Fostering belonging is one of the most effective strategies for student success.

Most seniors agree they experience belonging at ISU:

75% of students **feel valued**

75% of students feel like they are **part of the ISU community**

90% of students feel like they can **be themselves**

But belonging numbers can mask differences by group identity.

This matters. **80%** of first-year students who say they belong at ISU **plan on returning** for their 2nd year.

Only **36%** of FY students who **don't feel like they belong** plan on returning.

Students included in this report self-identified on the NSSE* instrument and are discussed in the book, *The Impact of a Sense of Belonging in College.*

Students include students who are commuters, culturally dynamic, first-generation, queer, trans-spectrum, online, transfer or working students.

Click to read student voices about belonging and see survey results

Click to view implications & recommendations

African-American students express **concerns about wellness, respect, representation and "being the only one."** Students are aware of gaps between institutional statements and actions.
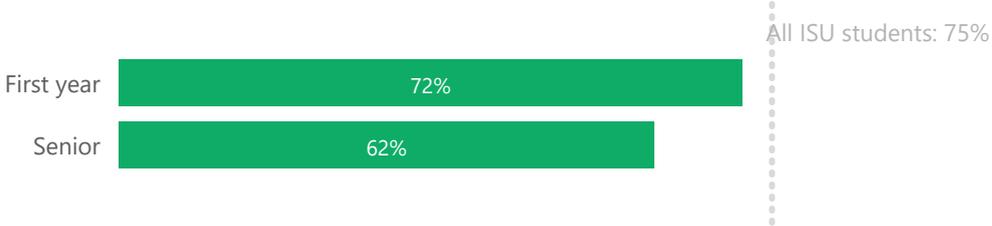
"**I love Illinois state university**. I feel that my studies and teachers were very rewarding. The only concern I have is the diversity. Being a minority, **you get a lot of wondering eyes** and **treated a little different by some faculty**. I feel that diversity needs to address a little stronger than just student organizations."

"**Not just saying diversity and inclusion but actually acting** like they are about diversity and inclusion. There is somewhat diversity here but I do not feel the inclusion."
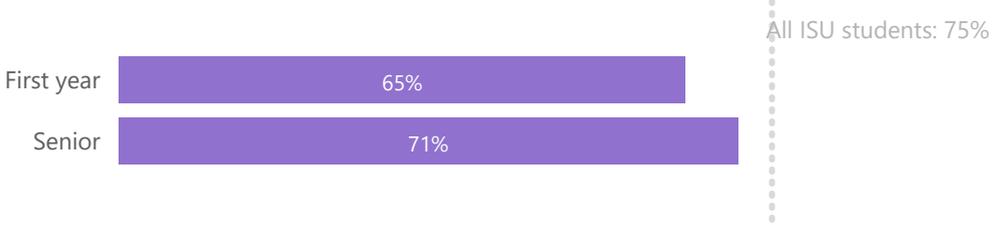
"The one thing that I would change about the educational experience at this institution is **hiring more professors that look like me**. I have yet to see an African-American professor and I think that should change. The thing that should not be changed is the **help and support that we receive from our professors**. They are truly one of the reasons why I have been successful thus far."

African-American students report **lower feelings of belonging** when compared to all ISU students.
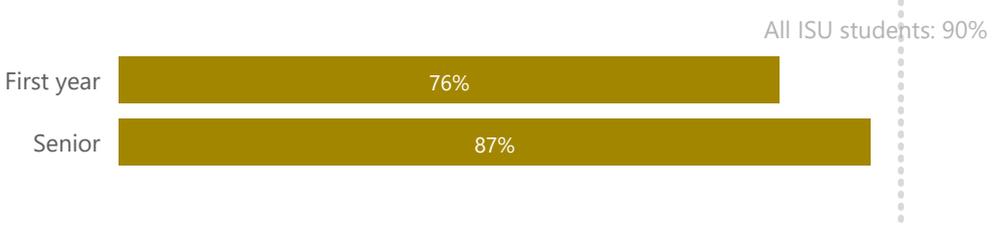
I feel like part of the community at this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year — 72%
Senior — 62%

I feel valued by this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year — 65%
Senior — 71%

I feel comfortable being myself at this institution

All ISU students: 90%

First year — 76%
Senior — 87%

Asian students express belonging through finding spaces to celebrate ethnic identities and belonging within a group.* Asian students also expressed more a desire for more **emphasis on diversity** by ISU.

Asian students report **lower feelings of belonging** when compared to all ISU students. Seniors report lower belonging than first-year students in every belonging category.

