



## **How Do Peer Connections Relate to the First-Year Student Experience?**

Skyfactor Research Note

## How Do Peer Connections Relate to the First-Year Student Experience?

Several classic works on college student development, including Pascarella's 1985 model, emphasizes interactions with peers as an important predictor of student learning and development. However, translating what we may know from student development theory into practice can be difficult. Within this context, this research note will explore peer connections in first-year college students using a national dataset of nearly 145,000 students.

### Key Questions:

1. To what degree do first year students make peer connections?
2. What are the characteristics of students who have a high degree of peer connections versus those who have lower degrees of peer connections?
3. How are peer connections related to key outcomes?

### Key Findings:

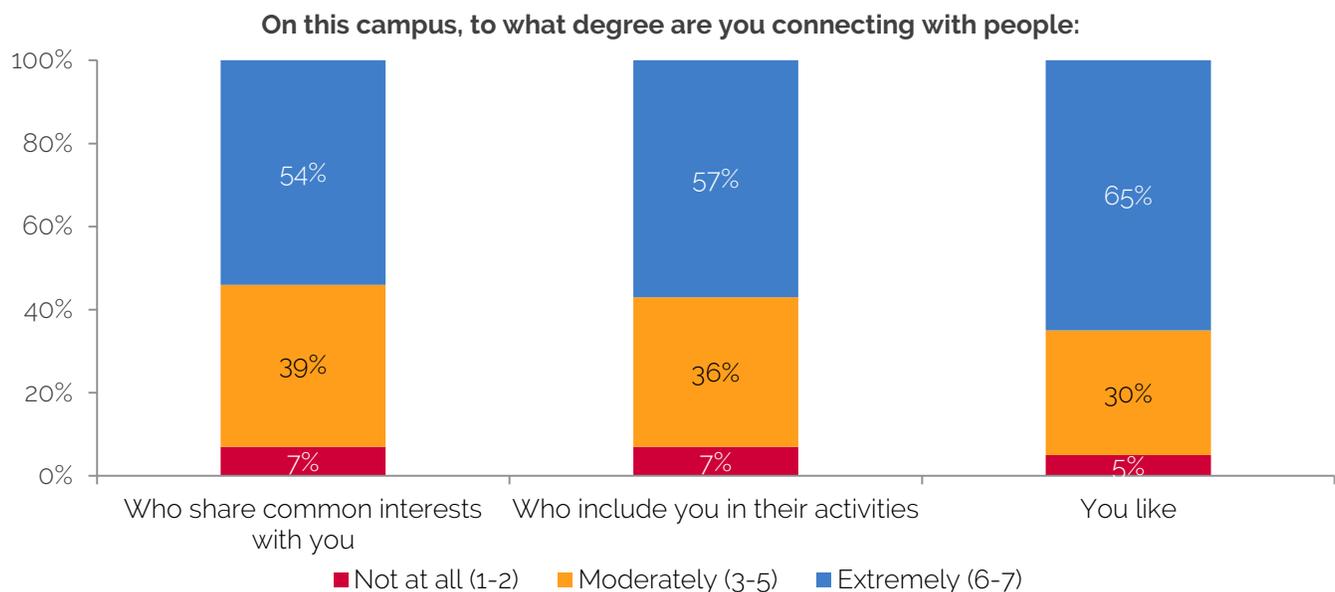
- Students with high peer connections reported higher levels of satisfaction with key aspects of their college experience compared to students reporting lower levels of peer connections.
- Students reporting high levels of peer connections were more likely to have higher fall-term GPAs and were more likely to be return for their second year of college.

### Prevalence of Peer Connections in First-Year Students

The peer connections factor in the Mapworks surveys contains three questions asking about the degree of connection to people with common interests, that they like, and who include them in activities. Figure 1 below displays the percentage of students responding not at all (1 or 2 on a seven-point scale), moderately (3-5) and extremely (6-7) on the peer connections questions.

