate opportunities clearly and consistently. (Buster Bot may present an opportunity to increase awareness about opportunities.)

### Questions:

- Can [Experience WMU](#) be enhanced to make it easier for students to discover and connect with groups that align with their interests? (First, it would be useful to learn why some students don’t perceive it as user-friendly.)
- Is it possible to create interest-based living learning communities for students whose majors or extracurricular activities don’t naturally foster affinity group formation?

### **3. Students care about career readiness and think WMU is serving them well in this area.**

Students perceive real-world preparation and advising and degree planning as some of WMU's strengths, along with academic support services. Most graduates believe their degrees prepared them for their profession. Broncos Lead interns reported high satisfaction and valuable outcomes related to career preparation. By building on these strengths, WMU is well-positioned to enhance its reputation as a place where students graduate with the skills and experiences they need to successfully launch into their professional lives.

However, as revealed in the undergraduate survey findings, issues with course offerings, scheduling, and transfer credits can impede students' timely progress toward their degrees and eventual careers.

**Action to Consider:** Explore options for expanding the Broncos Lead internship program to reach more students, perhaps by offering a cost-sharing structure with more highly resourced employers or seeking additional corporate or charitable support.

#### **Questions:**

- Is there a way to share the lessons learned from Empowering Futures' experience-driven learning grants to expand understanding of how to maximize the effectiveness of this style of instruction?
- Are there opportunities to streamline course requirements or scheduling to ensure all students can progress toward degree completion in a timely way?

### **4. Current workshop requirements for Bronco Connect and Broncos Lead may not be necessary for impact.**

Broncos Lead interns raved about their internships but were far less enthusiastic, albeit not overly negative, about the required workshops. They viewed some of them as especially useful, but many reported that they would have preferred to have spent those hours at their internship sites or in meaningful engagement with their peers. Attendance at Bronco Connect weekly sessions was low, with an average of 11 first-year students and three second-year students in a given week. Students in both programs valued the opportunity to engage with their peers but described some of the sessions as unengaging or duplicative of content they had received elsewhere.

Requiring workshop participation for certain programs may not be an effective strategy for achieving intended outcomes.

**Action to Consider:** With Broncos Lead and Bronco Connect program staff, explore the extent to which it would be feasible or desirable to reduce the amount of time in workshops or the number of required group sessions. An option would be to use the remaining time to focus on high-value topics and maximize peer-to-peer engagement.

### Question:

- What was the original rationale for requiring workshops for Bronco Connect participants, given that financial aid alone was shown to have a positive impact and that other living learning communities do not have similar requirements?

## 4. Retention and graduate rates are improving, but not equitably.

First- to second-year retention is on a positive trajectory, and if it continues, WMU will meet its overall graduation and retention goals for 2027–28. A troubling exception is the graduation rate for Black or African American students, which has declined over the past two years. As noted, a possible explanation is that these students were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and we are still seeing the effects. However, findings from the undergraduate survey indicate that current Black or African American students felt less positive than students from other identity groups regarding progress toward their educational or career goals.

In contrast, Black or African American, as well as Hispanic or Latino/a/x students, reported higher levels of impact from their participation in Bronco Connect compared with White students. While further investigation would be needed, this may suggest that programming is more impactful for historically underrepresented students.

**Action to consider:** Prioritize understanding the causes of the equity gap experienced by Black or African American students and engage students from that identity group in exploring ways the University can better serve and support them.

One possible course of action is to fully leverage the information we already have (e.g., data from institutional research and various surveys), distill key findings from those sources, and engage an advisory group of Black or African American students and campus leaders. Students can be centered as experts on their own lived experience; they can help interpret the data, share insights, and cocreate solutions, whether these are interventions for students or changes in aspects of how the University operates.

### Question:

- Has information gleaned from prior University-wide efforts aimed at understanding and addressing equity gaps been fully explored and used to inform the design of Empowering Futures or other activities? Examples include the Racial Justice Advisory Committee and the Equity in Retention work facilitated by the Gardner Institute (there may be others).

