



First-year students' transition to college and awareness of academic resources

This report, written by the Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) Beginnings subcommittee, discusses first-year students' academic and social transitions to college and their awareness of academic resources in Fall 2020. This cohort began their college career in a different environment from the traditional college experience due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings in this report discuss students' transitions in their first semester, and when possible, provide longitudinal comparisons. As the campus transitions back to being fully in-person in Fall 2021, these findings and comparisons provide insight into the unique experiences of this cohort, especially as the campus prepares to meet students' needs and help them succeed.

The 2020 Beginning Student Survey (BSS) was administered online to new, first-time undergraduates (including Freshmen Connection) in select courses from October 19 - November 6, 2020.¹ During the Fall 2020 semester, 1,080 (20%) out of 5,445 new, first-time undergraduates completed the survey. The distribution of respondents by race/ethnicity mirrored that of the population. Female students were slightly over-represented (56% of respondents compared to 50% of the population). Seventy-eight percent of respondents said that when in-person classes began, all their coursework was online, and the remaining 22% said they had a mix of in-person and online classes. Most respondents self-reported living either in an on-campus residence hall (42%) or off-campus with family/guardians (51%). The other seven percent lived elsewhere.

Respondents felt excited and well-adjusted academically, but less motivated than in the past.

- Overall, the majority of respondents were excited about what they were learning (65% agreed or strongly agreed), felt faculty cared about them (63%), and felt they were adjusting to the academic demands at UMD (82%). In terms of communication from the university, 58% of respondents felt well-informed about UMD's decisions affecting their coursework this semester.
- Many aspects of the academic experience remained the same as previous cohorts, despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic. However, fewer students reported being motivated (53% in 2020 compared to 71% in 2018), while more students felt faculty cared about them (63% in 2020 compared to 48% in 2018; Figure 1).

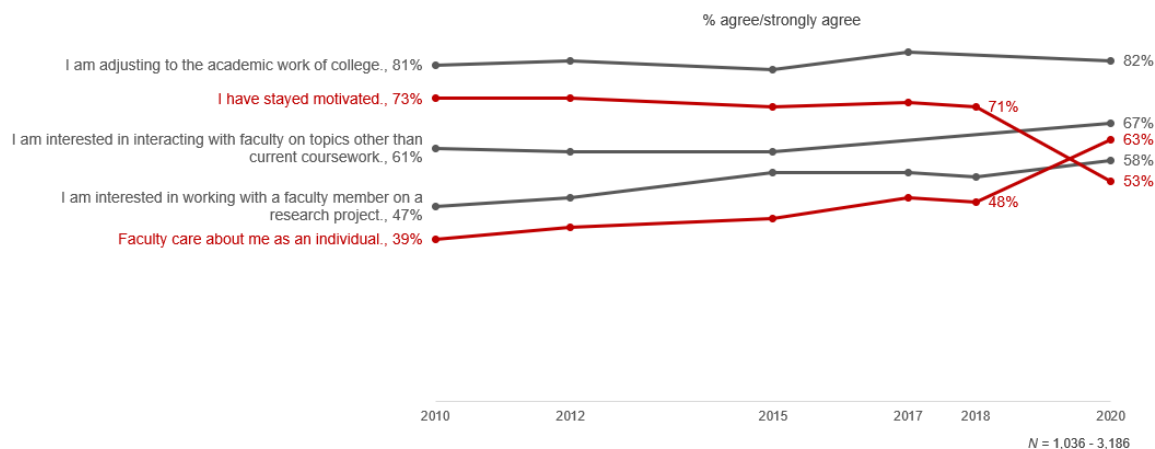


Figure 1. BSS longitudinal items on academic engagement and adjustment, 2010-2020

¹ The BSS survey, historically an in-person paper survey taken by over half of all first-year students, was administered in ENGL101, UNIV100, GEMS100, BSCV181, HNUH100, IDEA1010, and TLPL288D. Fall 2020 began completely remote. On November 5, UMD announced all courses would transition online after Thanksgiving. Although UMD transitioned to remote instruction the week of November 16, this announcement may have influenced some students' responses. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

This report was written by the Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) Beginnings subgroup: Joann Prosser, Chair, Resident Life; Jamie Edwards, Institutional Research, Planning & Assessment (IRPA); Danielle Glazer, IRPA; Melissa Hyre, Letters & Sciences; Lindsay Inge Carpenter, Libraries; Alia Lancaster, Academic Technology Experience; Alice Mitchell, Counseling Center; Nick Orban, Enrollment Management; Nicole Roop, School of Engineering; Alan Socha, IRPA. For more information, to view past reports, or to join a CAWG subgroup, visit <http://ter.ps/CAWG>.

