

## Degrees Without Doors: Why Peer and Professional Networks Still Elude Online Learners

Adult online learners feel they belong at WGU, but significant gaps in peer connection and professional networking — particularly among first-generation, lower-income, and students of color — threaten academic and career outcomes



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# Executive Summary

**T**wo distinct types of connection are critical for student success: professional networks that open doors to career opportunities, and peer relationships that support academic persistence and reduce isolation. For adult online learners, particularly those from underserved groups, building either type of connection remains one of the most elusive aspects of their educational experience.

Research consistently shows that both dimensions matter. Professional networks (knowing people in one's field and having access to mentors and senior leaders) are strongly associated with career advancement and economic mobility. Meanwhile, peer connection and a sense of belonging predict persistence, engagement, and completion. Yet for first-generation students, students from low-income backgrounds, and students of color, both types of connection are harder to build and maintain. These students often start with smaller, less diverse networks and have fewer opportunities to expand them through their educational experience.



Unlike traditional on-campus learners, adult students in online programs often miss out on the twin “hidden curricula” that support both academic and career mobility. In both instances, individuals learn the unspoken rules for success through the unstructured experiences that teach them valuable social and cultural norms, organizational structures, how to build networks, and interpersonal skills such as help-seeking. Without casual peer interactions, campus jobs, or in-person mentoring, many online students are navigating their education alone.

In September 2025, we surveyed 545 students at the largest non-profit online, accredited university in the U.S. to understand how they're building social and professional capital during their time in school. We asked students about their peer connections, professional networks, comfort with help-seeking, and use of institutional tools to build relationships.

Our findings reveal high levels of institutional belonging and clarity about career goals, but troublingly low levels of peer connection and professional networking. These gaps are especially pronounced for students from underserved backgrounds.

This report examines both dimensions of connection. We first explore students' professional networks, including their access to people working in their field and in positions of influence, and identify significant equity gaps. We then turn to peer connection and belonging, finding that institutional support doesn't automatically translate into student-to-student relationships.

## Key findings:

### Professional networks

- WGU students are clear and motivated: 95% know their academic goals; 87% are clear on the career they want after graduation.
- Professional networks are thin: Nearly 1 in 5 WGU students (19%) know zero people in their desired field. Over half know 3 or fewer.
- Underserved students are further behind: WGU students from lower-income and first-generation backgrounds report consistently weaker professional networks, up to 10 percentage points behind their more privileged peers.

### Peer connection and belonging

- Belonging doesn't equal connection: 77% of students feel they belong at WGU, but only 28% feel connected to other students.
- Help-seeking is limited: 76% say they ask for help, but 81% prefer to handle things alone. Only 36% feel comfortable reaching out to alumni.
- Technology tools aren't solving it: Most WGU students haven't used or don't find value in connection tools like discussion boards or alumni platforms. Only 30% had been introduced to someone in their field through the institution.
- Most WGU students want more connection: 71% of WGU students say they want deeper relationships with fellow students, but 64% haven't made a single peer connection outside of coursework.

These results point to a structural disconnect: students are motivated and clear on their goals, but they're not being supported in building the networks that help translate a degree into opportunity. Students are completing their academic programs without the professional relationships with mentors, advocates, and industry insiders that make career mobility possible.

This gap is not just personal, it's systemic. Students from historically underserved backgrounds arrive with fewer professional contacts and leave with similarly limited networks, putting them at a continued disadvantage in the job market. In an economy where most jobs are filled through connections, this lack of social capital represents a serious threat to equity and upward mobility.

These findings underscore the need to redesign digital learning environments with human connection at the center. That means going beyond discussion boards and affinity groups to build systems that intentionally foster relationships between students, alumni, and professionals in the field.



# Introduction

Two distinct types of connection are critical throughout students' educational and career journeys: peer relationships that provide academic support and reduce isolation, and professional networks that open doors to career opportunities. Yet for many adult online learners, particularly those from underserved groups, building these connections remains one of the most elusive aspects of their educational experience.

Research consistently shows that students with strong social ties to peers are more likely to persist through challenges and complete their degrees. Peer networks provide academic support, study partners, mutual encouragement, and a sense of community, all of which help students feel less isolated as they navigate the challenges of college. Students who feel connected to their peers report higher engagement, greater satisfaction, and increased likelihood of recommending their institution to others.<sup>1 2</sup>

Professional networks are equally critical, but for different reasons. Research shows that between 50 and 80 percent of jobs are filled through referrals and personal connections rather than traditional applications.<sup>3 4</sup> In one landmark study, Chetty et al. found that economic connectedness (relationships between people of different socioeconomic backgrounds) is

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1 Tinto, V. (1997). *Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of student persistence*. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 68(6), 599–623.

2 Thomas, L. (2012). *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change: Final report from the What Works? Student Retention and Success programme*. Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

3 Rajkumar, K., Saint-Jacques, G., Bojinov, I., Brynjolfsson, E., & Aral, S. (2022). A Causal Test of the Strength of Weak Ties. *Science*, 377(6612), 1304–1310.

4 Zippia. (2023). *What percentage of jobs are found through networking?* <https://www.zippia.com/advice/what-percentage-of-jobs-are-found-through-networking/>

among the strongest predictors of upward social mobility.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Project Basta’s research demonstrates that access to more senior professionals is particularly critical for first-generation college students seeking employment.<sup>6</sup> A strong network isn’t just about the quantity of connections; who you know matters as much as how many people you know. Professional connections provide career advice, insider knowledge about how industries actually work, job leads, and advocacy throughout one’s career trajectory.

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## What is the “Hidden Curriculum”?

The hidden curriculum refers to the informal, unwritten lessons that college students learn outside of formal coursework, such as how to network with professionals, navigate workplace norms, seek mentorship, and ask for help. Traditional on-campus students often absorb these skills through everyday interactions: study groups, campus jobs, casual conversations with peers and faculty, and extracurricular activities. For online learners, these organic opportunities for professional socialization are largely absent, making it harder to develop the social capital that supports career success.

