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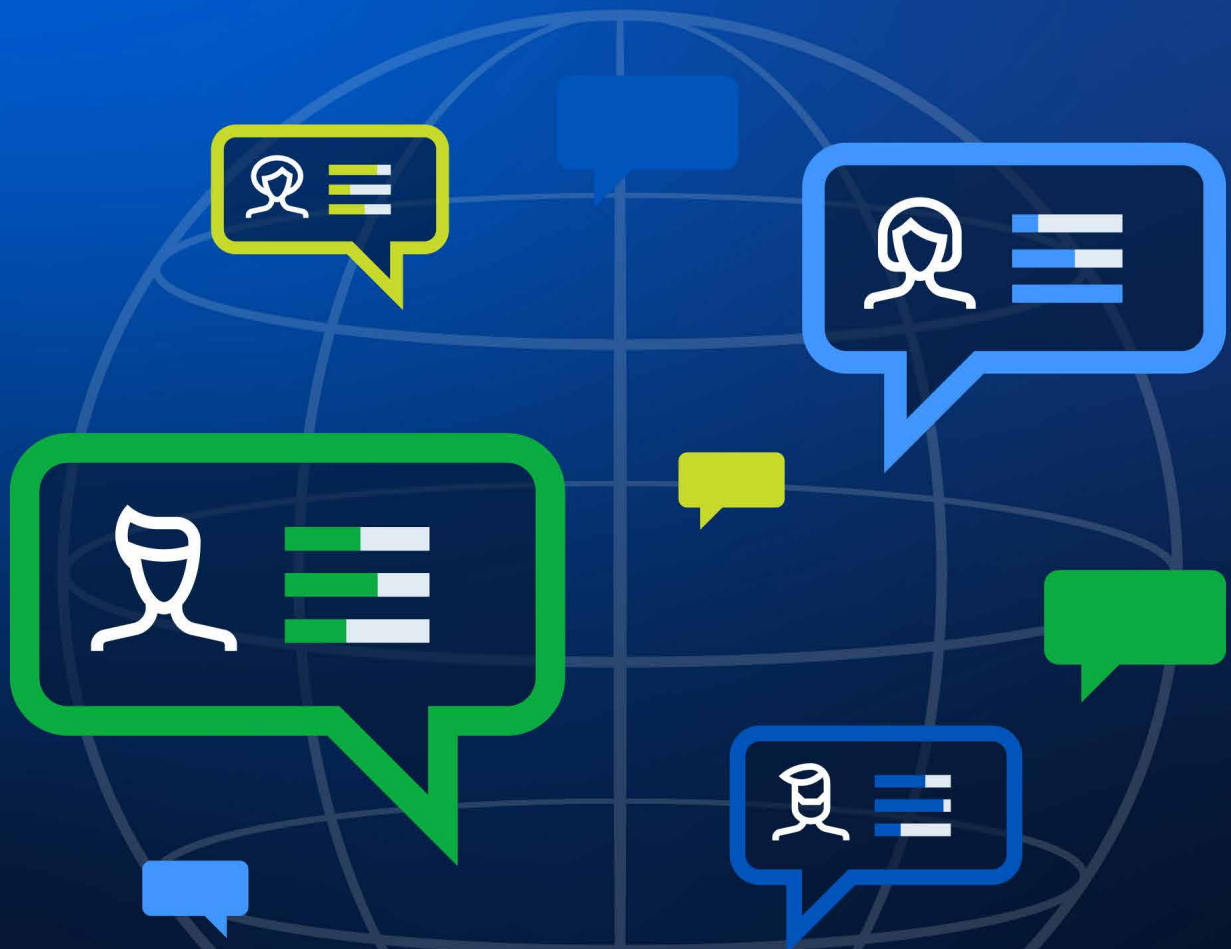
The Students' Perspective: Valuable Insights for University Leaders

Motivations, preferences, and needs of today's students

US EDITION

Understanding the evolving needs, preferences, and expectations of students in higher education is paramount to helping ensure their retention, completion, and long-term success. This is against a backdrop of learners having more options and opportunities today to gain skills than ever before, as well as the value of higher education being questioned to a greater degree in parts of the world in recent years.

Anthology conducted a global survey of more than 5,000 higher education leaders and current students in 11 countries to provide context and perspective from students and leaders about the opportunities, challenges, preferences, and technology impact across a number of areas.

