

Student Voices on Support: Experiences, Barriers, and the Future Role of AI



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Introduction

Despite widespread investment in academic advising, mentoring, and holistic student support, many students still do not take full advantage of the services available to them. [Underrepresented and nontraditional learners](#) — including first-generation students, working adults, and students of color — are especially unlikely to engage with institutional resources, even when those services are designed to support success. This issue is exacerbated by the fact that [services are often fragmented or hard to access](#). Even when services are used, a lack of [personalized and culturally responsive support](#) can leave students feeling alienated or unseen, undermining trust, satisfaction, and effectiveness.

These gaps in support raise equity concerns. Students juggling school alongside jobs, family, or caregiving responsibilities are often those who would benefit most from proactive, sustained support. Yet they are also the least likely to encounter systems that meet them where they are or reflect their lived experiences.

At the same time, technological advances, particularly in artificial intelligence and natural language processing, have introduced new opportunities to supplement human-centered support systems. Chatbots and AI-powered tools are now capable of delivering on-demand help, surfacing relevant resources, and even simulating motivational dialogue. Pilot programs across higher education suggest these tools may [identify risks and improve outcomes](#). But questions remain about whether students trust these tools, how they envision using them, and for whom they might work best.

To explore these questions, WGU Labs conducted a survey of 962 students at Western Governors University (WGU), recruited through the [WGU Student Insights Council \(SIC\)](#). The SIC is a standing panel of approximately 8,000 students designed to reflect the broader WGU student body in terms of program of study, degree level, and first-generation college status. It includes students from all four WGU colleges, both undergraduate and graduate programs, and intentionally oversamples

Asian, Native American/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students to support more reliable subgroup analyses. The survey explored students' awareness, utilization, and satisfaction with support services, as well as their openness to receiving support from AI. These findings were further enriched through in-depth qualitative interviews with 17 students, which revealed the emotional and practical dynamics that shape decisions about when and whether to seek help.

Specifically, this research explored the following core questions:

- How do students experience and engage with WGU's institutional support services?
- What barriers — whether practical, cultural, or structural — shape students' decisions to use or avoid support services?
- What role do mentors play in students' support ecosystems?
- How do students perceive the potential of AI-powered support, and what boundaries do they draw between human and AI interaction?

Western Governors University (WGU) offers a compelling case study for understanding the future of student support. As a fully online, competency-based institution serving over 150,000 learners, many of whom are adults, working professionals, or first-generation college students, WGU reflects the evolving

demographics and needs of higher education more broadly. Unlike most brick-and-mortar institutions, WGU assigns each student a dedicated program mentor who provides regular 1:1 guidance, often checking in weekly to support progress and offer personalized coaching. WGU's longstanding emphasis on mentorship and its exploration of AI-powered tools place it at the forefront of support innovation.

While this research is grounded in the WGU context, the challenges students face and the opportunities to better meet their needs are common across higher education institutions. In particular, the findings speak directly to how adult learners, including first-generation students, working professionals, caregivers, and students from racially and culturally diverse backgrounds, experience support in online, flexible learning environments. As the demographics of higher education continue to shift toward older, nontraditional students balancing multiple roles, understanding the specific barriers and preferences of this population is increasingly important. The insights surfaced shed light on what effective, equitable support looks like for adult learners and how emerging technologies like AI might play a meaningful role. These findings have implications for colleges and universities nationwide seeking to build more accessible, scalable, and responsive support systems for today's learners.

Summary of key findings

1

Nearly 80% of students know about support services, but less than 10% actually use them.

- 1 in 3 students do not use support services because they're too busy.
- On average, 77% of students are aware of the various support services offered at WGU, and 63% report satisfaction with their experiences using them.
- However, utilization of these resources lags significantly behind awareness and satisfaction, with an average usage rate of about 8%.

2

2 in 3 students hear about support services from mentors.

- 2 in 3 students consider availability, personalized guidance, and emotional support the most important aspects of mentor support.
- Two-thirds of students report interacting with their mentors at least weekly.
- Eighty-six percent said mentors are effective in helping them meet their needs, and 78% felt their mentors' advice is personalized.
- Students of color and first-generation students are 56% more likely to discover services through mentors than their counterparts.
- Nearly 2 in 3 students view availability and responsiveness, personalized academic guidance, and emotional and motivational encouragement as the most important aspects of their mentor support.
- Women view emotional/motivational support from mentors as particularly valuable — 16% more than men.

3

35% of students desire mentor support that is more proactive and accessible.

- 90% of students feel their mentor provides effective support; however, 35% of students still desire support that is more proactive and accessible.
- Students report that a centralized resource hub (40%), proactive support (36%), and extended hours (35%) would improve access to student support services.
- Students of color, women, and first-generation students were especially likely to desire extended-hours support, 6–10% more than their peers.

4

81% of students are open to receiving AI-powered support, but only 36% feel comfortable doing so.

- 81% of students are open to receiving some form of AI-powered support at WGU.
- However, only 36% feel comfortable doing so, and most students said they still preferred human guidance for complex or emotional needs.
- Under-resourced students are more open to AI support, including emotional and motivational support, than their counterparts.

5

84% of students prefer people to provide emotional support and complex academic planning (75%) over an AI tool

- Even if an AI tool were available, 84% of students said they would still want to maintain human connections, particularly because they prefer to receive emotional support (84%) and complex academic planning (75%) from human mentors rather than AI.
- 84% of students say it is important to continue having access to human mentors even if AI tools are introduced.
- Students especially prefer human mentors to provide emotional support (84%) and complex academic planning (75%) over an AI tool.

Finding 1:

Nearly 80% of students know about support services, but less than 10% actually use them.

Students reported high levels of awareness of and satisfaction with the support services available at WGU. Most respondents, ranging from 67% to 95%, indicated familiarity with services such as financial aid, IT services, academic coaching, career services, library resources, and well-being resources ([Figure 1](#)). Satisfaction with these services was also generally high, with 49% to 80% of students expressing contentment. Even resources that showed low awareness and satisfaction did so because they are less relevant to the vast majority of the student body, such as accommodation requests.

However, these high awareness and satisfaction rates obscure a deeper issue: Students are not turning to these services in meaningful numbers. Despite knowing these services exist, many students reported limited engagement. Only 2% to 19% of respondents said they use any given service at least weekly. This gap suggests that awareness alone is not enough, as support services may be perceived as passive offerings rather than proactive solutions woven into the student experience. No meaningful subgroup differences were observed by race, gender, or first-generation status in awareness, satisfaction, or utilization.

1 in 3 students say they don't use support services because they don't have time.