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Adult online learners face particular challenges in building both types of connections. Traditional on-campus experiences, such as part-time campus jobs, student organizations, casual peer interactions in the quad, and study groups in the library, naturally create opportunities for both peer bonding and career-connected learning. Recent research highlights that these informal campus interactions are where much of the “hidden curriculum” of professional development occurs.<sup>7</sup> Online learning environments, by design, lack these built-in mechanisms for peer-to-peer networking and professional connections. While some platforms attempt to replicate these opportunities through affinity groups or discussion boards, most online learning systems are not currently built with social connectedness (either peer or professional) as a core component of the student experience. Additionally, adult learners often don’t have time for

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5 Chetty, R., Jackson, M. O., Kuchler, T., Stroebel, J., Hendren, N., Garber, A., Grondin, A., & Heathcote, J. (2022). *Social capital I: Measurement and associations with economic mobility*. *Nature*, 608(7921), 108–121. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-022-04996-4>

6 Project Basta. (n.d.). *SoCap insights: Building social capital for first-gen college grads*. Retrieved December 12, 2025, from <https://insights.projectbasta.com/social-capital/>

7 Jack, A. A. (2019). *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*. Harvard University Press.



traditional internships where they might gain insider knowledge of how roles and industries actually work. For career-changers who represent over half of online learners, networking is especially important to help recruiters see beyond their resumes to their broader abilities.

These challenges may be compounded for students from historically underserved groups, who often begin college with smaller networks and fewer connections to advanced professional opportunities. First-generation college students, lower-income students, and students of color typically have less access to both peer support networks during college and professionals in their desired fields.<sup>8 9 10</sup> These gaps in both academic support and professional connections put students at a disadvantage for degree completion and job market success, making them both less likely to earn degrees and less likely to advance professionally.

This survey examined both peer connection patterns and professional networking behaviors among students at Western Governors University, the nation's largest nonprofit online university. Our goal was to understand gaps in both peer connections and professional networks, and to identify opportunities to strengthen students' social connections and support systems, particularly for those from underserved backgrounds.

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8 Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). *Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students*. Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.

9 Jack, A. A. (2019). *The privileged poor: How elite colleges are failing disadvantaged students*. Harvard University Press.

10 Museus, S. D., & Neville, K. M. (2012). Delving into the Cultural Wealth of Students of Color: How Cultural Capital and Campus Cultural Relevance Foster Sense of Belonging in College. *Journal of College Student Development*, 53(6), 709-730

Our findings reveal that these online learners have strong academic clarity and institutional belonging, but lack both the peer connections that support degree completion and the professional networks that enable career success:

## Key findings

### Section 1: Professional Networks

- **Key Takeaway 1:** Nearly all students are clear on their goals, but nearly 20% have no professional network
- **Key Takeaway 2:** Underserved students are almost 10 percentage points behind their privileged peers on network quality

### Section 2: Peer Connection and Belonging

- **Key Takeaway 3:** 77% feel belonging, but only 28% feel connected to other students
- **Key Takeaway 4:** 76% say they ask for help, yet 81% prefer handling things alone
- **Key Takeaway 5:** 64% of students made zero connections outside of courses

Taken together, these results reveal a critical disconnect. Despite a strong understanding of career goals and high satisfaction with their institution, students don't view their educational experience holistically. They see it as transactional (get the degree, get a job) without engaging with the “hidden curriculum” required to actually succeed: building peer relationships for academic support and networking to understand their future industry and make connections who can help them get jobs. For institutions focused on both retention and career outcomes, these data reveal an urgent need to integrate social connection (both peer and professional) into the core student experience.



# Survey Approach/ Methodology

**W**e distributed the survey in September 2025 to examine professional networks, social connections, belonging, help-seeking behaviors, and support systems among adult working students at Western Governors University (WGU). The survey included items on network size and quality, peer connections made during enrollment, feelings of belonging and loneliness, comfort with asking for help, and use of technology for social connection. Overall, 545 students responded to the survey.



## **Participants in this survey were recruited from the WGU Student Insights Council.**

The Student Insights Council (SIC) is a standing panel of approximately 6,000 students from across Western Governors University's broader student body of roughly 194,000 students. The panel was designed to be representative of WGU's overall student population based on key demographics such as program of study, degree program (undergraduate versus graduate), and first-generation college status. To enable more reliable subgroup analyses, the SIC intentionally oversampled Asian, Native American/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students. Participants come from all four WGU colleges.

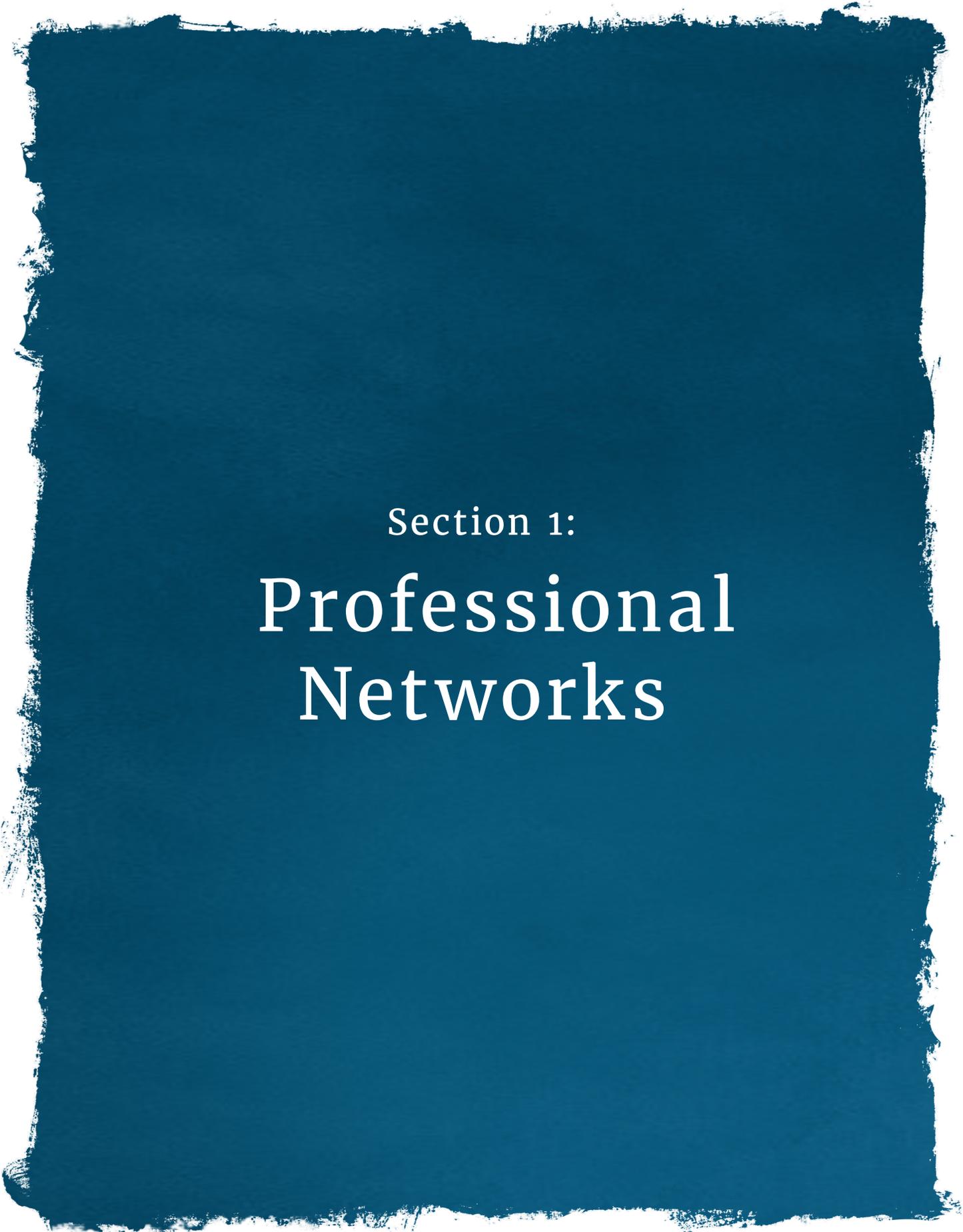
## Who Took Our Survey?