"During my Spring semester of 2017, I finally had a class with a professor who was not Caucasian. To keep them anonymous, I'll call this person Dr. H. Dr. H and I were actually the **same ethnic group** and had the **same beliefs and passions** when it comes to teaching. I felt like I connected most with that professor. However, it is **not just because of our cultures or ethnicity**, but because Dr. H would always come to class with a strong positive attitude and modeled (effective) teaching and energy."
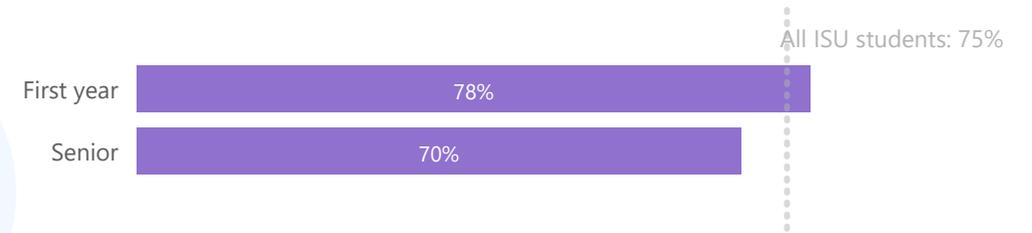
"I think one change (ISU could change is to try) to **talk about different cultures and being more open to poc.**"

"How to have a conversation about diversity and learning how I am biased on things I didn't know I was even biased about. I learned to get in touch with feelings that I never knew I had and **learned to talk to people about their lives**."
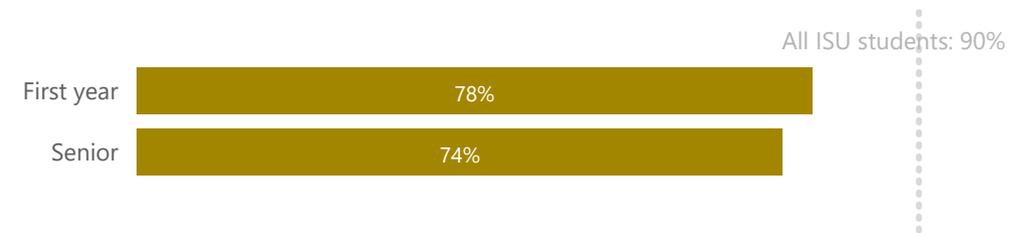
I feel like part of the community at this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year	70%
Senior	60%

I feel valued by this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year	78%
Senior	70%

I feel comfortable being myself at this institution

All ISU students: 90%

First year	78%
Senior	74%

*See C. Kao, Asian American Students and Sense of Belonging, 2022. In The Impact a Sense of Belonging in College.

Commuter students express a need for encouraging **interactions with faculty** and staff. Commuters also express need for **physical spaces and flexibility**. Commuters look for **signals of belonging in communications and marketing materials**.

Senior commuter students report higher belonging than first-year students.
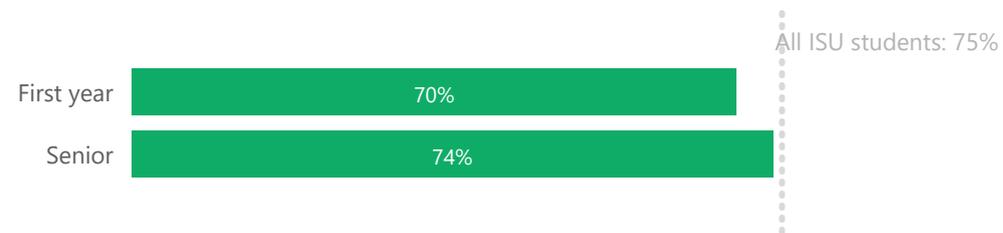
"One of the biggest changes is to have a better way of making commuters feel welcomed. **Maybe make a club for in coming commuters or something regarding commuters**, because personally I had a bad experience first semester. One thing that should not change is the amount of resources ISU provides."
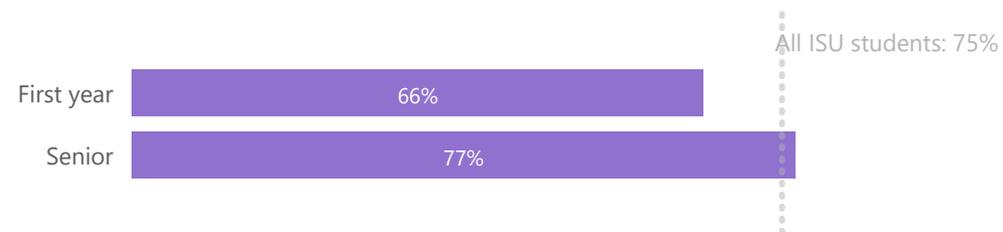
"**Exceptionally long commutes and the inability to afford an apartment** in the Bloomington/Normal area put me at a severe disadvantage compared to my peers. It also **took away my opportunities to engage** in campus activities and become a member of the campus community."

"I commute an hour to campus and am stuck here most of my day due to gaps in my schedule and **it's hard to find a place to relax and study in** private without distraction of other students."