Awareness, satisfaction, and usage of student support resources

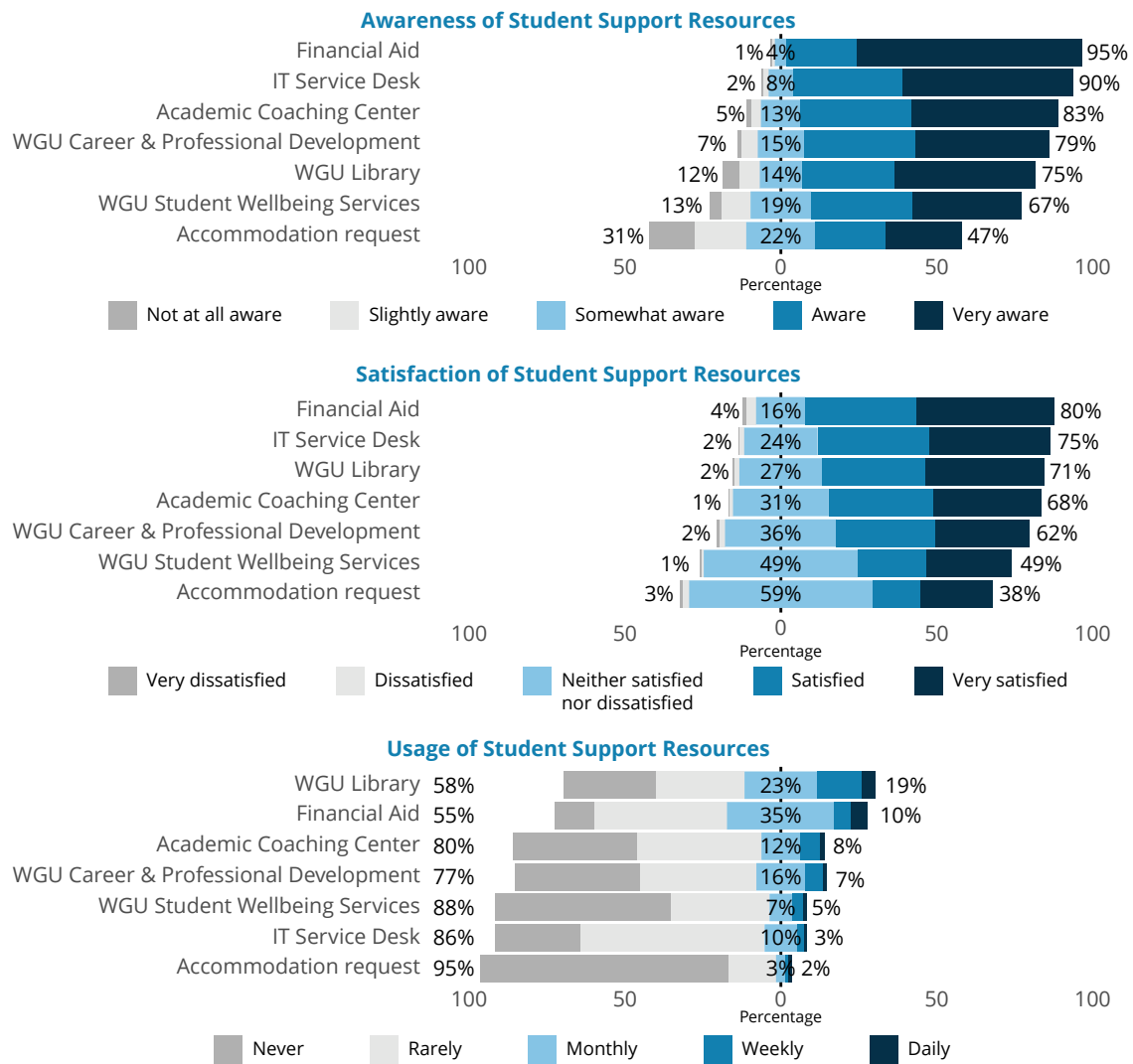
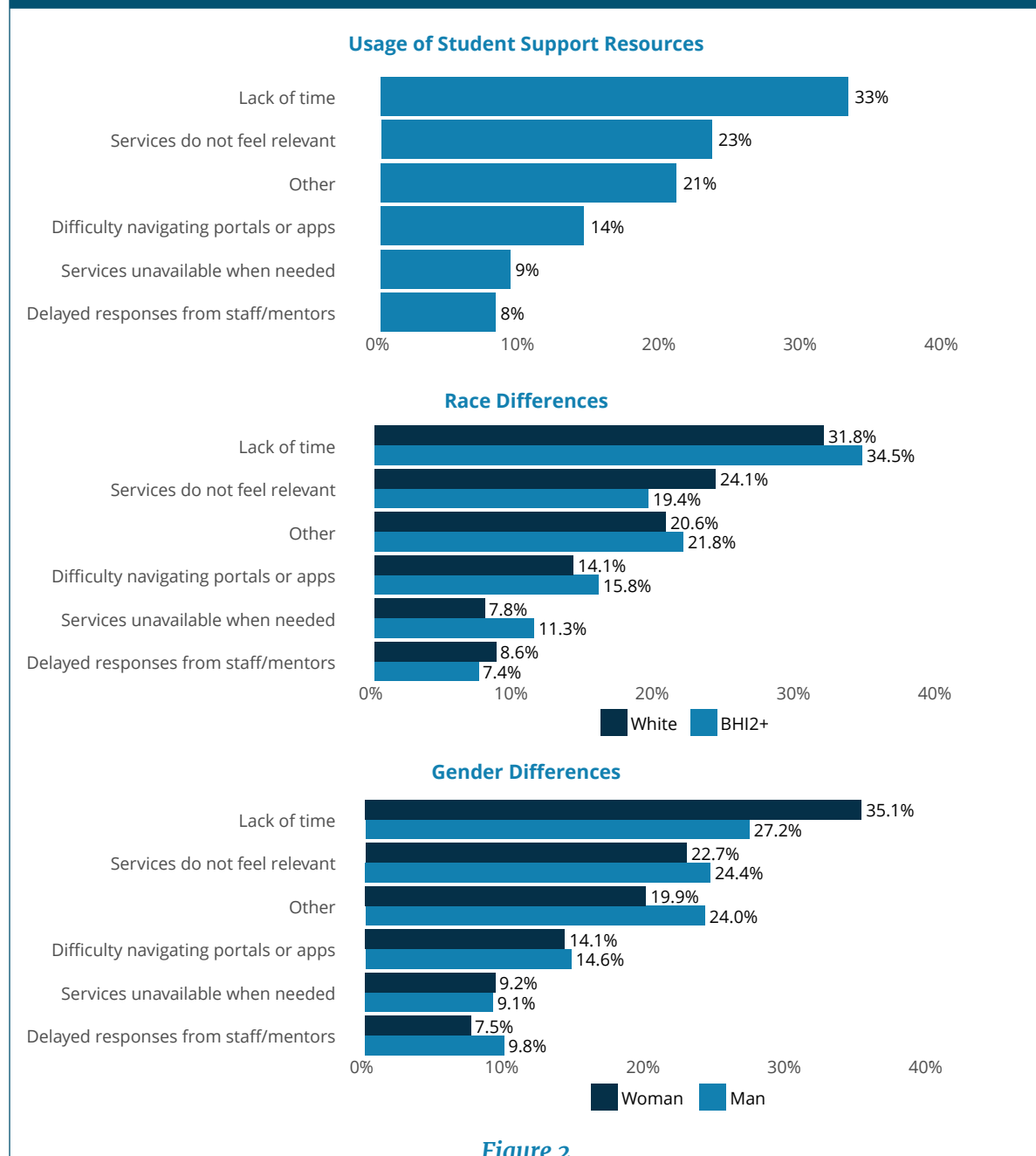


Figure 1

The most common barriers to using these resources were time constraints (33%), followed by uncertainty about whether the services were relevant to their needs (23%) (Figure 2). These results suggest that students are not only busy, but they're also unsure that these services are worth their already-limited time. These challenges were especially pronounced among students from historically under-resourced backgrounds, including students of color and women. Thirty-five percent of BHI2+ students reported time constraints as the biggest challenge in accessing student support resources, compared to 32% of white students. Similarly, 35% of women cited time constraints as the biggest barrier, compared to 27% of men. While these percentage gaps may seem modest, they point to deeper systemic patterns: Students from historically

marginalized groups may face compounded pressures, including caregiving responsibilities, work obligations, and sociocultural expectations that make it harder to prioritize or even recognize the need for institutional support. Even a small disparity in usage can widen outcome gaps if unaddressed. This highlights the importance of designing support services that are not only available but also actively responsive to the lived experiences of different student populations.

Challenges in accessing support resources



Interview data reinforced these patterns. Many students said they did not know where to start or that they discovered helpful services only by accident or after struggling on their own. One student shared, *"I don't know what I don't know. There could be more resources out there I've never heard of."* The fact that students often discover services only after struggling on their own points to a breakdown in timing and delivery. Rather than relying on passive marketing or one-time orientation messages, higher education institutions could explore ways to surface relevant support in real time, such as when a student misses deadlines, flags a concern with a mentor, or shows signs of disengagement. This approach would treat support not as a static list, but as a responsive, embedded part of the learning journey.

Interviewees who were aware of supports often cited time constraints, a lack of perceived relevance, or difficulty navigating digital portals as reasons for not engaging with student support services. For example, students who were academically successful or used external counseling through health insurance didn't see value in additional WGU services. This points to a broader insight: Many students don't think of support services as integral to their success, but rather as emergency or supplemental tools.

Why This Matters

These insights point to a deeper issue: Simply providing services may not be enough. Institutions must take intentional steps to ensure students not only know these resources exist but also understand when and why to use them. This could include proactively communicating the value of each service, embedding support touchpoints throughout the student journey, and simplifying access through user-friendly platforms. Without clear wayfinding and timely relevance, even well-designed services risk being underutilized, especially by those who could benefit most.

