

# AT-RISK NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS: CLOSING THE ENGAGEMENT GAP

Barnes & Noble College

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Enrollment of non-traditional college students is projected to increase more than twice as fast as traditional students from 2012 to 2022. Colleges and universities should focus on cultivating a deeper understanding of these students and address their needs and challenges.
- Research by Barnes & Noble College shows that almost twice as many non-traditional students are at risk of dropping out of school compared to their traditional peers.
- At-risk non-traditional students are characterized by at least one of the following: a low sense of connection to school, a low confidence in completing their program, or negative feelings about their current situation at school.
- At-risk and not-at-risk non-traditional students share some common academic, financial and social experiences and perspectives. However, at-risk non-traditional students score significantly lower on measures of well-being and satisfaction.
- Building stronger connections can help bridge the gap for at-risk non-traditional students. Schools can help strengthen experiences with campus resources and services, foster relationships with peers, and create a shared sense of identity.

**In a time when almost every facet of higher education is in a state of evolution, some of the starkest changes are those found in the students themselves. They may be older. They may be juggling school with a full-time job, or children, or both. They may be coming back from the job market or serving in the military. Simply put, students in today's college and university programs are redefining the face of college students. Colleges and universities must understand their unique needs and challenges to grow and thrive in the coming years.**

According to research data from the CLASP Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, 40 percent of today's higher education students are 25 years old or older. Almost 40 percent work

part-time. And, more than 25 percent are juggling the role of student with the role of parent.

This isn't a short-term trend: The Center projects that enrollment of non-traditional students will increase more than twice as fast as traditional students from 2012 to 2022.

At Barnes & Noble College, we conduct research to ensure that we are meeting the needs of the colleges and universities we work with – part of which entails providing them with fresh resources and insights into the needs of students. We embarked upon a research study focused on non-traditional students, as it became clear that a deeper understanding of this vital population will be crucial to delivering the right social

and academic experiences. For many colleges and universities, serving non-traditional students effectively is now fundamental to achieving recruitment and retention goals.

With this most recent research, we set out to investigate the foundation of the non-traditional student journey, exploring their unique needs and expectations, the barriers they encounter, and how to help them achieve greater levels of success.

Of course, as is so often the case, research begets research. In the course of analyzing our findings on non-traditional students, we identified a group of students within that population that merited closer examination: those potentially at risk of dropping out of school. According to our data, almost

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twice as many non-traditional students are at risk compared to their traditional peers. We took a deeper dive to learn more about [at-risk non-traditional students](#): their characteristics, how to identify them within the campus community, and ways to support them.

Three common characteristics were identified to define the at-risk non-traditional student population: a low sense of connection to school, low confidence in completing their program, and negative feelings about their current situation at school. These factors represent challenges that many non-traditional students face, but the at-risk non-traditional student responses reflected a more extreme struggle. Providing specialized, responsive tools and resources for these students is, and will continue to be, critical for colleges and universities. Fostering and nurturing supportive, fulfilling relationships – both academic and social – will be vital as well.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Nationwide, more than 1,000 traditional students and nearly 800 non-traditional students participated in our survey.

For the purposes of our research, non-traditional students identified with at least one of the following criteria:

- Age 25+
- First-generation
- Works full-time (35+ hours/week)
- Has dependents
- GED or other nonstandard high school diploma
- Veteran
- Re-entry student
- Distance learning or online

## SHARED EXPERIENCES: AT-RISK AND NOT-AT-RISK NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

It's worth noting that at-risk non-traditional students and not-at-risk non-traditional students expressed common ideas, feelings and challenges in some areas of their collegiate experience, starting with their reasons for attending. The most common responses among both populations reflected a pragmatic, employment-oriented point of view. More than three-fourths listed "to prepare for a career," and more than two-thirds listed "to learn or better myself," "to secure a stable job" or "to earn more money" as reasons to attend college. Less than one-fourth of respondents in either group, on the other hand, listed "to socialize or make friends" as a reason.

As they began their college experience, both at-risk and not-at-risk non-traditional students expressed that they faced similar obstacles, and at similar rates. Nearly half of respondents felt challenged by big-picture priorities: balancing school with family and work responsibilities, getting their desired grades, and finding a way to finance their education. As they dove into the details, about one-third of respondents were challenged by figuring out their class schedules, adjusting to the transition to college, and deciding on the right program of study.