- **Gender:** 79% Woman, 19.4% Man, 0.6% Non-binary, 1.0% Not provided
- **Race/Ethnicity:** 68.2% White, 18.0% Black, 11.4% Latino/a/x, 6.2% Asian, 3.8% Native American, 1.3% Pacific Islander, 0.9% MENA, 1.6% Another racial identity (10% of respondents identified two or more racial/ethnic groups.)
- **WGU College:** 33% School of Education, 27.3% School of Business, 23% School of Technology, 16.4% Leavitt School of Health
- **Household Income:** 11.9% \$0–\$15,999, 7.1% \$16,000–\$24,999, 10.3% \$25,000–\$34,999, 10% \$35,000–\$44,999, 17.5% \$45,000–\$64,999, 43.2% \$65,000 or more
- **First-Generation Status:** 50.4% Neither parent/guardian attended a 4-year institution, 15% One or both parents/guardians attended (but did not graduate), 34.6% One or both parents/guardians graduated from a 4-year institution
- **Age:** Mean age = 35.8 years (SD = 9.4); Range: 18 to 73 years

## A Note on Demographic Categories

**Throughout this report, we use “BHI2+” to refer to students who identify as Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Indigenous, or two or more races.** This categorization reflects WGU’s approach to examining equity gaps among students from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds. We also examine differences by income level (lower-income defined as household income below \$45,000) and first-generation status (neither parent/guardian completed a four-year degree).





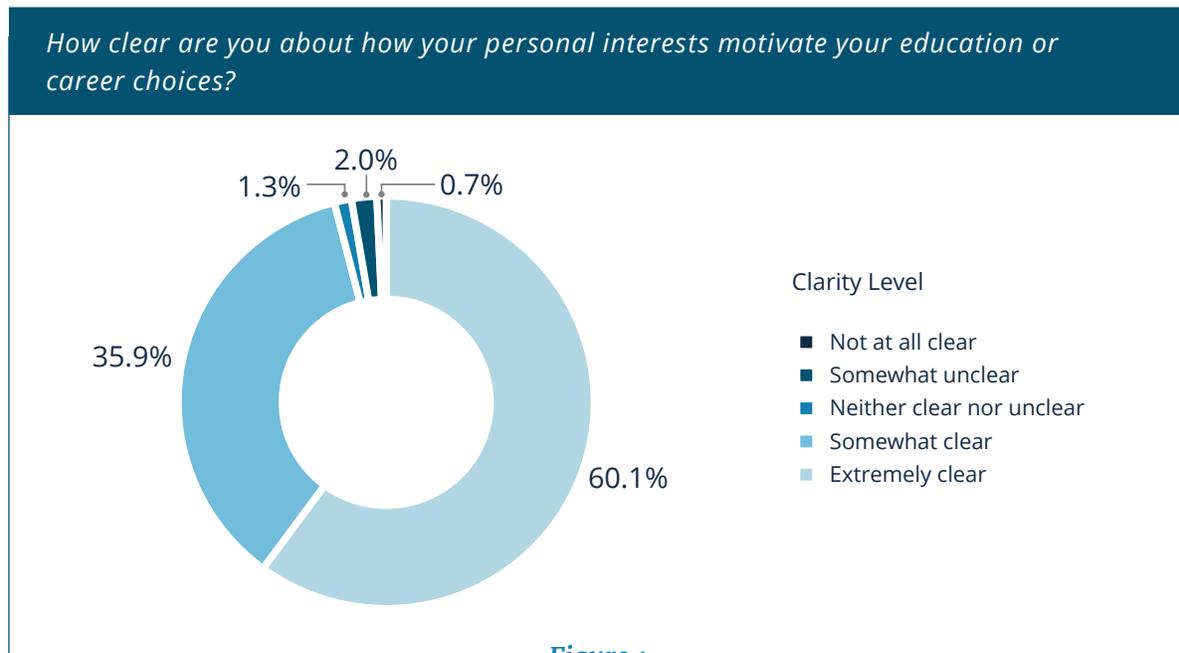
Section 1:  
**Professional  
Networks**

## Key Takeaway 1:

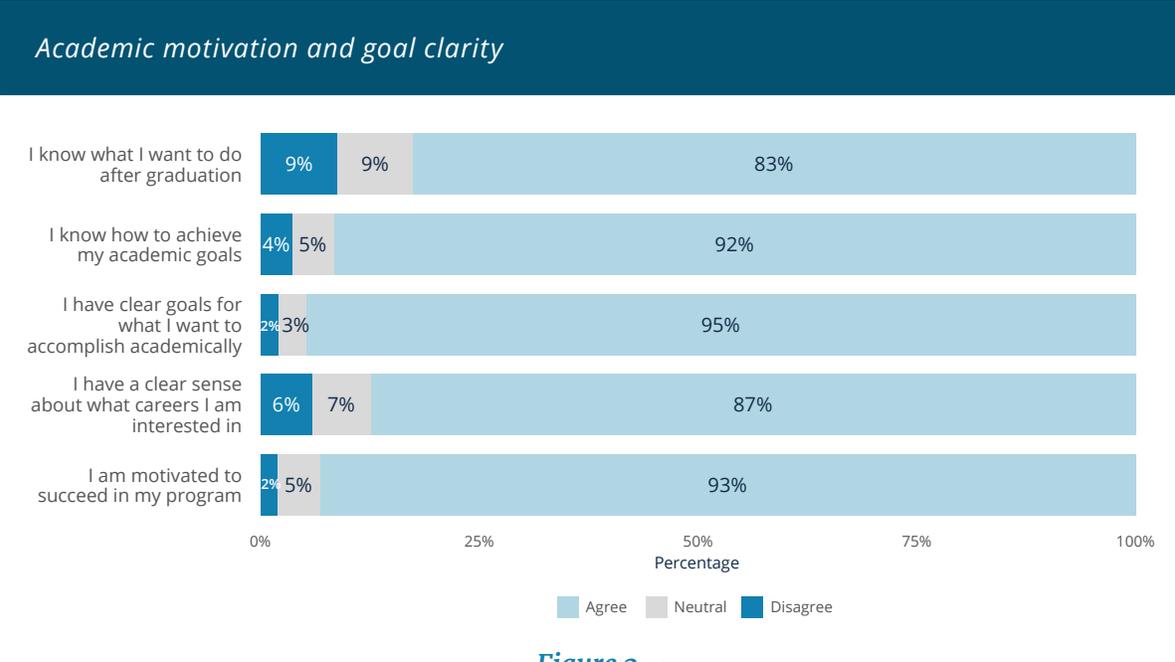
### Nearly all students are clear on their goals, but nearly 20% have no professional network

