

Motivation, Engagement, and Student Wellbeing in College

May 2026

Dana Humphrey, LearningWell Coalition

Ashley Finley, American Association of Colleges & Universities



LearningWell
Coalition

AAC&U

 MORNING CONSULT®

Students arrive at college with a range of motivations for being there. Those motivations shape how they experience their educational journeys, including how well they engage in the high-impact experiences known to improve outcomes and, ultimately, their overall wellbeing.

This report is the second in a two-part series highlighting the findings of a recent national survey, conducted by the LearningWell Coalition in partnership with the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and Morning Consult. The survey explored students' motivations for attending college and their engagement in and perception of high-impact practices. The poll was fielded in January 2026. Findings are based on a sample of 872 undergraduate students, ages 18–34, who are currently enrolled in two- or four-year degree programs. The first report focused on what students value most in college. Those findings revealed that while students are motivated to attend college to improve career outcomes, they are also seeking purpose, identity, and growth, and place the highest value on mentorship and opportunities to apply their learning in real-world contexts.



Photo: Belmont University

Motivation Shapes Engagement

Students' motivations for attending college are closely associated with the extent to which they engage in high-impact practices, such as internships, mentorship, service-learning, study abroad, and research with faculty — all [experiences known](#) to positively influence student success.

To better understand how students' motivations relate to their engagement, this report considered students within several broad motivation types based on their primary reason for attending college. "Community-oriented" students are those who report attending college to give back to their community. "Growth-oriented" students are motivated by learning, personal growth, and identity development, including gaining knowledge and developing a sense of who they are and what they are good at. "Career-oriented" students are primarily focused on getting a good job and advancing their careers. "Externally-oriented students" are motivated by external factors such as affordability and societal or family expectations.

At one end of the spectrum, community-oriented students show the highest levels of participation across nearly all high-impact practices. These students demonstrate especially high engagement in internships (**74%**), mentorship (**86%**), service-learning (**78%**), research with faculty (**67%**), and study abroad (**46%**), far exceeding other groups. However, only 3% of respondents listed wanting to give back to their community as a top reason for being in college (**23%** ranked it in the top 3 reasons).

Growth-oriented students, who are motivated by **personal growth, learning, and developing their identity**, also engage at relatively high levels across many experiences, though somewhat less consistently than their community-oriented peers. **71 percent** of those motivated by personal growth are participating in mentorships, as are **51 percent** of those

motivated by learning, and **55 percent** of those motivated by developing their sense of identity, respectively. **62 percent** of those motivated by personal growth are participating in service-learning, as are **45 percent** of those motivated by learning, and **53 percent** of those motivated by developing their identity. **71 percent** of those motivated by personal growth are participating in learning communities, as are **65 percent** of those motivated by learning, and **71 percent** of those motivated by developing their identity), suggesting that internally driven motivations are tied to engagement across high-impact practices.

Career-oriented students show somewhat more moderate and uneven participation in HIPs. While many still engage in key practices like internships (**39%**), their participation rates tend to lag behind community- and growth-oriented students, particularly in mentorship (**49%**), learning communities (**64%**), and service-learning (**43%**).

The lowest levels of engagement in high-impact practices are observed among externally-driven students whose motivations are shaped by affordability and societal or family expectations. These students consistently report lower participation across many high-impact practices (**See Graph 1**).

These patterns suggest that students' underlying motivations are not just abstract beliefs. They are linked to what extent they engage in the experiences that shape their development.

Graph 1. Percentage of Students Reporting Engagement in Various High-Impact Practices by Primary Motivation