Through this research, Anthology aims to contribute to the enhancement of the higher education experience for students and universities as they work together to refine, and in some cases redefine, how teaching and learning take place. This includes providing actionable recommendations to improve services, support systems, and learning environments.

Here, the focus will be on the perspective of leaders and students in the United States to identify relevant opportunities to enhance the student experience and further support students' success.

Student Motivations:
From Enrolling to the Push for Completion and the Challenges in Between

Students have different reasons for enrolling in a university and completing their degree. With an overall six-year graduation rate of 64% in 2020 (2023, National Center for Education Statistics), universities can continue to refine student support in efforts to improve retention and graduation rates. A deeper understanding of students' reasons for enrolling can help universities adjust communications with future prospective students, and also provide additional services to ensure that students successfully complete their studies.

Motivations for Enrolling

What were your primary motivations for enrolling at your current university?

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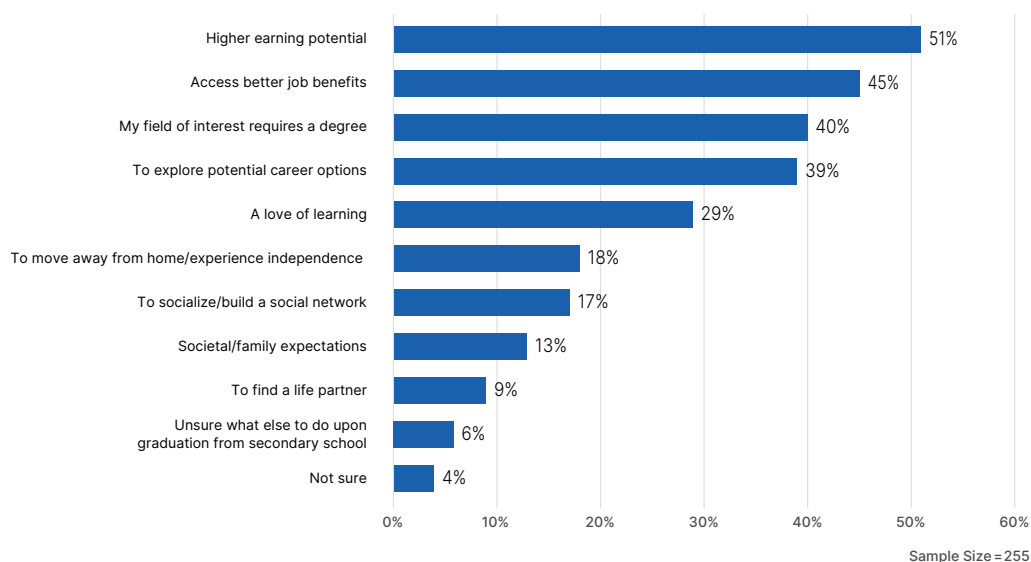
The primary reasons for enrolling at a university among US students are more practical in nature, led by the higher earning potential gained from having a degree, closely followed by being able to access better job benefits and their field of interest requiring a degree, as noted in the above chart. However, there are also other key reasons, including exploring potential careers, which was identified by four in 10 students, as well as for a love of learning from three in 10 respondents. Compared to other countries surveyed, US students have the highest interest in exploring career options as a motivator for enrolling and are second only behind Singaporean students in a higher earning potential being a primary motivation.

The high interest in exploring career options may be an opportunity for institutions to highlight the support provided to students and the ability to change their major after beginning their studies. Universities should also ensure that students can learn about potential career options throughout their education, given that this was important to more than one in three students. In addition, institutions should look for ways to highlight the return on the education as it relates to higher incomes and better benefits, given that these are the primary motivations. The social and personal motivations were less important for US students compared to some of the other countries surveyed, and students also do not seem to enroll in higher education due to lack of options or uncertainty about what else to do. This gives institutions key elements to consider in refining messaging to prospective students.

Motivations for Completing a Degree

Current students are primarily driven to complete their degree due to the potential of earning a higher income (59%), gaining a professional position in their area of interest (35%), and gaining life-long skills (34%). For one in four, it is also to support their family or to take advantage of broader employment opportunities. Overall, as seen with the motivation to enroll, the large majority of students are motivated to complete their degree because of the benefits to be gained from earning the degree.