Finding 2:

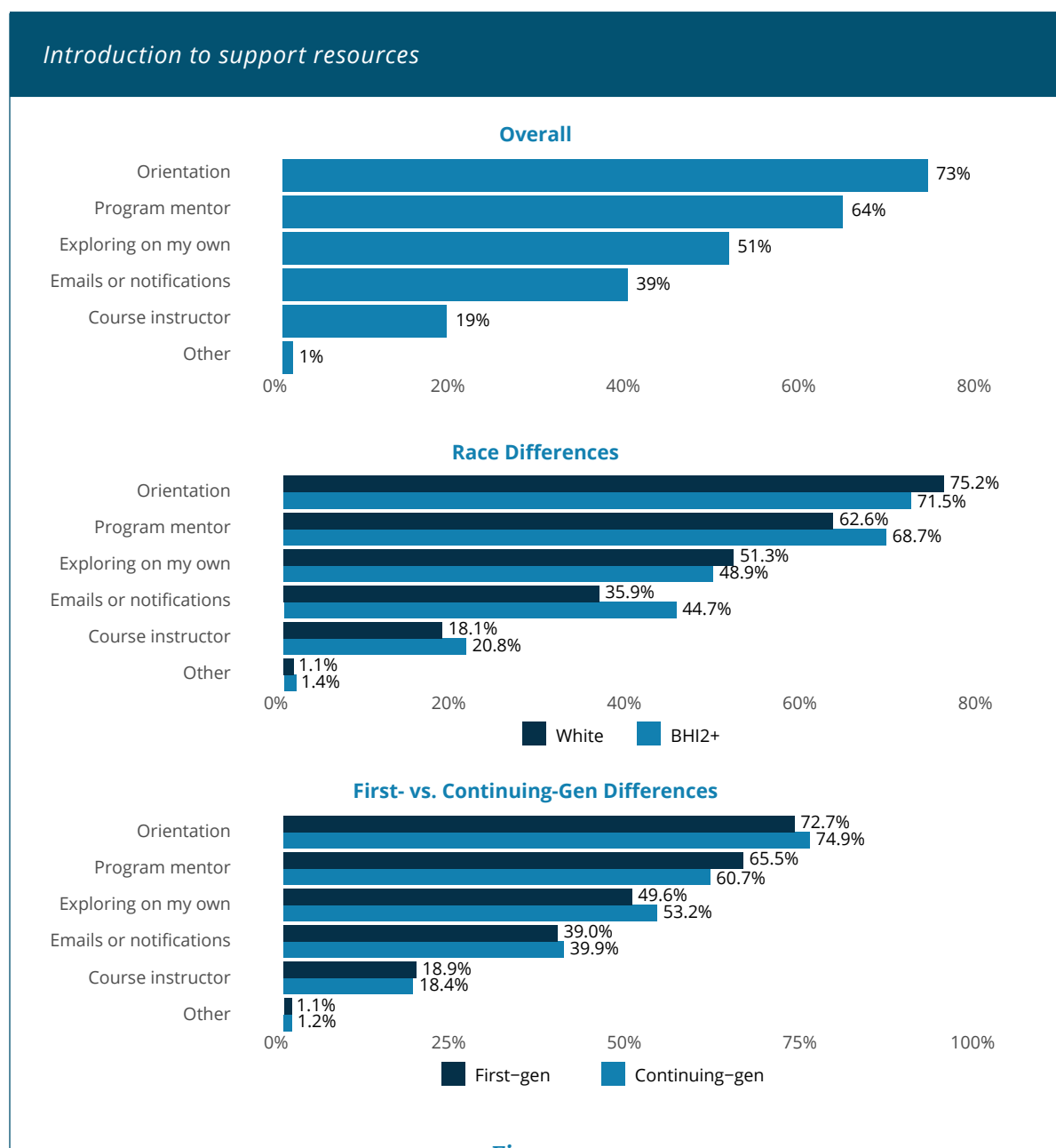
Two in three students hear about support services from mentors.

Despite low usage of many student support resources, students frequently interact with their mentors and express high satisfaction with the support they receive from them. Sixty-six percent of students reported connecting with their mentor at least weekly, and 95% at least monthly. An overwhelming 86% found their mentor to be very effective, and 78% said their mentor's advice felt highly personalized to their unique circumstances. This suggests that mentors are not just fulfilling a procedural role, but delivering support that feels highly personalized. Additionally, in a landscape where other support services go severely underutilized, mentors appear to be the one support touchpoint that is both consistent and trusted. Students generally value their mentors and find them to be a helpful source of support, and that trust makes mentors uniquely positioned to serve as navigators and translators within the broader support system at the institution.

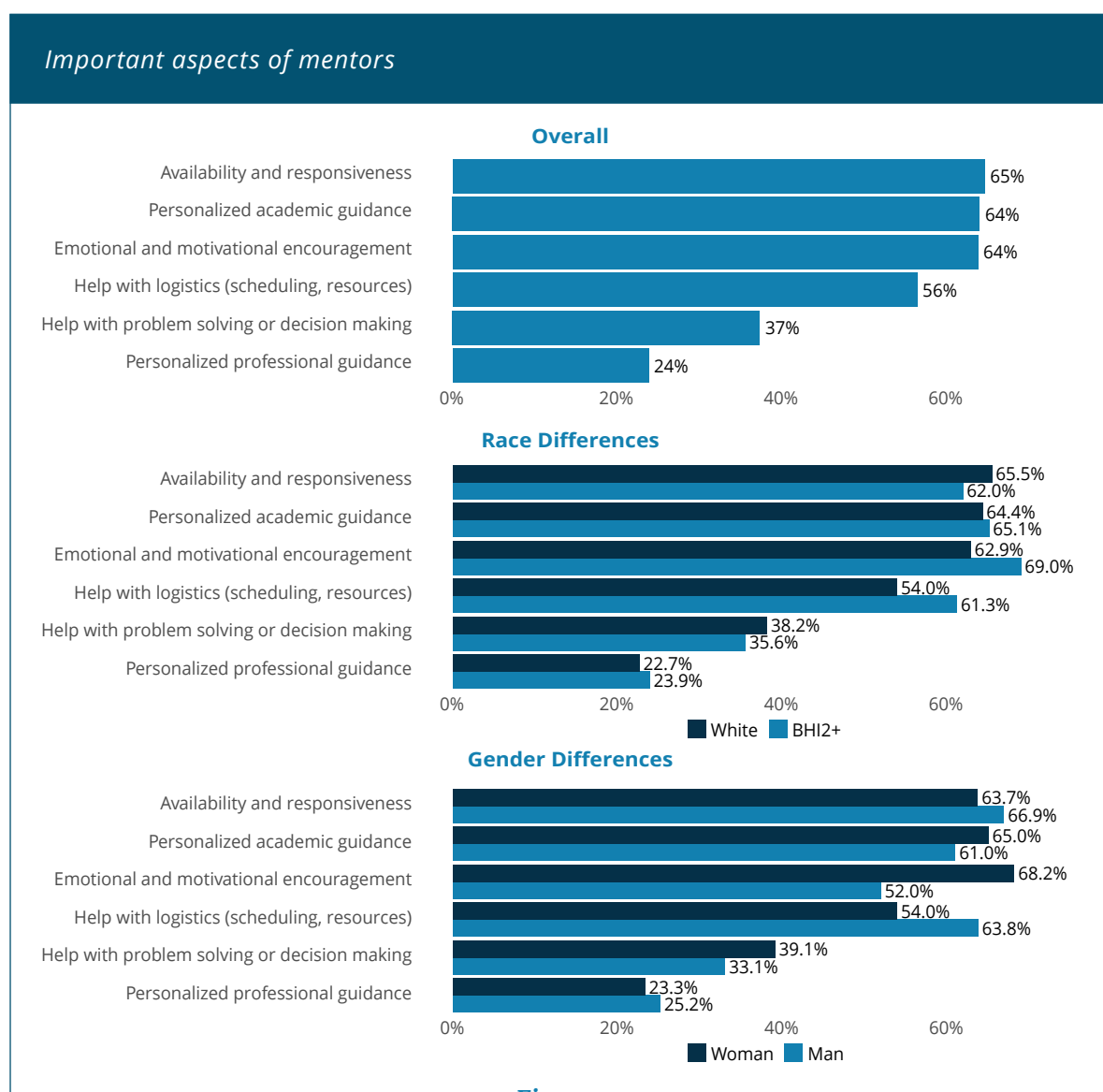
Students consider the following to be the most important aspects of mentor support:

- *availability*
- *personal guidance*
- *emotional support*

Certain groups of students, such as first-generation students and students of color, were especially likely to cite their mentor as the person who first introduced them to other available services. For example, 69% of BHI2+ students cited their program mentors as the first source from which they learn about student support resources, compared to 63% of white students. Additionally, 66% of first-generation students reported hearing about support resources from their program mentors, compared to 61% of continuing-generation students. This makes mentorship not only a support strategy but an equity lever, one that helps close gaps in access to information and opportunity.