"As a commuter student, weather in the spring semester gets in the way sometimes and **I feel like the weather has negatively impacted my experience at this institution**. I believe the one thing that should not be changed is pride the university takes in its students. I am definitely proud that I am attending this institution."
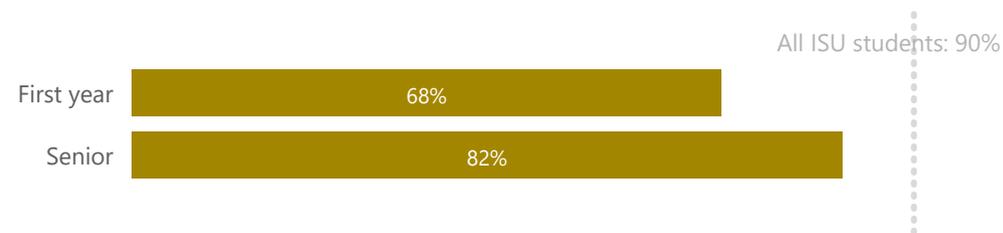
I feel like part of the community at this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year	70%
Senior	74%

I feel valued by this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year	66%
Senior	77%

I feel comfortable being myself at this institution

All ISU students: 90%

First year	68%
Senior	82%

*Commuters defined as students who spend at least 13 hours per week traveling to and from campus.

Students with disabilities sense of belonging is tied to their ability to **self-advocate** and be respected as college students in the the ISU community.*

Students with disabilities **lower feelings of belonging** when compared to all ISU students. **Seniors** report **lower** levels of belonging.

"**I am especially thankful for the disability concerns* department**. They have helped me when my health issues interfered with school."
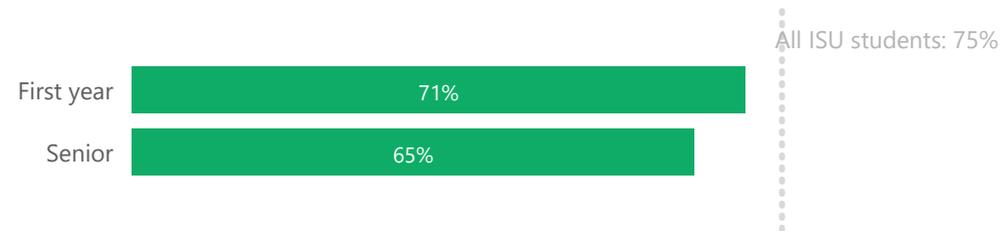
*Unit name actually Student Access & Accommodation Services

"Please make attendance policies less punitive, as they are often extremely **detrimental to the students who are already struggling the most,** such as disabled students (diagnosed or not), students with health concerns, or others who are going through a hard time."
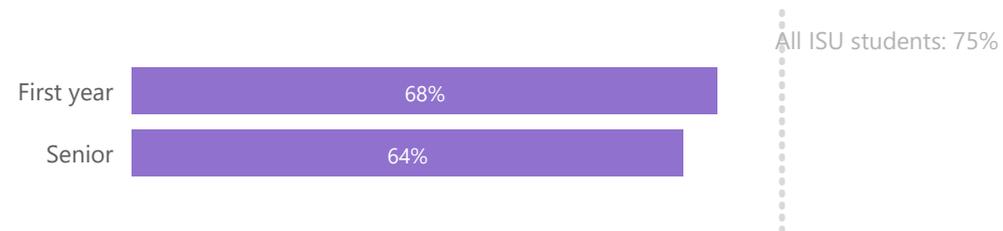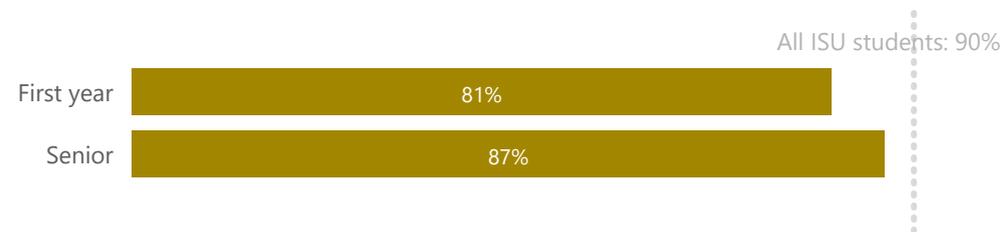
"I have diagnosed learning disabilities (ADHD & Reading Comprehension) but have many hoops to jump through before I'll be able to receive help. Because of that, and because of my struggles, I often look (bad) to my teachers as **I fall behind in my classes even though I put in much more effort** and time than my more-successful peers. It's as if I'm just rolling down a hill."

I feel like part of the community at this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year	71%
Senior	65%

I feel valued by this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year	68%
Senior	64%

I feel comfortable being myself at this institution

All ISU students: 90%

First year	81%
Senior	87%

Note: The NSSE instrument disaggregates disability by mental (depression, anxiety, etc.), physical, sensory and other. For additional details, contact University Assessment Services or Student Access and Accommodation Services. *See A. Vaccaro & B. Newman, Theoretical Foundations for Sense of Belonging in College, 2022. In The Impact a Sense of Belonging in College.