**Figure 1: Degree of Peer Connections in First-Year Students**

Percentage of first-year students responding not at all (1-2), moderately (3-5), or extremely (6-7) to questions in the peer connection scale.



## Student Characteristics and Peer Connections

Peer connections are positively related to various aspects of the first-year student transition, including institutional commitment, satisfaction with the institution, student involvement, homesickness, living experiences, social integration, and academic integration.

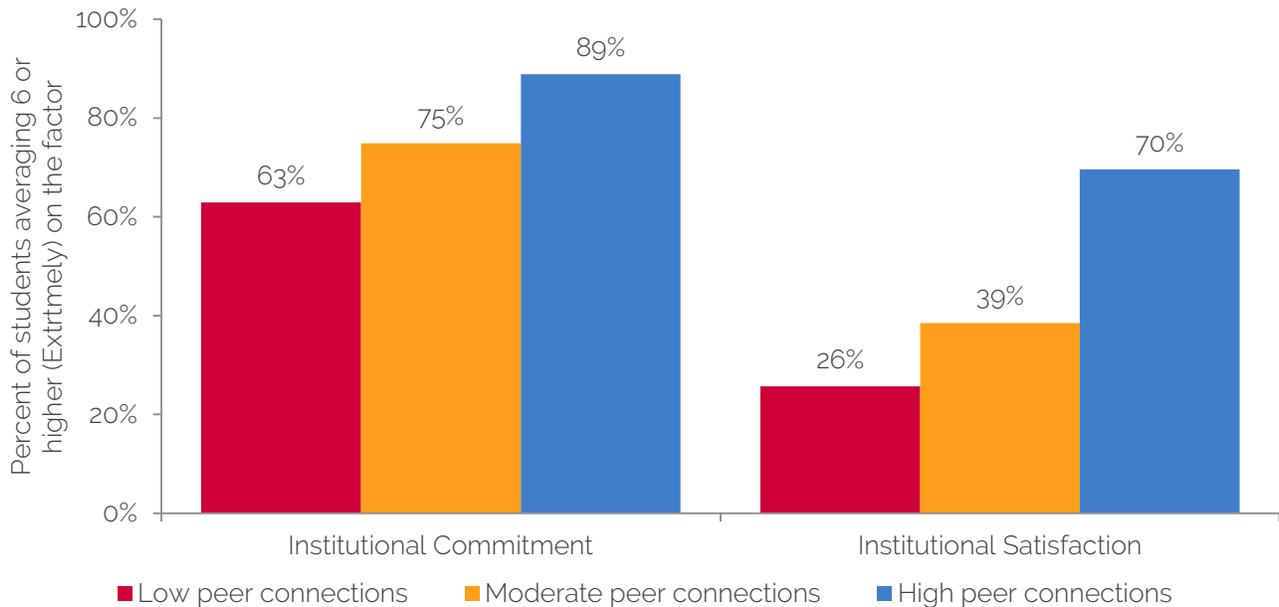
### Institutional Commitment and Satisfaction

Figure 2 below shows the percentage of first-year students responding averaging 6 or higher (extremely) on questions related to commitment to and satisfaction with their institution divided by peer connection groups. 7 out of 10 students with high levels of peer connections report high satisfaction with their institution compared to only 4 in 10 with moderate levels of peer connections and only a little over a quarter of students with low levels of peer connections. When paired with the 26% difference in institutional commitment between high and low peer connection levels, this serves to indicate just how important peer connections are to students' overall experience in their institution.

- 26% more students with a high degree of peer connections report high levels of institutional commitment than students with a low degree of peer connections.
- 44% more students with a high degree of peer connections report high levels of institutional satisfaction than students with a low degree of peer connections.

### Figure 2: Commitment, Satisfaction, and Peer Connections

Percentage of first-year students responding averaging 6 or higher (extremely) on questions related to commitment to and satisfaction with their institution by peer connections.