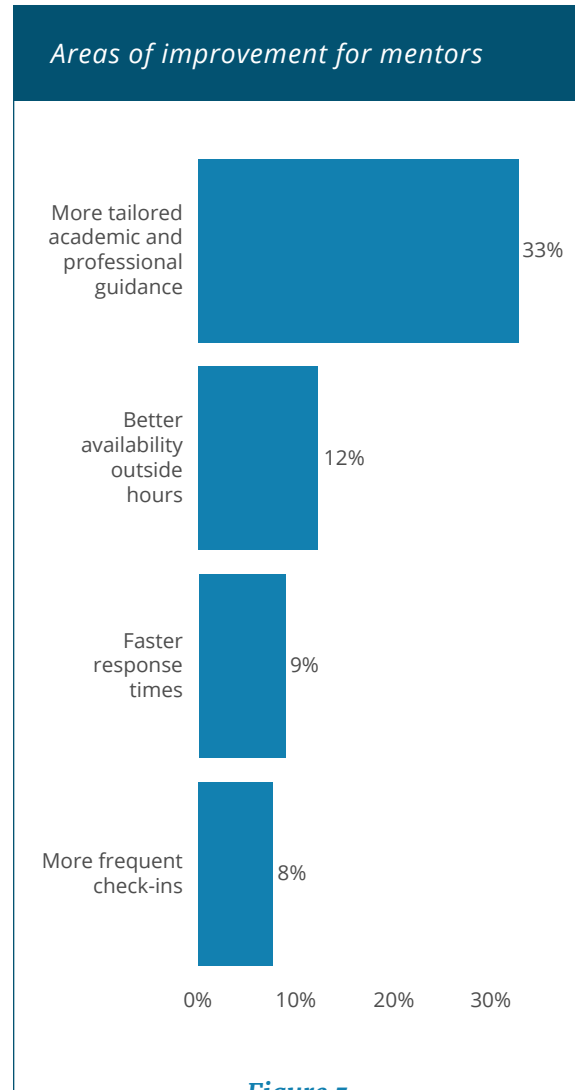


Students of color and women also placed greater value on the emotional and motivational support they received from their mentors compared to their counterparts. Sixty-nine percent of BHI2+ students identified emotional and motivational encouragement as one of the most important aspects of their mentor support, compared to 63% of white students. Similarly, 68% of women emphasized the importance of this type of support, compared to only 52% of men. These differences suggest that emotional support is not a “nice to have,” but an essential part of the mentorship relationship, particularly for students who may face greater barriers to persistence. Put simply, mentors are providing more than academic advice — they are offering practical guidance and emotional support that help students navigate both logistical challenges and moments of uncertainty.



Interview participants provided converging evidence: One student described their mentor as “*guidance when they are lost in the process,*” while another noted, “*My mentor keeps me grounded.*” Mentors supported students not only with academic planning but also with navigating administrative hurdles and managing moments of self-doubt. This breadth of academic, logistical, and emotional support demonstrates the critical role mentors play in students’ academic journeys.

However, experiences were not uniform. While some students described highly personalized and attentive relationships, others characterized mentor outreach as too generic or impersonal. Reflecting this variation, 33% of survey respondents said the top area for improvement was receiving more tailored and professional guidance, suggesting that not all students experience the same level of relevance or depth in their mentor interactions (Figure 5). This highlights a vulnerability: When mentorship quality varies, so too does the student experience, potentially reinforcing, rather than reducing, equity gaps.



Why This Matters

These findings highlight the crucial role mentors can play in the student support ecosystem, and in institutions where they are available. Students not only engage with their mentors frequently but also rate those relationships as highly effective and personally relevant. For under-resourced students in particular, mentors serve as both connectors to other services and sources of emotional and motivational support. At the same time, not all students experience mentorship in the same way. The call for more tailored academic and professional guidance points to an opportunity to improve the consistency and depth of mentor support across the student population.

Finding 3:

35% of students desire support that is more proactive and accessible.

Students emphasized the need for support services that not only respond to challenges but also anticipate them. This reflects a subtle but powerful misalignment in expectations that may contribute to the underutilization of support resources: Students aren't just asking for support to be available; they want it to arrive before they even know to ask.

Top recommendations from survey participants for improving student support services included a centralized resource hub (40%), proactive outreach (36%), and extended availability, such as evening or weekend hours (30%) ([Figure 6](#)). These preferences may be signaling that students are navigating WGU on tight schedules, often outside of traditional business hours, and need the system to flex around their real lives.

Proactive outreach about student support resources was especially important to students facing structural barriers, including first-generation students, students of color,

and women, many of whom are juggling work, caregiving, or other time-intensive responsibilities. Forty-two percent of BHI2+ students indicated that more proactive outreach would improve student support services, compared to 32% of white students. Similarly, 38% of women said the same, compared to 31% of men. Among first-generation students, 40% agreed, compared to 34% of continuing-generation students. This demand for outreach is not simply about convenience, but rather about inclusion. When time is a limited resource, the onus cannot be on students to navigate a complex system unaided.

Students aren't just asking for support to be available; they want it to arrive before they even know to ask.

Improving access to support resources

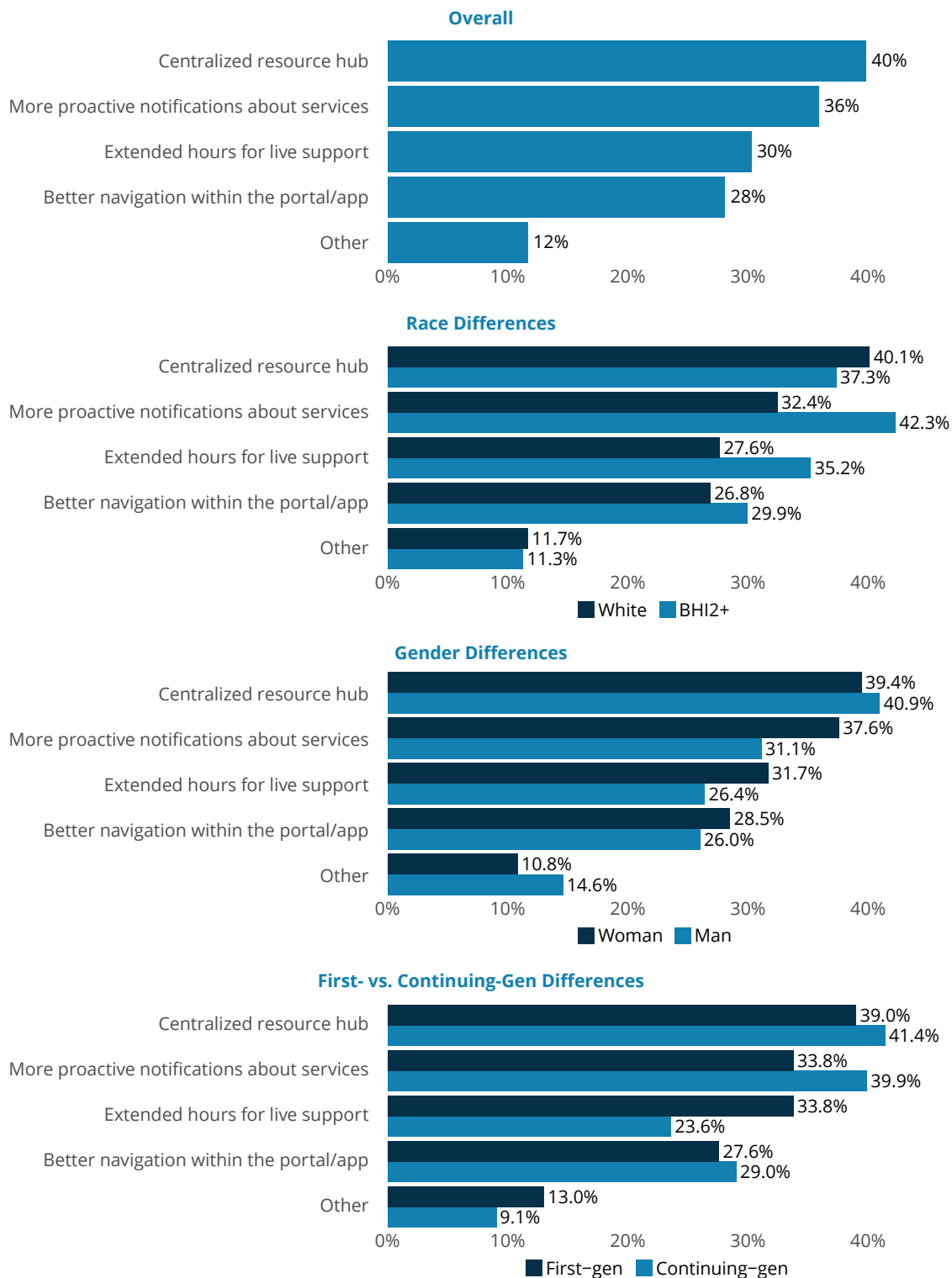


Figure 6

Interview feedback painted a similar picture. One student noted, *“Evening hours for coaching would be a game changer.”* Some students noted that the digital platforms designed to support them could be challenging to navigate. While they appreciated having a centralized hub for resources, they expressed a desire for a more intuitive and streamlined experience. As one student put it, “The app is helpful but could be more intuitive.” These reflections point to the broader importance of user-centered design in support tools that simplify access and do not inadvertently introduce new friction.