This further supports using outcomes-based information in communication with prospective students and in highlighting this type of content on the website, with a focus on earning potential, broader employment opportunities, and preparation for a career. This could help draw more students to the university as students will see that there is alignment with their expectations.
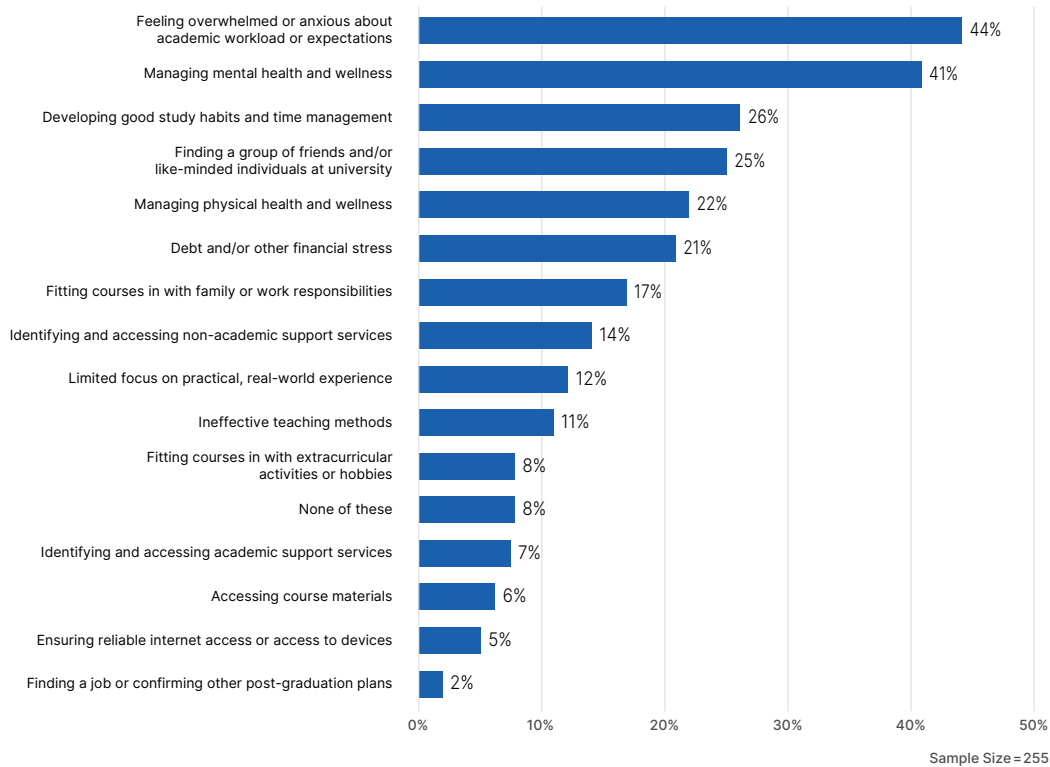
Students Continue to Face Challenges

Students face a variety of challenges during their university career. By being aware of these challenges, university leadership will be better able to identify opportunities to support students and, in so doing, help more students continue their studies and complete their degree. However, as mentioned previously, the student experience is not without challenges. 92% of respondents identified at least one significant challenge they faced during the last term.

The highest percentage of students—nearly one of every two—reported one of the most pressing challenges was feeling overwhelmed or anxious about academic workload or expectations. In addition, nearly the same percentage indicated that managing mental health and wellness was a key challenge. Overall, this highlights the reality of the student experience over the past year. Universities should be aware of these and other challenges that students are facing and identify ways to support them.

Additionally, about one in four students mentioned needing to develop good study habits and time management, as well as finding a group of friends and/or like-minded individuals at their university. These are additional stressors that impact a student's wellbeing and their likelihood of success. Having a group of friends has been shown to directly impact a student's sense of belonging, which impacts their likelihood to remain at university (Stayhorn, 2018; O'Keeffe, 2013). Universities should review where there may be opportunities to build community, whether during orientation, by supporting a range of student clubs and societies, and/or by making it easy for students to connect with other students virtually.

While there is much discussed about the cost of higher education, this was only highlighted by about one in four respondents, although the second highest percentage of students raised this compared to the other countries surveyed. Universities should seek to identify students who are concerned about financial stressors to identify whether more can be done to assist them.

What were the most pressing challenges for you at university this past term?