In terms of both positive and negative emotions, at-risk and not-at-risk non-traditional students diverged widely. However, they reported one similarity in terms of their overall feelings: financial security, or lack thereof. Only 11 percent of at-risk and 17 percent of not-at-risk non-traditional students felt financially secure. Unsurprisingly, their finances caused a larger ripple effect for many of these students. Both populations showed similar levels of financial strain across a variety of areas. For more than half

of respondents, their financial situation influenced their choice of school, number of credit hours to take each term, ability to get textbooks for classes, and dedicating the right amount of time to their academic work. Just over one-third of both at-risk and not-at-risk non-traditional students said that their financial situation impacted their ability to get involved at school beyond time spent in the classroom. This relatively small percentage is interesting to consider in light of divergences in social involvement that will be discussed in the following section.

Once on campus, both at-risk and not-at-risk non-traditional students did access at least some school services and resources. In both populations, a large majority of students had the ability to take online courses and engaged with academic advising, the financial aid office, and the campus bookstore. In these examples, the rate of usage was similar for at-risk and not-at-risk non-traditional students. What's interesting is that all of these services are foundational, helping students meet the most basic requirements to attend college. As the services got more specialized and/or more personalized, usage numbers varied more widely – and so did satisfaction levels.

Ultimately, the majority of both at-risk and not-at-risk non-traditional students believe that their college education will be valuable. What's telling is the differential: 94 percent of not-at-risk non-traditional students see the value, compared to only 77 percent of at-risk non-traditional students. This example highlights what we found when we looked at levels of academic support, emotional well-being and involvement: wide gaps in perspective. Almost across the board, at-risk non-traditional students were more likely to have negative feelings and experiences and less likely to have positive ones.

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## EXAMINING THE DIVIDE: AT-RISK VS. NOT-AT-RISK

When it comes to measures of well-being and satisfaction, at-risk non-traditional students scored significantly lower than not-at-risk non-traditional students.

One of the most revealing questions we asked non-traditional students was how supported they feel by different people or organizations spanning their academic and social lives. We saw stark differences between at-risk and not-at-risk non-traditional students in every category. Only 38 percent of at-risk non-traditional students felt supported overall – less than half than their not-at-risk peers. And, only about one-fourth of at-risk non-traditional students felt supported by their school as a whole.

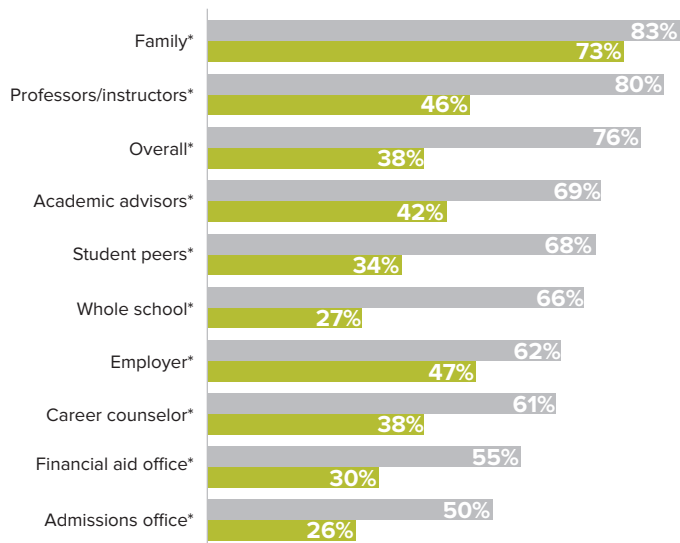
These figures suggest a heightened sense of isolation and frustration that comes through in at-risk non-traditional students' responses throughout the study. They're less likely to be engaged on campus – academically or socially – and less likely to be in a good place emotionally.

