Partners in Prevention

Missouri's higher education substance misuse prevention consortium

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Sense of Belonging and Retention by Subpopulation

Partners in Prevention (PIP) is Missouri's higher education substance misuse consortium dedicated to building and sustaining healthy and safe college campuses. The coalition is comprised of 28 public and private colleges and universities in the state. The campuses in PIP work to prevent high-risk behaviors by implementing evidence-based strategies, including education, social norming campaigns, policy review and enforcement, and more. To measure progress and obtain data needed for the implementation of programs, PIP created the Missouri Assessment of College Health Behaviors (MACHB) Survey. The MACHB is an annual, online survey that has been implemented each spring since 2007. The survey assesses the roles that alcohol, cannabis, other drugs (illegal and prescription), tobacco/nicotine, interpersonal violence, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and mental health concerns have on student health and well-being. This brief includes data for the twenty-one 4-year institutions in the coalition; 2-year campuses participate in a separate version of the survey. This brief will explore sense of belonging and retention among Missouri college students.

The following are findings from the MACHB survey (N=4,759) of 4-year member institutions in Missouri from Spring 2026:

Belonging & Retention Overview

In 2026, 71% of Missouri 4-year college students reported having a sense of belonging on campus in the past year, and 81% agreed they had a sense of responsibility to contribute to the safety and well-being of their peers. Additionally, 25% (1 in 4) of Missouri college students reported having considered transferring, and 17% thought about discontinuing their college/university enrollment in the past 12 months. When asked what factors contributed to their considerations of leaving, students reported mental health concerns (49%) and financial constraints (47%) as the most frequently cited reasons, followed by social isolation ("lack of friends" at 38%), academic difficulties (29%), and a lack of campus belonging (22%). A complete breakdown of these factors is provided in Table 1.

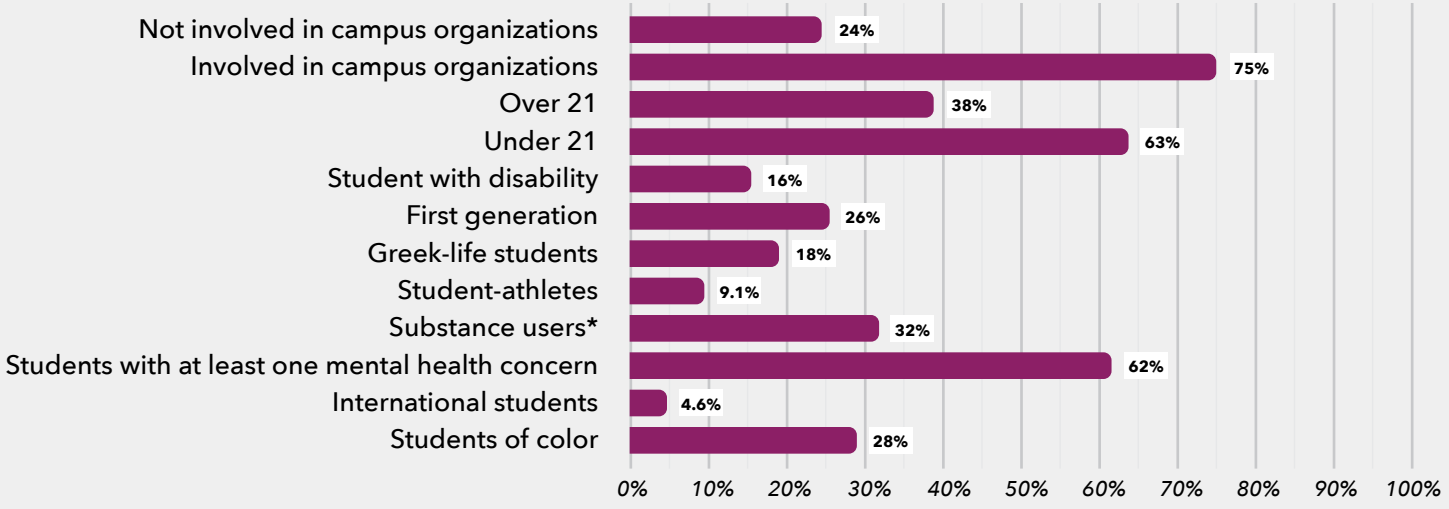
Table 1. What reasons have contributed to you considering leaving your current college/university?

