



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

Research Note

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

Several classic works on college student development emphasize the importance of interactions to student development, learning, and success. To that end, many institutions put significant effort and resources towards efforts to help students build positive peers connections. Intuitively, higher education professionals understand the importance of positive peer connections. However, it is crucial to highlight data and research to back up these stories and theories.

This note explores peer connections in first-year college students using responses from a national survey of over 25,000 first-year college students from nearly 30 institutions in the United States.

### Key Points:

- Students reporting strong peer connections were more likely to score high on other social constructs, such as social integration and homesickness.
- Students reporting strong peer connections were also more likely to score high on non-social factors, including institutional commitment, satisfaction, and academic integration.

### Key Questions:

1. To what degree did first-year students report making connections with peers?
2. Were there differences in peer connections across different populations?
3. How did peer connections relate to the first-year student experience?

### How Frequently Did First-Year Students Report Participating in Class?

Figure 1 displays responses to a set of survey questions asking about connections with peers under the common stem, “On this campus, to what degree are you connecting with people who:”

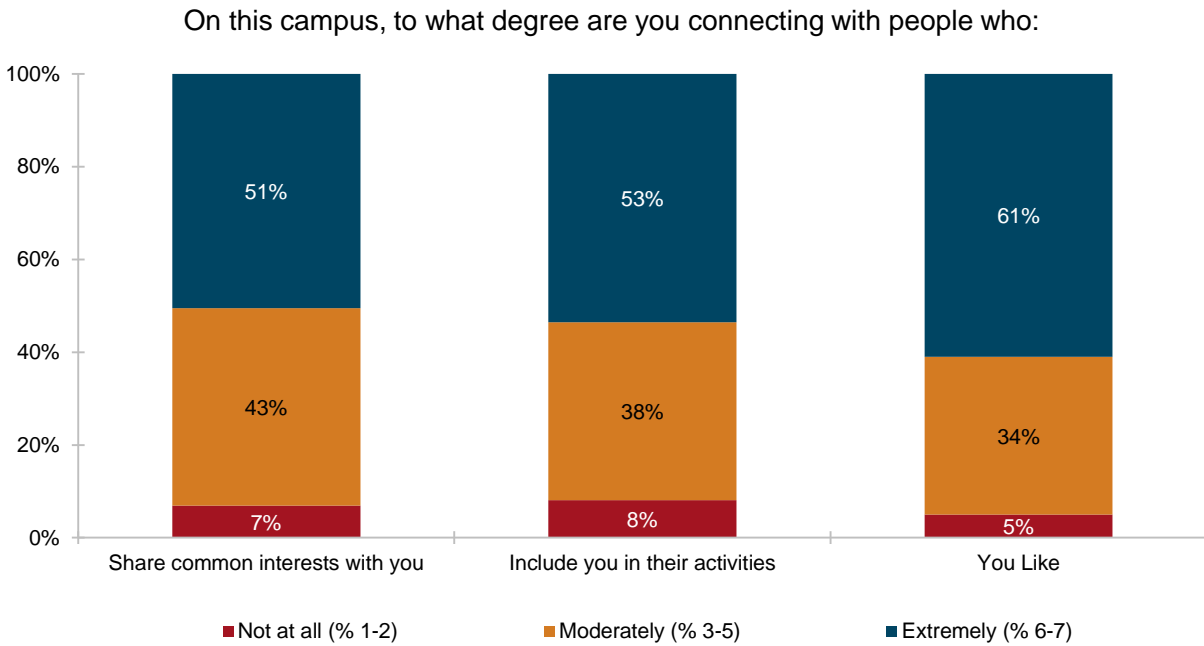
- Share common interests with you
- Include you in their activities
- You like

The questions were on a seven-point scale, one being “Not at all” and seven being “Always.” Figure 2 displays the distribution of factor scores for the peer connections survey factor. The factor score is the mean value of all responses for that student in the particular factor. The factor scores are grouped into three buckets: low (mean score 1.0-2.9), moderate (mean score 3.0-5.9), and high (mean score 6.0-7.0).