About half of respondents felt overwhelmed by schoolwork, and only half of those overwhelmed knew where to get academic help.

- Over half of respondents had trouble balancing school and life (55% agreed or strongly agreed) and felt overwhelmed by the amount of academic work required (54%).
- Students who were overwhelmed by schoolwork also struggled in other areas (Figure 2). Among the 54% of respondents who felt overwhelmed by the amount of academic work they had to do:
 - Eighty percent agreed they found it difficult to balance school with other aspects of life.
 - Only half (50%) knew where to get help for courses in which they were struggling.
- Additional analyses (not pictured here) revealed that even when students found it difficult to balance schoolwork and other aspects of life, more than half (60%) were still excited about what they were learning in their classes.

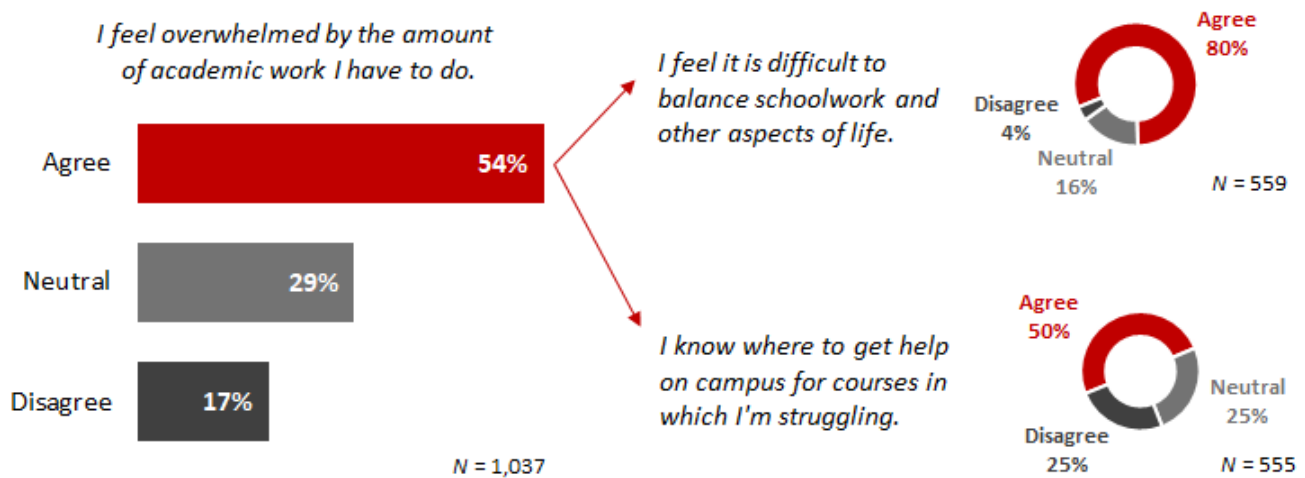
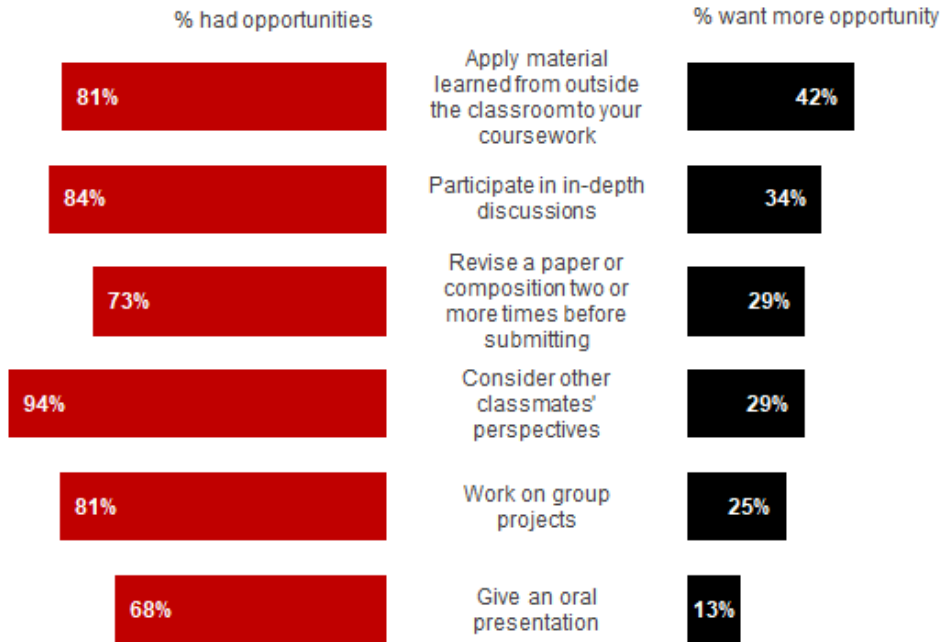