First generation students feel a sense of belonging by **creating personal connections** with faculty and staff, as opposed to navigating college processes and norms they may be unfamiliar or nervous about engaging with.
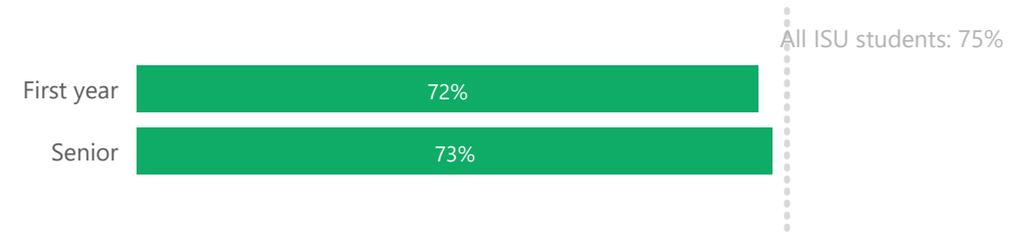
First-generation students experience **similar levels of belonging** as continuing generation students.

"Overall, I loved my experience at ISU. Being a first generation student to go away for college **has been a tough transfer**, but the **community at ISU has really helped** make it much more easier for me to adjust. ISU has been my **home away from home** and although I will be graduating this May, I know ISU will always hold a special place in my heart."

"I have learned that it is **okay to speak up** in class and participate. When I first started at the institution, I sat in the back and never raised my hand or participated in class. Eventually it was mandatory to be involved in class and then **I learned that it was okay and fun to participate**."
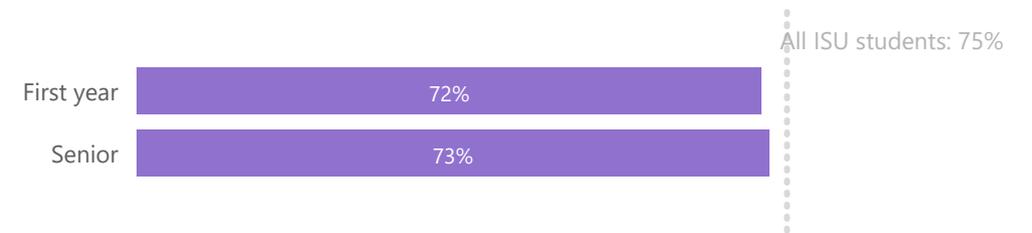
"**I want to feel like I know my professors,** so being personal and developing connections is really important to me."

I feel like part of the community at this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year — 72%
Senior — 73%

I feel valued by this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year — 72%
Senior — 73%

I feel comfortable being myself at this institution

All ISU students: 90%

First year — 82%
Senior — 91%

Research suggests that **queer and trans-spectrum students** experience belonging through **personal relationships and affirming spaces**, like clubs or buildings.* Belonging is also expressed by institutions through **affirming language** and **responsiveness**.

Queer and trans-spectrum ISU seniors student feel **less valued** and less like a **part of the ISU community** than first-year students. However, seniors are more likely to report they feel more comfortable being themselves.

"One thing that could be changed would be my **university's support of nonbinary people**. I'm hyperaware of this issue, but it would also be appreciated if professors could **reflect a change in language to represent this community**. Not saying "boy and girls," "ladies and gentlemen," etc. People should be given more frequent opportunities to say their pronouns as custom at the beginning of a course. I believe people's genders shouldn't be assumed and **created a space** to discuss pronouns should be normal."
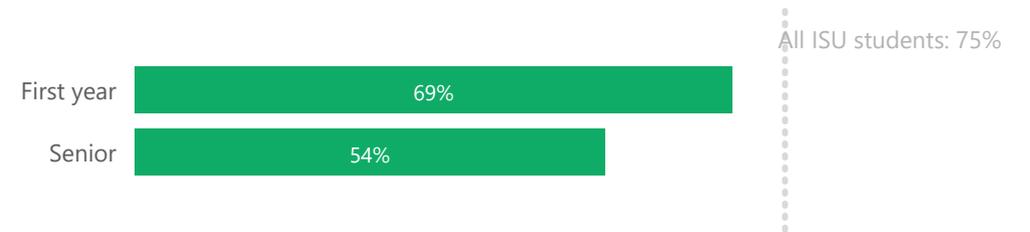
"As a member of the LGBTQIA+ community I have felt a **great lack of support** from the higher ups. At times I have felt unsafe on campus and it seemed like no one cared."

"Most inclusion of LGBGQ+ community it is **not talked about much** in the classroom and teachers become very uncomfortable when brought up."

I feel like part of the community at this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year — 69%
Senior — 54%

I feel valued by this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year — 76%
Senior — 51%