Mental health concerns	49%
Financial concerns	47%
Lack of friends	38%
Difficulties keeping up with academic expectations	29%
Don't feel as if I belong on campus	22%
The campus culture/environment does not align with my beliefs/values	20%
Other (*please specify*)	16%

Using the 2026 MACHB survey, this brief assesses belonging and retention indicators across various demographics and subpopulations to identify which groups reported the highest and lowest sense of belonging and retention, as well as factors that may influence these outcomes. Representation of each subpopulation surveyed among 4-year undergraduate college students can be seen in Chart 1.

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Chart 1. Representation of Subpopulations Among 4-Year Undergraduate Students



***Substance users:** students who reported using alcohol, cannabis, or other drugs witihin the past 12 months.

NOTE. *The 1,132 graduate students that participated in the survey were analyzed separately and were not included in the overall 4-year undergraduate sample.*

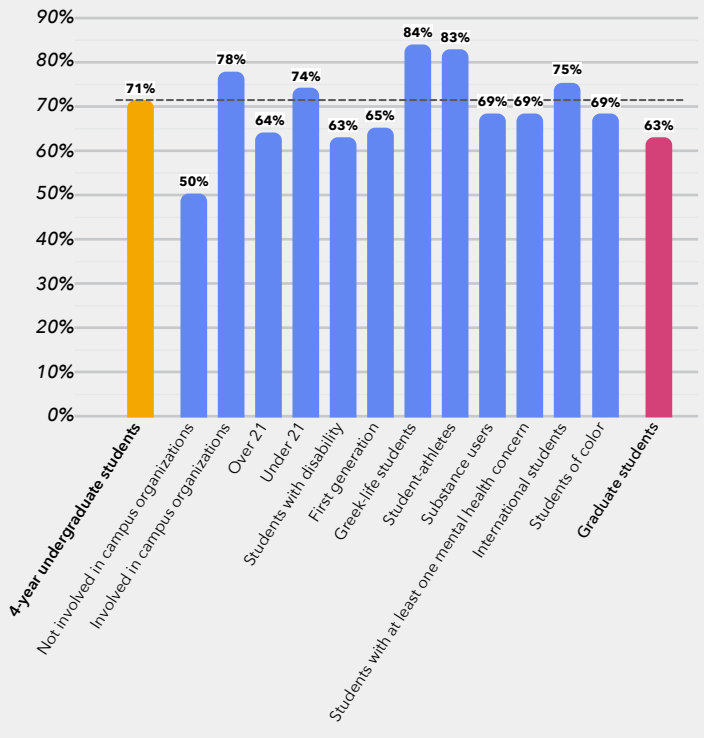
Sense of Belonging by Subpopulation

Among the 71% Missouri college students who reported having a sense of belonging on campus, belonging was compared between females (72%) and males (70%) but varied notably by age and enrollment status. Across the subpopulations examined, 75% of international students and 69% of students of color reported a high sense of belonging. The percentage of students reporting mental health concerns or substance use reported high levels of belonging that were similar to the overall student population (70% each). Smaller percentages of first-generation students (65%), students with disabilities (63%), and graduate students (61%) reported a high sense of belonging. See **Chart 2** for an overview of sense of belonging across subpopulations.

Among students who considered transferring from their college, 54% reported a sense of belonging, and 49% among those who thought about quitting school altogether.

MACHB data also supports that involvement in student groups and organizations is positively correlated with a higher sense of belonging. Students involved in campus organizations reported significantly higher belonging (78%) than students who were not involved in any organization (50%). See **Chart 5** for a more in depth overview of sense of belonging by student involvement. Athletes and Greek-life members reported the highest levels of belonging among involved student groups (83% and 84%, respectively), reinforcing the importance of opportunities for campus engagement and connection.

