



# STUDENT SUCCESS

*Building a Culture for Retention and  
Completion on College Campuses*

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*Student Success: Building a Culture for Retention and Completion on College Campuses* is based on a survey conducted by Maguire Associates, Inc., was written by Jeffrey J. Selingo, contributing editor at The Chronicle of Higher Education, Inc. and is sponsored by Blackboard. The Chronicle is fully responsible for the report's editorial content. Copyright © 2015.

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# 1

EXECUTIVE  
SUMMARY

Colleges and universities have started to investigate why students leave before they graduate and how institutions could improve retention and completion rates.

Colleges and universities long have focused on getting students in the door, spending vast resources and time on recruiting and admissions to craft the right classes and meet their revenue targets. Whether students succeeded once they arrived on campus was seen as the responsibility of academic departments and individual faculty members, not as an institutional priority.

But in recent decades, colleges and universities have started to investigate why students leave before they graduate and how institutions could improve retention and completion rates.

That push has accelerated recently. Mountains of data on student performance have allowed campus officials to build early warning systems to pinpoint students at risk of dropping out and provide a

snapshot of problem areas that need to be fixed, from inadequate advising to gateway courses with high failure rates. At the same time, federal and state officials have intensified attention on what they see as a dropout crisis, with some states linking appropriations to public colleges based on completion rates.

Despite this focus, graduation rates continue to lag. By May 2014, only 55 percent of the students who entered college in the fall of 2008 had earned college degrees or certificates, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. That's down slightly from the cohort that started in 2007.

As a result, colleges and universities are experimenting with new approaches to helping students succeed. They have hired academic coaches; put in place more intrusive advising for select groups of at-risk students; and coordinated efforts that bring together academic affairs, student affairs, and faculty members.

Those are among the findings of an extensive fall 2014 survey conducted by The Chronicle of higher-education leaders involved with student success efforts. The survey, completed by more than 300 provosts, officials in student affairs, and enrollment managers, reveals the practices used to promote student success and the results of those initiatives. Highlights from the survey include:



**APPROACHES TO STUDENT SUCCESS**

Institutions tend to take one of five approaches to student success. Overall, public institutions have a higher level of oversight and engage a broader group of campus officials in their efforts than private institutions and typically focus on tutoring and degree planning. Meanwhile, private institutions are more limited in their efforts, which mostly focus on coaching, tutoring, and alerts about academic progress.



**STUDENT SUCCESS PRACTICES**

The most popular approaches include orientation, academic tutoring, alert systems when students get off track, and writing and study skills programs. Public institutions are more likely to use focused interventions, such as degree planning and professional advising, while private colleges focus on curricular developments, such as first-year programs and freshman seminars.



**INSTITUTIONAL FOCUS**

An institution's priorities are typically reflected in how it assigns staff, and almost half of institutions have both an individual and a committee solely focused on student success. The seniority of the individual differs by sector, with private colleges much more likely than public institutions to have someone at the vice-president level or above dedicated to student success initiatives. Nearly a quarter of institutions have defined budgets for their retention efforts.



**ADVISING MODELS**

Institutions report that they have focused extensively on how they provide advising to students. Public institutions, in particular, have transferred advising from faculty members to centralized professional advising staff, mostly for first-year students. Even so, all institutions report that faculty and students are only moderately happy with advising.



**DATA ANALYTICS**

Nearly all colleges and universities use data analytics to better understand the influences on student success at their institutions. About half of the institutions surveyed report building predictive models with data to identify at-risk students.



**MEASURING SUCCESS**

Despite the focus on retention and graduation rates, institutions reported a wide range of success in their efforts. The median retention rate among public colleges in the survey was 77 percent; private colleges was 79. The median six-year graduation rate for public institutions was 51 percent; private colleges 63 percent.

# NO. 2

## INTRODUCTION

More than  
40 percent  
of American  
students who  
begin at four-  
year colleges  
don't earn a  
degree in six  
years.

American higher education often is viewed as the best in the world. It has some of the most recognized names in higher education, from Ivy League institutions to Stanford University to Williams and Amherst colleges. Students from all over the world come to the U.S. to study, nearly 900,000 students last year alone. And it has one of the most diverse systems of higher education, with colleges and universities in nearly every corner of every state and a world of choices for students from research universities to two-year technical colleges.

With a college degree increasingly necessary to succeed financially in a global economy, policymakers have made access to higher education a top priority, and as a result, enrollment has grown substantially in recent decades. Some 18 million undergraduates enrolled in college in the United States last year, up nearly 50 percent since 1990, when 12 million students attended. By 2023, undergraduate enrollment is expected to exceed 20 million students.

While more students are going to college, not all of them are graduating. An estimated 400,000 students drop out of college every year. More than 40 percent of American students who begin at four-year colleges don't earn a degree in six years. When community colleges are added to the mix, the numbers are even worse: Only about half of students actually earn a degree. What's more, the odds of finishing are tied closely to income. Children from families who earn more than \$90,000 have a one-in-two chance of getting a bachelor's degree by age 24. That falls to a one-in-17 chance for those earning under \$35,000.

After years of focusing on increasing access to higher education, federal and state higher-education policymakers recently have begun to shine a spotlight much more on the results of those efforts. Accountability measures have been put in place in many states to measure retention and graduation rates, and in several states, taxpayer appropriations to the colleges are based on how well institutions are doing on those fronts. Prospective students and parents also are paying more attention to grad-

uation rates in making their college decisions to ensure students receive their degrees on time and don't end up paying more in tuition than they should.

All that has college officials searching for strategies to get students to stay in college and graduate. They have put in place a variety of policies and approaches, starting with orientation and focusing particularly on the first year of college, when most students drop out. In large part, these efforts remain experiments as officials determine what works and what doesn't.

This brief attempts to inform that process for college executives. It is based on a survey of provosts, officials in student affairs, and enrollment managers, and explores their experiences with various student success efforts at their institutions and their impact on improving retention and graduation rates.

Only 12  
percent of  
institutions say  
they calculate  
the return on  
investment for  
their student  
success  
strategies.

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FROM COACHING  
TO ADVISING:  
WHAT COLLEGES  
DO AND HOW  
THEY DO IT

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## Serving students is a big job for colleges and universities. Positions in student services now make up nearly a third of professional jobs on campuses, more than three times the number of administrative positions.

