

What Students Value in College

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Though students value college as a pathway to financial security and a good job, they are also seeking an education that creates a sense of purpose, identity exploration, and personal growth. Having mentors and opportunities to apply learning to real-world contexts are viewed by students as being particularly valuable, though relatively few students report actually accessing these resources or opportunities.

A recent national survey, conducted by the LearningWell Coalition in partnership with the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and Morning Consult, explored students' motivations for attending college and their engagement in high-impact educational practices such as internships, mentorship, research, and more, and the effect of those factors on their wellbeing. The poll was fielded in January 2026 among 872 undergraduate students (ages 18–34) enrolled in two- or four-year degree programs.

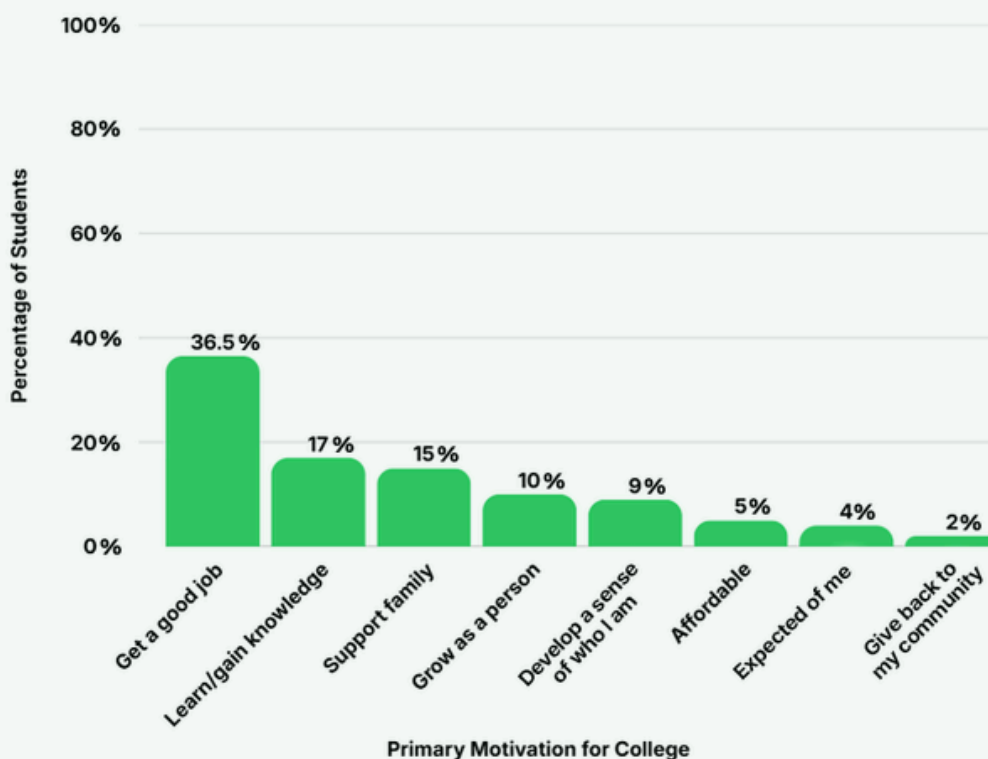


Photo: Yuming Jin

Understanding Motivation

Higher education's ROI is increasingly evaluated on career outcomes only; yet the survey shows that students themselves have a much broader set of goals. According to the LearningWell Coalition's survey of 872 college students, career outcomes are a primary motivation for attending college. **36.5%** of students identified "to get a good job and advance my career" as their primary reason for attending college. However, our findings suggest students' motivations for attending college are more nuanced, and more holistic, than often assumed. While more than a third of students cited career outcomes as a primary motivation, a similar percent (**38%**) cited factors related to intellectual and personal growth, identity formation, and giving back to their community. **15%** noted that their desire for economic security was to better support their family.

Graph 1. Top Reasons Students Attend College



Demographic Differences Challenge Assumed Narrative

Lower-income and first-generation students are more likely to prioritize motivations such as personal growth than their higher-income peers and less likely to cite career as their primary motivation. For example, only **32%** of students from households under \$50K prioritize career as their top motivation, compared to **48%** of students from households over \$100K.

First-gen students (**13%**) and lower-income students (**12%**) are more likely than their non-first-gen (**8%**) and higher-income peers (**5%**) to cite personal growth as a motivation than their peers.

Meaningful Relationships, Applying Learning to the Real World are the Most Impactful and Valued Experiences in College

Mentoring and Faculty Relationships

According to this survey, relationships with faculty and staff are among the most powerful elements of the undergraduate experience. More than half of students (**54%**) report having a faculty or staff mentor, with even higher rates among first-generation students (**60%** compared to **50%** of non-first-generation students). These relationships are deeply valued: **76%** of students say having a mentor was “very” or “extremely” valuable, making it one of the top-rated college experiences in the survey.