Overall, the majority of first-year college students scored high (i.e., selected “6” or “7” on a seven-point scale) to questions on the peer connections factor. As such, most first-year students fell into the high and moderate score buckets. Just 7% of first-year students had a low factor score, indicating low peer connections.

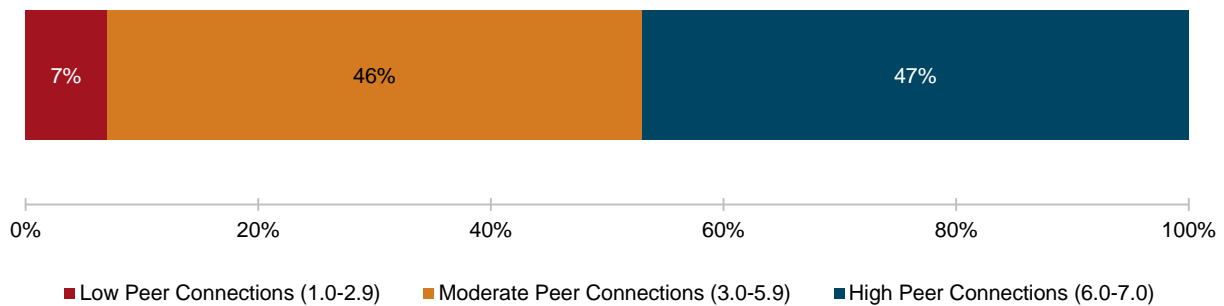
### Figure 1: Peer Connections

Percentage of students responding “Not at all” (1 or 2), “Moderately (3, 4, or 5), or “Extremely” (6 or 7) to questions related to peer connections



### Figure 2: Peer Connections Factor Score Distribution

Percentage of first-year students averaging low (1.0-2.9), moderate (3.0 to 5.9), or high (6.0-7.0) scores on the peer connections factor