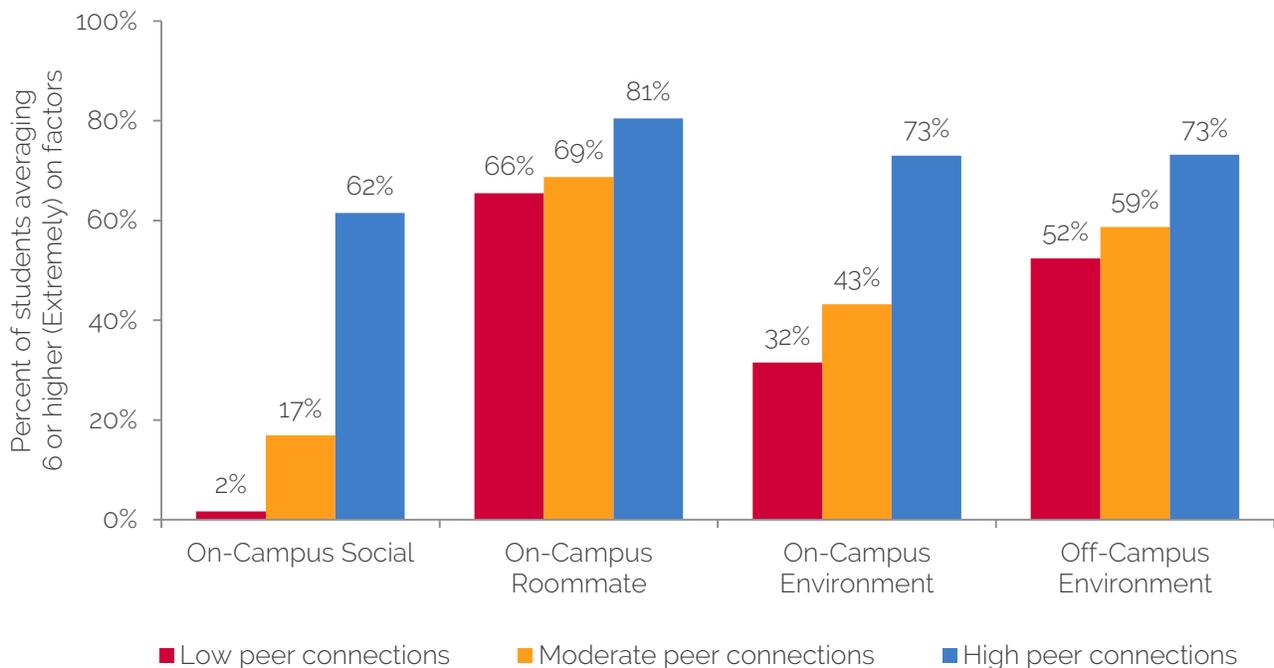
## On- and Off-Campus Living Experiences

Figure 3 below shows the percentage of first-year students responding averaging 6 or higher (extremely) on questions related to their on-campus social experience, on-campus environment, on-campus roommate, or off-campus environment divided by the three levels of peer connections. We see the largest difference in on-campus social experience, with almost two thirds of students with high levels of peer connections reporting high satisfaction with on-campus social experience, compared to only 17% of medium peer connection level students and only 2% of low peer connection level students.

- 60% more students with a high degree of peer connections report high satisfaction with their on-campus social experience than students with a low degree of peer connections.
- 15% more students with a high degree of peer connections report high satisfaction with their on-campus roommate than students with a low degree of peer connections.
- 41% more students with a high degree of peer connections report high satisfaction with their on-campus environment than students with a low degree of peer connections.
- 21% more students with a high degree of peer connections report high satisfaction with their off-campus environment than students with a low degree of peer connections.

### Figure 3: On- and Off-Campus Experiences

Percentage of first-year students responding averaging 6 or higher (extremely) on questions related to their on-campus social experience, environment, or roommate, or off-campus environment by degree of peer connections.