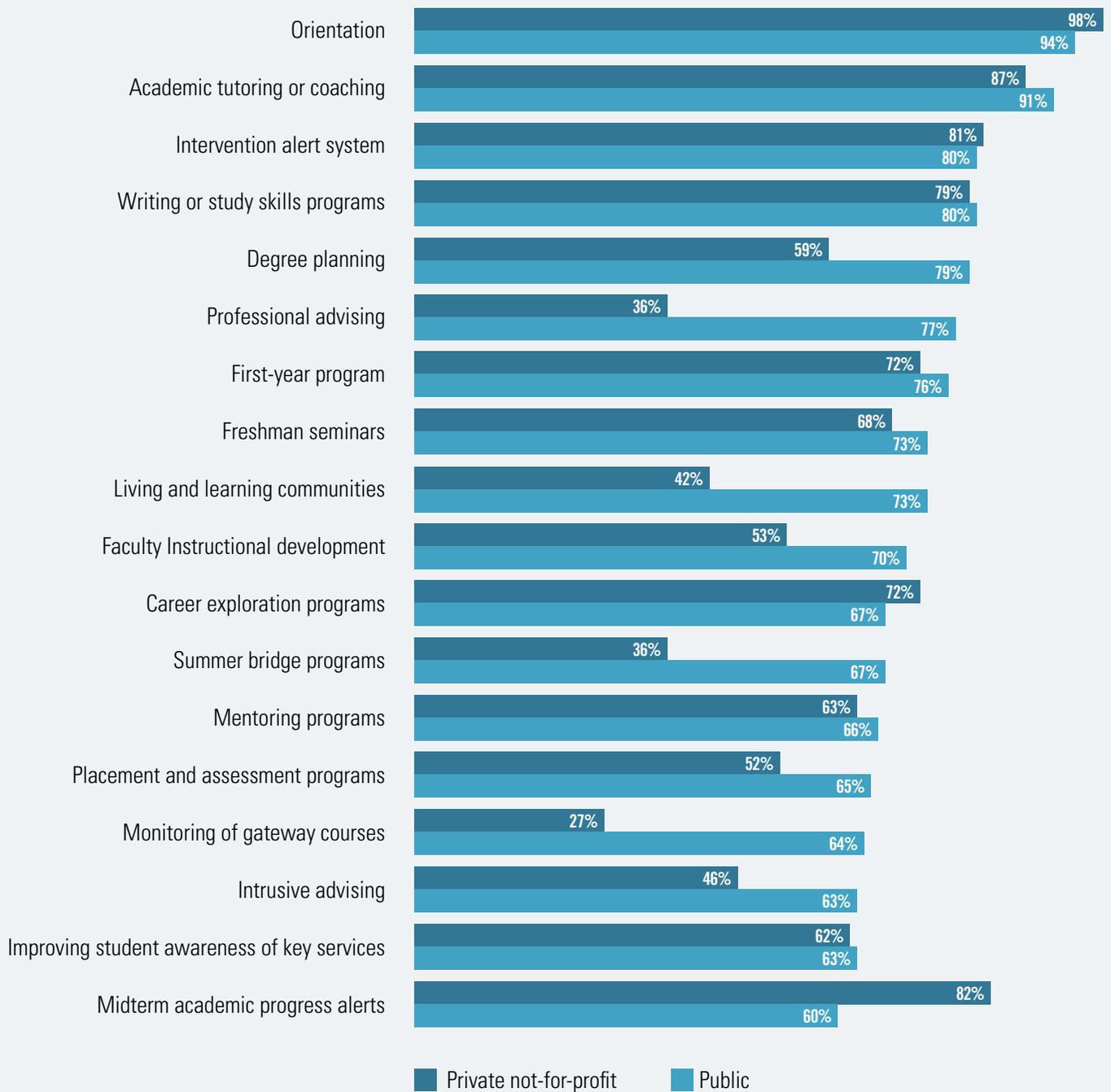
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At many colleges, the growth in student services has occurred because of the addition of initiatives to promote student success. The range of activities used to advance student success is extensive, and includes orientation, academic coaching, early alert systems, study skills, and degree planning **(see Figure 1)**.

Only 12 percent of institutions say they calculate the return on investment for their student success strategies. Without measuring ROI, campus officials report that it has been difficult to persuade budget planners to add more resources to those efforts in recent years.

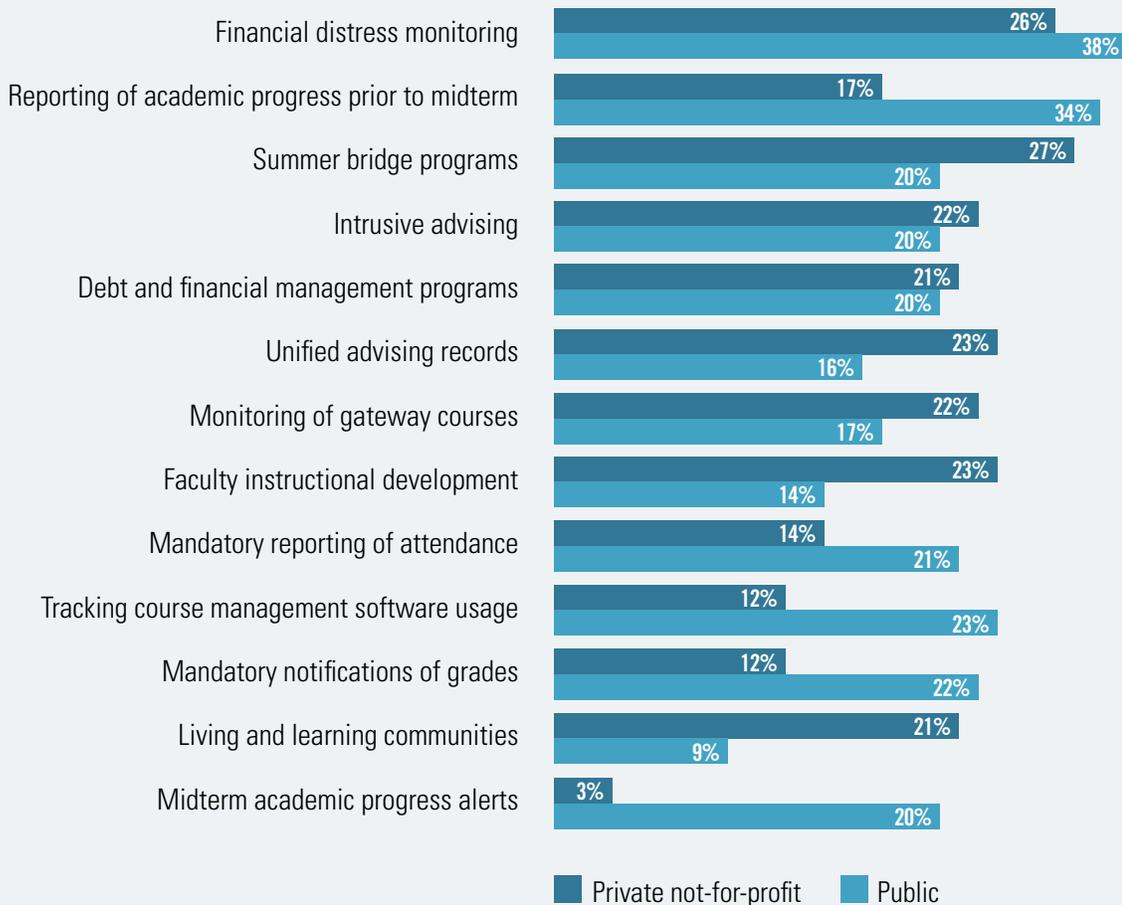
Some nine in 10 institutions pay for their student success efforts by reallocating dollars from other parts of the campus. More than half of respondents said that financial resources are an impediment to pursuing new initiatives. Only 23 percent of colleges and universities report having a defined budget for student success strategies.

**FIGURE 1:**  
**ACTIVITIES MOST USED**  
**TO PROMOTE STUDENT SUCCESS**



If they had the money, public universities would most like to add the capacity to monitor students who might be facing financial distress as well as provide reporting of academic progress before mid-term grades. Private colleges and universities would most like to add monitoring of financial distress and summer bridge programs (see Figure 2).