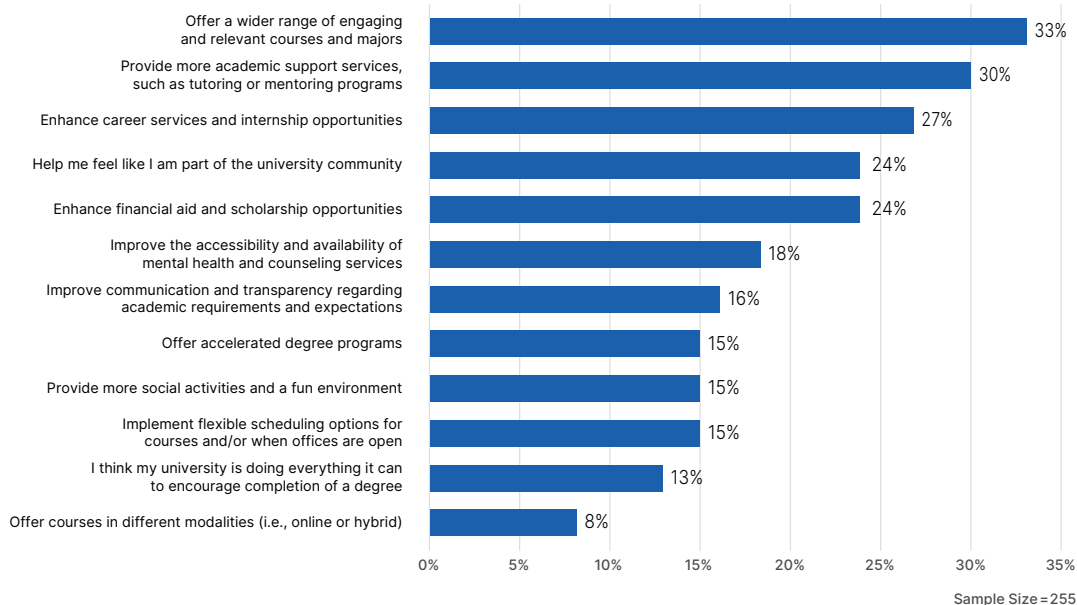| Challenge	Percentage
Feeling overwhelmed or anxious about academic workload or expectations	44%
Managing mental health and wellness	41%
Developing good study habits and time management	26%
Finding a group of friends and/or like-minded individuals at university	25%
Managing physical health and wellness	22%
Debt and/or other financial stress	21%
Fitting courses in with family or work responsibilities	17%
Identifying and accessing non-academic support services	14%
Limited focus on practical, real-world experience	12%
Ineffective teaching methods	11%
Fitting courses in with extracurricular activities or hobbies	8%
None of these	8%
Identifying and accessing academic support services	7%
Accessing course materials	6%
Ensuring reliable internet access or access to devices	5%
Finding a job or confirming other post-graduation plans	2%

Sample Size = 255

There are clear actions that universities should consider based on this data. Prioritizing mental health support for students seems paramount based on the responses—while this may not be fully in a university's remit, ensuring that students are aware of mental health services that are available, and are able to access these services, is critical. Additionally, universities should consider ways to reduce the anxiety or pressure from academic expectations—how universities can better support students, ensuring they feel prepared rather than overwhelmed. Facing challenges while at university can impact students' academic success as well as their happiness and sense of wellbeing, which have all been linked to likelihood of retention (O'Keeffe, 2013; Stayhorn, 2018).

Opportunities for Universities: Student Needs and Leader Perspectives — the Balancing Act

Given the challenges that they identified, students were asked to share how their university could help them and their classmates complete their degrees. University leaders were asked a similar question to help determine whether there was alignment between students and leaders on opportunities.
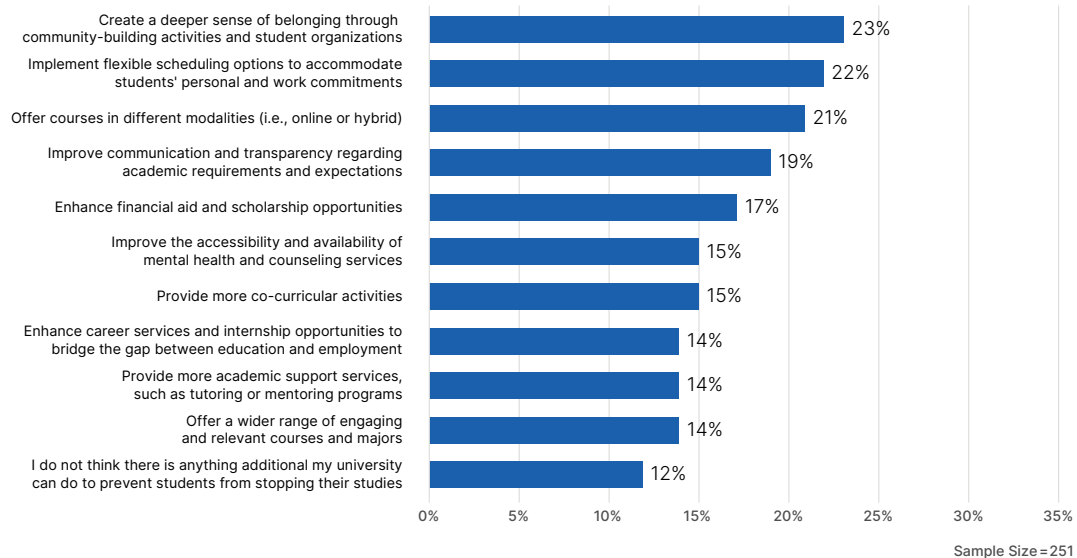
Student Perspective: Opportunities for Change