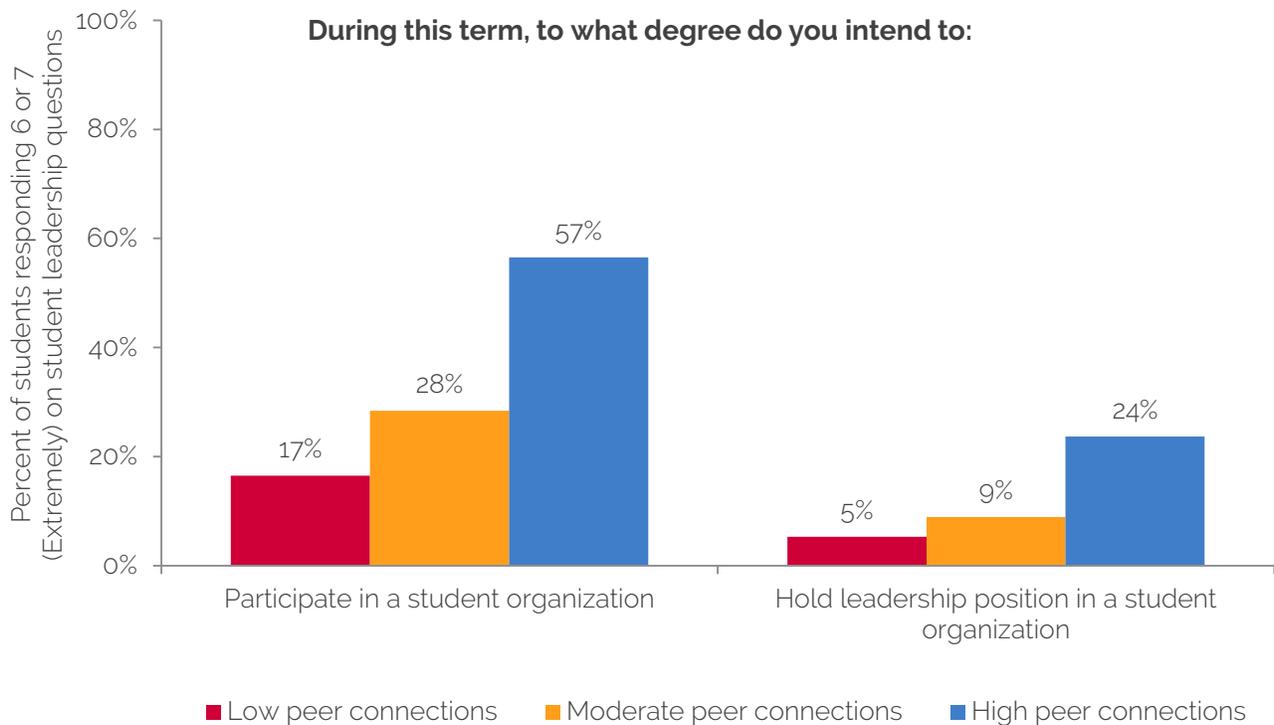
## Student Organization Involvement

Figure 4 below shows the percentage of first-year students responding averaging 6 or higher (extremely) on questions related to intent to be involved or even to pursue a leadership position in a student organization. Over half of students with high levels of peer connections intend to be involved in a student organization during the following term, compared to only 28% of students with moderate levels of peer connections and 17% of students with the lowest levels of peer connections.

- 40% more students with a high degree of peer connections report a high intent to participate in at least one student organization than students with a low degree of peer connections.
- 19% more students with a high degree of peer connections report a high intent to become involved in the leadership of at least one student organization than students with a low degree of peer connections.

### Figure 4: Student Organizations and Peer Connections

Percentage of first-year students responding averaging 6 or higher (extremely) on questions related to degree of intent to be involved in student organizations or to become involved in student organization leadership.