### Campus Services and Academic Support

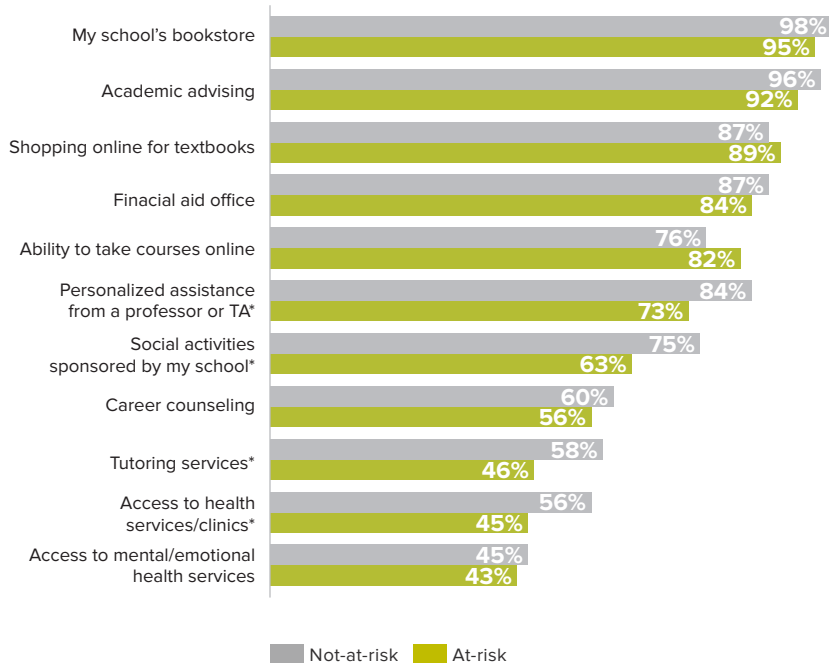
It's important to note that at-risk non-traditional students spend less time on campus than their not-at-risk peers. Outside of class, at-risk non-traditional students spend a median of 10 hours on campus each week, compared to the 16 hours that not-at-risk non-traditional students spend.

While both groups of students access basic services and resources at similar rates, at-risk non-traditional students tend to use the next layer of more personalized campus services and resources at a lower rate. In particular, they were significantly less likely to receive personalized assistance from a professor, participate in social activities, or access general health services.

## FEELINGS OF SUPPORT



## STUDENTS WHO HAVE USED SERVICES



■ Not-at-risk ■ At-risk

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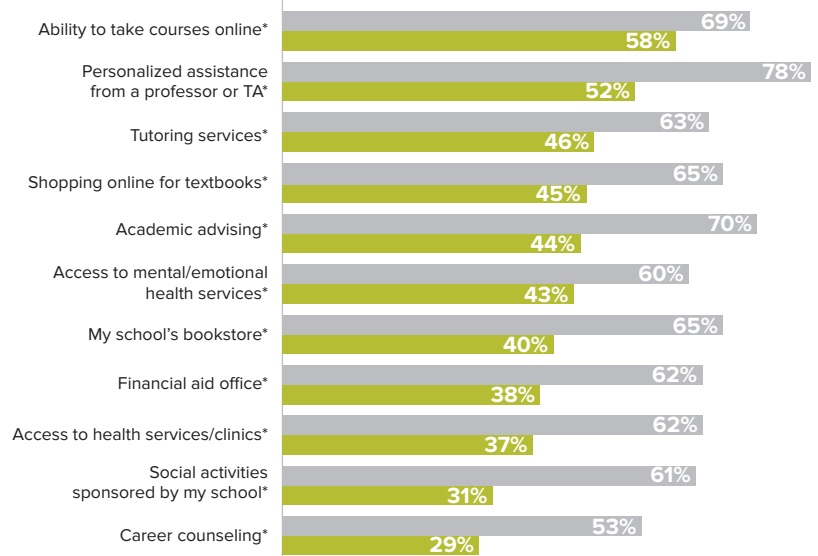
Striking is how much less likely at-risk non-traditional students were to be satisfied with their experiences when they did engage. Less than half were satisfied with most of the services measured, and less than one-third were satisfied with career services in particular – worth noting in light of the largely career-oriented reasons for attending college. Academic advising and personalized assistance from professors represented two of the largest divergences between at-risk and not-at-risk non-traditional students, with a 26-point difference.

In fact, 28 percent of students listed one of their major challenges when they began their programs as connecting with people to help them succeed. And, while you could reasonably expect that professors and advisors would fit in that category, at-risk non-traditional students were significantly less satisfied with those relationships. In both cases, at-risk non-traditional students scored relationship measures much lower than not-at-risk non-traditional students.