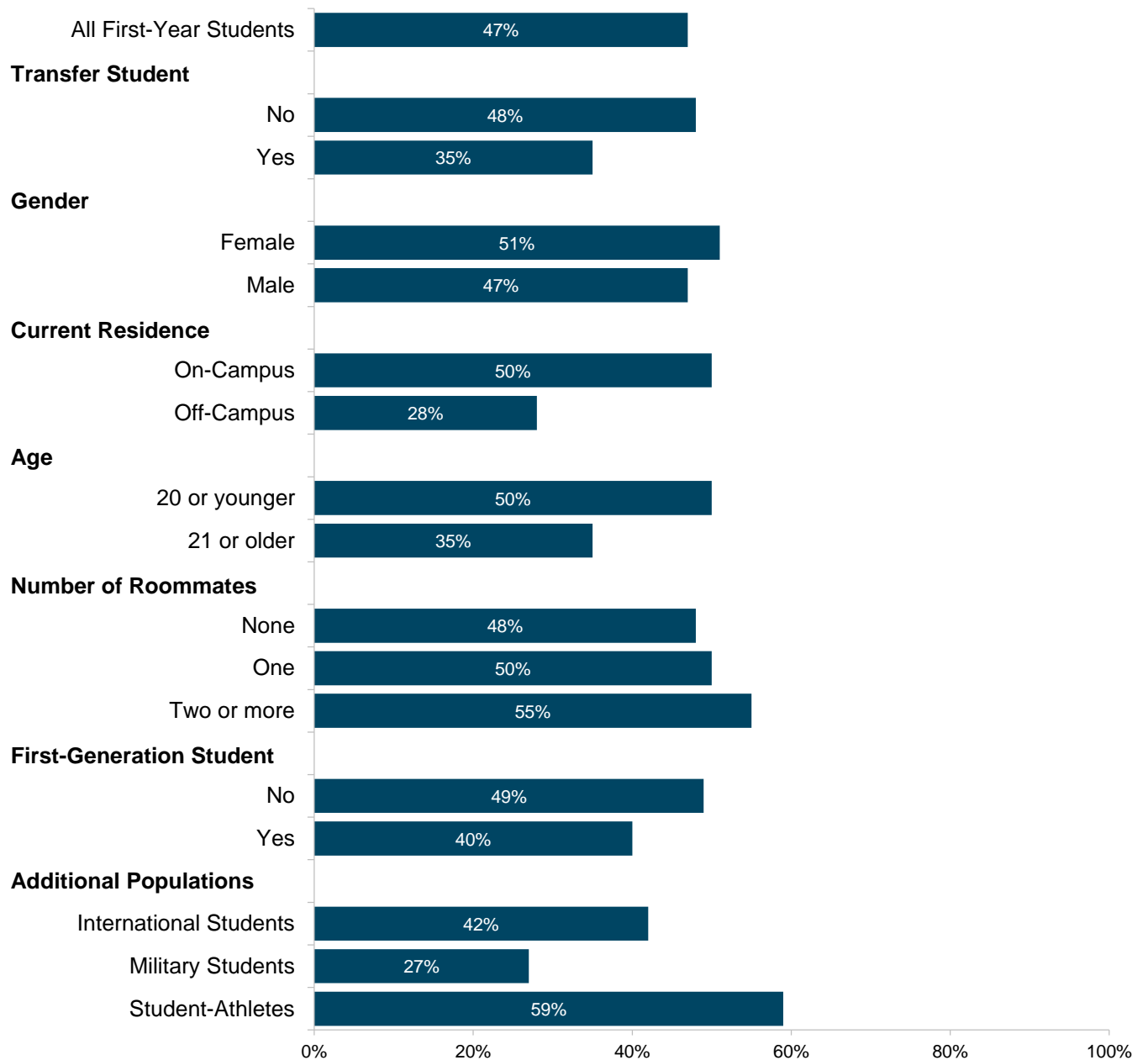
### Were There Differences in Peer connections Rates across Different Populations?

Figure 3 displays the breakdown of the percent of first-year students scoring high on the peer connections factor (i.e., averaged 6 or higher on the factor score) by a variety of demographics. On a high level, there are several differences which stood out:

- Transfer – First-year transfer students were less likely to report strong peer connections than first-year non-transfer students
- Military students, international students, first-year students over the age of 21, and first-generation students were less likely to report strong peer connections
- Roommates – On-campus residents with no roommates were less likely to report strong peer connections than those with roommates

### Figure 3: Peer Connections by Campus Populations

Percentage of various student populations that indicated high levels of peer connections



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

The results highlighted in the remainder of this note are based on an in-depth analysis of data from first-year college students using a variety of statistical methods. The survey factors and questions presented were selected from exploring concepts that statistically and conceptually related to both peer connections and first-year student success.

Overall, student perceptions of their connections with peers were related to various factors related to first-year student transition, including social integration, on-campus housing experiences, homesickness, academic integration, institutional commitment, and institutional satisfaction.