**FIGURE 2:**  
STUDENT SUCCESS APPROACHES  
CAMPUSES WANT TO ADD





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## FIVE APPROACHES TO STUDENT SUCCESS

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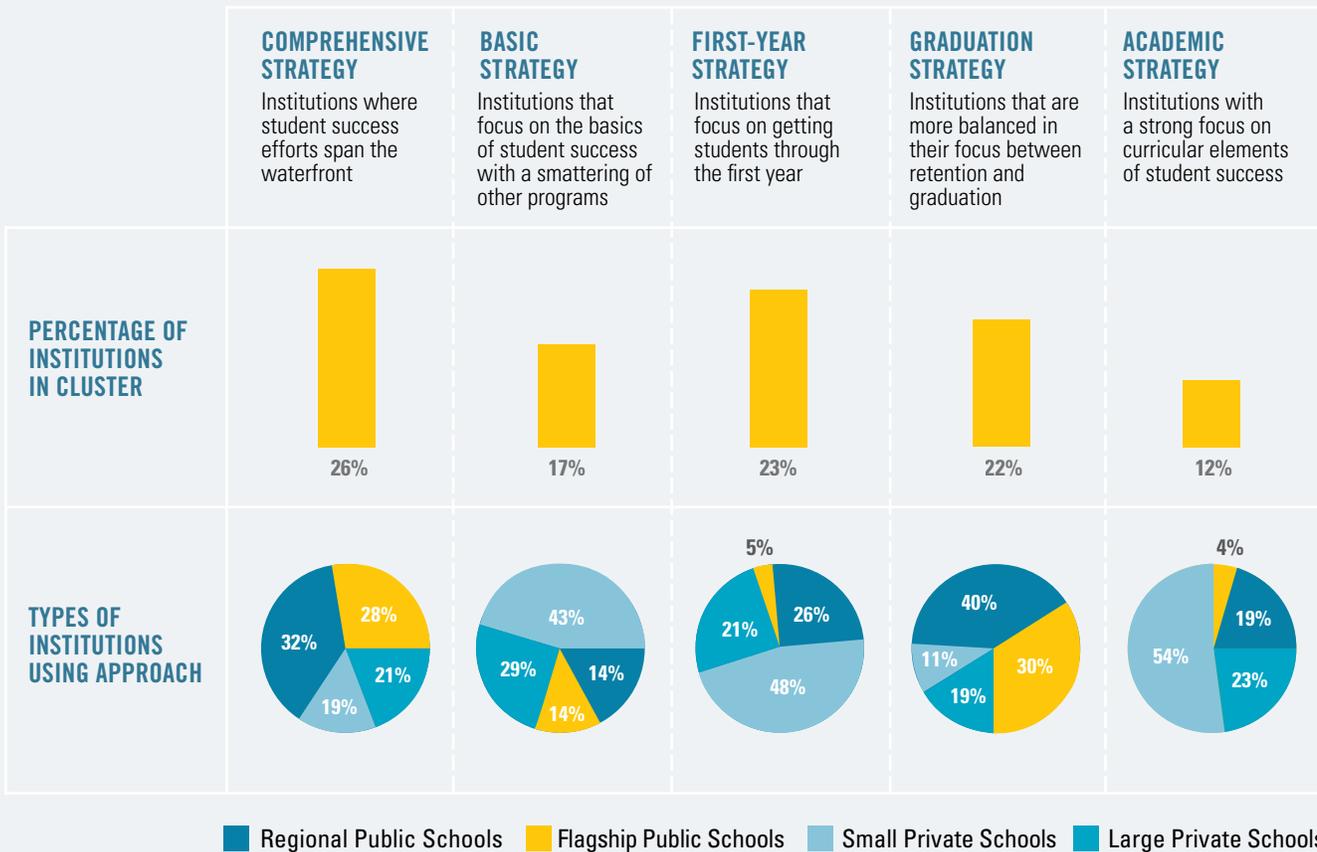
Responsibility for student success spans divisions, schools, and departments, so it is sometimes difficult to measure all the efforts a particular institution might be undertaking.

Higher education institutions often operate in separate “silos,” without much communication between departments and divisions. But responsibility for student success spans divisions, schools, and departments, so it is sometimes difficult to measure all the efforts a particular institution might be undertaking. In recent years, some colleges and universities have combined their approaches under

one umbrella by creating a new division or a senior-level position to oversee student success.

To quantify the range of strategies around student success, The Chronicle survey analyzed typical approaches that individual institutions take and then clustered those practices together to form a series of five common strategies (see Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3:**  
FIVE APPROACHES TO  
STUDENT SUCCESS

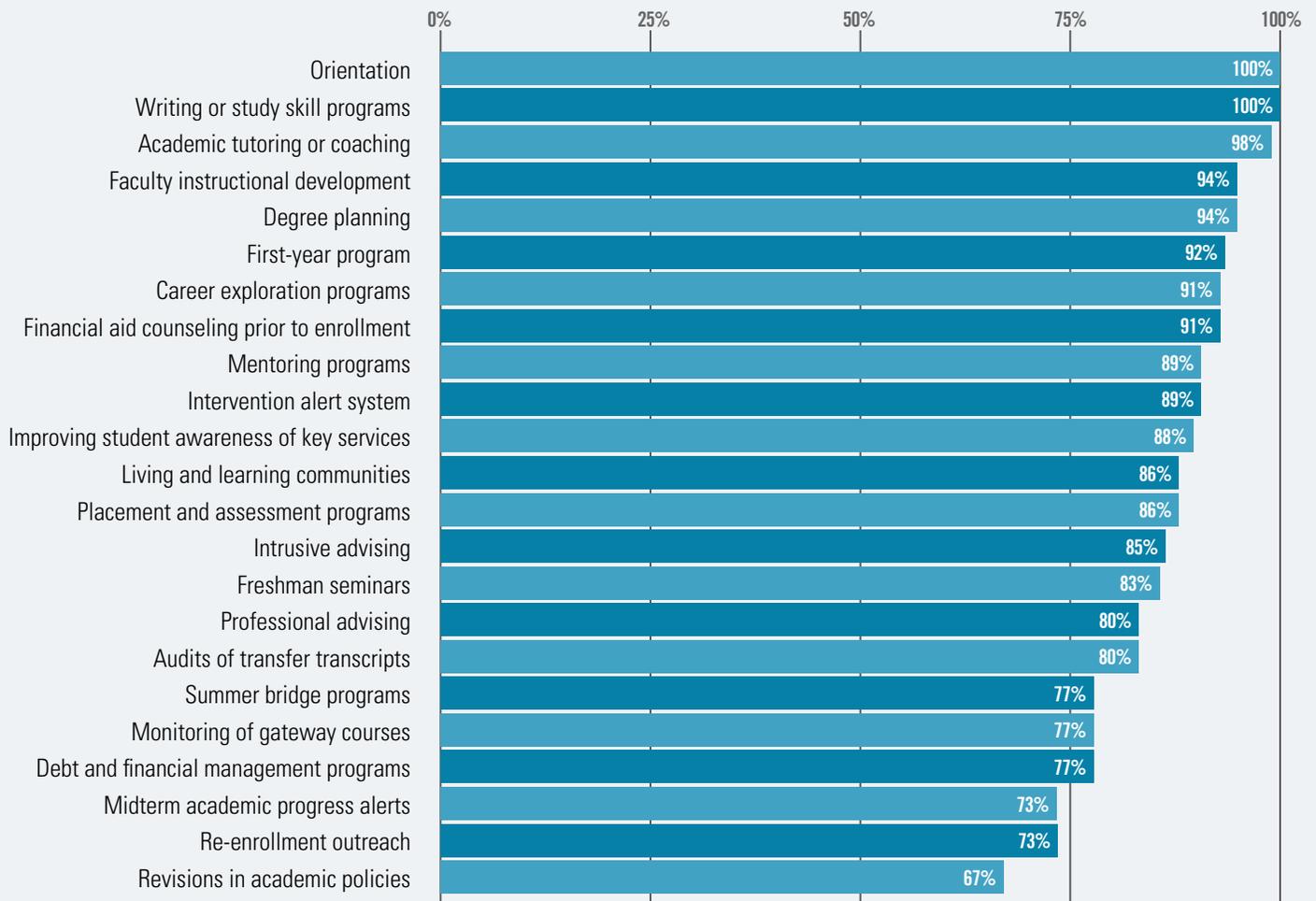


A quarter of all institutions follow a comprehensive strategy to student success. According to the survey, these institutions use, on average, 23 different practices, from intrusive advising to career exploration programs (see Figure 4). Slightly more than half of these institutions have a position or a committee responsible for oversight of these

efforts, and the committees have, on average, representatives from 10 different constituencies. Public universities—especially regional public institutions—are more likely to follow this strategy than private colleges.