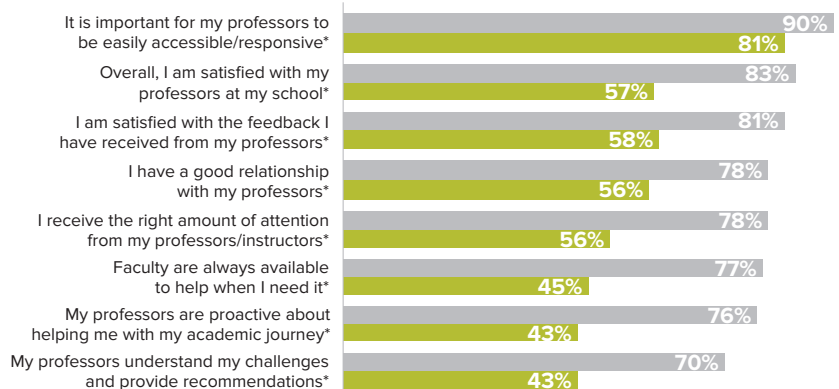
The accessibility and responsiveness of professors and advisors are very important to most non-traditional students, regardless of risk status. However, there's a significant disconnect between non-traditional student experiences. Across the board, at-risk non-traditional students scored relationship measures between 20 and 33 points lower than not-at-risk non-traditional students. For many measures, only half – or less – of at-risk non-traditional students are satisfied.

This view isn't limited only to professors and advisors. When asked about how supported they feel by different entities on campus, the differences between at-risk and not-at-risk non-traditional students were similarly stark. Less than half of at-risk non-traditional students felt supported by professors, advisors or career counselors; less than one-third felt supported by the financial aid office or

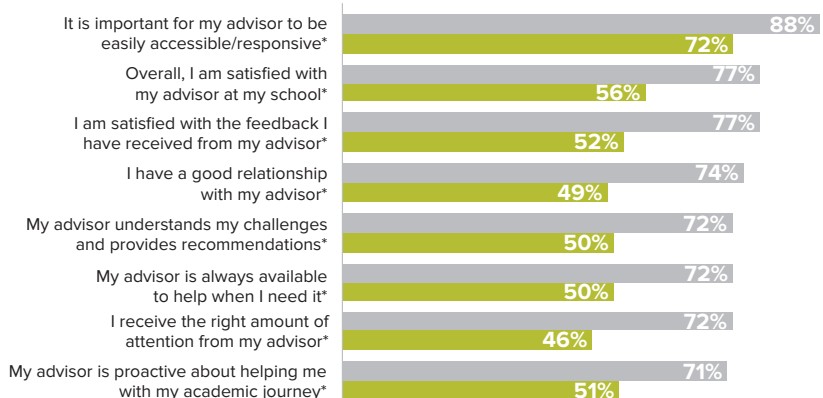
## SATISFACTION WITH SCHOOL SERVICES/RESOURCES (of those who have used service)



## RELATIONSHIP WITH PROFESSOR (agreement with the following statements)



## RELATIONSHIP WITH ADVISORS (agreement with the following statements)



■ Not-at-risk ■ At-risk

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the admissions office. For not-at-risk non-traditional students, these percentages were 23 to 34 points higher.

## Social Life and Emotional Well-being

Challenges of engagement and support extend beyond the academic front. At-risk non-traditional students also are less likely to engage with their peers and develop relationships than their not-at-risk peers. As a starting point, only 8 percent of at-risk non-traditional students feel like they belong at their school, compared to 39 percent of not-at-risk non-traditional students. At-risk non-traditional students were also more likely to consider “feeling like I fit in” as an obstacle from the very beginning of their program.

In addition, only 35 percent of at-risk non-traditional students feel supported by their peers overall, compared to 68 percent of not-at-risk non-traditional students.

These feelings could contribute to at-risk non-traditional students’ lower levels of social engagement on campus. While 63 percent of at-risk non-traditional students say that they’ve participated in social activities, only 31 percent of these students were satisfied with their experiences. By comparison, 75 percent of not-at-risk non-traditional students participated in social activities, and 61 percent came away satisfied.

At-risk non-traditional students were even less likely to participate in extracurricular activities – representing clubs, sports and other activities that occur on a regular or repeated basis. These types of activities don’t just provide an opportunity for social interaction, they can build connections over shared interests and foster new relationships over time. However, at-risk non-traditional students were less than half as likely than their not-at-risk peers to participate in these activities.