Our findings showed that students are remarkably clear about their educational and career goals. Indeed, 95% of students said they were clear about how their interests motivate their education or career choices ([Figure 1](#)).

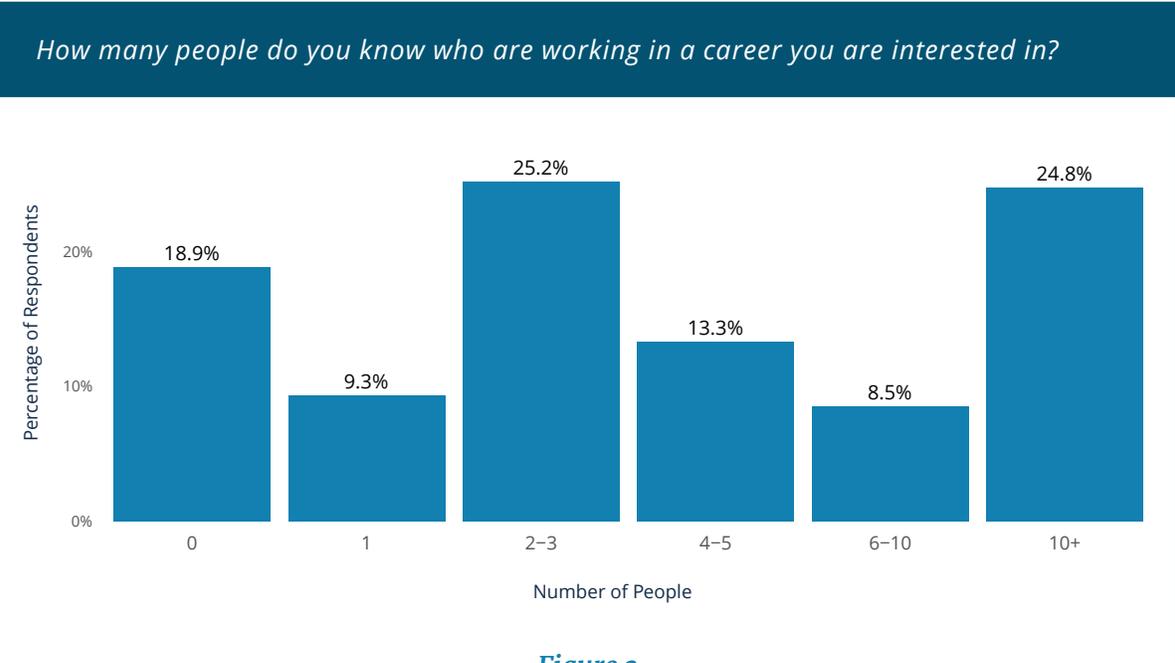
Ninety-five percent of students said they have clear goals for what they want to accomplish academically, 87% said they have a clear sense of what careers they are interested in, and 83% said they know what they want to do after graduation ([Figure 2](#)). Students were also highly motivated to achieve their goals. Ninety-three percent agreed they were motivated to succeed in their program, and 92% said they know how to achieve their academic goals. Taken together, these data suggest that nearly all WGU students have clear academic and career goals and are highly motivated to accomplish them.



Despite high motivation to succeed in school and career, our findings revealed that many students lack the networks critical to achieving their goals. We asked students how many people they know who work in the career they are interested in. Almost 20% (18.9%) reported knowing zero people working in the career they are interested in ([Figure 3](#)). Over half (53.4%) reported knowing 0-3 people working in the field they are interested in.



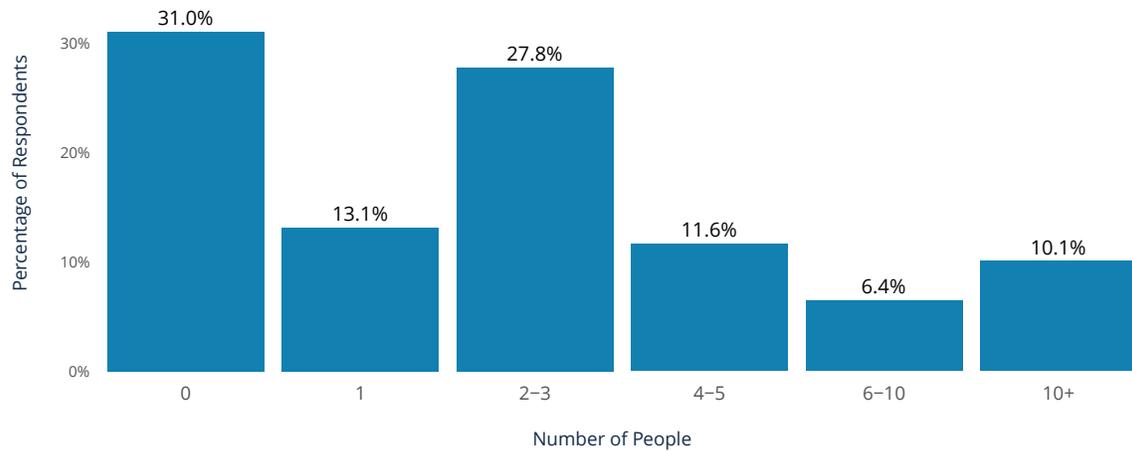
**Figure 2**



**Figure 3**

The gaps become even more pronounced when examining access to people in senior or influential positions. Almost a third of students (31%) reported knowing no one in a senior or influential role in their desired field (Figure 4). Seventy-two percent reported knowing 0-3 people in senior or influential roles in their desired field.