Figure 2. Difficulty of balancing schoolwork and life and knowing where to get help for courses by students who are overwhelmed by academic work, BSS2020

Most respondents had opportunities to engage in several course activities early in their first semester.

- Even with instructors transitioning their courses online, two-thirds or more of respondents said they had the opportunity to participate in pedagogical practices to connect more deeply with other classmates or the material (Figure 3).
- Almost seven in ten (68%) said they had given an oral presentation by the time they took this survey, eight to ten weeks into the semester.
 - This marks an increase from the last time these items were asked in 2010 (11%-41% of students had similar opportunities in at least one class; Figure 4). Thus, in the past 10 years, these findings suggest many more instructors have incorporated these types of practices.
- Respondents expressed the least desire to give more oral presentations (13%) and work on group projects (25%). Respondents expressed the most interest in applying material learned from outside the classroom to their coursework (42%).

Most respondents **had opportunities** in the following course activities, but fewer **want more opportunities** to do them



N = 1,036 - 1,038

Figure 3. Opportunities in different course activities, BSS2020

Of the six items in Figure 3 above, four were asked previously on the BSS2010, albeit with slightly different response option wording. As illustrated in Figure 4, more than twice as many respondents replied “yes” they had the opportunity in 2020.

	2010: % had the opportunity in at least 1 class	2020: % “yes” had the opportunity
Apply material learned from outside classroom to coursework	41%	81%
Work on group projects	35%	81%
Revise a paper or composition two or more times before submitting	23%	73%
Give an oral presentation	11%	68%

Figure 4. Opportunities in different course activities, BSS2010, BSS2020

Although respondents in residence halls connected with other students more, engagement for all students was markedly lower compared to 2016.

- As expected, respondents reported a different social transition to UMD than previous cohorts. Just over half reported making friends at UMD (57%) and being able to connect with other people (57%); however, many reported feeling lonely or isolated. In Fall 2020, during COVID-19, 40% of first-years agreed that they felt lonely, and 44% reported feeling isolated from the university community. In 2016, when asked if they feel lonely and isolated, only eight percent agreed.
- Fewer respondents connected with others in 2020 compared to 2016. Eighty-five percent agreed they were able to connect with other people in 2016, while only 57% were able to in 2020. In 2016, high proportions agreed they made campus friends (93%) and were happy with the number of friends at UMD (71%). In 2020, only 58% made friends at UMD, and 38% were happy with the number of new UMD friends.
- Respondents in 2020 were evenly split regarding their feelings about the number of new UMD friendships they had made, with 38% agreeing or strongly agreeing and another 38% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing they were happy with the number.
- Striking differences exist based upon where the first-years reported living: in residence halls or with family/guardians (Figure 5).