In the context of the feelings at-risk non-traditional students shared and their lower rate of social engagement, it’s not surprising that less than one-third feel like they have friends at school, and just 3 percent strongly agreed that they have friends. Not-at-risk non-traditional students are twice as likely to feel that they have friends, and 34 percent feel it strongly.

Given their differences in both the academic and social realms, it follows that at-risk and not-at-risk non-traditional students diverge emotionally. Both populations cite their mental and emotional well-being as a challenge, and at similar rates – 40 percent of at-risk non-traditional students and 36 percent of not-at-risk non-traditional students. A closer look at specific emotions reveals that at-risk non-traditional students score much lower on almost every positive emotion and much higher on negative emotions.

At-risk non-traditional students are less than half as likely to feel happy, optimistic or motivated – and more than twice as likely to feel lost or discouraged. Even when focusing on emotions directly related to academic performance, at-risk non-traditional students are much less likely to feel successful in the moment or confident in accomplishing their goals in the future.

## PARTICIPATES IN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES



## AGREEMENT WITH “I FEEL LIKE I HAVE FRIENDS AT MY SCHOOL”



**“Reach out. Reaching out to students is extremely important. Some are afraid to seek assistance. These are the ones who need the support the most. Some may not know how or where to find the support that they desperately need.”**

– Junior, at-risk non-traditional student

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While these results may feel discouraging, the good news is that non-traditional students are accustomed to overcoming obstacles. They are resilient. Many are thriving. It's possible to help at-risk non-traditional students move beyond the challenges they're facing and turn around negative experiences. But, it requires a proactive effort to find, engage and work with these students.

## IDENTIFYING AT-RISK NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

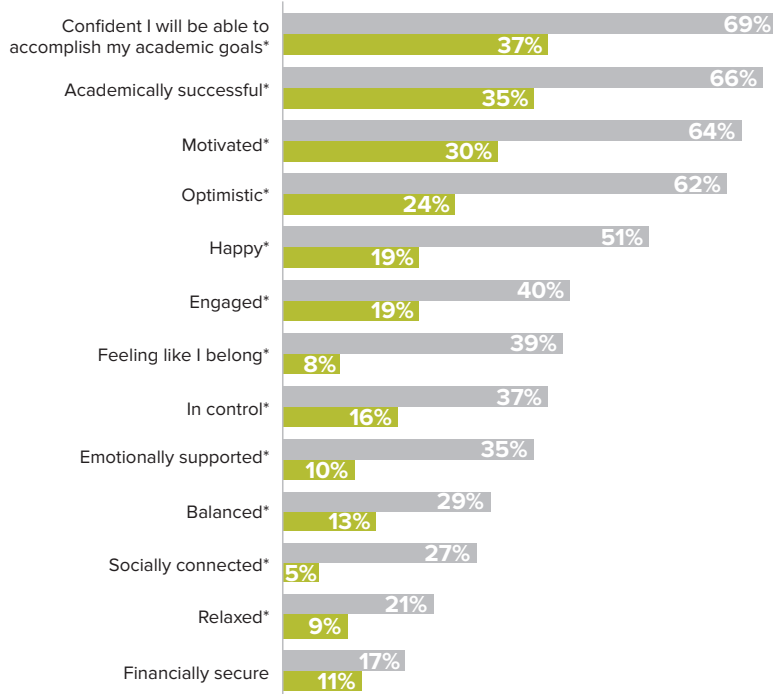
Colleges and universities seeking more effective ways to support their students – and especially those most vulnerable to dropping out of school – need to consider their at-risk non-traditional students. However, while many have put systems and resources in place for non-traditional students, identifying those who are at risk presents a challenge. The most common characteristics shared by at-risk non-traditional students are often intangible – and not necessarily intuitive.

For example, when looking for potential risk factors, we examined demographics such as gender, race, household income and age. We also looked at students' majors or areas of study. And, we considered the impact of students' studies on their finances – whether they were impacted by choice of school, program or number of credit hours, or by the amount of time the students dedicated to academic work (time not spent working and earning a paycheck).