Collectively, these reflections suggest that while support services may be robust in content, the systems that deliver them often fall short in usability. Students aren’t looking for more information, but rather they’re looking for clarity, relevance, and ease of access. In this context, thoughtful design isn’t a bonus; it’s a prerequisite for meaningful support.

Why This Matters

These findings show that delivering meaningful support requires more than simply expanding services. It calls for intentional design, timely delivery, and a deeper understanding of the realities students are navigating. Many learners today, especially adults and nontraditional students, are balancing school with work, caregiving, and other responsibilities. They are not just asking for additional support. They are asking for better support that is easier to find, more responsive to their lives, and aligned with how they manage competing demands.

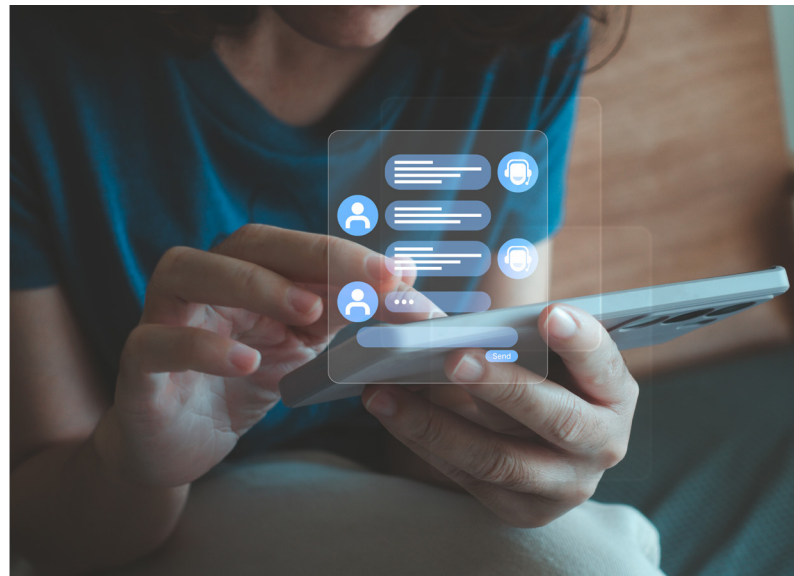
These expectations reflect broader shifts in how people engage with services. Just as consumers now expect immediate and intuitive digital interactions in their daily lives, students are bringing similar expectations to their educational experiences. The desire for on-demand support is not just about convenience. It reflects a new baseline for what people consider usable and trustworthy. When systems feel inaccessible, confusing, or overly complicated, students are less likely to engage, especially those already juggling multiple roles.

Finding 4:

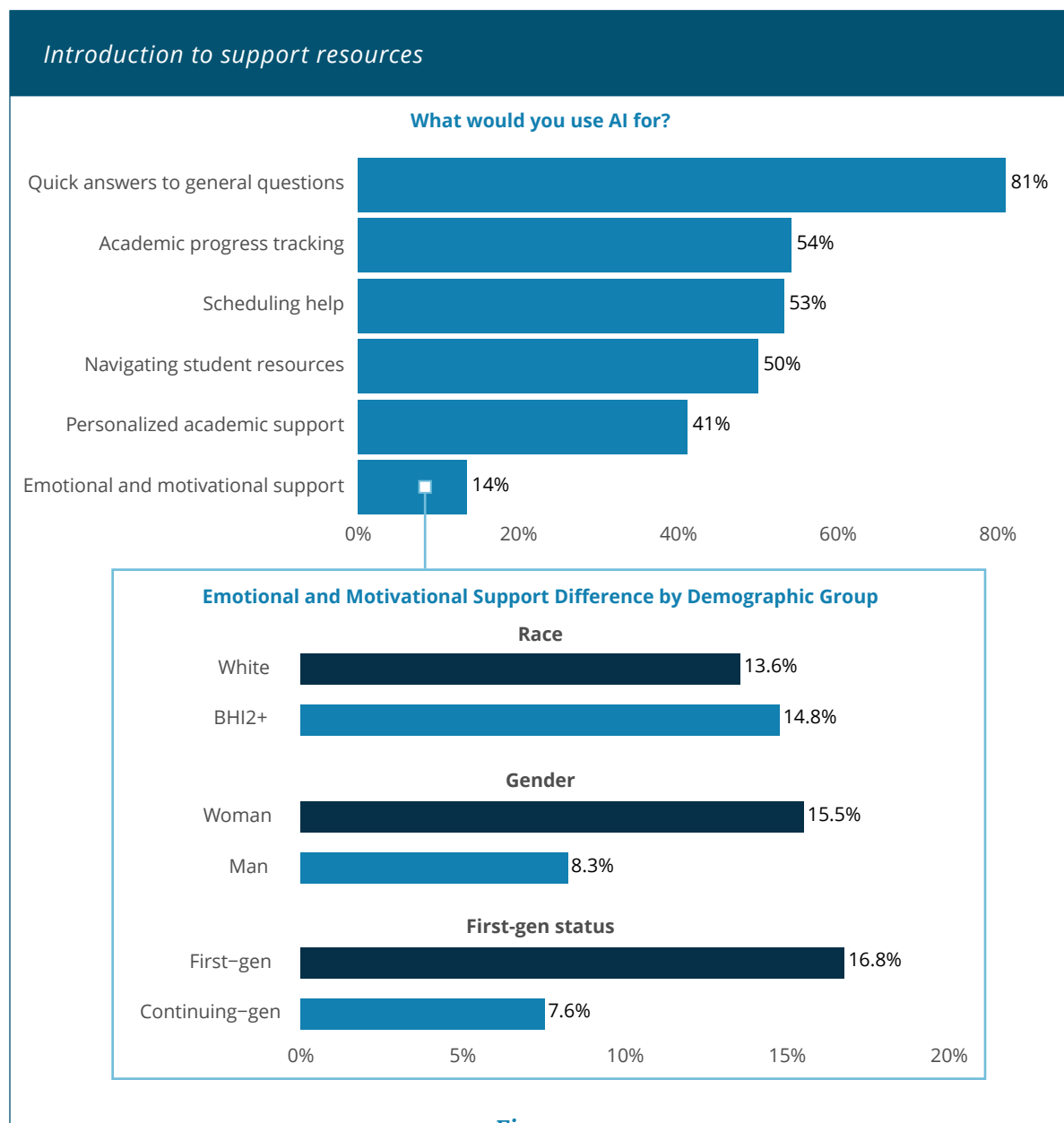
81% of students are open to receiving AI-powered support, but only 36% feel comfortable doing so.

Overall, students expressed openness to AI-powered support, but that openness came with conditions. A majority were willing to use AI for instrumental or task-based purposes, such as getting quick answers to general questions (81%), tracking academic progress (54%), scheduling help (53%), and navigating student resources (50%) ([Figure 7](#)). In contrast, only 14% of students said they would be willing to use AI for emotional and motivational support. These preferences point to a pragmatic view of AI: Students are interested in speed and utility, but not in forming a relationship with a tool. Students still seem to draw a sharp boundary between informational support and emotional connection, and they see the latter as distinctly human.

Interestingly, even though the overall number of students willing to use AI for emotional and motivational support was relatively low, there were clear demographic differences. Students of color, women, and first-generation students were more open to using AI for this kind of support compared to their peers. For example, 16% of women selected this option, compared to just 8% of men. Among first-generation students, 17% expressed interest, compared to 8% of continuing-generation students.



This divergence suggests that students who may have fewer available supports, may seek more and more varied resources, or may have had unsatisfying prior experiences with mentors or coaches, could be more willing to experiment with nontraditional forms of help, even if those forms fall short of ideal. Cultural or social norms may also shape this openness, particularly if students have been discouraged from asking for help or have learned to expect limited responses when they do. In this context, AI may be perceived less as a replacement for human connection and more as a bridge in its absence, a way to access support that feels more approachable, more immediate, or simply more available when other options fall short.



Despite their willingness to use AI for various tasks, only 36% of students said they were comfortable receiving academic or administrative support from AI (**Figure 8**). Many students want what AI can do, but they don't fully trust it. That trust gap is particularly important when thinking about how and where to introduce AI into the student journey. Even here, demographic differences emerged: Students of color reported higher comfort levels with receiving AI-based support (44%) compared to white students (32%). This again reinforces that openness to AI may be shaped not only by individual preference but also by lived experience, particularly when traditional systems of support have felt distant or inaccessible.