The impact of these relationships extends beyond perception into measurable outcomes. Using the PERMA framework of wellbeing, students with a faculty or staff mentor report higher wellbeing (**7.12**) compared to those without one (**6.62**), making mentorship one of the strongest contributors to student flourishing among all experiences studied.

Applying Learning to the Real World

Internships, service-learning, and employment experiences consistently emerged as the most valued and impactful practices. Internships in particular are the second most valued experience in the survey, with 78% of students rating them as “very” or “extremely” valuable (second only to “experiences that exposed you to people with backgrounds, viewpoints, or cultures different from your own” at 79%).

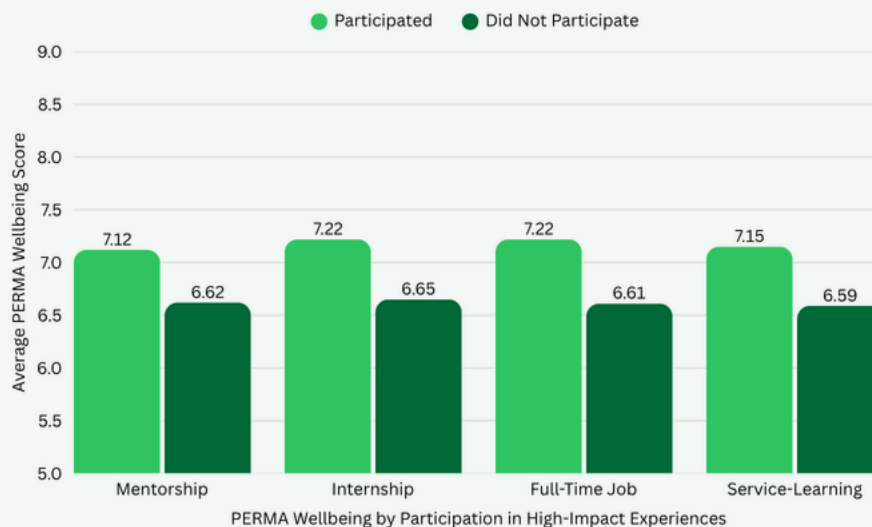
Students also identify internships as especially effective at helping them reflect on their growth, connect academic learning to real-world challenges, and build meaningful relationships.

Furthermore, students who participate in internships report significantly higher wellbeing (**7.22** vs. **6.65** for those without internships). Additionally, students with full-time jobs report some of the highest wellbeing scores in the dataset (**7.22**), compared to **6.61** for students without jobs.

Similar patterns emerge across other forms of applied learning. Students engaged in service-learning report higher wellbeing compared to students who have not been engaged in service-learning (**7.15** vs. **6.59**), in addition to finding these experiences valuable (**74%**).

These findings suggest that students are not just looking for opportunities to learn but to use what they learn in meaningful ways. Experiences that connect education to real-world contexts help students build confidence, develop skills, and see the relevance of their education in their lives beyond college.

Graph 2. Participation in High-Impact Experiences Is Associated With Higher Student Wellbeing



A Participation Gap for Experiences with the Best Outcomes

While the survey found participation in many high-impact practices to be widespread, a clear pattern emerges across the data: The experiences students find most valuable and that have the strongest wellbeing outcomes are often the least accessible. This pattern applies to all students, regardless of socioeconomic or first-gen status.