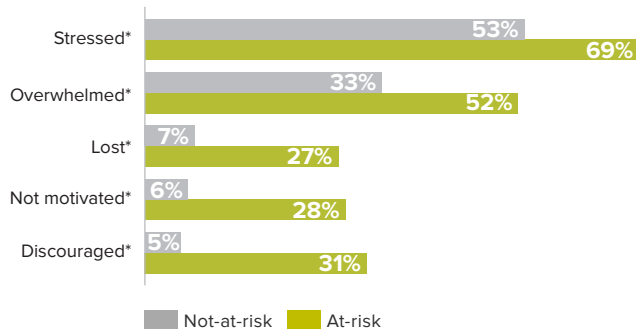
None of these attributes were associated with a higher likelihood of being at risk. Instead, non-traditional students showed significantly higher rates of being at risk when they failed to make effective connections in their college experience.

Specifically, at-risk non-traditional students spent minimal time on campus; participated in no extracurricular activities; had negative experiences with school support systems or services; and/or paid for school independently.

## STUDENT FEELINGS: POSITIVE EMOTIONS



## STUDENT FEELINGS: NEGATIVE EMOTIONS



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Schools may be able to find some of these students within their existing systems – through the financial aid office, for example, or through any feedback mechanisms in place for students using campus services. However, some proactive outreach to students and faculty likely will be necessary for any school serious about tracking down and working more closely with at-risk non-traditional students.

## ENGAGING AND SUPPORTING AT-RISK STUDENTS

Based on the findings of this study and our on-campus experiences working with students, Barnes & Noble College developed an initial list of ways schools can provide support to at-risk non-traditional students and address key needs.

### Identify and then seek feedback on campus services from at-risk non-traditional students.

As the data shows, some of these students are not using services currently, and will require further education. But, for those who have used services – and especially those who came away with a negative perception – starting a dialogue may yield multiple benefits. Individual students will be heard and receive the personalized attention that say they want from their school and support systems. And, the exchange likely will sharpen the school's understanding about the needs and challenges of at-risk students while uncovering opportunities for updates and improvements.

### Help them build connections and relationships on campus.

Many at-risk non-traditional students explicitly stated that they don't feel like they belong on campus, and that's rarely a path to success, academically or socially. It may help these students to know that others are sharing some of the same experiences. But, at-risk non-traditional students may not know how to connect with their peers. They also may need additional incentive to spend more time on campus or move beyond a negative experience in the past. Events and activities tailored to address the unique needs, schedules and interests of these students can help bring them together and foster longer-term relationships.

### Be persistent and consistent in communications.

For any college student population, it's important to find creative ways to get in front of them regularly and tap into the communications channels they prefer. It may take more time to reach at-risk non-traditional students, and to figure out how to hold their attention. Anything that can be done to demonstrate that the school is reaching out to individual students to meet their needs may help to get them engaged with services and activities on campus.

### Think broader with career counseling support.

Many at-risk non-traditional students expressed that they feel stressed, overwhelmed, out of place, and experience other difficult emotions

as well. Under those conditions, they may start to feel disconnected from the benefits their education can bring them and what they're really working to achieve. Engaging these at-risk non-traditional students with resources and services that can help them break through negative feelings, define goals and uncover opportunities may serve as a powerful motivator.

### Educate students on affordable materials and a variety of learning solutions.

It is particularly important that at-risk non-traditional students find the right support that they can access in the places and times that work best for them. Efforts to drive them to campus services, resources and activities are still important, but meeting at-risk non-traditional students where they are is key. Digital learning tools, for example, might provide flexibility and a useful opportunity to connect with peers remotely.

Non-traditional students are vital to the future of colleges and universities across the nation. Supported properly, they can thrive, in the classroom and beyond. Their unique challenges and needs, however, mean that some non-traditional students will continue to be at risk of dropping out. Schools that invest the time and resources to understand, engage and sustain this population will be better positioned for the future – not only to meet their own recruitment and retention goals, but to help all students achieve success.

The Barnes & Noble College Insights<sup>SM</sup> platform regularly taps into its network of more than 10,000 students, parents, faculty and alumni to better understand the thinking, behaviors and expectations of current and future college students. The efforts have resulted in generational research studies on topics such as millennials and careers, and Gen Z and their expectations of learning.

Responses to this survey were weighted by gender and region to reflect the broader student population. T-tests were performed between at-risk and not-at-risk student groups, using  $p < .05$  for a significance threshold. All differences that are statistically significant are marked in charts with an asterisk (\*). The margin of error for this study was +/- 2.26% at a 95% confidence level.

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