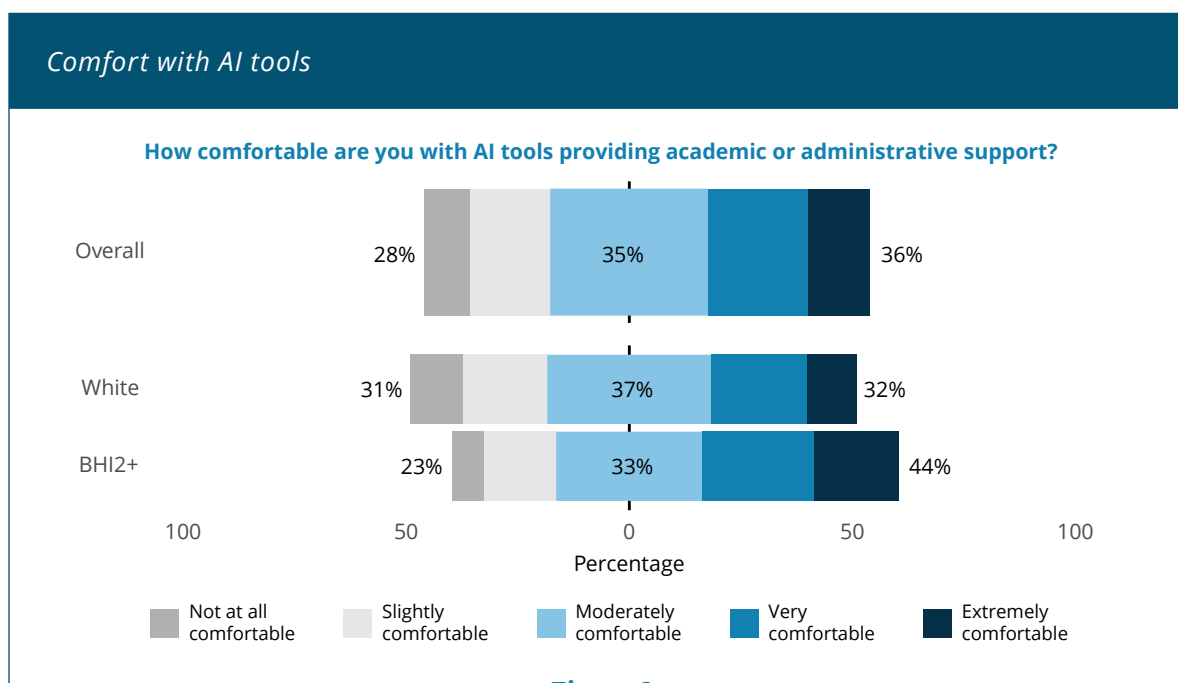


Figure 8

In addition, women and first-generation students were more likely than their counterparts to prefer using AI chatbots, particularly for getting quick answers, over other forms of support like self-service tools, email, or text message, or live one-on-one help. This question used a rank-choice format, where students ranked different support options from 1 (most preferred) to 5 (least preferred); thus, lower numbers indicate stronger preferences. First-generation students rated AI chatbots the most favorably, with an average rank of 2.66, compared to 2.94 among continuing-generation students (**Figure 9**). Women also rated them more favorably (2.72) than men (2.87). These patterns further show that AI is not one-size-fits-all and that for certain populations, it may fill gaps left by other forms of support that feel too slow, too rigid, or too distant. These patterns reinforce a key finding from our prior SIC research: students see AI chatbots as particularly useful for straightforward, time-sensitive support tasks, especially when they're busy, overwhelmed, or unsure where to go.

Preferred formats of support

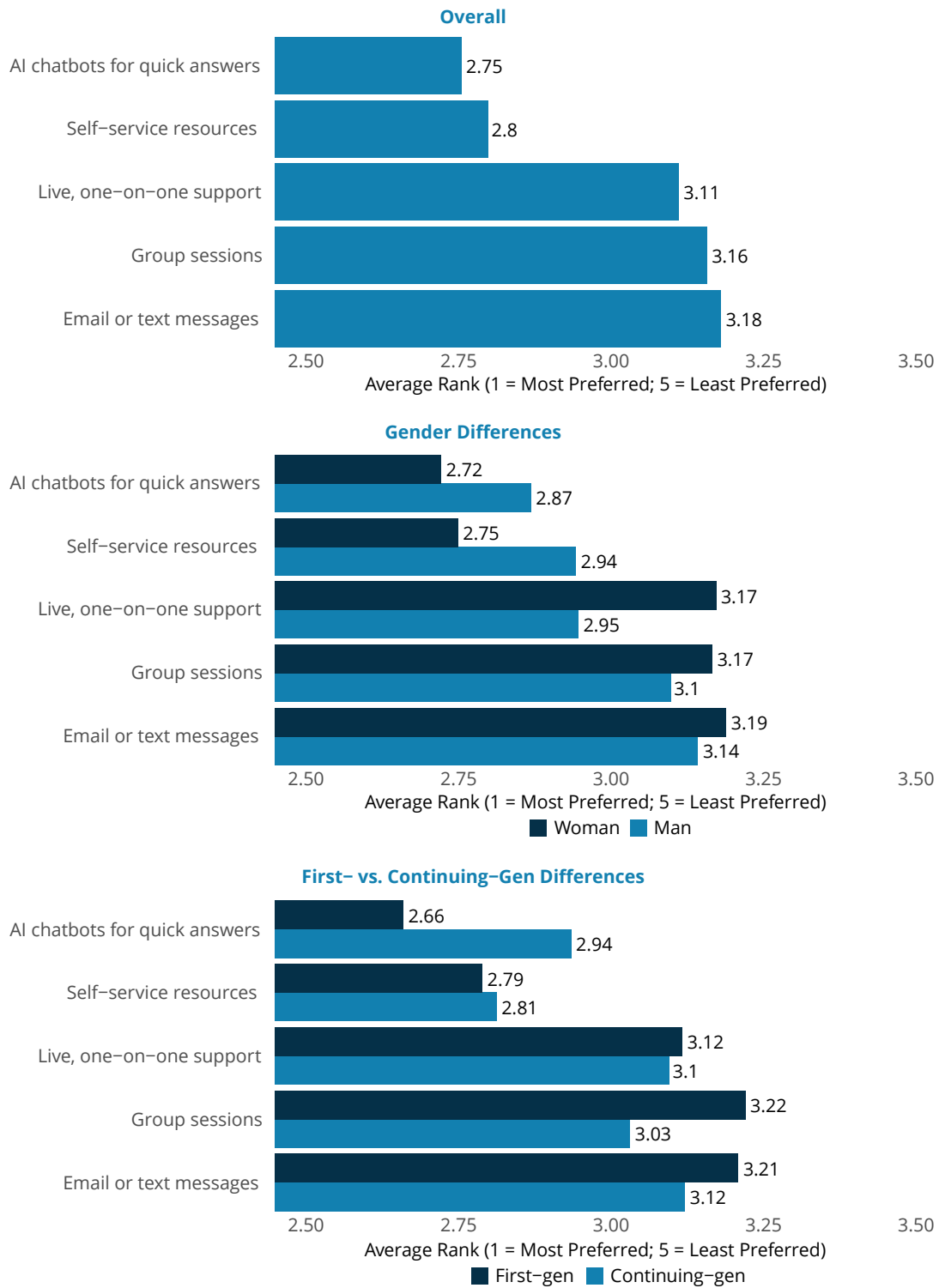


Figure 9

Interview feedback echoed these themes. Many students saw value in AI tools for their speed, convenience, and 24/7 availability. One student remarked, “AI can answer questions at any time, which is great for a busy schedule.” These examples confirm that students view AI as a helpful logistical assistant but not a coach, guide, or companion yet. Participants were also notably more hesitant about AI’s ability to provide emotional insight or personalized motivation. As one student put it, “AI can point me in the right direction quickly, but it’s no replacement for a mentor.” This quote crystallizes the core boundary students are drawing: AI is a tool, not a touchpoint.

Why This Matters

These findings suggest that while students are open to using AI for specific, efficiency-focused tasks, they draw a clear line when it comes to deeper, relational forms of support. For under-resourced students, AI may hold particular appeal as a supplemental tool, but not a substitute for human connection. For higher education institutions interested in pursuing AI-based services, careful design will be critical. In a previous survey, we found that 92% of students want to know when they are interacting with AI. Tools must be trustworthy, transparent, and clearly positioned to complement, not replace, the personalized, emotionally resonant support students value most (more on this point in Finding 5).

Finding 5:

84% of students prefer people to provide emotional support and complex academic planning (75%) over an AI tool

Despite their openness to AI, students overwhelmingly valued the human relationships they had built with their mentors. In fact, 84% said it was very important to continue receiving support from their mentors, even if AI tools were introduced ([Figure 10](#)). For most students, AI is not a replacement but an enhancement that is useful only insofar as it protects and preserves the personal touchpoints they value.