I feel comfortable being myself at this institution

All ISU students: 90%
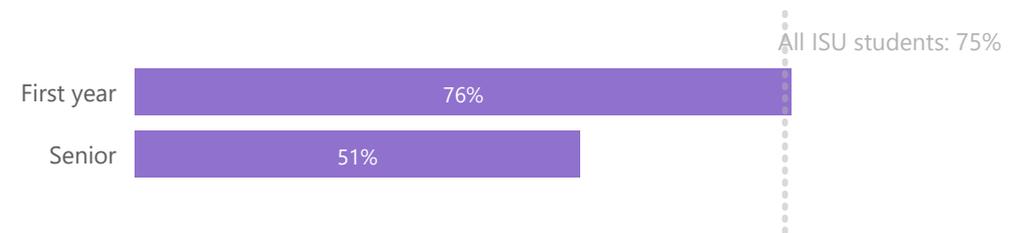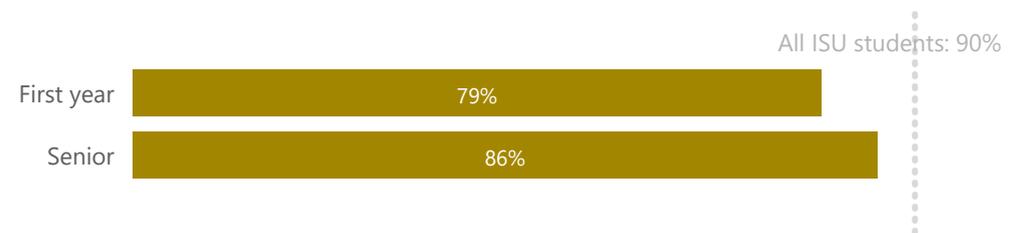
First year — 79%
Senior — 86%

Note: Queer and trans-spectrum students are defined as students who reported their gender as agender, demigender, genderqueer, genderfluid, two-spirit, trans / transgender, questioning or unsure, and/or another gender identity, and/or who reported their sexuality as ___." Trans-spectrum students are less likely to identify on surveys. Hence, survey research may not provide a complete picture and should be supplemented with other research methodologies. See Assessing the Feasibility of Asking about Gender Identity in the Current Population Survey, 2017. *See B. Gano, How and Where Do Queer and Trans-spectrum College Students Experience Belonging: A Critical Review of the Literature, 2022. In The Impact a Sense of Belonging in College.

Research suggests **Hispanic, Latina/o, Latine, or Latinx** students approach sense of belonging by **maintaining close ties to family and by building academic families** on campus.*

Hispanic, Latina/o, Latine, or Latinx students **experience similar levels of belonging as all ISU students.**
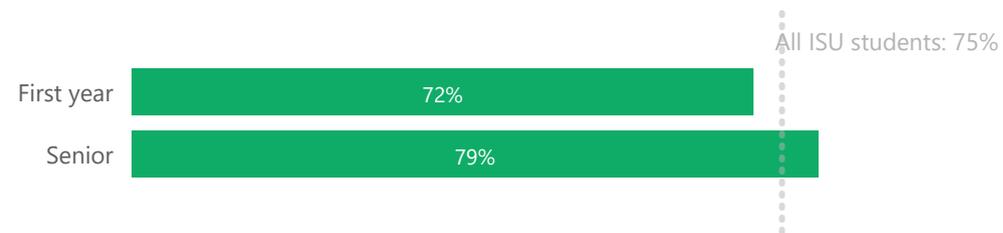
"I as a Hispanic woman did not feel like I belonged until my junior year when I was **put in the same classes with all other bilingual education peers**. I did not see others like myself often nor have a space like many others did to hear their music, eat their native food, see their culture around campus, etc. This definitely made me feel alone and insecure."

"I think that the school needs **more Hispanic and Latinx events**, I feel like it's just the organizations making these events but **I don't feel like anything on campus really represents me**."
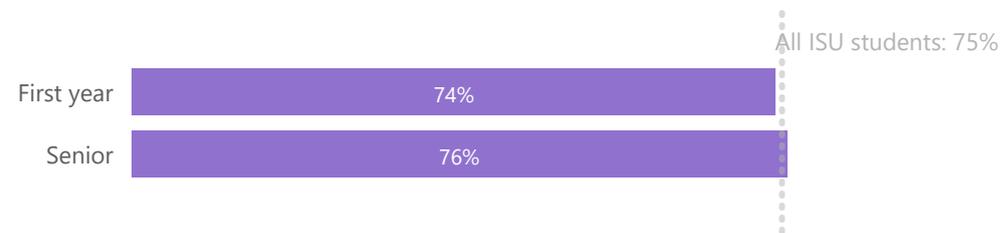
"I think one change that should be made is **better communication for families** that are of Hispanic background. My parents like to be involved in my schooling and my mom doesn't get much information and when she calls the school. I think **one thing (ISU should keep doing) is the festivals** that the school has to get to know the organizations they have."

"(I would like to see) diversity in classrooms, **it is sad being the only hispanic in class**."
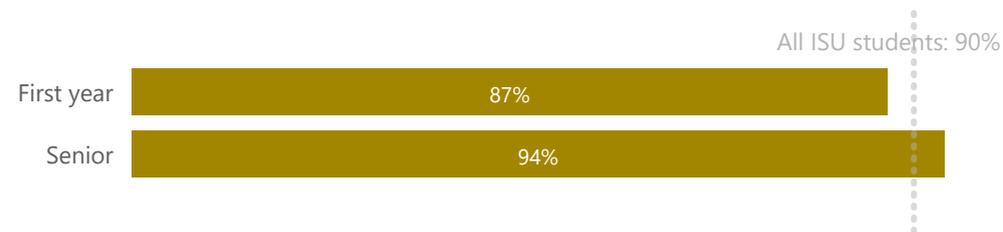
I feel like part of the community at this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year — 72%
Senior — 79%

I feel valued by this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year — 74%
Senior — 76%

I feel comfortable being myself at this institution

All ISU students: 90%

First year — 87%
Senior — 94%

Online and hybrid students rely heavily on **self-motivation and appreciate the flexibility** of online courses. Many indicate a **desire for peer-to-peer interactions** and increased dialogue and activities in courses, as those may be the only opportunities they have to engage with instructors and other students.