About 17 percent of all institutions follow a limited basic strategy toward student success, according to the survey. Nearly half of the institutions that follow this approach are small private colleges where students live on campus and the student-faculty ratio tends to be small, so at-risk students are often identified through activities in the classroom or residence halls.

**FIGURE 4:**  
COMMON PRACTICES OF THE COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY TO STUDENT SUCCESS



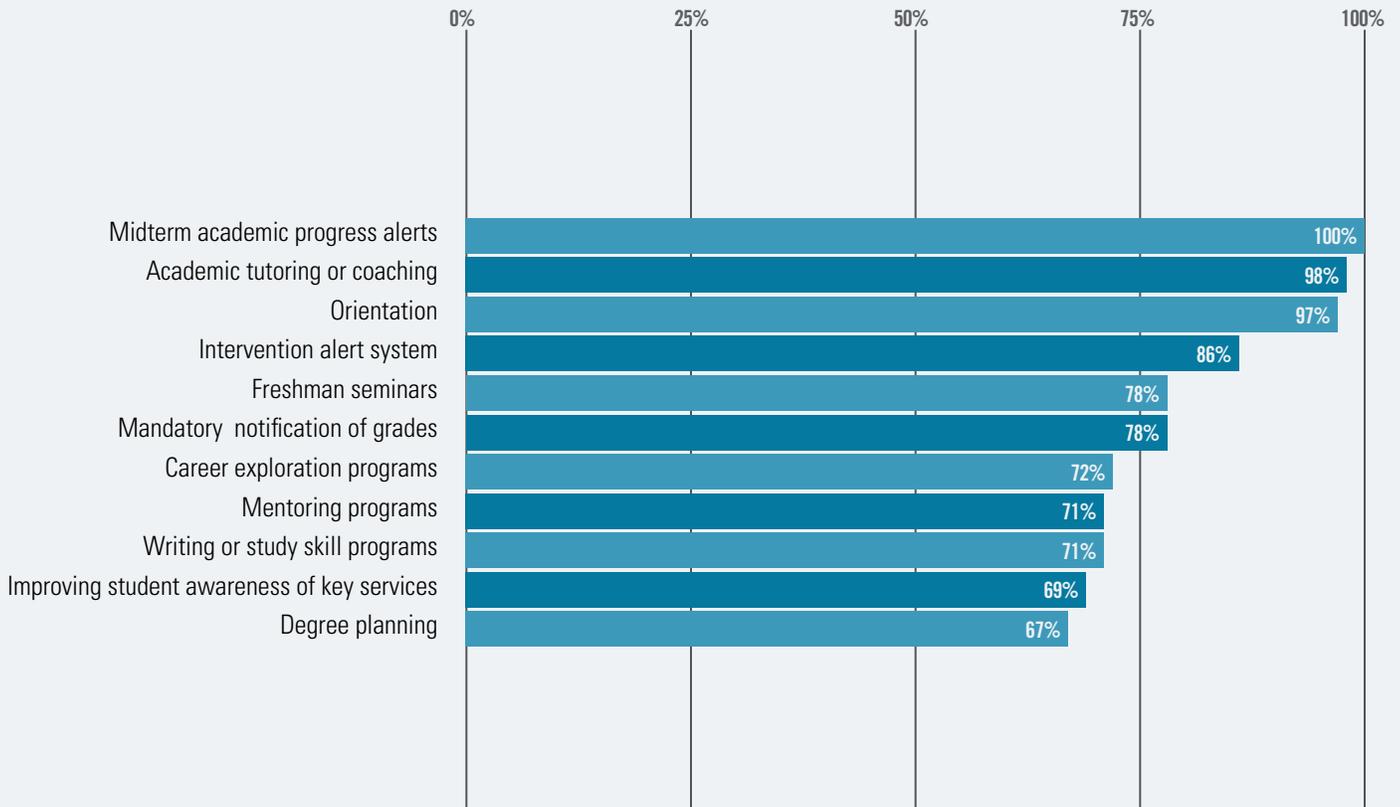
Survey respondents in this group identified only two practices they commonly use to promote student success: orientation and alert systems that show students who are off track. Only a third of these institutions have a senior-level position or a committee responsible for oversight of student success efforts.

About half of the institutions surveyed follow more targeted approaches, using either a first-year strategy or a graduation strategy. A little more than half of the institutions that have adopted one of these approaches have a senior-level position or a committee responsible for student success.

A first-year strategy is popular among private institutions, given

that most of their students attend college full time and are more likely to graduate if they make it through the first year. Some 70 percent of private institutions follow this approach, using about a dozen student success practices that focus on first-year programs, such as freshman seminars, career exploration programs, and degree planning (see Figure 5).

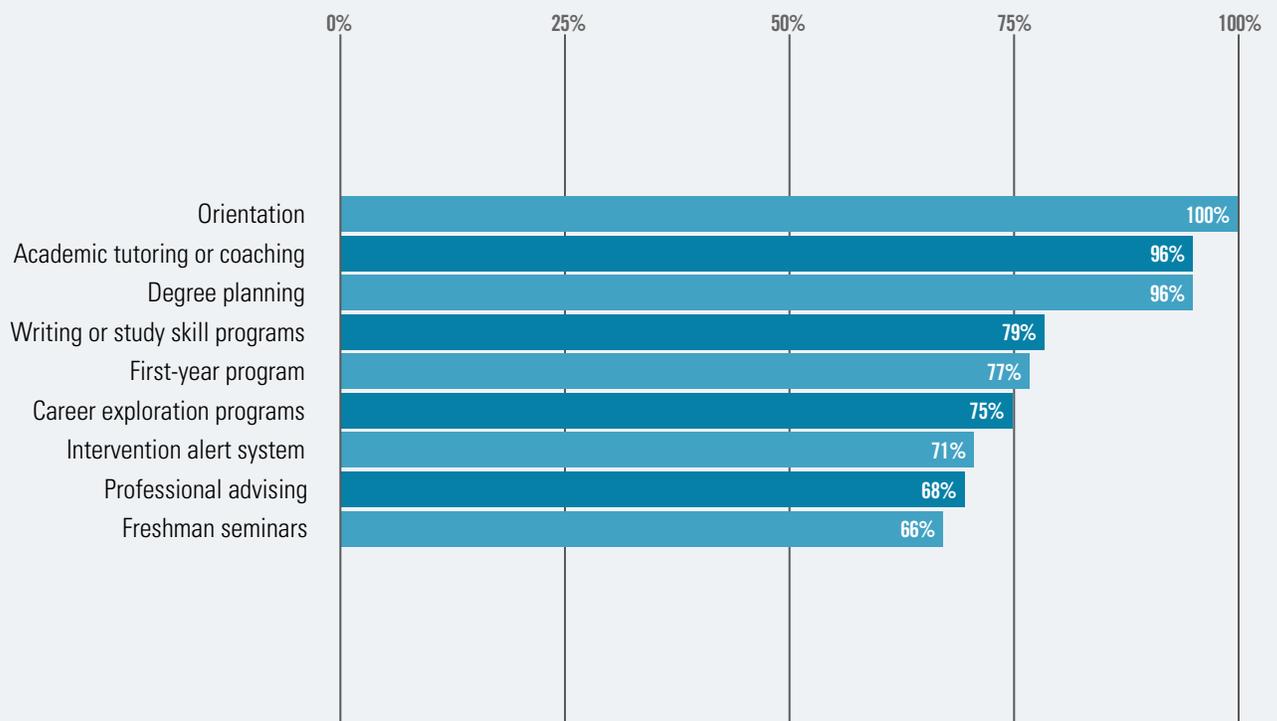
**FIGURE 5:**  
COMMON PRACTICES OF THE FIRST-YEAR STRATEGY TO STUDENT SUCCESS



Because public colleges and universities are increasingly measured by their completion rates—and in some cases their public funds depend on the percentage of students who get a degree—they are much more likely than private institutions to follow a graduation strategy. Such a strategy incorporates some 15 practices, on

average, focused both on the first year of college as well as getting students to commencement (see Figure 6).