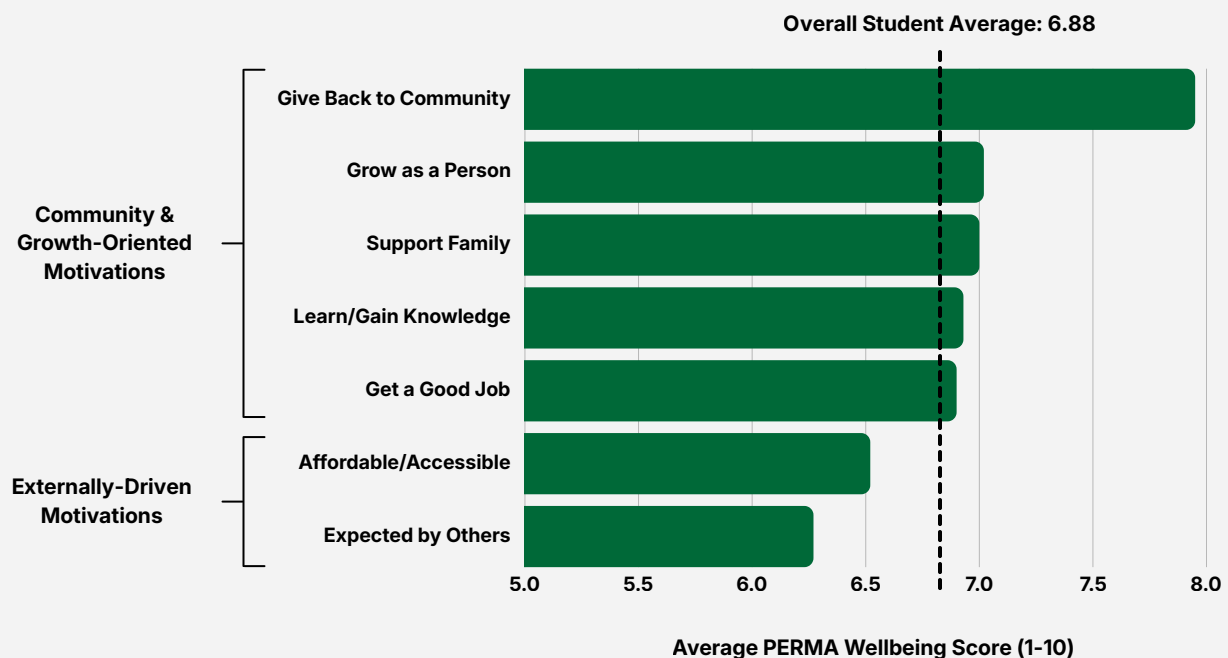
High-Impact Practice	Give Back	Grow as a Person	Learn More	Develop Identity	Get a Good Job	Affordable	Expected by Others
Learning Community	74%	71%	65%	71%	64%	56%	67%
Internship	74%	44%	40%	35%	39%	22%	30%
Research w/ Faculty	67%	34%	44%	43%	34%	39%	31%
Mentorship	86%	71%	51%	55%	49%	45%	48%
Study Abroad	46%	13%	24%	26%	13%	9%	16%
Service Learning	78%	62%	45%	53%	43%	42%	41%

Motivation, Engagement, and Wellbeing Are Closely Connected

Motivation for being in college is also associated with student wellbeing. Using the PERMA framework, students reported an overall average wellbeing score of **6.88**, with meaningful variation across motivation types.

Community-oriented students have the highest average wellbeing at **7.95**, followed by those motivated to grow as a person (**7.02**) and to support their family (**7.00**). Students motivated by learning and gaining knowledge have an average wellbeing score of **6.93**, while those focused on getting a good job report **6.90**. Lower scores are observed among students motivated by external factors: affordability or accessibility (**6.52**) and, lowest of all, those who say they attend college because it is expected of them (**6.27**).

Graph 2. Students Motivated by Community and Personal Growth Report Higher Wellbeing



These differences in wellbeing follow the same pattern observed in engagement. Students with community-, identity development-, and personal growth-oriented motivations are not only more likely to engage in high-impact practices but also more likely to report higher levels of wellbeing.

At the same time, the experiences themselves are strongly associated with wellbeing. As shown in the first report, ["What Students Value in College,"](#) students who participate in mentorship, internships, service-learning, and other forms of real-world learning consistently report higher wellbeing than those who do not.

These findings suggest a reinforcing dynamic: Students who enter college with community- and growth-oriented motivations are more likely to engage in high-impact experiences, and those experiences, in turn, are associated with higher levels of wellbeing.

Conclusion

Students' motivations for attending college shape how they engage in the experiences that define their education and how they experience college overall.

Students driven by giving back and personal growth engage more frequently in high-impact practices, such as mentorship, internships, and service-learning. These same students also report the highest levels of wellbeing.

By contrast, students whose motivations are shaped more by external forces engage less frequently in these experiences and report lower wellbeing. These findings point to a clear connection between motivation, engagement, and outcomes. High-impact practices are not just beneficial on their own; they are part of a broader pathway through which students translate their motivations into meaningful educational experiences and stronger wellbeing.

At the same time, as highlighted in the [first report](#), the experiences students find most valuable and that are most strongly associated with wellbeing, meaningful relationships, and opportunities to apply learning in real-world contexts are not consistently accessed by all students. Taken together with the findings in this report, this suggests that differences in motivation may further shape who engages in these high-impact experiences, reinforcing gaps in participation and outcomes.

For institutions, this suggests several complementary opportunities: expanding participation in high-impact practices (especially those that are highly valued and positively impact student wellbeing); helping students connect their education to personal growth and contribution beyond themselves, and broadening the narratives provided to prospective and

current students about the purpose of college. Strengthening these may be one of the most effective ways to increase student engagement and improve overall outcomes.



LearningWell
Coalition