What do you think your university can do to help you and your
classmates be more likely to complete your degree?

Response	%
Offer a wider range of engaging and relevant courses and majors	33%
Provide more academic support services, such as tutoring or mentoring programs	30%
Enhance career services and internship opportunities	27%
Help me feel like I am part of the university community	24%
Enhance financial aid and scholarship opportunities	24%
Improve the accessibility and availability of mental health and counseling services	18%
Improve communication and transparency regarding academic requirements and expectations	16%
Offer accelerated degree programs	15%
Provide more social activities and a fun environment	15%
Implement flexible scheduling options for courses and/or when offices are open	15%
I think my university is doing everything it can to encourage completion of a degree	13%
Offer courses in different modalities (i.e., online or hybrid)	8%

Sample Size = 255

Leader Perspective: Opportunities for Change

What do you believe are the most important actions your university can
take to help students stay enrolled and complete their degrees?

Response	%
Create a deeper sense of belonging through community-building activities and student organizations	23%
Implement flexible scheduling options to accommodate students' personal and work commitments	22%
Offer courses in different modalities (i.e., online or hybrid)	21%
Improve communication and transparency regarding academic requirements and expectations	19%
Enhance financial aid and scholarship opportunities	17%
Improve the accessibility and availability of mental health and counseling services	15%
Provide more co-curricular activities	15%
Enhance career services and internship opportunities to bridge the gap between education and employment	14%
Provide more academic support services, such as tutoring or mentoring programs	14%
Offer a wider range of engaging and relevant courses and majors	14%
I do not think there is anything additional my university can do to prevent students from stopping their studies	12%

Sample Size = 251

One in three students identified expanding the range of relevant courses and majors as an element that could help fellow students complete their degree, followed closely by opportunities to provide more academic support services, including tutoring and mentoring programs, as well as enhancing career services and internship opportunities. This was followed by enhancing financial aid and scholarship opportunities and helping them feel like part of the university community. University leaders were generally aligned on supporting the feeling of community by creating a deeper sense of belonging—this was the action with the most support among the university leaders surveyed.

However, this was the only area of overlap in the top four identified areas. University leaders focused on implementing more flexible schedules and offering courses in different modalities. While this may seem important, especially given the shifts during and after the pandemic, it is notable that these were much lower on the list for student respondents, capturing interest from 15% and 8% of students, respectively. Only 14% of university leaders cited offering a wider range of courses and majors as among the most important areas, a difference of 19% compared to students. A similarly high difference (17%) occurred related to providing more academic support services. This is a noticeable difference and leaders should consider how their institution can improve support. In this case, this may be as simple as ensuring more students are aware of the variety of support services available to them, as opposed to adding additional services. A similar misalignment was related to enhancing career services, with a 13% gap between student sentiment and that of university leaders. Clearly, students are concerned about employment and the level of career support. Universities have an opportunity to grow support in that area to reduce student anxiety and concerns.

In perhaps surprising data for university leaders, the highest percentage of students in the US prefer fully online courses at 37%, followed by 33% who prefer courses in a blended or hybrid format, while only three in ten prefer face-to-face courses. The modality currently being offered as the majority of courses by surveyed institutions is relatively well aligned to these preferences: university leaders report that at 41% of institutions, the majority of courses are offered in either a blended or hybrid format, with 37% having the majority of courses offered face-to-face, while 23% of university leaders stated that the majority of courses at their institution are offered fully online. Even though these generally match student expectations, there is an opportunity to seek to move additional courses online in order to more closely match student expectations.

Overall, while aligned in some areas related to where changes can be implemented to further support students, university leaders should consider ways to highlight existing academic support services, consider additional courses or majors that may be of higher interest to students, and seek to further enhance career services and internship opportunities.