## 5. The WMU student experience is shaped by core University services and activities.

Students' experiences with housing, dining, student health, recreation, student organizations, advising and academic support, and financial aid strongly influence their perceptions of the University, their satisfaction, and their overall college experience. These are the University services that students interact with the most, and therefore they are the avenues for impacting the most students.

The importance of basic University services is unlikely to be surprising to those involved in Empowering Futures. However, this finding, which surfaced in both the undergraduate survey and qualitative study of the first-year experience, underscores how influential these core services are in shaping the student experience.

**Action to Consider:** Sustain strong support for these areas and continue efforts to identify and address gaps or weak links that could undermine the student experience. Common pain points that surfaced in interviews with first-year students included holds, parking, and technology problems.

### Questions:

- What are the known, chronic problems that students experience that could be addressed with adjustments to University services, customer service, or administrative procedures? Have resources been adequately mobilized to address these problems? (Note that resources include funding, but time, technology, collaboration, and influence are also important considerations.)
- Is there a way to engage students as experts in their own experience to identify challenges and cocreate solutions, as well as identify opportunities for improvement and innovation?

## 6. Instructors are central to shaping the quality of the WMU student experience.

Evidence of the critical role of instructors surfaced in the undergraduate survey and in the study of first-year experience. When instructors demonstrate interest in or concern for students, students notice. When they don't seem to care, students notice. The quality of these interactions matters. Students want their classroom experiences to prepare them for the real world, and that also depends on instructors.

**Action to Consider:** Given the influential role of instructors, explore how they can be more involved in transformational change at WMU. In our [Proposal for Deepening the Impact of Empowering Futures](#), we included the following suggestions as a way to begin this work.

Viable strategies for fuller integration with academics should be co-created with faculty, as well as advisors and student success professionals. One way to initiate this process would be to consult the director or faculty fellow from the Office of Faculty Development, the current or recent president of the Faculty

Senate, or other faculty representatives who have been engaged in student success efforts and understand the demands on faculty.

**Question:**

- How can or should part-time instructors be engaged in Empowering Futures and contributing to transformational change? About 38% of WMU's instructional staff is part-time ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2025](#)). (The percentage of credit hours taught by part-time instructors is also important to know, but we do not have that data point presently.) Could be a critical lever for change if given adequate opportunity and incentive.

## **What We Don't Know Yet and How to Find Out**

There are still many unknowns regarding the various activities supported by Empowering Futures and how best to achieve its aims. Therefore, we recommend pursuing the following questions in the coming year.

### **1. To what extent and how does the Navigator Network contribute to improved retention and graduation rates?**

The assumed theory of change is that when students receive outreach and support to address challenges, they are more likely to stay at WMU. But we don't actually know to what extent the Navigator Network is having an impact and what actions or events are causing that impact.

For the specific alert for low midterm grades, the preliminary evidence suggests reactive outreach may be insufficient to make a difference in retention. However, there are many other types of alerts and ways that the Navigator Network engages with students, which we have not examined.

To address this question, we are planning a mixed-methods study of the Navigator Network with these features:

**Study Questions:**

1. To what extent, if any, does engagement with the Navigator Network impact students' likelihood of persisting at WMU?
2. What are students' opinions of their experiences with navigators and their helpfulness for navigating WMU?

**Q1 Design:**

- Using Student Success Hub data, create 2–3 groups of second-year students with varying numbers of alerts and levels of engagement with the Navigator Network in 2024–25, matching groups on characteristics such as year, gender, race/ethnicity, first-generation status, Pell grant eligibility, high school GPA, and student type.

- Using institutional research data, compare retention and other key outcomes for 2025–26.

## **Q2 Design**

- Recruit two groups of 15–25 students with high and low engagement (as defined in Q1) with the Navigator Network to participate in the study.
- With adequate participation incentive, conduct in-depth interviews with these students to learn how their engagement with a navigator (and any subsequent services) affected them.
- Analyze data to understand how and why engagement with the Navigator Network affects students and their ability to manage challenges or opportunities.