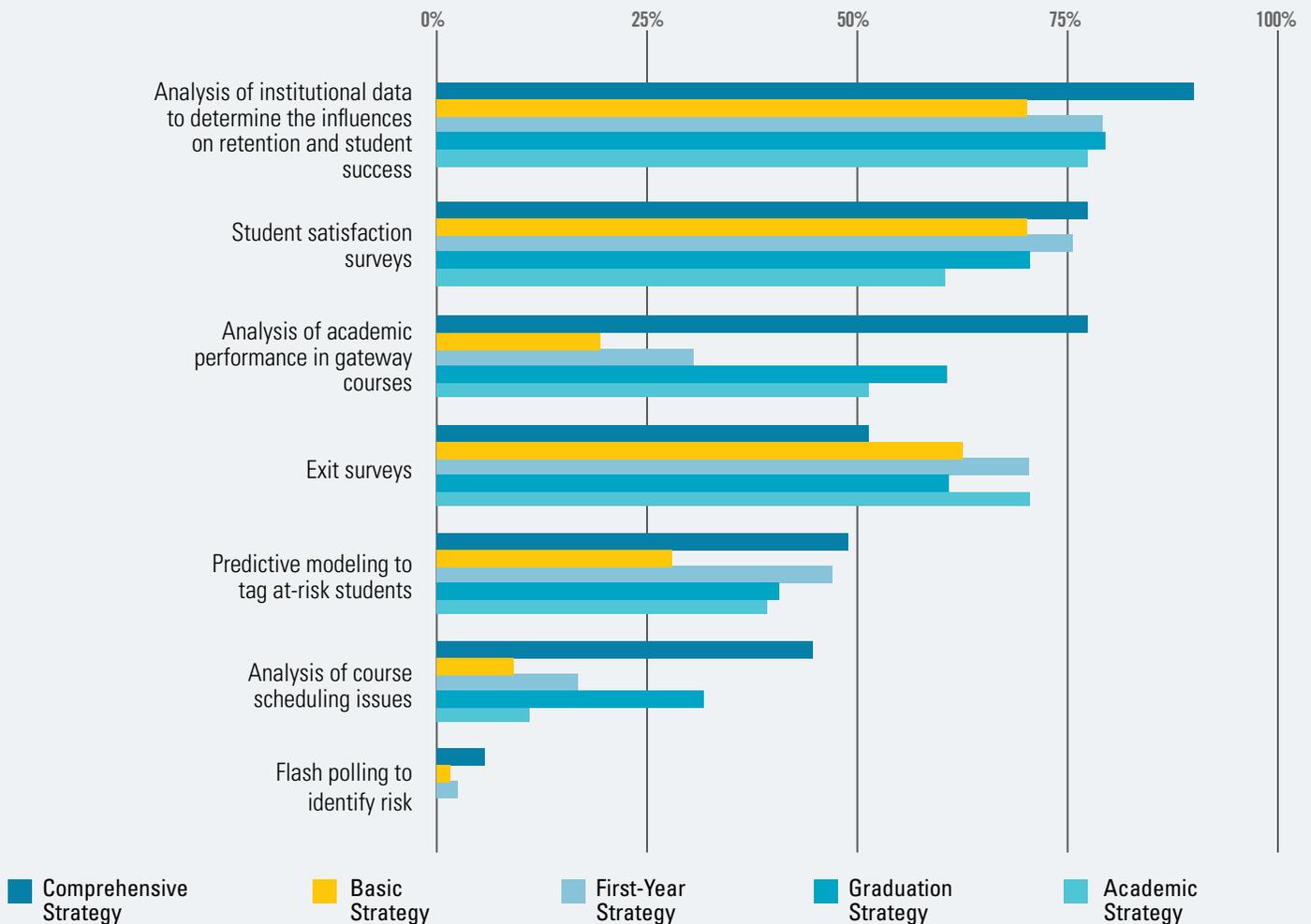
**FIGURE 6:**  
MOST COMMON PRACTICES OF THE GRADUATION STRATEGY TO STUDENT SUCCESS



Finally, 12% of institutions, mostly small private colleges, have adopted an academic strategy in which they focus their student success efforts mostly through curricular and academic means, including writing programs, mentoring, and academic tutoring.

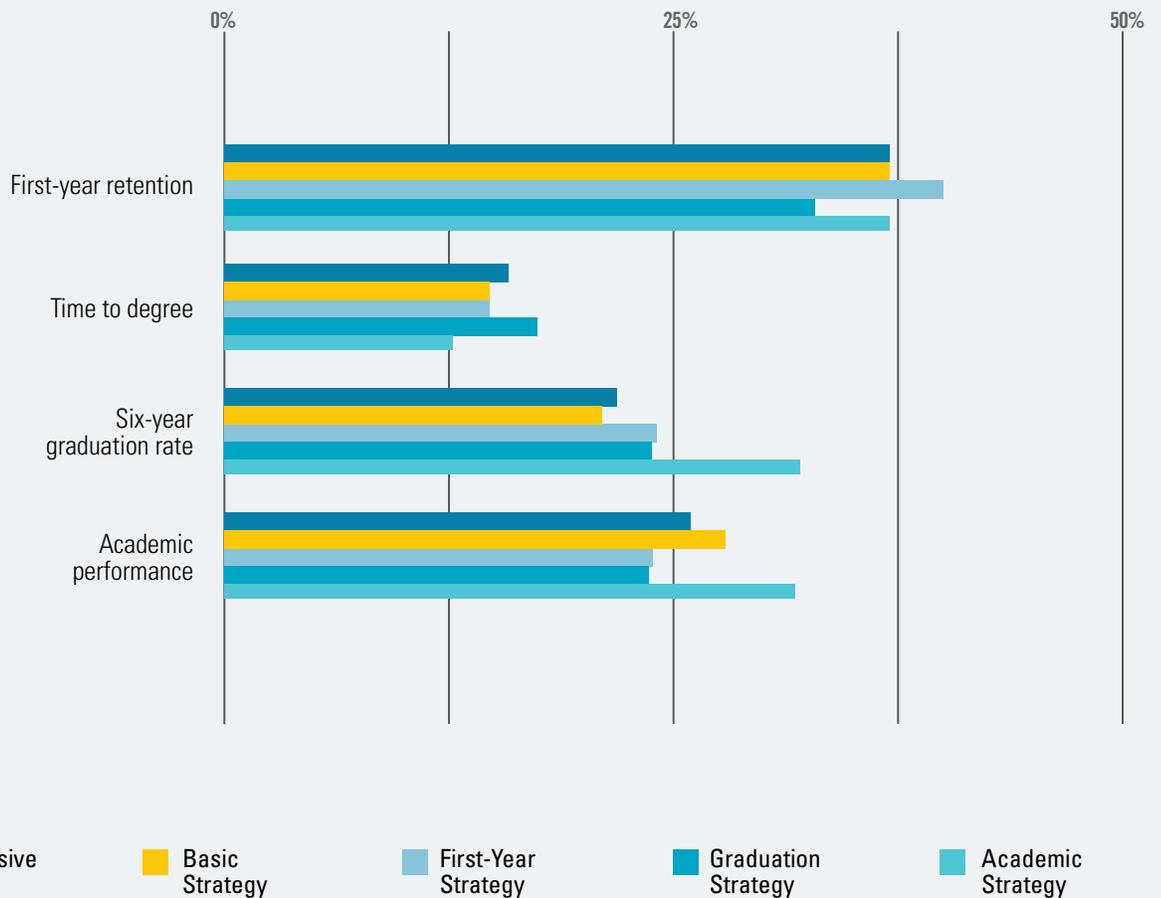
How institutions incorporate data to measure the success of their approach depends largely on the strategy they are following. Institutions pursuing a comprehensive strategy, for example, use the most data to inform their approach, from student satisfaction surveys to predictive modeling to tagging at-risk students (see Figure 7).