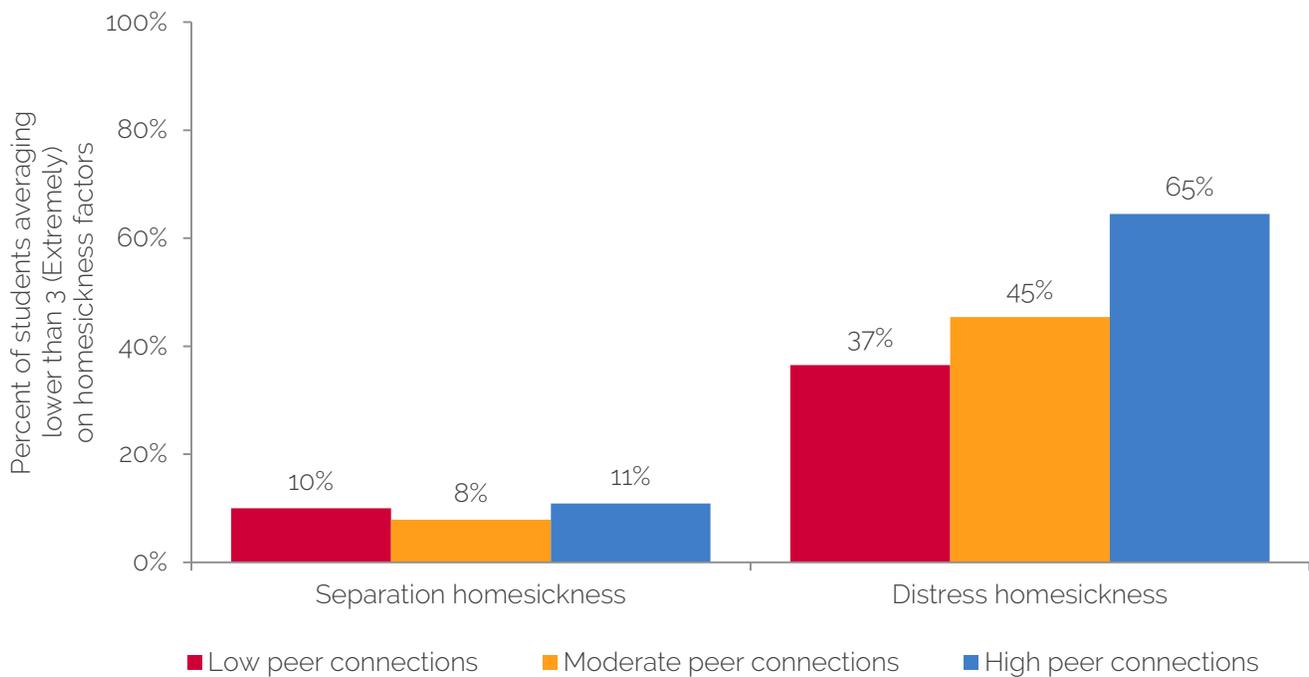
## Homesickness

Figure 5 below shows the percentage of first-year students responding averaging 6 or higher (extremely) on questions related to homesickness separation and distress divided by peer connections. Homesickness separation (a separation from home, family and friends, or the familiar which can lead to homesickness distress) does not appear to have any relationship with peer connections while homesickness distress (the negative feelings or distress related to that separation) has a relatively strong connection to peer connections. This suggests that, while the amount of separation that a student has from home does not affect peer connections, peer connections may help to limit the distress that a student experiences due to that separation.

- There is essentially no difference in degree of homesickness separation between high and low levels of peer connections.  
28% more students with a high degree of peer connections report high levels of homesickness distress than students with a low degree of peer connections.

### Figure 5: Homesickness and Peer Connections

Percentage of first-year students responding averaging 6 or higher (extremely) on questions related to homesickness separation and distress by peer connections.