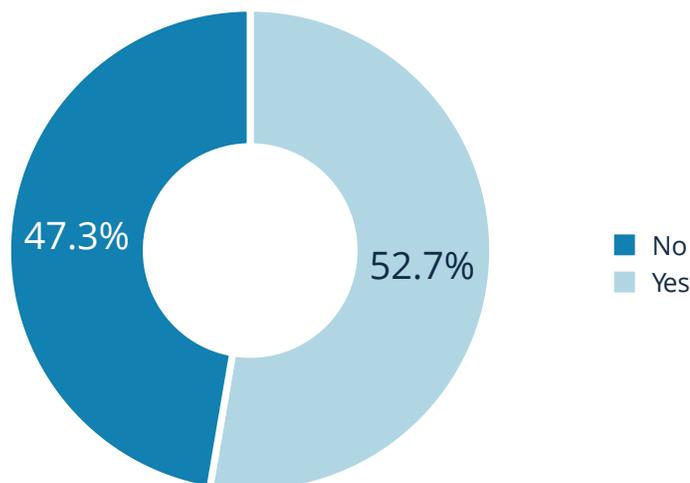
*How many people do you know in senior or influential roles in your field of interest?*



*Figure 4*

Finally, we found that many students did not regularly engage their networks. Indeed, 47% of students reported not having spoken with anyone in their field about advancing their careers in the past month (*Figure 5*). This finding is noteworthy because professional relationships require active maintenance; networks atrophy without regular conversations and contact.

*In the past month, have you talked to anyone in the field you're interested in about advancing your career?*



*Figure 5*

## Why This Matters

Research consistently shows that professional networks are critical for career advancement.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Our survey found that nearly one in five students know zero people in their field and over half know three or fewer, revealing a fundamental gap in career readiness. Even students with clear goals and strong motivation cannot access opportunities they don't know exist. Without connections currently working in their desired field, students lack access to informal advice about how their industry actually operates, what skills are most valued, what the day-to-day work entails, and how to position themselves as competitive candidates.

Having a strong network is not just about how many people someone knows. It's about who they know. Indeed, access to "people leaders" (those in senior or influential roles) is particularly beneficial.<sup>13</sup> These individuals have broader networks they can connect students into, carry more weight when making recommendations, provide an insider perspective on industry dynamics and emerging opportunities, and can advocate for candidates in hiring decisions. Yet almost a third of students don't know anyone in such positions, and nearly three-quarters know three or fewer people in senior roles, severely limiting their access to critical career advantages.

In today's job market, where professional networks provide a significant edge in securing positions, these gaps threaten students' ability to translate their education into career advancement.<sup>14</sup> Research shows that approximately half of jobs are found through informal networks, and referred candidates are significantly more likely to be hired than those who apply through traditional channels.<sup>15</sup> Students may leave WGU with the credential they came for and the clarity about what they want to do next, but without the professional relationships that help them actually get there. To fulfill the promise of a degree as a path to upward mobility, institutions must help students build and activate strong professional networks.

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11 Wolff, H.-G., & Moser, K. (2009). Effects of networking on career success: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 94(1), 196–206.

12 Wolff, H.-G., & Moser, K. (2010). Do specific types of networking predict specific mobility outcomes? A two-year prospective study. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 77(2), 238–245.

13 Seibert, S. E., Kraimer, M. L., & Liden, R. C. (2001). A Social Capital Theory of Career Success. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44(2), 219–237.

14 Rajkumar, K., Saint-Jacques, G., Bojinov, I., Brynjolfsson, E., & Aral, S. (2022). A Causal Test of the Strength of Weak Ties. *Science*, 377(6612), 1304–1310.

15 Burks, S. V., Cowgill, B., Hoffman, M., & Housman, M. (2015). The Value of Hiring through Employee Referrals. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 130(2), 805–839.

## Key Takeaway 2:

# Underserved students are almost 10 percentage points behind their privileged peers on network quality

Students from underserved backgrounds face substantial disadvantages when it comes to professional network quality.<sup>16</sup> Across multiple measures, we found consistent gaps of approximately 10 percentage points or more between students from privileged backgrounds and their peers from underserved communities.

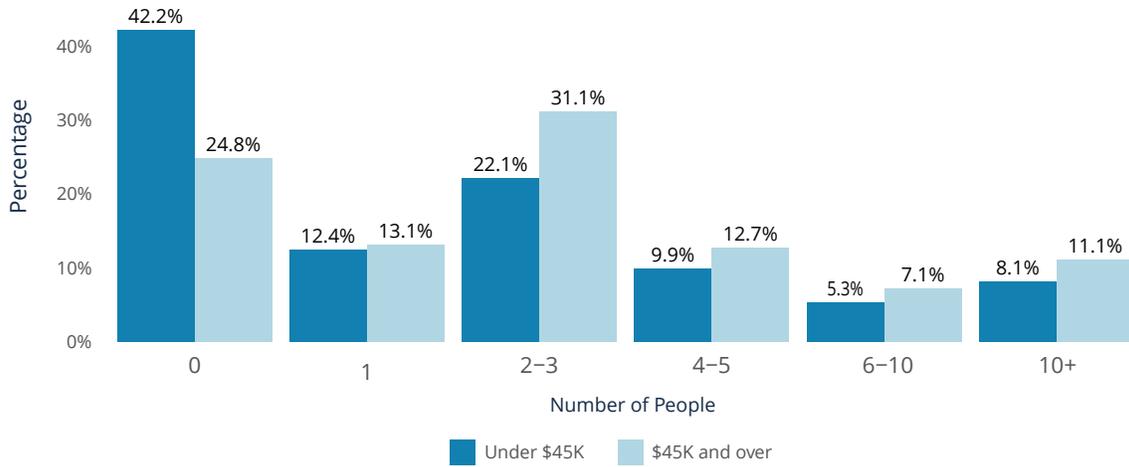
## Lower-Income Students Face Stark Network Gaps

Among students with annual household incomes below \$45,000, nearly a quarter (24.5%) reported knowing no one working in their field of interest, compared to just 15.3% of their higher-income peers (Figure 6). Lower-income students were also less likely to know senior or influential people in their field of interest. Whereas 24.8% of higher-income students reported knowing no one in senior roles in their field of interest, over 40% of lower-income students did (Figure 7). These gaps are striking and place lower-income students at a considerable disadvantage in the labor market.



16 Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (2011). A Social Capital Framework for the Study of Institutional Agents and Their Role in the Empowerment of Low-Status Students and Youth. *Youth & Society*, 43(3), 1066-1109.