**FIGURE 7:**  
WHERE BIG DATA PLAYS A ROLE  
IN STUDENT SUCCESS



When it comes to measuring success, some approaches, such as first-year strategy, focus more heavily on tracking retention rates as a measure of success than others that balance their efforts between time to degree, graduation rates, and academic performance (see Figure 8).

**FIGURE 8:**  
HOW EACH STRATEGY  
MEASURES SUCCESS



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5

INSTITUTIONAL FOCUS ON  
STUDENT SUCCESS

Three in five  
institutions have a  
dedicated full-time  
position responsible  
for student success.

## For generations, colleges and universities were seen as places where adolescents would either sink or swim on their way to adulthood.

**FIGURE 9:**  
SENIORITY OF  
FULL-TIME POSITION  
RESPONSIBLE FOR  
STUDENT SUCCESS

The institution’s role was to provide the tools for students to succeed, but not to shadow them on that journey with support services at every turn. But as access to higher education expanded over the past several decades—especially for students who were first in their family to go to college—institutions discovered that they needed to build new advising structures to ensure that this new wave of students would make it to graduation.

Today, three in five institutions have a dedicated full-time position responsible for student success, according to the survey. At most institutions, that position is an associate provost, vice president, or director (see Figure 9). Many of those institutions also have a standing committee that is responsible for comprehensive oversight of student success initiatives.

### Public



### Private not-for-profit



### Flagship public schools



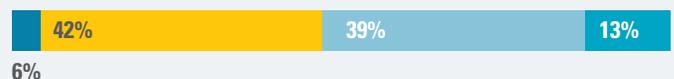
### Small private schools



### Regional public schools



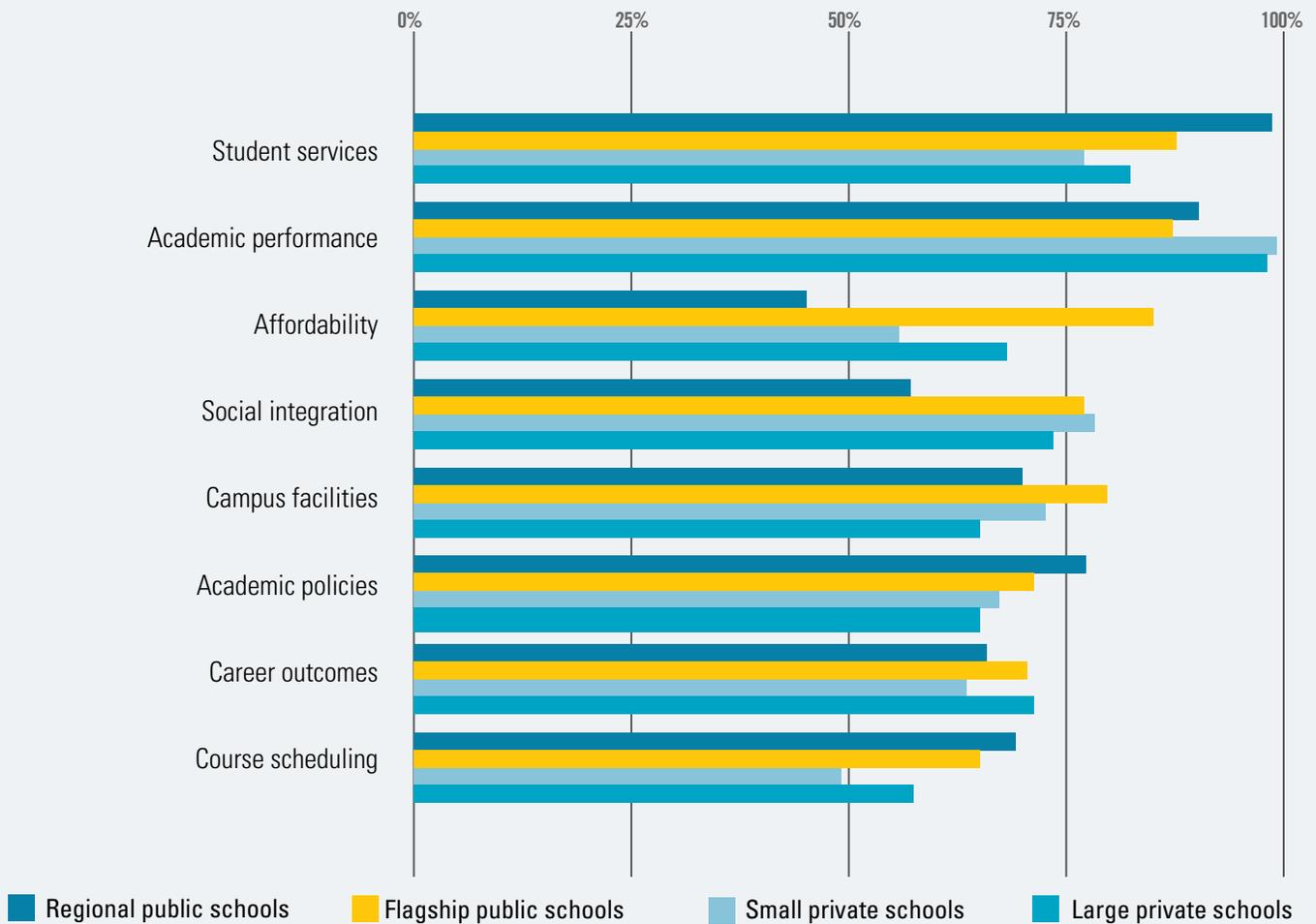
### Large private schools



Most student success efforts focus on student services and academic performance, but some institutions have broadened their approach, knowing that the inability to pay a tuition bill or register for a critical class also could knock students off the pathway to graduation. Among the institutions that completed the

survey, flagship public and regional state universities tend to focus their success approaches most on student services, while private colleges focus more on academic performance (see Figure 10).