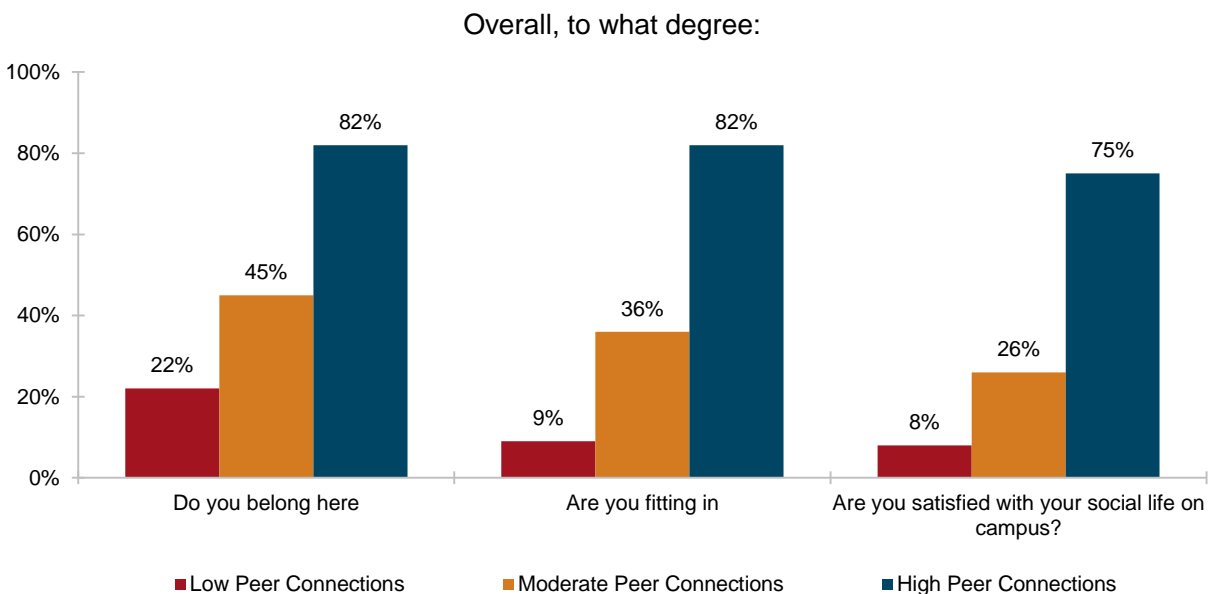
### Social Integration

Social integration is a three-question survey factor measuring the degree to which students broadly feel they are connected and belong to their campus community. Figure 7 displays the percentage of students responding “Extremely” (% 6 or 7) to the questions on the Social Integration factor based on their peer connections.

There was a strong relationship between peer connections and social integration. Students reporting making connections with peers were far more likely to score high on the social integration factor. For example, while 82% of first-year students who reported high peer connections reported that they felt like they belonged at their institution, 45% of first-year students who reported moderate levels of peer connections and just 22% of those reporting low peer connections also indicated they felt like they belonged at their institution.

#### Figure 7: Social Integration by Peer Connections

Percentage of students responding “Extremely” (% 6 or 7) on questions related to social integration by their frequency of peer connections