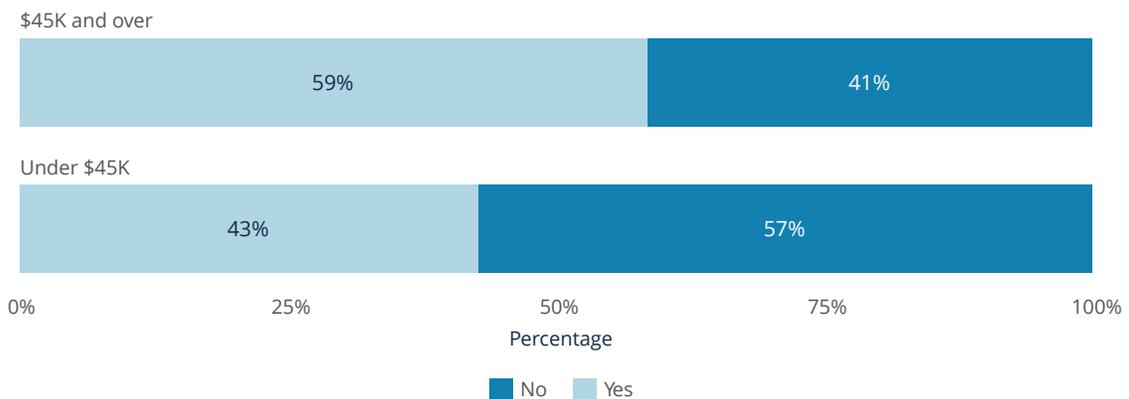
*How many people do you know in senior or influential roles in your field of interest?  
(By income)*



**Figure 7**

Lower-income students were also less likely to have had a recent career-related conversation. Just 43% said they had spoken to someone about advancing their career in the past month, compared to 59% of higher-income students (**Figure 8**).

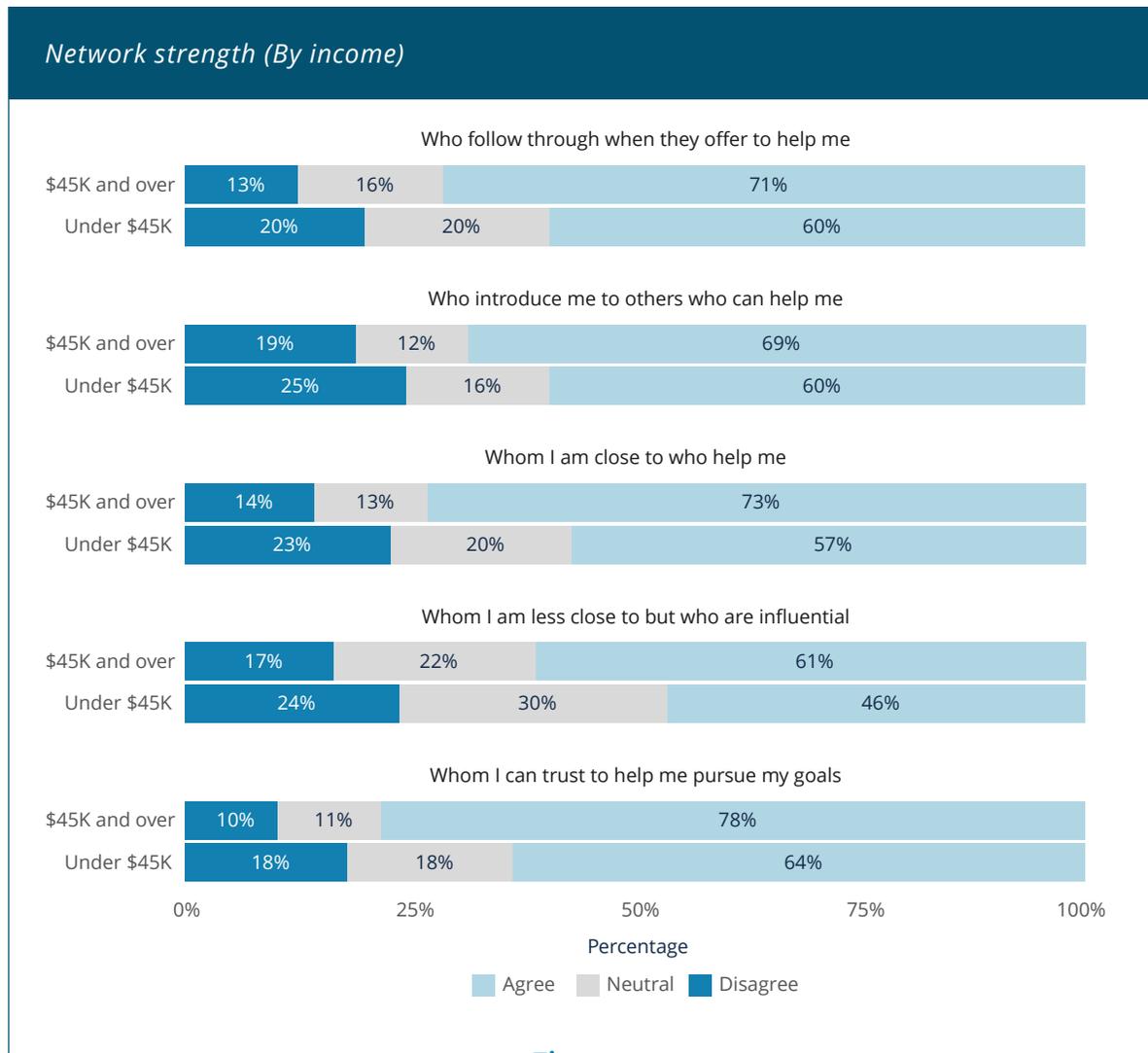
*In the past month, have you talked to anyone in the field you're interested in about advancing your career? (By income)*



**Figure 8**

When asked about the strength of their networks, low-income students were consistently less likely to report having people they could trust, who followed through, or who were influential:

- Trust to help pursue goals: 64% (low-income) vs. 78% (higher-income)
- Follow through on help: 60% vs. 71%
- Close ties who help: 57% vs. 73%
- Influential contacts (i.e., weak social ties): 46% vs. 61% (**Figure 9**)