Chart 2. Sense of Belonging Across Subpopulations

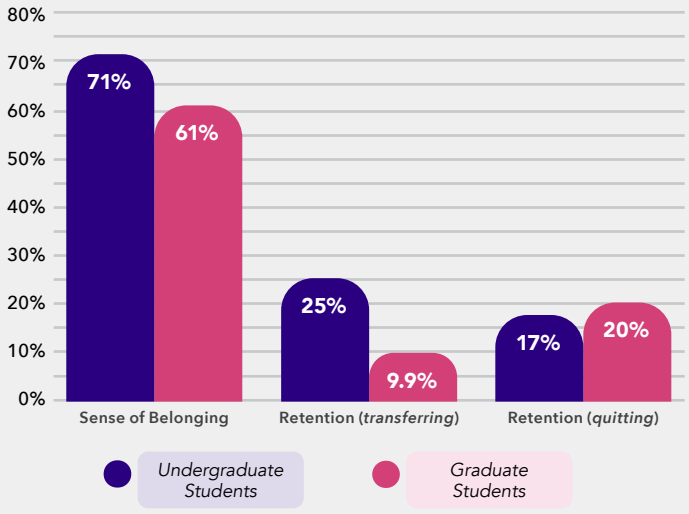


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Retention

Among 4-year undergraduate college students, 25% reported considering transferring to another institution, and 17% reported considering quitting college, while graduate students showed a distinct pattern: 9.9% reported considering transferring, whereas 20% reported considering quitting college. See **Chart 3** for an overview of sense of belonging and retention indicators among undergraduate and graduate students.

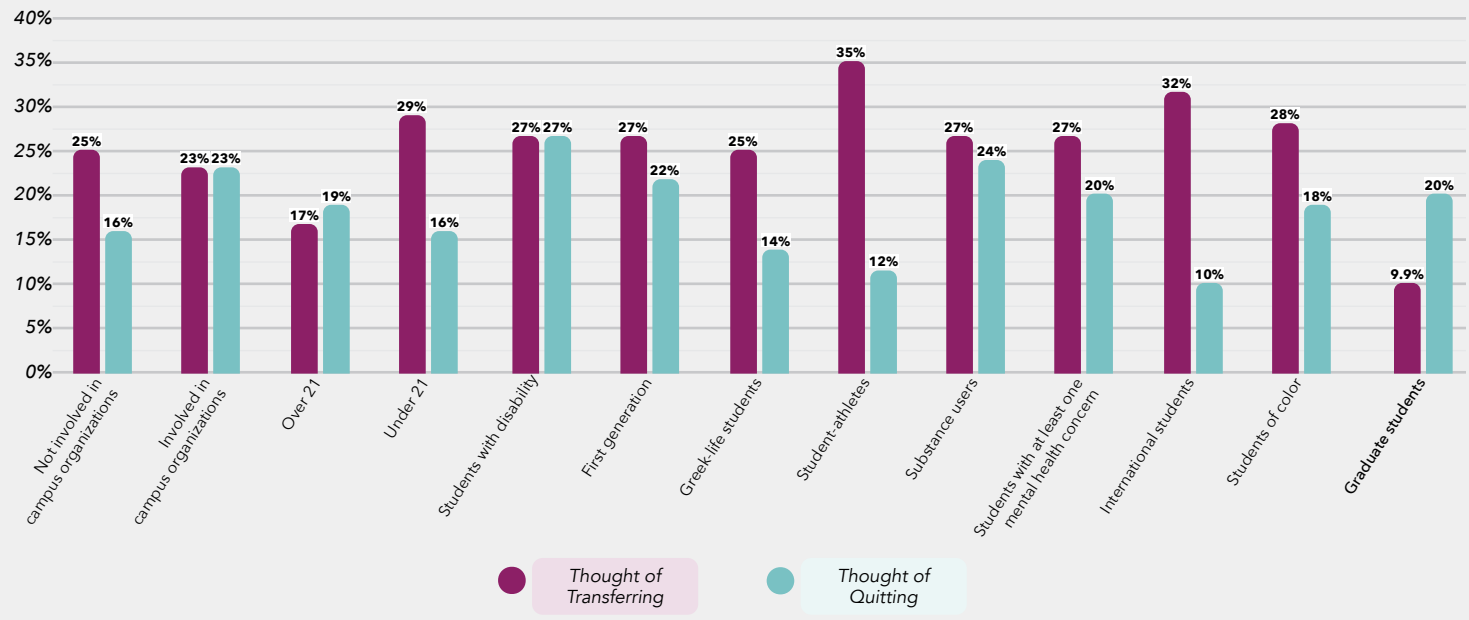
Chart 3. Sense of Belonging & Retention for Undergraduate & Graduate Students