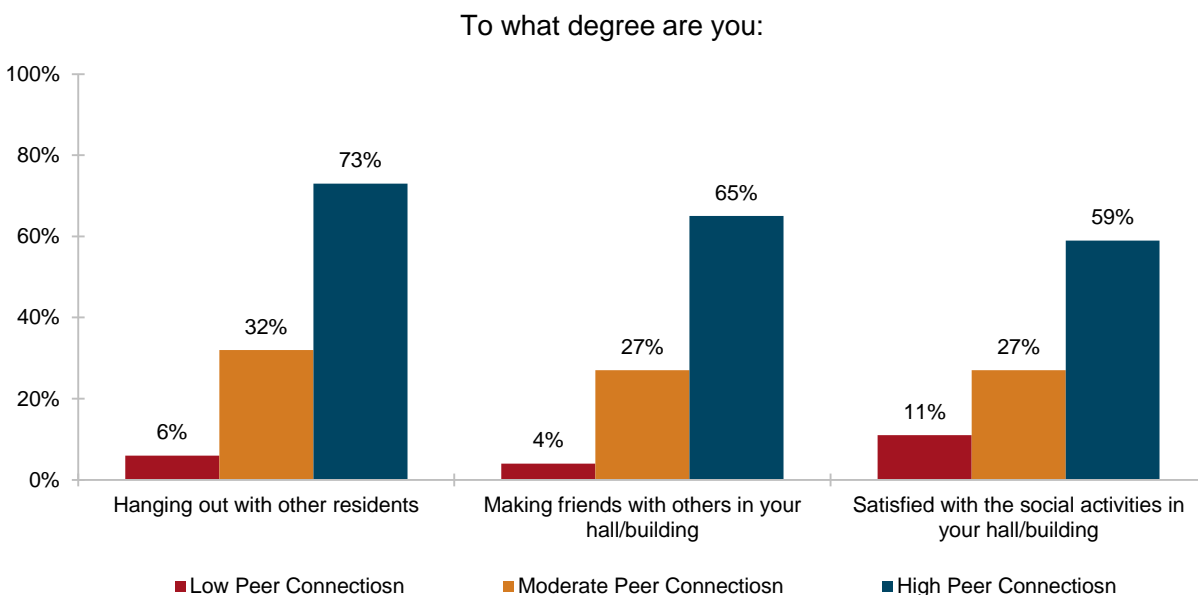
## On-Campus Housing Social Connections

On-Campus Housing Social Connections is a three-question survey factor measuring the degree to which students are satisfied with their social connections specifically in on-campus housing. Figure 5 displays the percentage of students responding “Extremely” (% 6 or 7) to the questions on the On-Campus Housing Social Connections factor based on their peer connections.

Students who reported strong peer connections were more likely to report strong connections in on-campus housing, specifically. For example, while 69% of first-year students who reported high peer connections reported making friends with others in their residence hall, 27% of students reporting moderate levels of peer connections and only 4% of students reporting low peer connections also reported making friends with others in their residence hall.

### Figure 5: On-Campus Social Connections by Peer Connections

Percentage of students responding “Extremely” (% 6 or 7) on questions related to on-campus social connections by their frequency of peer connections



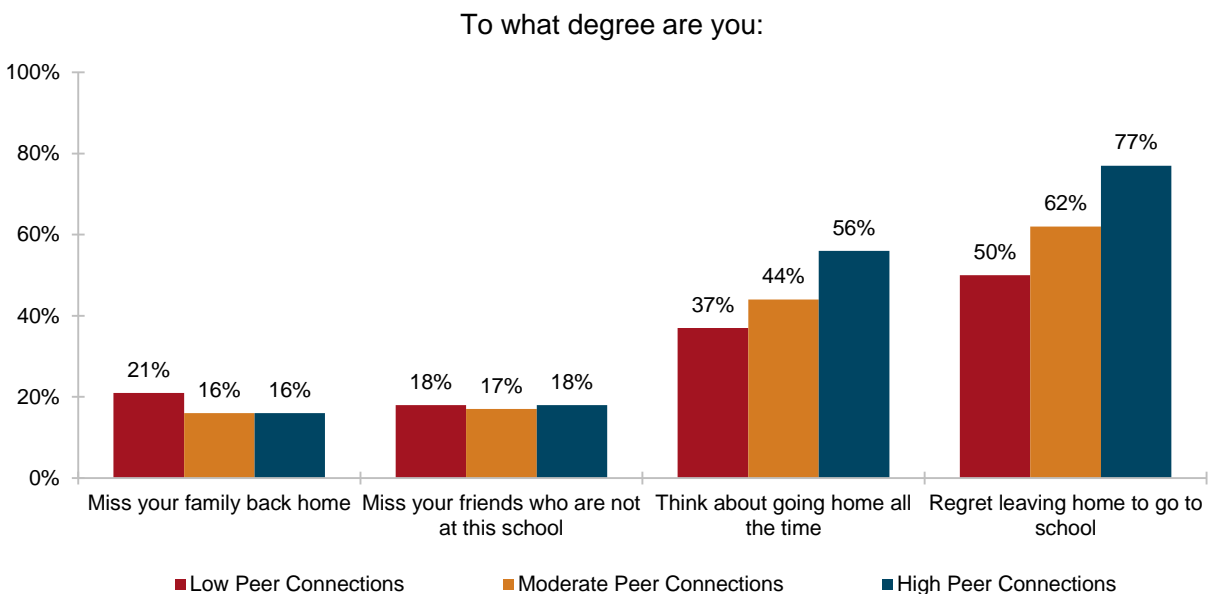
## Homesickness

There are two factors containing questions related to homesickness, one measuring the separation aspect of homesickness and the other measuring distress associated with homesickness. Figure 6 displays the percentage of students responding “Not at all” (% 6 or 7) to questions on these two factors based on their level of participation in class. The questions on the left side of the chart (missing family and missing friends) are on the separation homesickness scale, while the questions on the right side (think about going home and regret leaving home) are on the distress scale.