## **2. What is the Tenacity Scholarship’s impact on recipients’ retention and graduation?**

Given Empowering Futures’ substantial support (\$800,000 per year) of the Tenacity scholarship, it is worth investigating the return on investment in terms of student retention and graduation.

Tenacity scholarships are intended to help upper-division students stay at WMU by paying their outstanding tuition and fees of up to \$1,000. Because the students who receive Tenacity scholarships may have been unlikely to persist at WMU in the short term, any impact should be seen in a gradual improvement in four- and six-year graduation rates over time. Additionally, similar to the analysis conducted on the Bronco Promise scholarships, it may be possible to statistically evaluate the effects of Tenacity scholarships on retention and graduation while controlling for the variables associated more generally with student success at WMU.

Note: The feasibility of conducting this study in the coming year depends on the capacity of Institutional Research staff to do the analysis, which will depend on priorities established for Institutional Research by the provost, the information needs of Enrollment Management, and other factors.

## **3. How can Empowering Futures or other University resources be best used to support student health and wellness?**

While we only have a few indicators about students’ health and wellness, the data suggest that many students are challenged in this area. Across the three areas examined in the undergraduate survey (belonging, health, and progress toward educational or career goals), students rated themselves lowest in health and wellness. They also reported the lowest satisfaction with what WMU is doing to support them in this area. Data from the National College Health Assessment indicate that WMU students’ ratings of their overall health and wellness have been stable over time. However, the percentages of students with some degree of psychological distress, food insecurity, and financial challenges are increasing. These

findings point to an urgent need to identify effective strategies to reverse these trends.

Empowering Futures' biggest financial investment for supporting students' health and wellness has been UWill, which we understand will not be continued beyond its current contractual period. Empowering Futures also funds certain positions. Since there aren't clear-cut health-focused interventions funded by Empowering Futures other than UWill, the evaluation team hasn't focused on this area.

The University's [Well-Being Collective](#) is working to "lead transformational change with the WMU community to be a Health Promoting University." This work involves identifying specific shared health and well-being goals, consolidating evaluation efforts, and engaging students in the Department of Health Promotion and Education and Public Health to conduct health-focused studies with WMU students.

This kind of cross-divisional effort to track, measure, and evaluate health and well-being outcomes is in alignment with our recommendations both here and in our proposal for future work, and we see it as vital to building an effective culture of evaluation and assessment. The health and well-being experts on campus are best equipped to build and lead this effort with the support of the evaluation team's expertise and resources.

#### **4. Is Buster Bot filling the University communication gaps perceived by some students?**

WMU's communication about opportunities for students was both praised and criticized by students responding to the undergraduate survey. For those who believe more communication is needed, it's possible that Buster Bot will help fill the gap. Presumably, the team managing the chatbot will be using the real-time data it generates to understand how it's perceived and used by students. In addition, the evaluation team can investigate students' perceptions of the chatbot in the 2026 administration of the undergraduate survey.

### **Recommendations for Ongoing Data Collection**

Special Empowering Futures–related studies (e.g., the proposed Navigator Network study and possible examination of the Tenacity scholarship's impact) will help the University better understand the impact of Empowering Futures. It is equally important to continue monitoring the well-being and experiences of students.

First, we recommend continuing with the regular cadence of well-designed and informative surveys like NSSE, NCHA, PGAR, the housing and dining survey, and the WMU undergraduate survey. These sources will continue to provide information about Empowering Futures' ongoing investments in student success and overall students' well-being and satisfaction.

Second, we are optimistic that the undergraduate survey (started in 2024 by the Empowering Futures evaluation team) can be an increasingly valuable source of

information, which can be tailored each year to collect data about how students experience new or improved Empowering Futures programming. Questions addressing specific initiatives or new activities, such as Buster Bot, can easily be added to the annual undergraduate survey. Additionally, we can streamline the survey and speed up analysis by asking fewer open-ended questions and by focusing on areas where we have clear information gaps.