Introduction to support resources

How important is it to have access to human mentors in addition to AI tools?

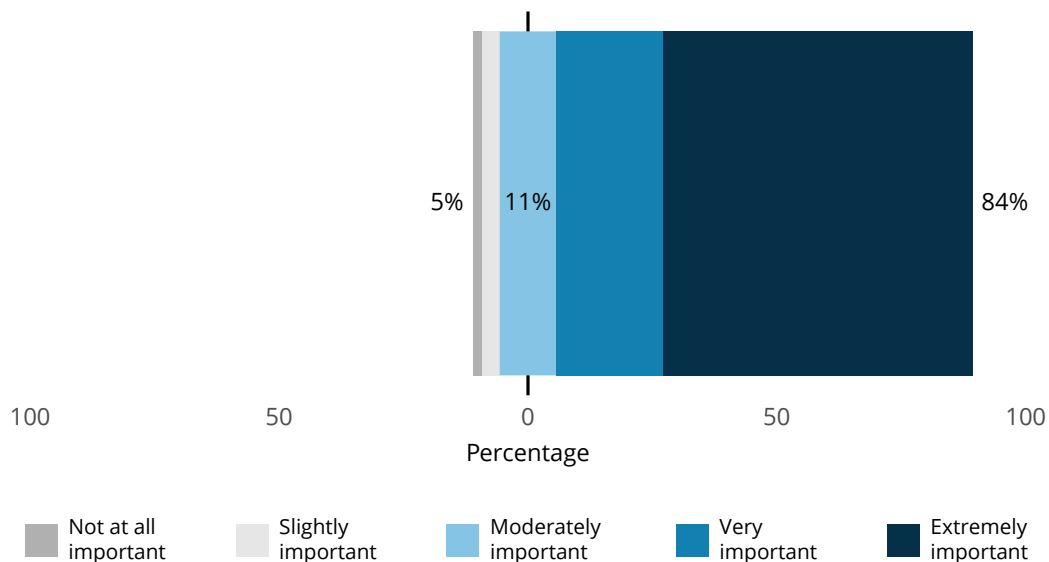
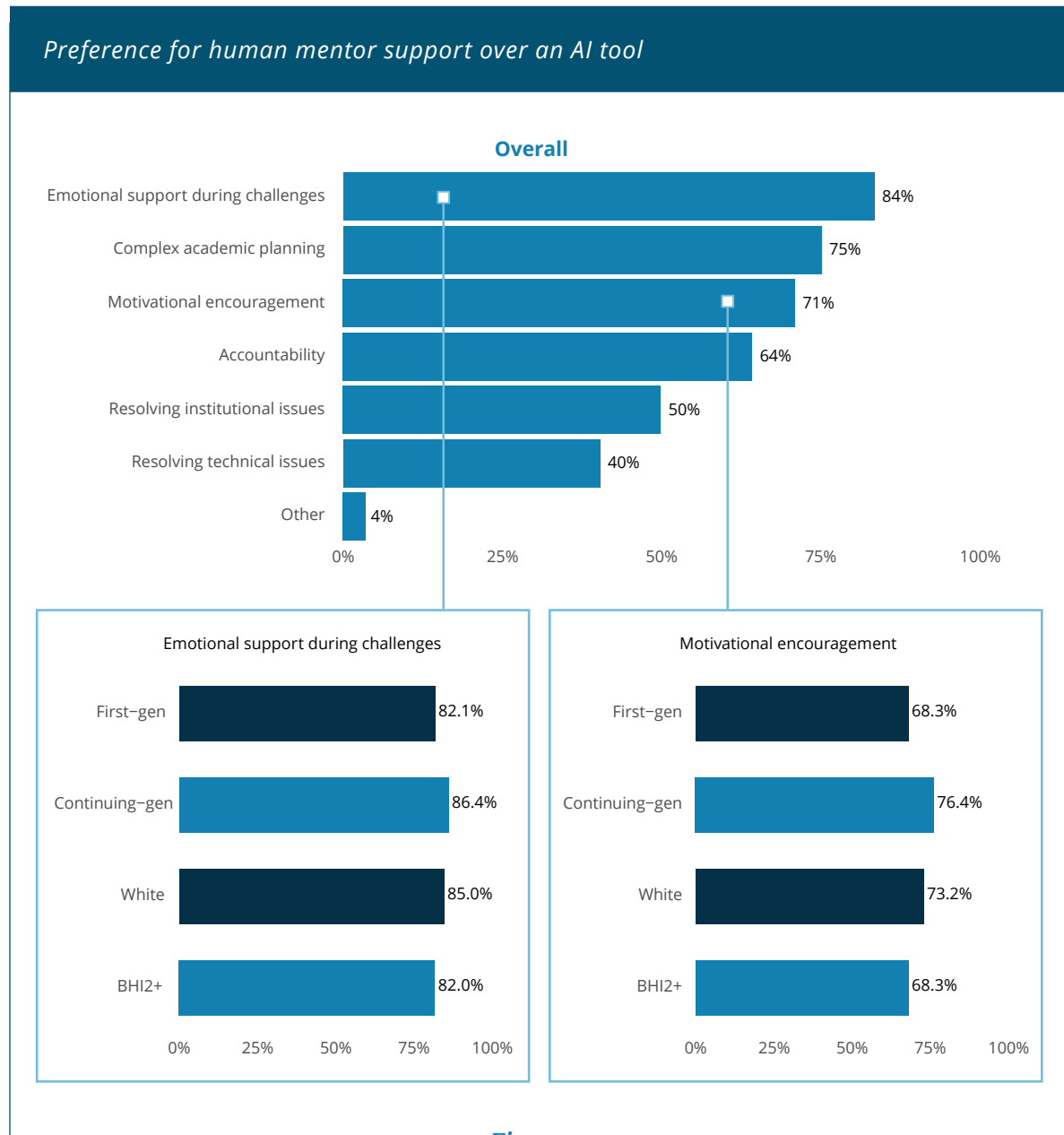


Figure 10

When asked to choose between AI and a human mentor for specific types of support, students strongly favored human mentors for tasks involving emotional support during challenges (84%), complex academic planning (75%), motivational encouragement (71%), and accountability (64%) (Figure 11). It's important to note that because the question was framed in terms of preferring a human over an AI, lower percentages reflect greater openness to receiving that type of support from AI. These results suggest that students view mentorship as a deeply relational process, one rooted not just in information delivery but in trust, nuance, and empathy.





Interestingly, students from under-resourced backgrounds, including first-generation students and students of color, were comparatively more open to receiving emotional and motivational support from AI. For example, only 78% of first-generation students preferred a human mentor for emotional support, compared to 86% of continuing-generation students, indicating greater relative openness to AI support among first-generation students. Similarly, 68% of first-gen students favored a human mentor for motivational encouragement, compared to 76% of continuing-gen students. A similar pattern appears across race: 82% of BHI2+ students preferred a human mentor for emotional support, versus 85% of white students. For motivational

encouragement, the gap was 68% (BHI2+) vs. 73% (white students). While human mentors are still the preferred source of support overall, these subtle subgroup differences suggest that when human connection has historically been less accessible and more susceptible to bias, students may be more willing to explore AI as a secondary source of motivation or reassurance, not because they prefer it, but because they've learned to rely on alternative forms of support. For some students, particularly those who may have faced barriers to personalized guidance in the past, AI could represent not just convenience, but a kind of agency: a judgment-free, always-available resource that doesn't require navigating institutional gatekeepers or social risk.

Some students noted that if AI tools were available, they would feel less need to reach out to mentors. For example, while 66% of students reported interacting with their mentors at least weekly, only 49% said they would do so if an AI tool were available to handle routine support (Figure 12). This doesn't necessarily reflect a desire to avoid mentors, but rather a desire to preserve mentor time and attention for higher-order needs. Students appear to be making pragmatic distinctions between types of support, favoring AI for logistics and humans for more complex or emotional needs. No meaningful subgroup differences were observed across race, gender, and first-generation status in this pattern.