While there was not a relationship between peer connections and separation homesickness, there was a strong relationship between peer connections and homesickness. Generally, about one-in-six first-year students did not miss friends or family back home, regardless of the degree to which they indicated making connection with their peers. However, while 77% of students reporting high peer connections did not regret leaving home to go to school, just half of students with low peer connections said they did not regret leaving home to go to school.

### Figure 6: Homesickness by Peer Connections

Percentage of students responding “Not at all” (% 6 or 7) on questions related to homesickness by their frequency of peer connections



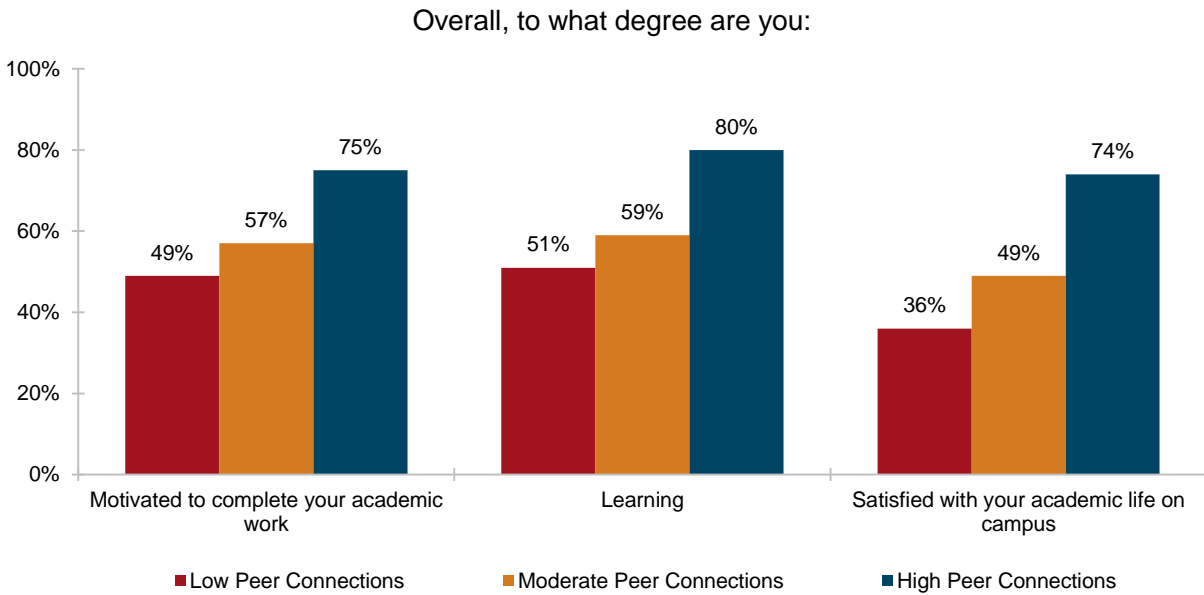
### Academic Integration

Academic Integration is a four-question survey factor measuring the degree to which students broadly feel they are learning from their college experience and satisfied with their academic experience. Figure 7 display the percentage of students responding “Extremely” (% 6 or 7) to the questions on the Academic Integration factor based on their peer connections.

Generally, first-year students who reported making strong peer connections were more likely to score high on the academic integration factor. For example, while 74% of first-year students who reported high peer connections were highly satisfied with their academic life on campus, just 49% of students reporting moderate levels of peer connections and 36% of students reporting low peer connections also were highly satisfied with their academic life on campus.