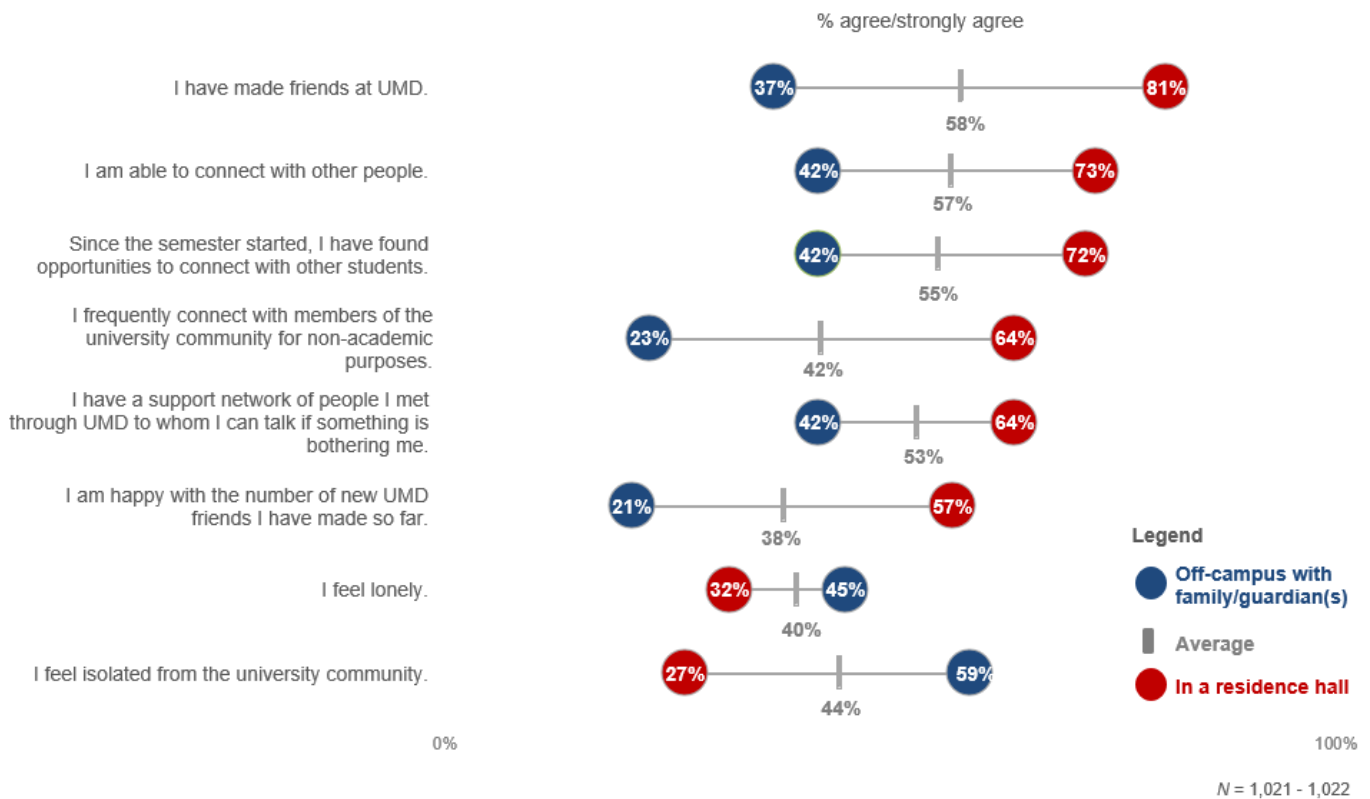


Figure 5. Percent of respondents who selected agree/strongly agree by housing situation, BSS2020

Question to Consider:

Do the thirty to forty percentage point differences between living situations have implications as the campus considers ways to welcome and engage the rising second-years who did not live on campus their first year due to COVID-19?

Respondents were willing to ask for help, but only about half knew where to get it.

- About three-fourths of respondents said they were willing to ask for help when they needed it (72%), were comfortable asking their instructors for help (72%), and that they knew how to contact an advisor (77%; see Figure 6). On the other hand, only a little over half agreed they knew where to go for help in courses in which they were struggling (55%) or to get help with reading and study skills (52%).
- With the exception of having a support network of people students can turn to for help (noted in Figure 5), large differences did not emerge between students living in a residence hall and at home with their families/guardians on items related to academic resources.