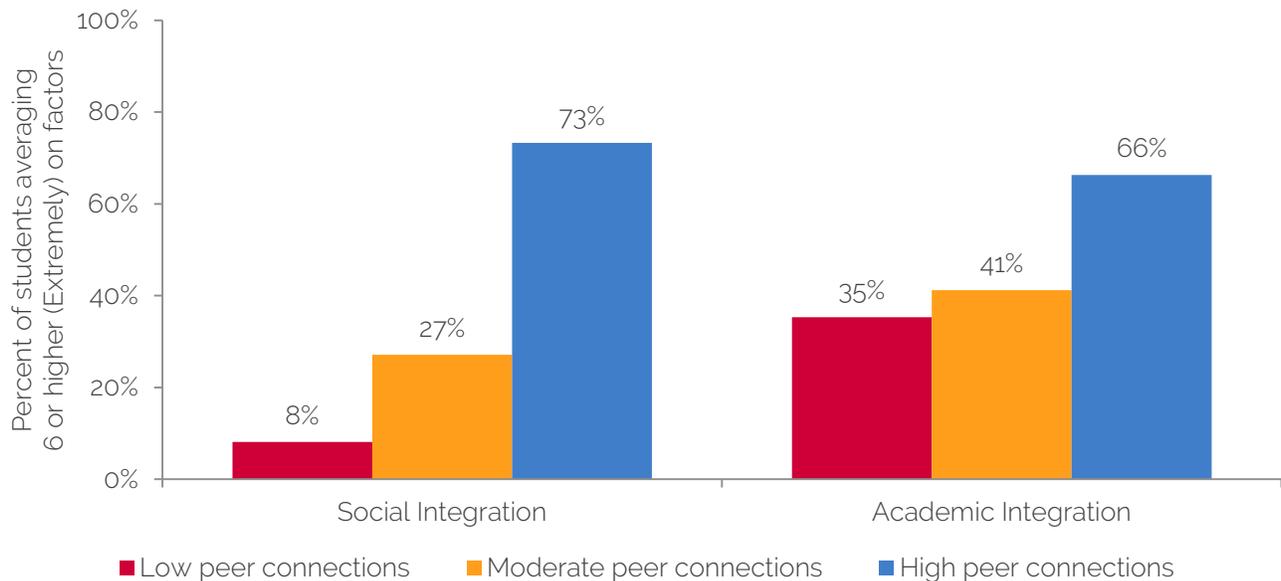
## Social Integration and Academic Integration

Figure 6 below shows the percentage of first-year students responding averaging 6 or higher (extremely) on questions related to social and academic integration separated by degree of peer connections. Almost three-fourths of students with a high degree of peer connections also report high levels of social integration, compared to just over a quarter of students with a moderate degree of peer connections and only 8% of students with a low degree of peer connections. While not as distinctive as with social integration, academic integration also shows a difference. Two thirds of students with a high level of peer connections report a high level of academic integration, compared to only a third of students with a low level of peer connections.

- 65% more students with a high degree of peer connections report a high degree of social integration than students with a low degree of peer connections.
- 31% more students with a high degree of peer connections report a high degree of academic integration than students with a low degree of peer connections.

### Figure 6: Social Integration, Academic Integration, and Peer Connections

Percentage of first-year students responding averaging 6 or higher (extremely) on questions related to social and academic integration by level of peer connections.