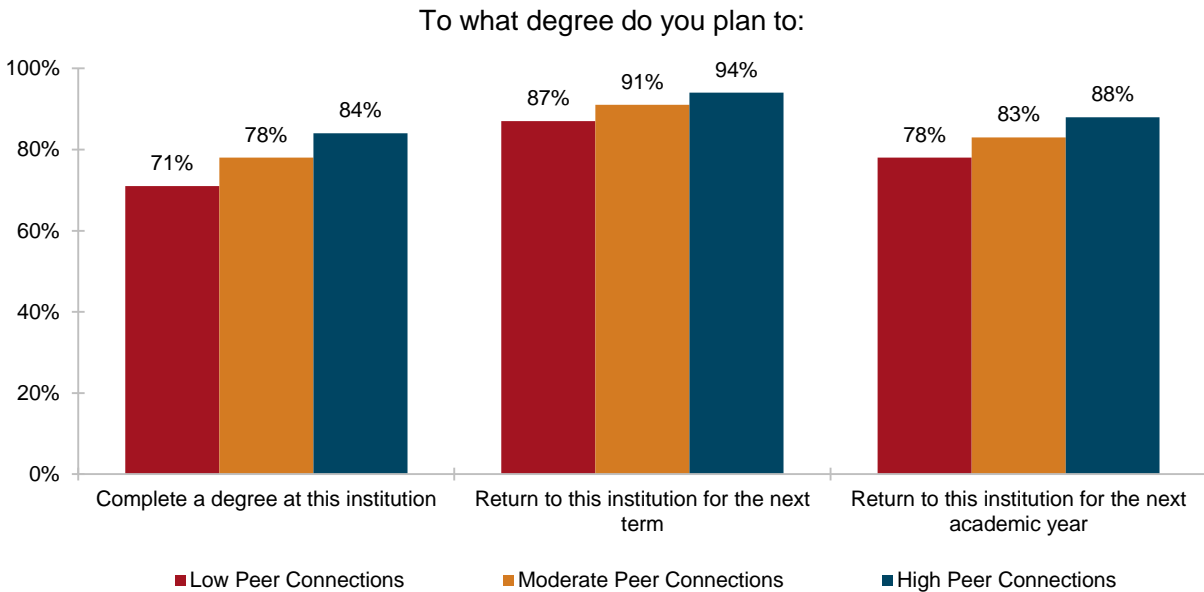
### Figure 7: Academic Integration by Peer Connections

Percentage of students responding “Extremely” (% 6 or 7) on questions related to academic integration by their frequency of peer connections



### Figure 8: Institutional Commitment by Peer Connections

Percentage of students responding “Extremely” (% 6 or 7) on questions related to institutional commitment by their frequency of peer connections





## Institutional Commitment

Institutional commitment is a three-question survey factor measuring the degree to which students are committed to completing a degree and returning to their current institution. Figure 8 displays the percentage of students responding “Extremely” (% 6 or 7) to the questions on the institutional commitment factor based on peer connections.

Overall, students who reported making strong peer connections were more likely to report high commitment to their college. For example, 88% of first-year students who reported high peer connections intended to return for the next academic year, compared to 78% of first-year students reporting low peer connections.