Feeling valued and comfort with **being oneself** is higher for online seniors than online first-year students.
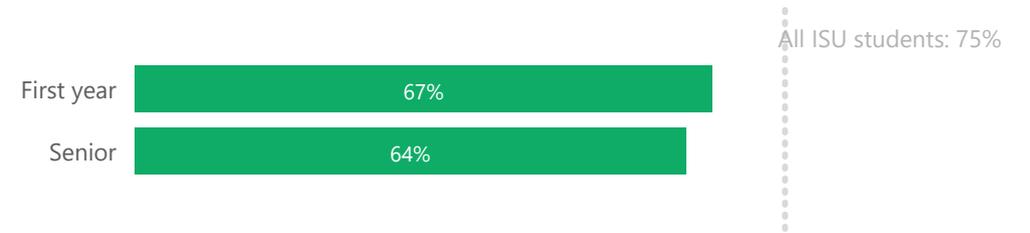
"Change: More discussion type courses. I often feel like I am just being lectured to or read to off of slides that are presented. **I would like to have more dialogue in my courses.** Do not change: offering hybrid and online courses. For a non-traditional student earning their first bachelors degree, these offerings are **the only way I will be able to complete my degree**. Without of them, I would not have been able to finish college."

"I have only taken on line classes and these are great. I am a returning student after several years just to complete my undergraduate degree and work on my graduate degree. I know lots of things have changed since I was student in the seventies. **Instructors are great and very caring about their students and how they learn**."
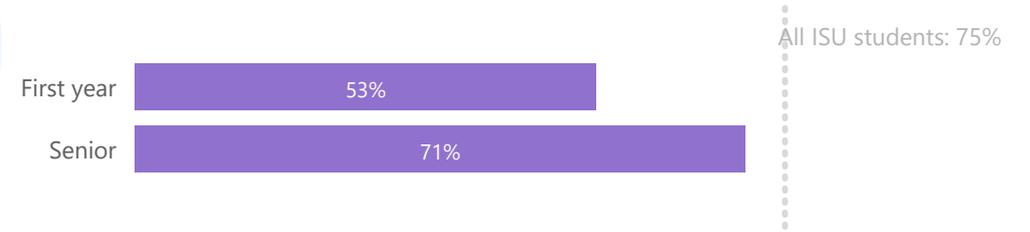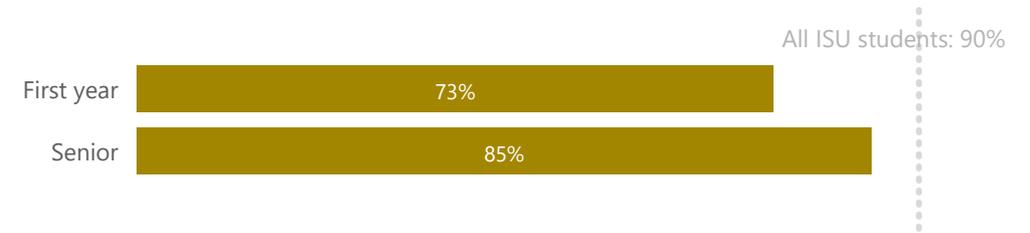
"Online courses need to have various types of assignments in addition to **allow people with test anxiety to prove their knowledge** and understanding of the material....it makes it difficult to prove your understanding of material."

I feel like part of the community at this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year: 67%
Senior: 64%

I feel valued by this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year: 53%
Senior: 71%

I feel comfortable being myself at this institution

All ISU students: 90%

First year: 73%
Senior: 85%

Online students defined as students who reported the following: Mostly remote courses (online, web-based, Zoom, etc.) and Mostly hybrid or blended courses that combine in-person and remote instruction.

Transfer student belonging is more focused on being a part of a community and barriers to transfer, which could **serve as signals** they don't belong.

Senior transfer students report higher levels of sense of belonging, except in the belonging category of feeling like a part of the ISU community.

"Being a transfer student, I was **nervous about moving away from home** and going to a different school. **ISU was very welcoming and made me feel comfortable.** I am VERY happy with my choice to transfer to ISU."