*Students prefer to receive **emotional support** and **complex academic planning** from human mentors rather than AI.*

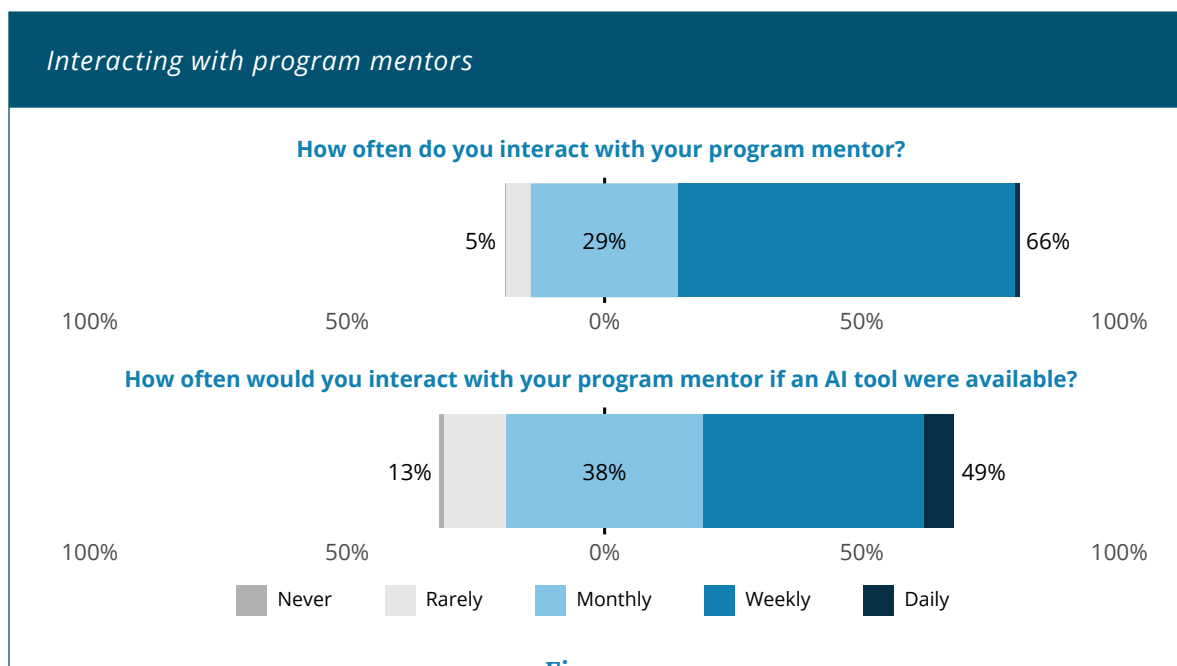


Figure 12

In interviews, students suggested that AI could manage surface-level or logistical tasks, freeing mentors to focus on deeper, more personal forms of support. One participant captured this balance well: “Combining AI and human support could balance speed with empathy.” This vision of a hybrid model, in which AI handles efficiency while humans deliver care, aligns closely with what students across the board seem to want: a system that is fast without being cold, and personal without being inaccessible.

Why This Matters

In short, students want AI to act as a first-line supplement, not a substitute, for the human-centered core of student support. They are drawing a clear line between types of support: quick, routine questions can be handled by AI, while deeper engagement still belongs with mentors. This distinction reflects a pragmatic approach to efficiency. Students are showing us how to use mentor time more wisely, preserving it for complex, relational needs rather than tasks that technology can address. This balance may be especially important in areas like emotional support, decision-making, or long-term planning. For students from under-resourced backgrounds, who may be more open to AI due to previous gaps in support, a well-designed tool could help fill those gaps without further distancing them from meaningful human connection.

The evolving role of the mentor in higher education

WGU students, on balance, appreciate the support they receive through a model built on long-term, consistent relationships with mentors. Mentors are effective and deeply valued, especially for emotional and academic guidance. But students are also clear-eyed about the gaps. Many don't use support services, even when they know about them, because they're too busy or don't see the relevance. And while most students view their mentor support positively, they are honest about the gaps in this support model — it doesn't allow for timely and flexible support, it can be cumbersome for resolving simple questions, and they want more proactive support than the mentors can reasonably provide. Students are pointing to a role for technology to play in complementing the mentor's support and potentially more.

At the same time, students aren't asking to replace their mentors with technology. Most students are uncomfortable relying on AI for complex or emotional needs. Even with AI available, they overwhelmingly want to maintain human connections, especially for emotional support and academic planning. Taken together, these findings suggest an opportunity to build on what students already value – strong human relationships – while addressing unmet needs through thoughtfully designed technology that complements, rather than replaces, mentor support.



Implications for equitable AI support design

The survey and interview data provide both a strong foundation and a clear set of gaps in how students engage with support at WGU, with implications for all higher education institutions interested in better supporting their students. Students generally know where to find help and, when they do, they report high satisfaction, especially with their mentors. But awareness doesn't always translate into use. Time constraints, unclear relevance, and digital friction are real barriers, particularly for students from traditionally under-resourced backgrounds, many of whom may be juggling work, family, and school. First-generation students, students of color, and women are often the least likely to use available services, even though they stand to gain the most.

Like many online-centered institutions, WGU places mentors at the heart of its student support model, a structure that differs from what is typical at many brick-and-mortar colleges, where advising and student services are often more fragmented. At WGU, each

student is paired with a dedicated 1:1 program mentor who provides consistent guidance throughout their academic journey, often checking in weekly to offer support. For many students, these mentors are the first and strongest connection to other resources. They provide accountability, motivation, and a sense of being seen. These relationships are not easily replaced, and students don't want them to be.

At the same time, students are open to receiving support from AI, especially for administrative or task-based help. Students of color, women, and first-generation students, in particular, were more likely to see the potential for AI to offer emotional and motivational support as well.

While these findings are grounded in the WGU context, they offer broader insight into the evolving support needs of adult learners, especially those navigating online or nontraditional learning environments. Many of these students balance work, caregiving,



or other responsibilities, and are looking for both flexibility and human connection in their educational experiences. This research contributes to a growing understanding of how to design support systems, whether human, AI-powered, or blended, that align with the lived realities of adult learners.

These patterns present both a challenge and an opportunity. If institutions are to build more equitable, responsive support systems, then future tools must be designed with these gaps and the students who experience them in mind. In this context, AI offers real promise. When thoughtfully implemented, AI could directly address many of the core barriers students face, offering just-in-time help, simplifying navigation, and extending support beyond the limits of traditional availability. But to realize this potential, AI tools must be designed not just for scale or efficiency, but for inclusion.

Recommendations for improving the student support experience with technology



■ **Surface support when it's most relevant.**

Students of color, first-generation students, and women are more likely to learn about support through mentors rather than through orientations or institutional materials. This suggests that timing matters as much as content. Many students don't need information at the start of their journey; they need it in the moment, when a challenge arises. Proactively surfacing the right resource at the right time, not just early, but contextually, can reduce friction and improve access. This kind of just-in-time responsiveness is well-suited to AI, which can monitor engagement patterns and anticipate needs without requiring students to opt in or reach out.

- ## ■ **Use technology to meet students on their terms — anytime, anywhere.**
- Time constraints were one of the most cited barriers to using support services. An AI tool's on-demand, asynchronous nature could help students get the help they need outside of traditional hours, when mentors or staff may not be available.

- **Reduce stigma and widen access.** A 24/7, task-focused AI tool could make it easier for students to take the first step toward getting support, especially during moments when they might otherwise disengage.
- **Preserve and enhance human connection.** Students overwhelmingly value their relationships with mentors and want to maintain that connection. An AI tool should be positioned not as a replacement, but as a supplement, handling low-stakes or logistical needs so mentors can focus on more complex, emotional, and personalized support.
- **Tailor support to those who need it most.** The students most open to emotionally intelligent AI support are also those most likely to have been underserved by traditional systems. A holistic AI support tool has the potential to deliver culturally responsive, identity-conscious support — if it's built with those needs in mind.
- **Test with intentionality.** Not all students want AI for the same reasons. Institutions should continue piloting emotionally intelligent AI interactions with students who have expressed openness, especially those from under-resourced backgrounds, to design tools that resonate with and effectively support the learners who stand to benefit most.

Ultimately, student support should not be one-size-fits-all. What this research shows is that trust, relevance, and ease of access matter just as much as availability. If an AI support tool is designed to reflect these priorities, particularly for those students who've historically been left behind, it has the potential to not only scale support but to make it more equitable. That is the real promise of AI in education — not simply efficiency, but equity.

With its scale, demographic diversity, and mentor-centered approach, the WGU population surveyed serves as a powerful test case for the future of student support. These students reflect national trends, including adult learners, first-generation students, caregivers, and working professionals navigating higher education in complex contexts. WGU Labs is actively developing and testing AI-powered support tools to supplement its human-centered ecosystem — work that can generate insights not only for internal use, but across higher education. As more institutions grapple with how to extend support in scalable, equitable ways, this research can help shape what effective, human-anchored AI looks like in practice, and offer a blueprint for how technology can meet students where they are, without losing the human relationships that matter most.



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About WGU Labs

WGU Labs is the research and development arm of Western Governors University, where our mission is to identify and support scalable solutions that address the biggest challenges in education today.

Report Contributions

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