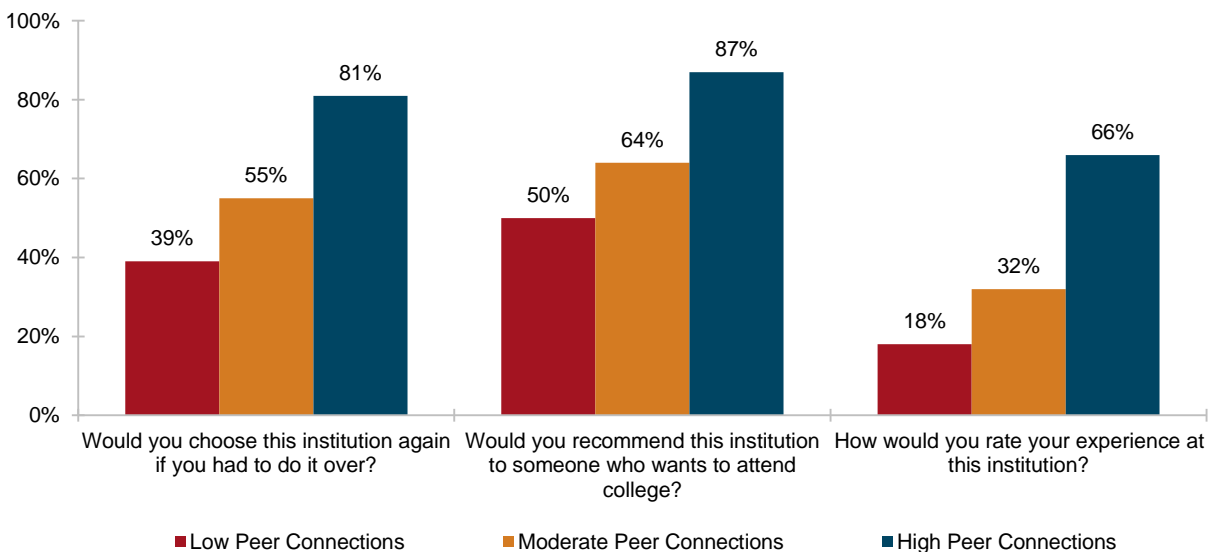
## Institutional Satisfaction

Institutional satisfaction is a three-question survey factor measuring a college student’s overall satisfaction with their college or university. Figure 9 displays the percentage of students selecting “6” or “7” on a seven-point scale to the questions on the institutional satisfaction factor by their score on the peer connections factor.

Overall, first-year students who reported strong peer connections were more likely to report high satisfaction with their college experience. Regarding their overall experience, two-thirds of students reporting high peer connections rated their overall experience at their college highly. In contrast, less than 20% of students reporting low peer connections also rated their overall experience at their institution highly.

### Figure 9: Institutional Satisfaction by Peer Connections

Percentage of students responding “6” or “7” on a seven-point scale on questions related to institutional satisfaction by their frequency of peer connections



## Conclusion

First-year college students who reported strong peer connections were more likely to score high on a wide range of factors that address concepts crucial to first-year student success. Specifically, strong peer connections is linked to narrower social constructs—such as on-campus housing social connections—as well as broader measures of connections such as social integration. Furthermore, students reporting high peer connections were less likely to report homesickness, more likely to report learning from their academic experience, more likely to intend to return for the next academic year, and more likely to report high satisfaction with their college experience.

## About the Data

The data used in this research note are from the 2018-2019 Mapworks Transition Survey. The data from this survey were used as a pilot for and the foundation of the Benchworks New Student Assessment. The Benchworks New Student Assessment survey enables institutions to evaluate the experiences, behaviors, and expectations of students entering a college or university. Data is collected at the beginning of the academic year, typically three to five weeks into the year. The data in this note are from 28,330 first-year college students from 27 four-year institutions in the United States.

## About Skyfactor

Since 1994, Skyfactor, a Macmillan Learning company, has been dedicated to improving retention, student success, and the quality of the college student experience. Our products and services have empowered over 1,500 college and universities to positively impact student development, learning, retention and satisfaction.

## About Benchworks

Benchworks (formerly EBI) includes over 50 easy-to-use nationally-benchmarked program assessments across a portfolio of over a dozen disciplines, including academic programs, housing and residence life, college union, student activities, orientation, new student transition, and student services. These market-leading assessments empower programs across an institution to identify areas of improvement for maximum impact on student outcomes. The national assessments are statistically validated, cover important content areas, mapped to key professional and accreditation standards, and allow for campus-level customization. Robust analytics and easy-to-understand reports deliver high-level trends, identify concepts statistically predictive of outcomes, allow for peer and longitudinal benchmarking, and support a culture of continuous program improvement.



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