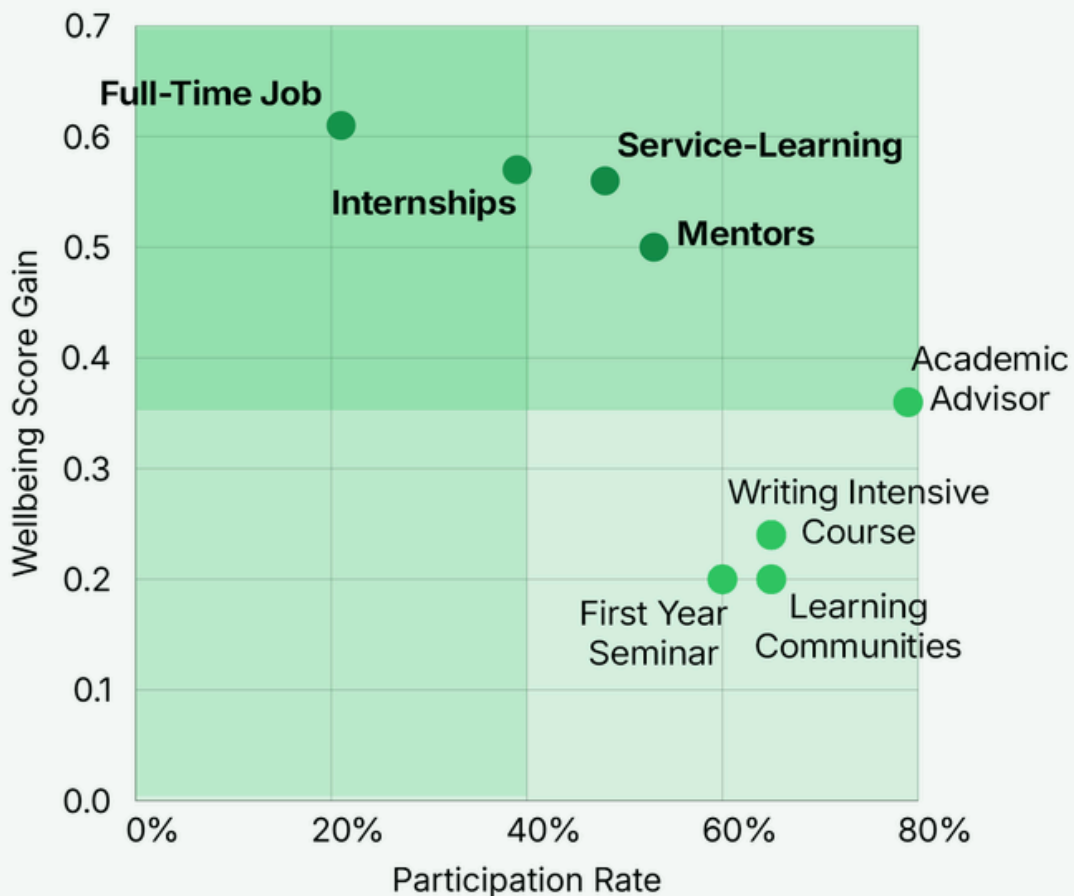
Many commonly implemented practices, including collaborative assignments, engagement with an academic advisor, exposure to diverse perspectives, learning communities, and writing-intensive courses, reach a large share of students, with participation rates exceeding **65%**. However, across multiple measures, including perceived value, quality of experience, and wellbeing outcomes, these more widely available practices tend to show smaller gains. For example, first-year seminars and writing-intensive courses are associated with more modest increases in wellbeing (**+0.20** and **+0.24**, respectively) and are rated as less valuable by students.

By contrast, the experiences that stand out as most valued and impactful to student wellbeing, particularly those involving meaningful relationships and real-world application of learning, reach far fewer students. Only **39%** of students report participating in an internship, and fewer than half have engaged in service-learning.

While **53%** report having a faculty or staff mentor, that still leaves nearly half of students without access to one of the most influential experiences in college. One exception to the participation gap is employment: **65%** of students report having at least a part-time job, an experience that is also associated with strong wellbeing outcomes.

These findings point to a fundamental gap in participation. The experiences with the strongest impact on students' wellbeing are not yet reaching the majority of students, while those with the broadest reach tend to have comparatively lower impact. This suggests an opportunity for institutions to more intentionally expand participation in high-impact, high-value experiences so that more students can benefit from them earlier and more consistently throughout their college journey.

Graph 3. Experiences with the Greatest Wellbeing Impact Often Have the Lowest Participation Rates



Conclusion

Students arrive at college with a wide range of motivations, many of them centered on identity development, personal growth, and contribution. Yet institutions are increasingly asked to define their value primarily in terms of career outcomes. While career success is important, this narrow framing does not fully reflect what students say they are seeking or what they experience as most meaningful during college.

Across the data, two types of experiences consistently stand out as both highly valued and highly impactful: meaningful relationships with faculty and staff, and opportunities to apply learning in real-world contexts. These experiences are not peripheral. They are central to how students make sense of their education, build confidence, and develop a sense of identity and purpose. They are also among the strongest contributors to students' overall wellbeing. These findings align with earlier research, including Gallup's College Alumni Study, which found that close relationships with faculty and experiential learning opportunities during college are strongly associated with long-term wellbeing and engagement after graduation.

However, the experiences with the greatest impact are not reaching all students. If these are the experiences that matter most, colleges and universities should prioritize expanding participation in them. This points to a clear opportunity for institutions: not necessarily to create more programs but to prioritize and scale the experiences that already demonstrate the greatest impact. Embedding mentorship early and throughout the student experience, expanding access to internships, service-learning, and work-based opportunities, and ensuring that students have repeated opportunities to connect learning to real-world challenges may be one of the most direct paths to improving student wellbeing, engagement, and long-term success.

A more nuanced definition of value in higher education would both reflect the full range of student motivations and prioritize the experiences that students themselves say they are seeking. Doing so allows institutions to better align what they offer with what students are seeking and to more fully support students in building lives and careers of purpose, growth, and contribution.