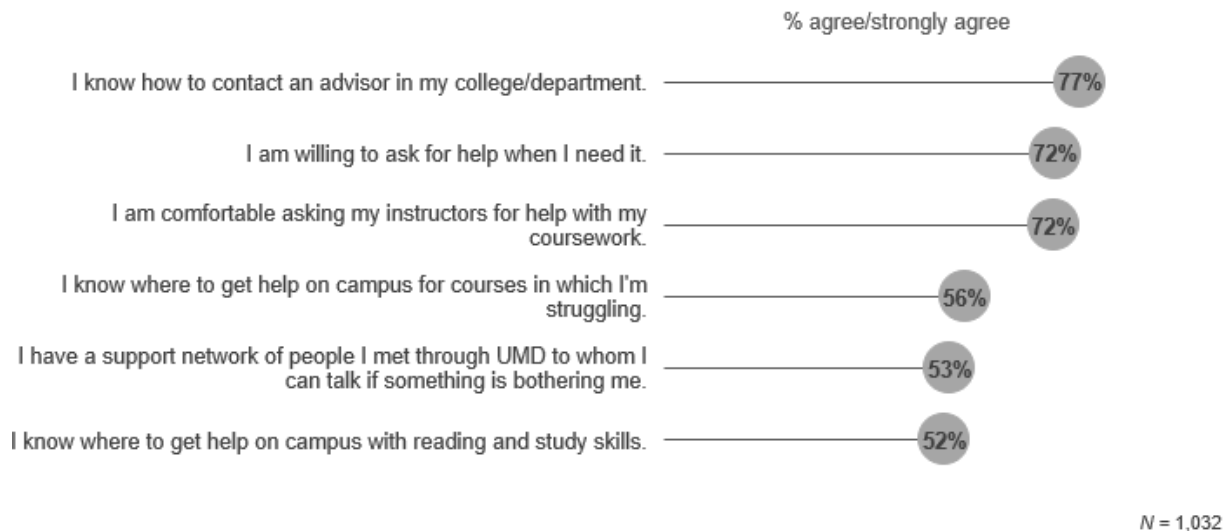


Figure 6. Percent of respondents who selected agree/strongly agree, BSS2020

Fewer respondents knew where to get help on campus and had a support network than in previous cohorts.

- In a previous survey administration, 68% of respondents knew where to get academic help compared to only 52% in Fall 2020. In addition, fewer respondents agreed that they had a support network of people they met at UMD who they can talk to if something is bothering them.

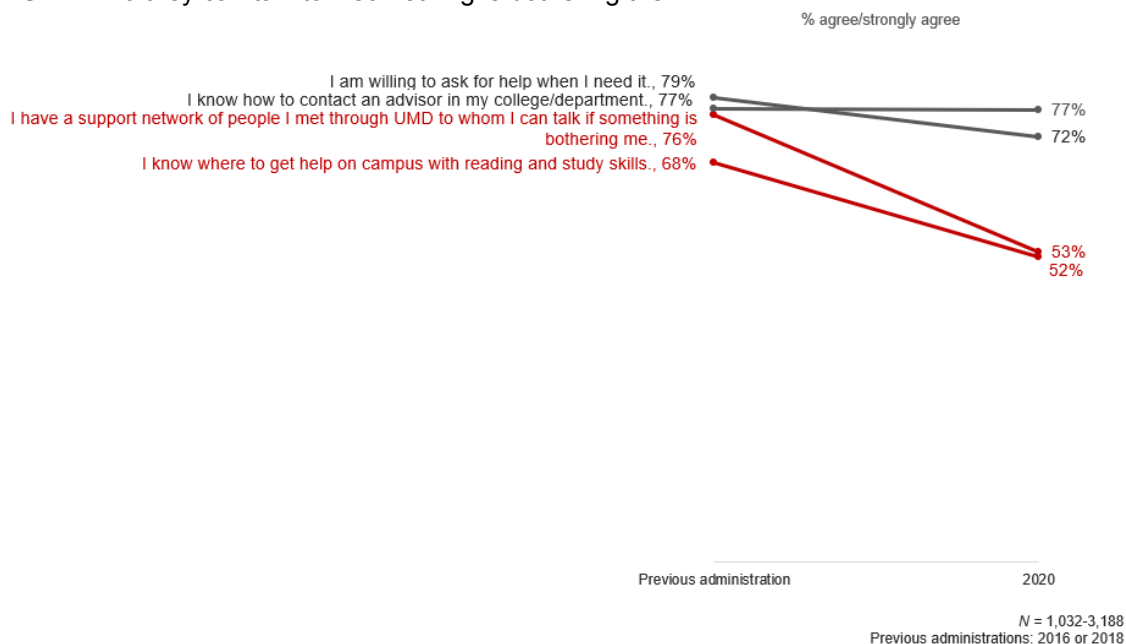


Figure 7. BSS longitudinal items on support and seeking help, 2020 and previous survey administrations