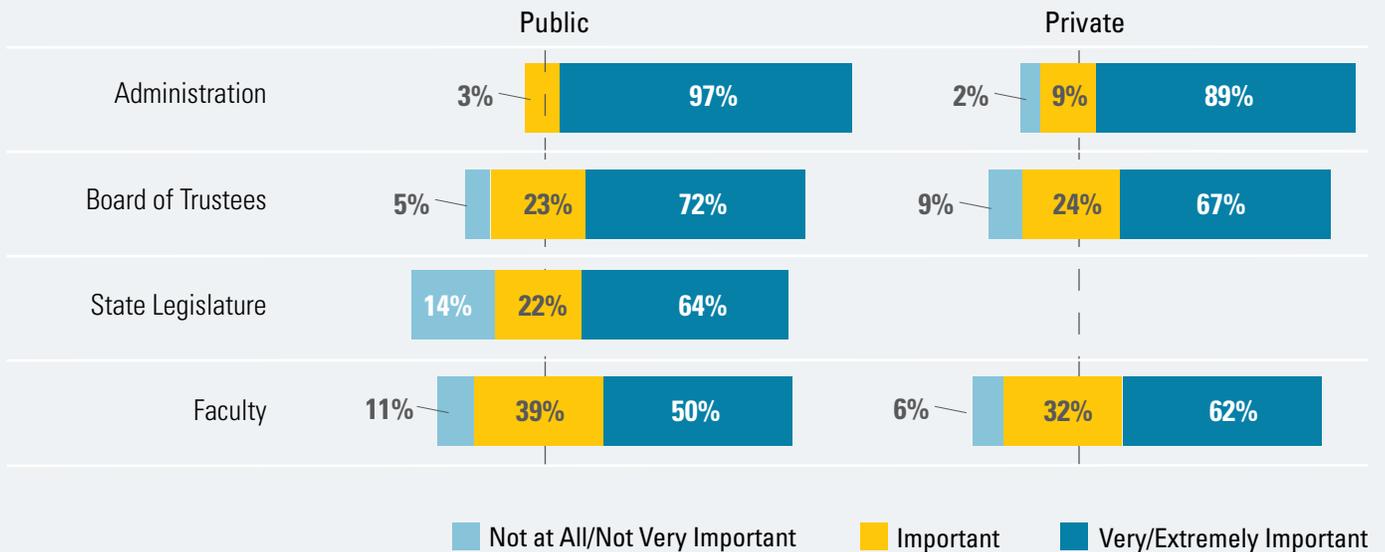
**FIGURE 10:**  
THE FOCUS OF STUDENT SUCCESS EFFORTS ON CAMPUSES



On many campuses, the leading advocates for expanding student success strategies have been administrators, who care much more than faculty members about the efforts and their success, according to the survey. Asked to rate the enthusiasm for retention and graduation strategies among

various campus constituents, 97 percent of respondents at public institutions and 89 percent of those at private colleges said they were “very or extremely” important to administrators. That compares to 50 percent for faculty at public institutions and 62 percent at private colleges (see Figure 11).

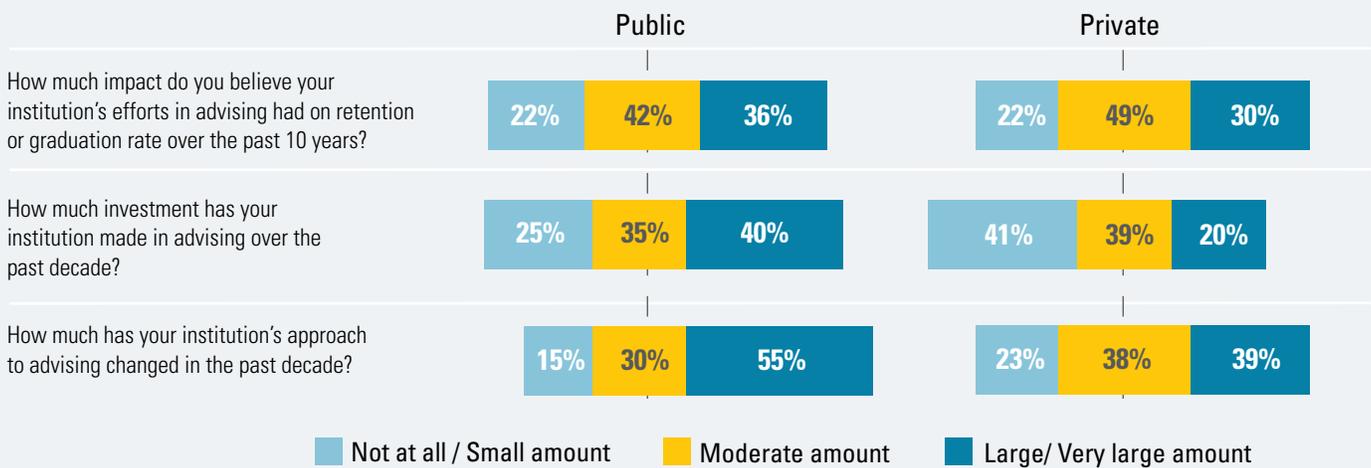
**FIGURE 11:**  
IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT SUCCESS INITIATIVES TO CONSTITUENTS



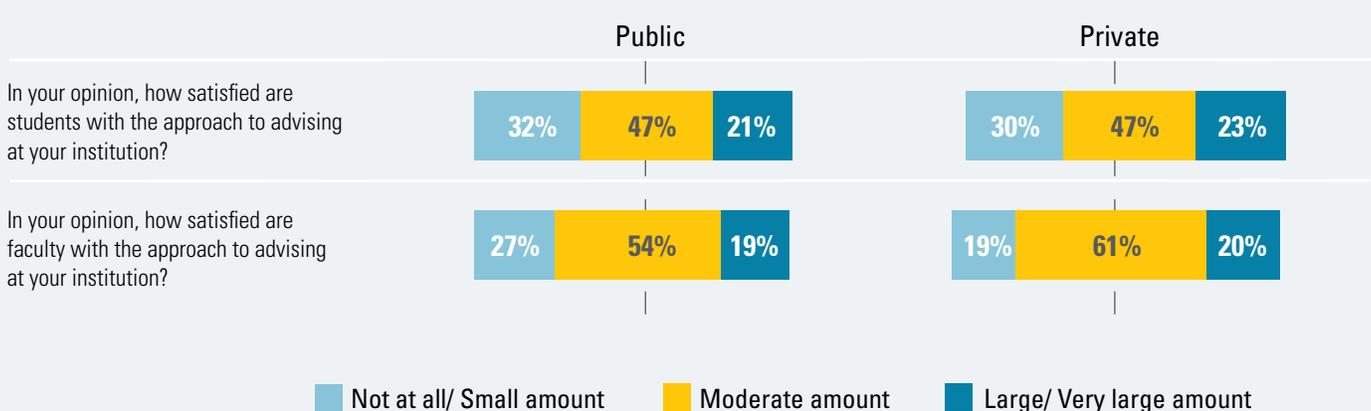
Academic advising remains the basic student success function for most colleges and universities. In the past decade, both public and private institutions report large changes to their advising approach, which they believe has had a positive impact on retention and graduation rates

(see Figure 12). Even so, respondents to the survey reported only a moderate level of satisfaction with advising among students and faculty members (see Figure 13).

**FIGURE 12:**  
IMPACT OF ADVISING ON STUDENT SUCCESS EFFORTS



**FIGURE 13:**  
STUDENT AND FACULTY SATISFACTION WITH ADVISING



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## THE RISE OF BIG DATA

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Institutions are taking deeper dives into data, using student satisfaction surveys or analyzing the academic performance of students in introductory courses.