"I would change the overall feel of campus. At times, it doesn't feel inviting. **As a commuter and transfer student I have felt out of place**."
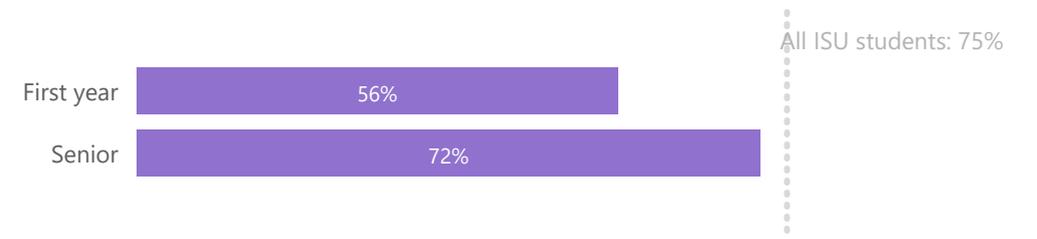
"It is incredibly difficult for transfer students to become part of the campus culture, myself and most other transfer students **have very few friends on campus and have no idea how to get involved.**"

"Everything is alright. **It is just hard to adjust being a working transfer student.**"
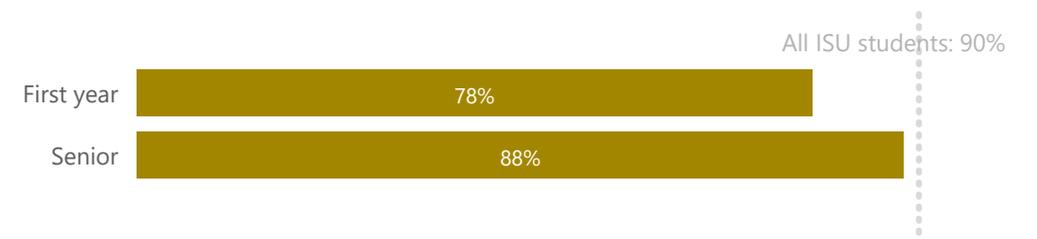
I feel like part of the community at this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year	67%
Senior	68%

I feel valued by this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year	56%
Senior	72%

I feel comfortable being myself at this institution

All ISU students: 90%

First year	78%
Senior	88%

Students who **work off campus** experience similar issues as commuter students. Belonging is attached to finding spaces and services during time gaps. Another theme of students who work off campus is **exhaustion and competing priorities for time.**

Despite the challenges of working off campus, **seniors report similar levels of belonging** as all ISU students.
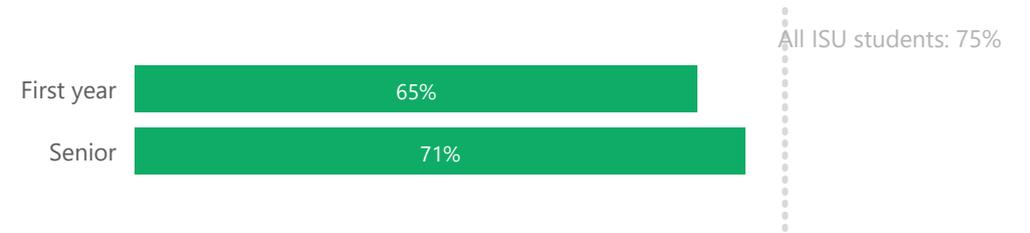
"Start taking more interest in students who are working 25+ hours a week outside of campus in order to pay for tuition and to make ends meet. ISU (like other colleges) needs to be **taking care of the people to who give up and work every weekend**, have to study late at night every night in the library due to the long commute, to where if you don't pack two meals a day, you are stuck purchasing food that is overpriced and franchised, where every morning you are stuck with anxiety of having to fight for a parking spot, when the entire level of parking behind."

"Maybe small private study pods? I commute an hour to campus and am **stuck here most of my day due to gaps in my schedule** and it's hard to find a place to relax and study in private without distraction of other students."
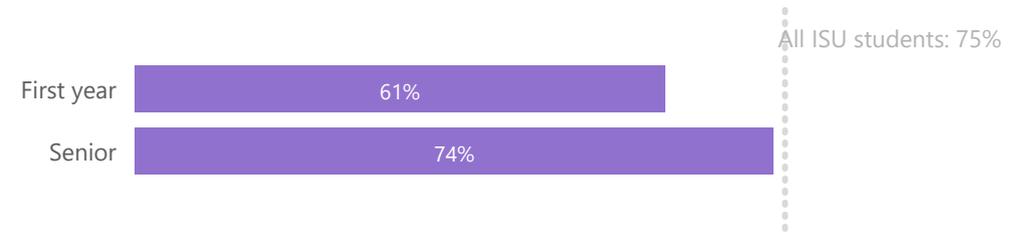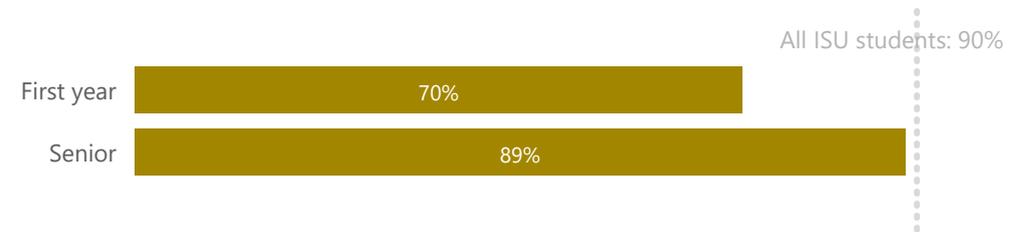
"I would do a lot better in school if I weren't **continually exhausted from working** the number of hours I need to in order to support myself"

*Students who work at least 13 hours a week off campus.