## Peer Connections and Student Outcomes

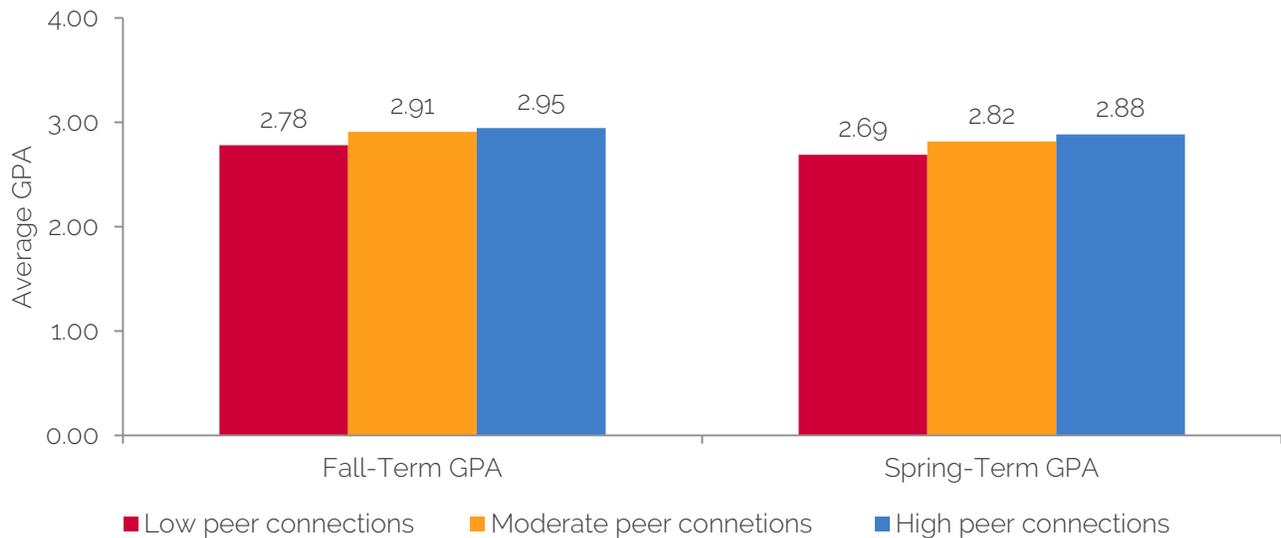
### Academic Performance

Students with the highest levels of peer connections earned the highest GPA during their first and second terms. Figure 7 below shows the average GPA for both the fall term and the following spring term divided by level of peer connections. While there is not a large difference between groups, it is large enough to warrant consideration.

- In the fall semester there is a small difference between groups; students who have a high level of peer connections have, on average, a .17 higher GPA than those with low peer connections.  
In the spring semester we see a similar difference between groups. Students who have a high level of peer connections have on average a .19 higher GPA than those with low peer connections. To put this into perspective, for a full-time student with 5 three-credit hour classes, this would translate into approximately a one grade letter improvement in one of their five classes.