Opportunities to Improve the Student Experience with Technology

In a more connected world, students are looking for technology to help them be more efficient. This study asked a series of questions related to ways that technology could be helpful to determine the level of interest on the part of students.

Universities should seek to reduce the number of systems or platforms that students have to use to complete assignments and other university processes—more than half of students strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that there are too many systems to use. This presents an opportunity for university leaders to identify efficiencies in systems, and in doing so, also get better access to student data (95% of university leaders agree that a holistic view of a student would benefit their team and their students, while only 51% have this type of data available). Forty-six percent of US university leaders also report using, on average, between five and seven systems to track student data and/or student progress, the highest of any country surveyed. This identifies the potential to reduce systems to enhance the student experience and move closer to having a holistic view of students for university leaders.

One area where there has already been progress is that most students (90%) report having access to a self-service portal where they can view academic progress to see if they are on track. However, 38% feel that while the information is provided, it is not easy to consume. For the four percent of students who do not have this type of information readily available, it is critical for institutions to invest in technology to help inform students of their progress (note that six percent of university leaders also indicated that their institution did not have technology in place for this).

Overall, students are looking for more support and guidance in a world where they are increasingly communicated with. One of the key opportunities is through more personalized information from their university. The large majority of students would find the following types of information helpful to receive:

- Reminders about assignments due in class (90%)

- Recommendations for courses to take based on career goals (89%)

- Recommendations for courses to take based on prior grades (88%)

- Reminders about upcoming deadlines such as course registrations, etc. (87%)

- Recommendations for courses to take based on their major (86%)

- Information about upcoming student organization events (82%)

Every option for this type of information that was presented to respondents appears to be highly valued among US students. Therefore, the more institutions can do to provide students with this type of information, the more likely students will feel supported and remain enrolled.

Providing reminders about assignments being due and when course registration starts are easy opportunities for success, as many of these features are already built into learning management systems and CRM platforms. Universities should encourage faculty members to use the learning management system for all courses, as this creates a consistent experience for students as far as receiving reminders about assignments that are due as well as how assignments are turned in. The more consistency that can be provided in these ways, the more likely students will turn assignments in by the due date and be successful.

In addition, students want to have course content available to them in a variety of ways. Seventy-four percent of students in the US point to having the ability to listen to or read course content to be helpful, while two-thirds indicated that being able to read content from the learning management system on their mobile device would be extremely or very helpful. Moreover, 61% felt that being able to translate content into their native language would be extremely or very helpful. Universities should work with faculty members and encourage them to make content available in these ways, as it increases the likelihood that students will consume the content.

Overall, these are areas that present opportunities to universities to increase their use of data and technology to deliver more detailed recommendations more efficiently. This information does not take the place of advisor meetings, but by providing insights for students, such as recommended courses, that can be accessed at any time, conversations during meetings can be more focused and productive.

In considering how best to communicate with students, they continue to prefer email as the primary way to hear from the university, with 51% indicating that more personalized communications with relevant information are preferred as one of two favored methods of communication. However, unlike in other countries, students in the US are much less likely to respond to general broadcast emails, with only 27% listing that as one of two preferred ways—the lowest of any country surveyed. Second highest among US students was text messaging (31% of respondents), followed by phone calls (30% of respondents). These insights can be helpful as universities consider how best to reach students.

Methodology

Data collection was conducted online among university leaders and students across eleven countries in August 2023, including Australia, Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. Separate questionnaires with similar questions were utilized to enable comparisons. To qualify, student respondents had to indicate that they were currently enrolled at a higher education institution and pursuing a degree or diploma. University leader respondents had to indicate that they were currently senior leaders (dean, provost, rector, etc.) at a higher education institution. In total, 2,617 university leaders and 2,728 students qualified for and completed the survey. In the United States, 255 students and 251 university leaders responded to the survey.

About Anthology

Anthology delivers education and technology solutions so that students can reach their full potential and learning institutions thrive. Millions of students around the world are supported throughout their education journey via Anthology's ecosystem of flagship SaaS solutions and supporting services, including the award-winning Blackboard® (LMS), Anthology® Student (SIS/ERP), and Anthology® Reach (CRM). Through the Power of Together™, we are uniquely inspiring educators and institutions with innovation that is meaningful, simple, and intelligent to help customers redefine what's possible and create life-changing opportunities for people everywhere. **anthology.com**

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