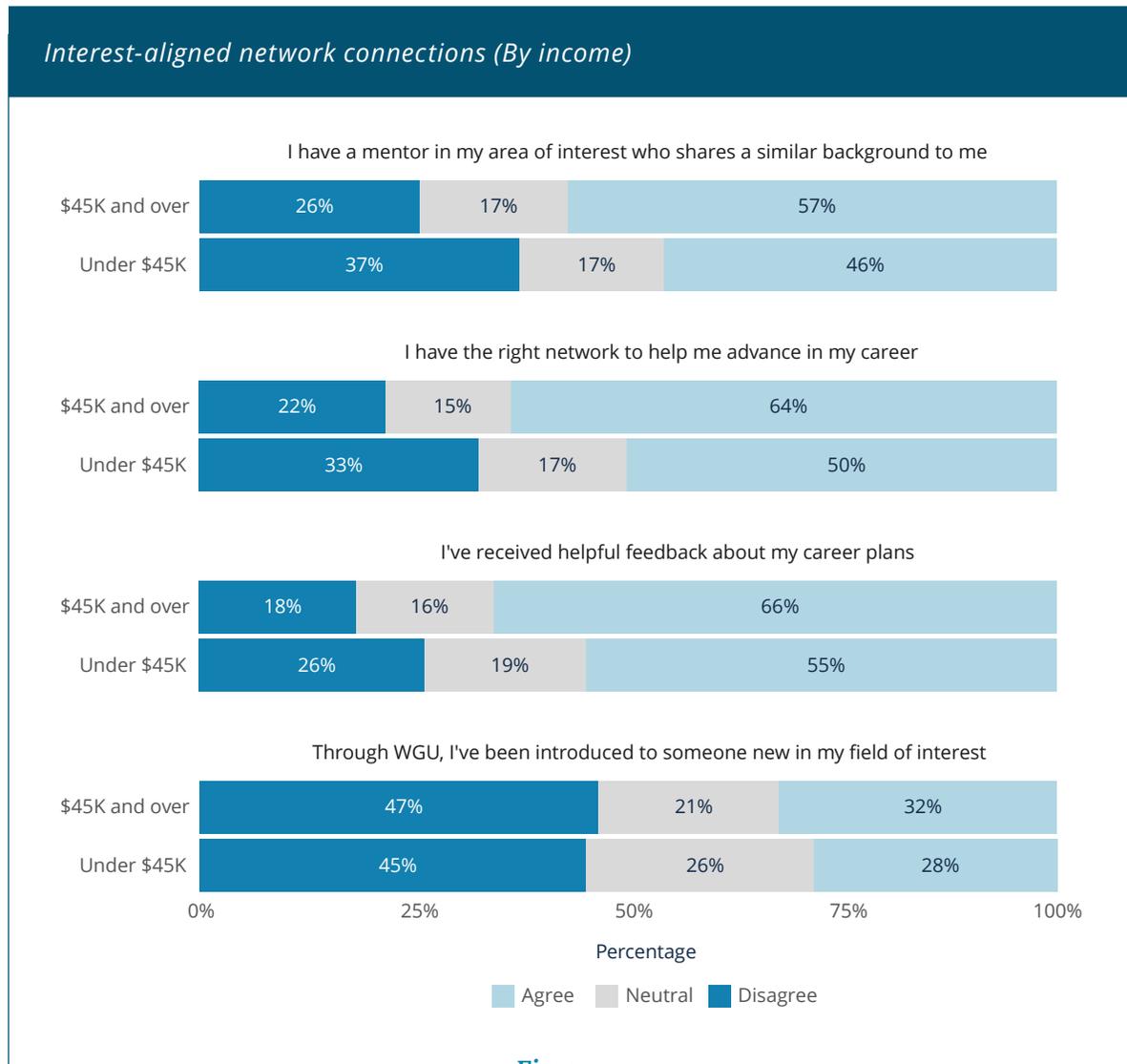


**Figure 9**

These findings suggest that it's not just that low-income students know fewer people. They're also less likely to know people who actively provide support, are in positions of influence, or who can help open doors to others.

Even when students had social connections, they were less likely to receive helpful, career-aligned support. For example, lower-income students were:

- Less likely to have a mentor in their field who shares a similar background (46% vs. 57%)
- Less likely to have received helpful feedback about career plans (55% vs. 66%)
- Less likely to feel they have the right network to help them advance (50% vs. 64%) ([Figure 10](#))