I feel like part of the community at this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year: 65%
Senior: 71%

I feel valued by this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year: 61%
Senior: 74%

I feel comfortable being myself at this institution

All ISU students: 90%
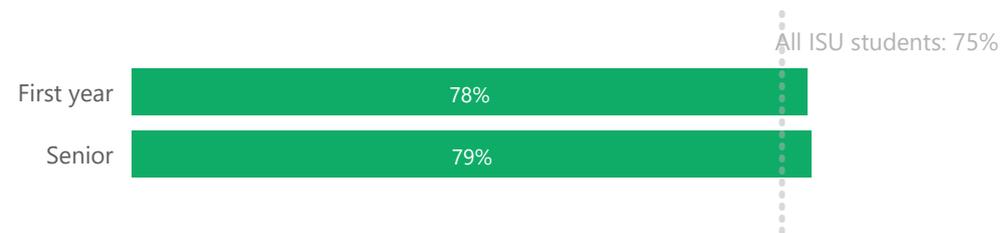
First year: 70%
Senior: 89%

Students who **work on campus** report positive outcomes and experiences. **Connections to individuals and units** are often associated with belonging.

Students who work on campus witness much higher levels of belonging than students who work off campus and all ISU students in general.

"Working at Campus Rec with the Adventure program has provided me with the most significant learning experiences. **Learning how to facilitate teams, address conflict, and work with others are skills** that I will practice for a lifetime. I learned patience through my boss. I learned about potential career options I hope to explore, thanks to this program."
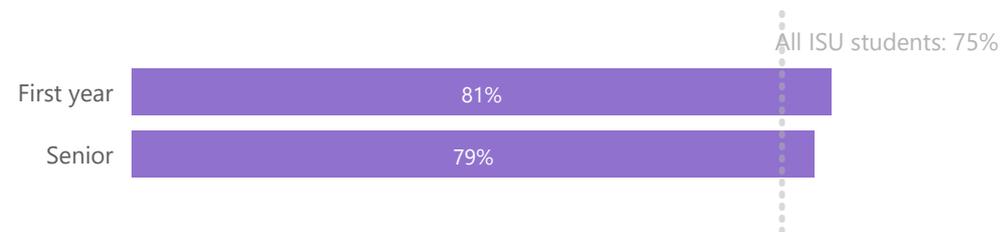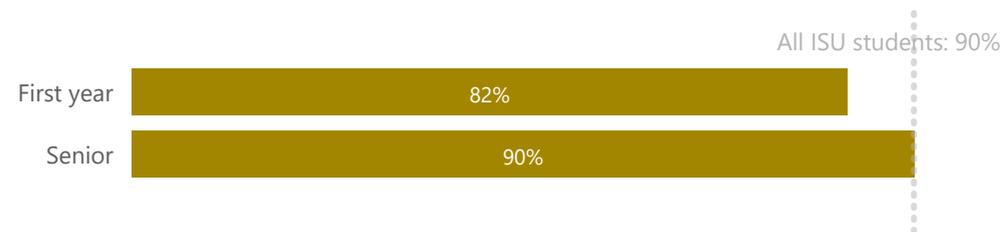
"My most significant learning experiences have occurred outside of a classroom. **Working on campus made me grow a lot as a person and sharpened my communication and teamwork skills** much more than any class did."

I feel like part of the community at this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year	78%
Senior	79%

I feel valued by this institution.

All ISU students: 75%

First year	81%
Senior	79%

I feel comfortable being myself at this institution

All ISU students: 90%

First year	82%
Senior	90%

*Students who work on campus between 1-18 hours a week on campus.

And the bottom lines are...

#1: **Students are finding affirming spaces over time.**

#2: **Physical spaces and wayfinding** play a significant role in belonging.

#3: **Interactions with ISU faculty and staff** through courses, spaces and especially on-campus jobs encourage belonging.

#4: Many students expressed **appreciation and admiration for ISU,** even those who questioned their belonging.

#5: Creating a sense of belonging is premised on the idea of **building off student assets.**

10 Simple Things ISU Faculty & Staff Can Do

Encourage a growth mindset in classes and activities.

Guide students to events and folks where they can experience belonging.

Intentionally create physical spaces for belonging.

Promote representation among faculty and staff.

Respect student strong ties to culture, family, religion and other communities.

Appreciate that **belonging is dynamic** and can depend on the situation or context.

Create experiences that **validate students' multiple identities**.

Communicate **high academic standards** *and* **confidence** in students.

Get students **jobs and experiences** on campus.

Use data to create **habits of mind** and **evidence-informed stories**.

Some strategies adapted from: The Impact of Sense of Belonging in College: Implications for Student Persistence, Retention and Success, 2022.

Some identity groups are not included in this report, including Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students, Indigenous students, Middle Eastern/North African students, linguistic minority students and military veterans, to name a few. University Assessment Services is working on strategies for capturing the voices of students who aren't always represented in assessment data.

- Disaggregated NSSE data at national and regional levels
- National Congress of American Indians, Disaggregation Data Statement