### Figure 7: Term GPA and Peer Connections

Average fall term and spring term GPA by degree of peer connections



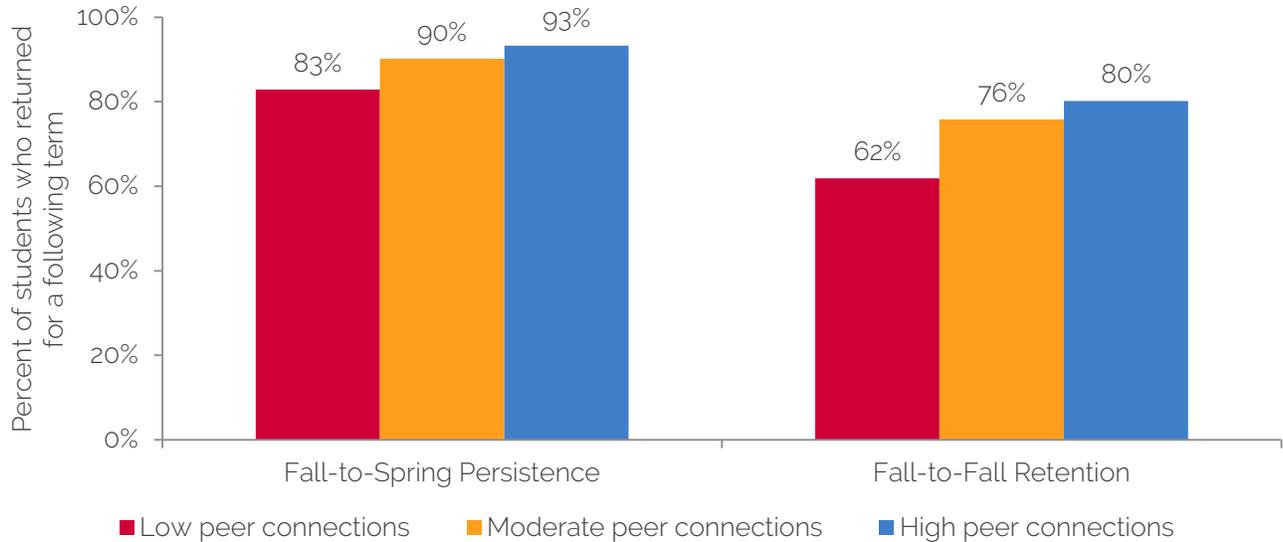
### Persistence and Retention

Figure 8 below shows the percentage of first-year students returning for the spring semester or for both spring and the following fall semester divided by degree of peer connections. While 10% more students with high levels of peer connections finished out their first year than students with low levels, 18% more students with a high degree of peer connections returned for the following fall than did students with a low degree of peer connections.

- 10% more students with high levels of peer connections continue through the following term than students with low levels of peer connections.  
18% more students with high levels of peer connections return for the following fall term than students with low levels of peer connections.

### Figure 8: Persistence, Retention, and Peer Connections

Percentage of first-year students returning for the spring semester or both spring and fall semester by degree of peer connections.



## Conclusion

Six percent of respondents reported that they are not meeting people who include them in activities, that they like, or who share common interests, and forty-two percent of students report only moderate success with making these important peer connections. These respondents were less likely to be satisfied with their on-campus experience and environment, less likely to become involved in student organizations, and are more prone to homesickness distress. These students are also less likely to be socially and academically integrated. Students with low and moderate levels of peer connections report lower levels of resiliency, self-efficacy, self-discipline, and time-management. They were also less likely than other respondents to express high satisfaction with or commitment to their institution. Finally, students with lower levels of peer connections had a somewhat lower GPA for both fall and the following spring semester and were less likely to return for the spring term and even less likely to return for the following fall semester.

## About the Data

The data used in this research note is from the 2014-2015 Mapworks Fall Transition Survey. The survey was jointly designed by the survey development team at Skyfactor and researchers at Ball State University. The Transition Survey measures the behaviors and expectations of students entering a college or university. Data is typically collected beginning three to four weeks into the fall term via Skyfactor's online survey system. The data in this note is from 144,938 first-year college students from 128 two and four-year institutions in the United States. The note also used student profile data uploaded by participating institutions during the 2014-2015 academic year, including but not limited to term GPA and retention.

## About Skyfactor

Skyfactor (formerly EBI MAP-Works) and Ball State University partnered to create Mapworks. Mapworks capitalizes on Ball State's 20 years of experience with the original MAP (Making Achievement Possible) and Skyfactor's 14 years of experience with national benchmarking assessments.

Mapworks® is a research-based, comprehensive, student retention and success platform created through a partnership between Skyfactor and Ball State University. It capitalizes on Ball State's 20+ years of experience with the original Making Achievement Possible (MAP) program and Skyfactor's expertise in national benchmarking assessments. Mapworks leverages predictive analytics to identify at-risk students. It presents that information in a format that makes it easy for an institution's faculty and staff to focus on the needs of students early in the term and to have a positive impact on student success and retention.



For more information about Skyfactor Mapworks and services, to schedule a demonstration, or to sign up for a webinar, please write to us at [info@Skyfactor.com](mailto:info@Skyfactor.com) or visit [Skyfactor.com](http://Skyfactor.com)