Retention varied slightly by gender; among males 24% considered transferring compared to 25% for females. Similarly, 18% of male students and 17% of female students reported considering quitting college. However by age, students younger than 21 were more likely than students aged 21 or older to report considering transferring (29% and 17%). In contrast, students aged 21 or older were somewhat more likely to report considering quitting college (19% and 16%) respectively.

Across subpopulations, student-athletes reported the highest prevalence of considering transferring (35%), followed by international students (32%), students of color (28%), and students with disabilities (27%). However, student-athletes and international students reported comparatively low prevalence of considering quitting college (12% and 10%, respectively). First-generation students and students reporting substance use had the highest prevalence of considering quitting college (23% each), followed by students reporting mental health concerns (20%). Among students involved in Greek life, 25% reported considering transferring and 14% reported considering quitting college. See **Chart 4** for a complete overview of retention across student subpopulations.

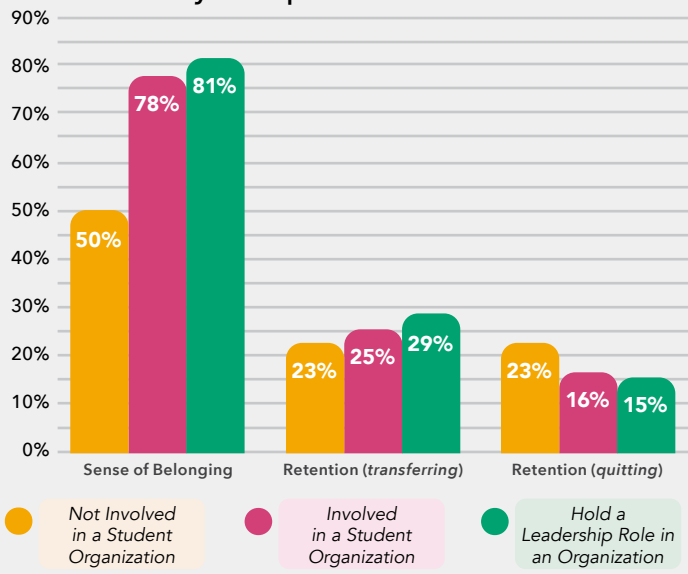
Chart 4. Retention Across Subpopulations



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The level of campus involvement a student reported being engaged in showed different patterns for thoughts of transferring and quitting. Students with no organizational involvement (23%), students involved in at least one organization (25%), and students in leadership roles (29%), reported similar or increasing prevalence of considering transferring. In contrast, the prevalence of considering quitting college was lower among students involved in at least one organization (16%) and students in leadership roles (15%) than among students not involved in an organization (23%). See **Chart 5** for an overview of retention by campus involvement.

Chart 5. Sense of Belonging & Retention by Campus Involvement



Summary

Partners in Prevention continues to monitor factors that shape Missouri college students' experiences, including their sense of belonging and retention. Data from the 2026 MACHB survey highlight differences in belonging and retention indicators across student subpopulations, emphasizing that students' experiences and needs may vary across campus communities. A strong sense of belonging and connection to campus can play an important role in students' overall college experience, while concerns related to mental health, finances, academics, social connection, and campus belonging may influence students' consideration of transferring or leaving college. Understanding these experiences across student populations can help institutions identify groups that may benefit from additional support and inform strategies to strengthen connection, engagement, and persistence. Statewide data provide a broader picture of students' experiences and can help campuses compare local trends and foster inclusive campus environments that support students' sense of belonging, well-being, and continued enrollment. For more information about Partners in Prevention and to explore our research, visit **www.mopip.org/pip/research/**.

Report and data prepared by Angel Benjamin and Wenting Sun, Research Assistants.

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