

Invisible on Campus: The Student Loneliness Crisis

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Introduction

Many college students struggle with their mental health while enrolled, with data from the latest [Healthy Minds Study](#) (HMS) revealing that more than 60 percent are not “thriving”—suggesting they may lack strong personal relationships, self-esteem, a sense of purpose, or optimism. With only 38 percent of students classified as “flourishing”, this widespread absence of wellbeing could have far-reaching implications for their personal health and academic performance.

One of the core domains of flourishing—close social relationships¹—is absent for many students. In fact, data from the [2024 Student Financial Wellness Survey \(SFWS\)](#) show that as many as 57 percent of students feel lonely “sometimes” (45 percent) or “always” (12 percent). Only 15 percent responded that they never feel lonely. Students

who frequently express loneliness are far more likely to indicate symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder, and tend to feel less supported by their institutions than their peers who are “rarely” or “never” lonely.

This brief compares 43,519 students who frequently experience loneliness (“Lonely”) and their peers who do not (“Non-Lonely”) across key indicators of mental health and perceived institutional support.

Loneliness is widespread on college campuses, with especially high rates among students under age 25, LGBTQIA+ students, former foster youth, and those experiencing basic needs insecurity.

Respondents Reporting Being Sometimes or Always Lonely

All Undergraduates	57%
Students Under Age 25	60%
LGBTQIA+ Students	74%
Former Foster Youth	66%
Students Who Experienced Basic Needs Insecurity	65%

Students Experiencing Loneliness

In spring 2023, then-Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy declared loneliness a national epidemic and significant public health concern, citing its strong connection to cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, and premature death.² While loneliness can affect anyone, certain populations are especially vulnerable to social isolation and a diminished sense of belonging.

Among college students, these disparities are especially pronounced. As they navigate academic pressures, life transitions, and shifting support systems, many students struggle to form meaningful connections. Data from the 2024 SFWS and other national surveys indicate that loneliness is widespread on college campuses, with especially high rates among students under age 25, LGBTQIA+ students, former foster youth, and those experiencing basic needs insecurity.

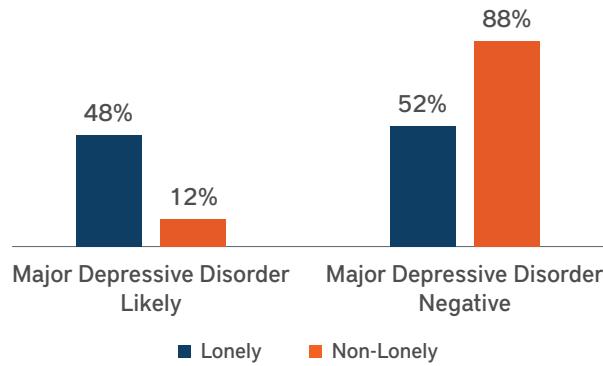
Students who regularly feel lonely are about four times as likely to exhibit depression symptoms than their non-lonely peers.

Anxiety, Depression, and Loneliness

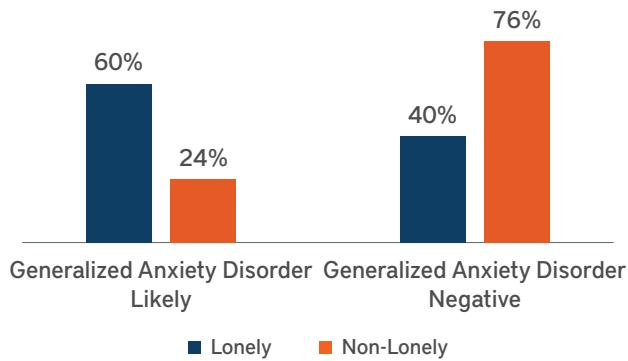
Overall, 44 percent of students showed signs of generalized anxiety disorder, and a third (33 percent) reported symptoms of major depressive disorder. Among those who often felt lonely, the prevalence of these two conditions was much higher. Sixty percent met the criteria for likely anxiety disorder, compared to 24 percent of non-lonely students (who never/rarely feel lonely). Similarly, lonely students reported symptoms of major depressive disorder at higher rates (48 percent) than their non-lonely classmates (12 percent). In other words, students who regularly feel lonely are about four times as likely to exhibit depression symptoms than their non-lonely peers. These findings align with prior research linking loneliness to heightened levels of psychological distress.³

Loneliness, anxiety, and depression can significantly undermine students' ability to stay enrolled and complete their degrees. In a national survey conducted by Trellis Strategies with nearly 3,000 students who had some college but no credential, 24 percent reported leaving their most recent institution due to personal reasons. Among these students (n=1,060), 58 percent cited emotional or mental health challenges, and 30 percent said they stopped out because they felt alone or isolated.⁴

Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2)



Generalized Anxiety Disorder 2-item Scale (GAD-2)



Perceptions of Support

Lonely students were also significantly less likely to recommend their institution to other potential students. The SFWS includes a customer satisfaction rating (Net Promoter Score or NPS) to better understand how current students perceive their school. In the 2024 SFWS, the Net Promoter Score (NPS) was markedly lower among lonely students (10.9) compared to their non-lonely peers (29.2), suggesting students who feel socially disconnected may be less likely to view their institution positively. A strong sense of belonging is often tied to students' overall satisfaction with their institution, and these findings find that loneliness may erode that connection.⁵

In addition to lower satisfaction, lonely students also reported reduced confidence in their institution's ability to support them. When asked whether their school has resources to help with financial challenges, 56 percent of lonely students agreed or strongly agreed, compared to 64 percent of non-lonely students. When it comes to feeling seen by the institution, lonely students are especially doubtful. Only 35 percent of lonely students feel their school is aware of their situation, versus 45 percent of their non-lonely peers. These differences highlight a troubling pattern where students who feel socially isolated or disconnected are more likely to feel unsupported, both emotionally and practically, by their institutions.

Conclusion

Loneliness among college students is deeply intertwined with mental health, wellbeing, academic performance, and their ability to persist. Addressing loneliness presents a powerful opportunity for institutions to improve student retention and graduation rates. By recognizing loneliness as a critical indicator of student distress, colleges and universities can better identify at-risk populations and tailor interventions that foster a deep sense of connection, belonging, and trust. This includes expanding access to mental health services, increasing visibility of existing resources, and creating environments where every student feels seen, supported, and valued.



Participating in the Student Financial Wellness Survey is free and provides institutions with:

- ✓ **Customized report and shareable infographic**
- ✓ **Results benchmarked against peer institutions**
- ✓ **Customized shareable infographic**
- ✓ **De-identified student response dataset**

Contact surveys@trellisstrategies.org to learn more.

References

- ¹ VanderWeele, T.J. (2017). On the promotion of human flourishing. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, U.S.A.*, 31:8148-8156.
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- ⁴ Cornett, A., Fletcher, C., Mentzer, L., & Beckham, M. (2026). National Some College, No Credential Survey Results. Unpublished tables. Trellis Strategies.
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Student Financial Wellness Survey – Fall 2024 Results

Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., Plumb, M.H., and Ashton, B. (2025). Student Financial Wellness Survey report: Fall 2024. Trellis Strategies. <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/student-financial-wellness-survey-fall-2024-results/>

The Hidden Cost of Transferring: Debt Challenges Facing Transfer Students

Beckham, M. (2025). The Hidden Cost of Transferring: Debt Challenges Facing Transfer Students. Trellis Strategies. <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/the-hidden-cost-of-transferring-debt-challenges-facing-transfer-students/>

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