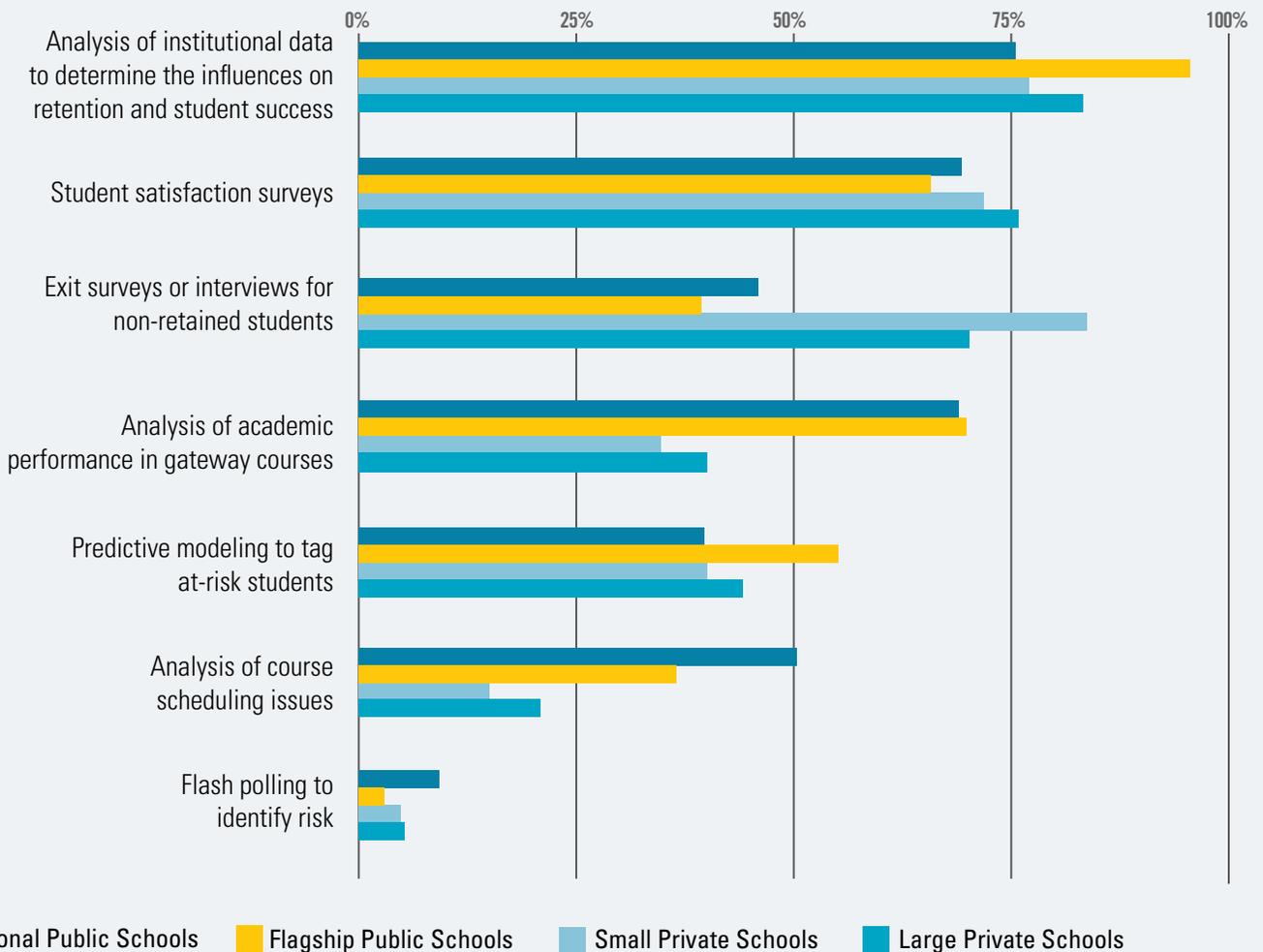
In the modern economy, big data is seen as a powerful tool to improve decision making, from whether a doctor should order an expensive medical test for a sick patient to how much insurance companies should charge for coverage in hurricane zones. But until recently, data science largely was absent from the

high-stakes decisions made in higher education. That is changing as more institutions use data to help students choose majors or pick classes.

Data also are helping inform strategies for student success. More than three-quarters of colleges and universities report analyzing

institutional data to determine the influences on retention and student success (see Figure 14). Other institutions are taking deeper dives into data, using student satisfaction surveys or analyzing the academic performance of students in introductory courses.

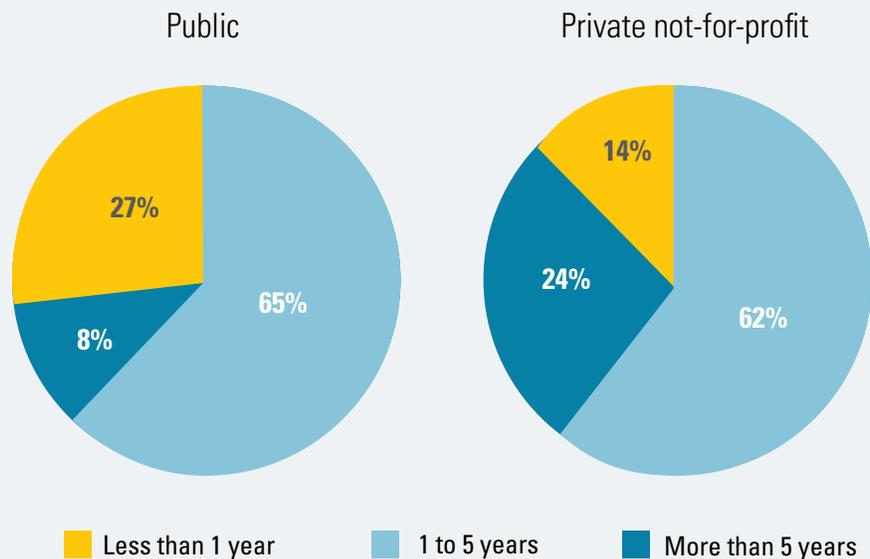
**FIGURE 14:**  
USE OF DATA ANALYTICS IN STUDENT SUCCESS STRATEGY



College officials see using data to predict student behaviors as a way to steer students to more appropriate courses and majors, and in the long run, reduce their time to earn a degree. Colleges like to compare these efforts to how Amazon or Netflix directs consumers to books or videos they might be interested

in purchasing or renting. In the past five years, most colleges and universities have started to use predictive analytics to tag at-risk students, and a significant portion of public universities, some 27 percent, have started such efforts just in the past year (see Figure 15).

**FIGURE 15:**  
LENGTH OF TIME COLLEGES HAVE BEEN USING PREDICTIVE ANALYTICS TO TAG AT-RISK STUDENTS



# CONCLUSION

For much of its history, higher education focused its resources on recruiting and admissions, rather than on the retention of students. But as lawmakers and the public became concerned with low graduation rates, particularly at state-run institutions, college officials started to spend more time and money on student success strategies.

Today, the array of approaches colleges are taking to ensure students stay in school and graduate is mind-boggling. The survey found five primary approaches to student success, with a quarter of institutions pursuing a comprehensive approach using initiatives aimed at first-year students and seniors alike. The specific strategy institutions follow is largely dependent on their sector within higher education. Public colleges, for instance, focus heavily on getting students to graduation, and private colleges focus more on integrating their efforts with the curriculum.

Finally, the survey reveals the broad expansion of student success efforts in recent years, with most institutions reallocating dollars from other parts of the campus to hire full-time senior officials and create committees to oversee retention initiatives. The introduction of big data to track which initiatives are working holds the promise to help institutions decide where to put their resources in the future for the maximum benefit.

# METHODOLOGY

The results of *Student Success: Building a Culture for Retention and Completion on College Campuses* are based on a survey of provosts, officials in student affairs, and enrollment managers at four-year, not-for-profit institutions that fall into a selected group of classifications developed by the Carnegie

Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Maguire Associates, of Concord, Mass., which conducted the online survey for *The Chronicle*, invited a random sample of 4,108 enrollment leaders to respond, and 326 did. The data collection took place in November 2014.



*Student Success: Building a Culture for Retention and Completion on College Campuses* is based on a survey conducted by Maguire Associates, Inc., was written by Jeffrey J. Selingo, contributing editor at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Inc. and is sponsored by Blackboard. *The Chronicle* is fully responsible for the report's editorial content. Copyright © 2015.

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