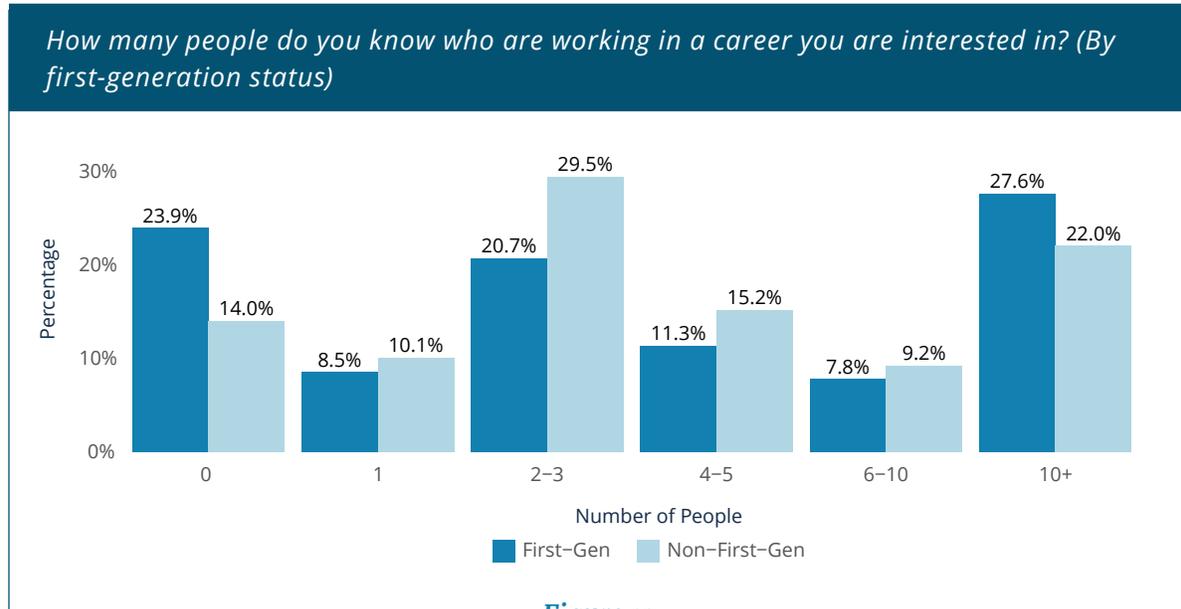


**Figure 10**

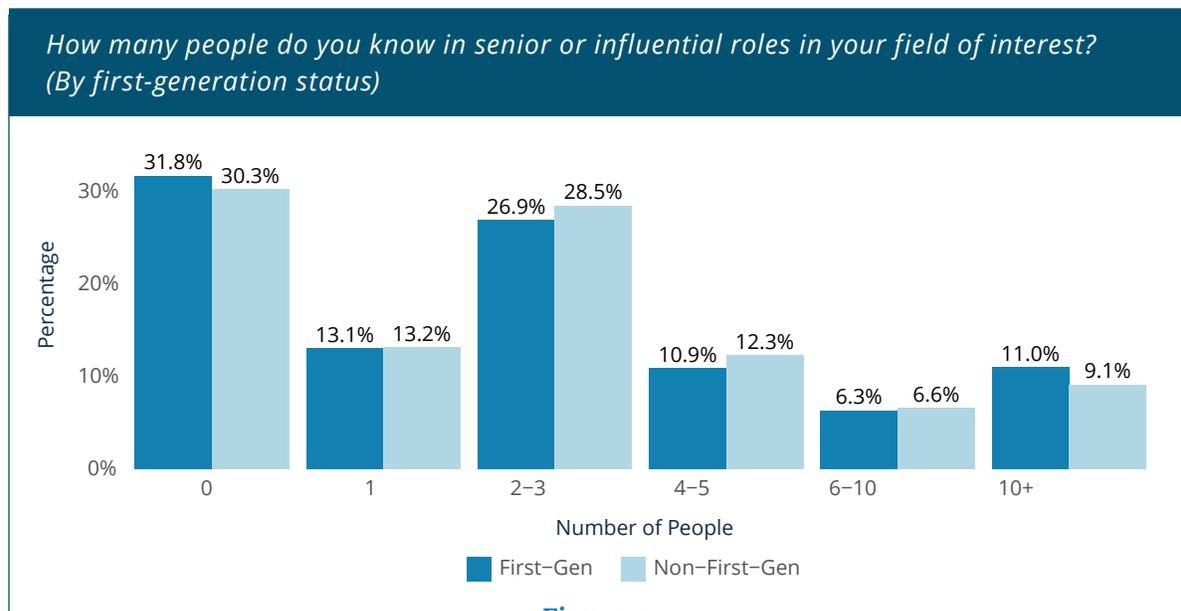
These differences suggest that students with fewer financial resources may also have more limited access to the informal career guidance and real-world perspective that come from consistent professional interactions.

## First-Generation Students Also Experience Reduced Network Access

The data show similar patterns for first-generation college students. First-generation students were more likely than continuing-generation students to report having no one in their field of interest (23.9% vs. 14%) ([Figure 11](#)) and were less likely to know someone further along in their career (81% vs. 91%) ([Figure 12](#)), reinforcing a gap in access to career-relevant social capital.

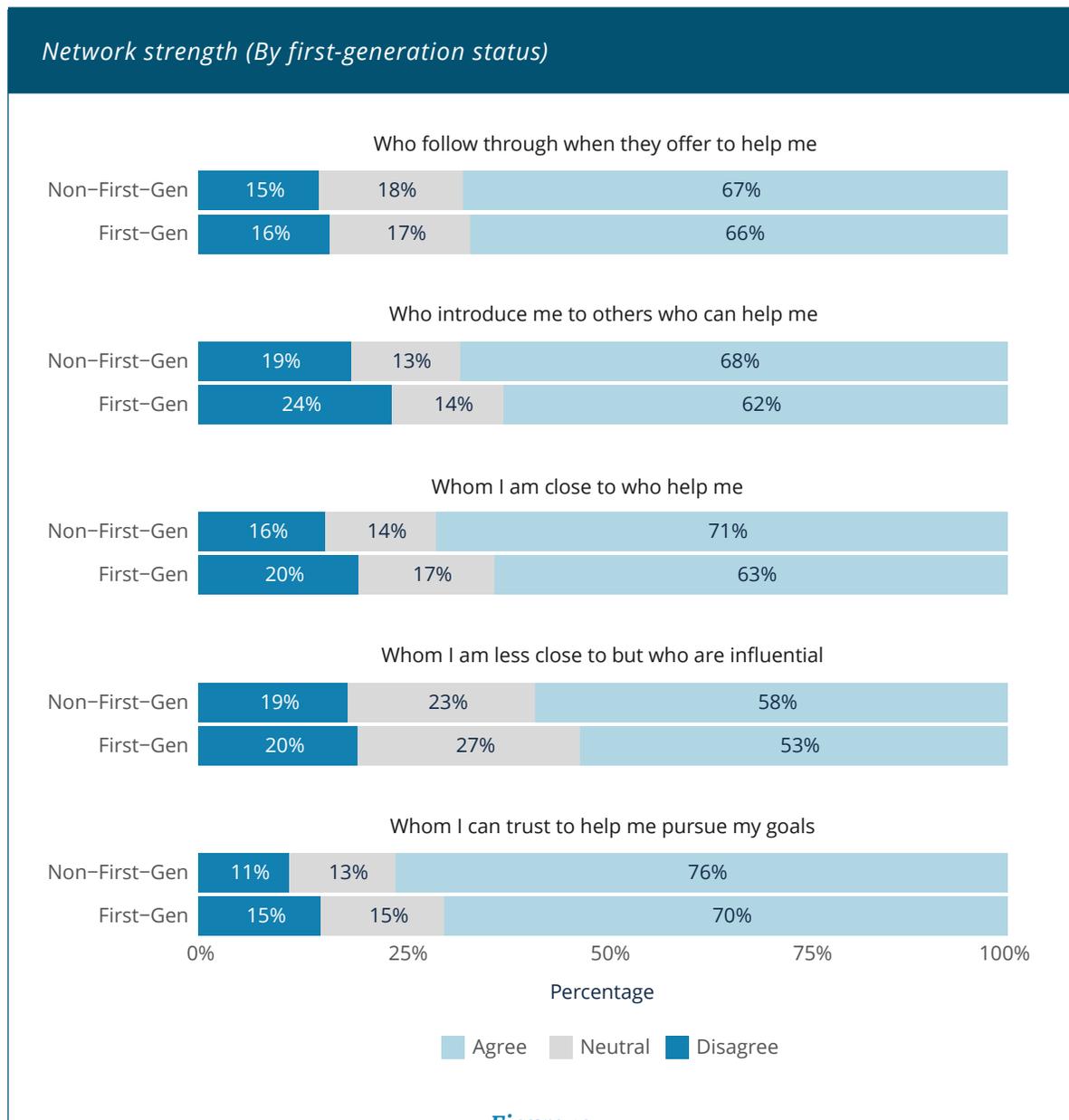


**Figure 11**



**Figure 12**

The strength of first-generation students' networks was also generally lower across multiple relational indicators. First-generation students were slightly less likely to agree they have people who introduce them to others who can help (62% vs. 68%), people they are close to who help (63% vs. 71%), people they are less close to but who are influential (53% vs. 58%), and people they trust to help pursue their goals (70% vs. 76%) (Figure 13). Perceived follow-through on offers to help was about the same (66% vs. 67%). Taken together, these results suggest that first-generation students may feel they have some career-aligned support, but are less likely to report the kinds of strong, mobilizable, and influence-linked ties that help networks translate into concrete opportunities.



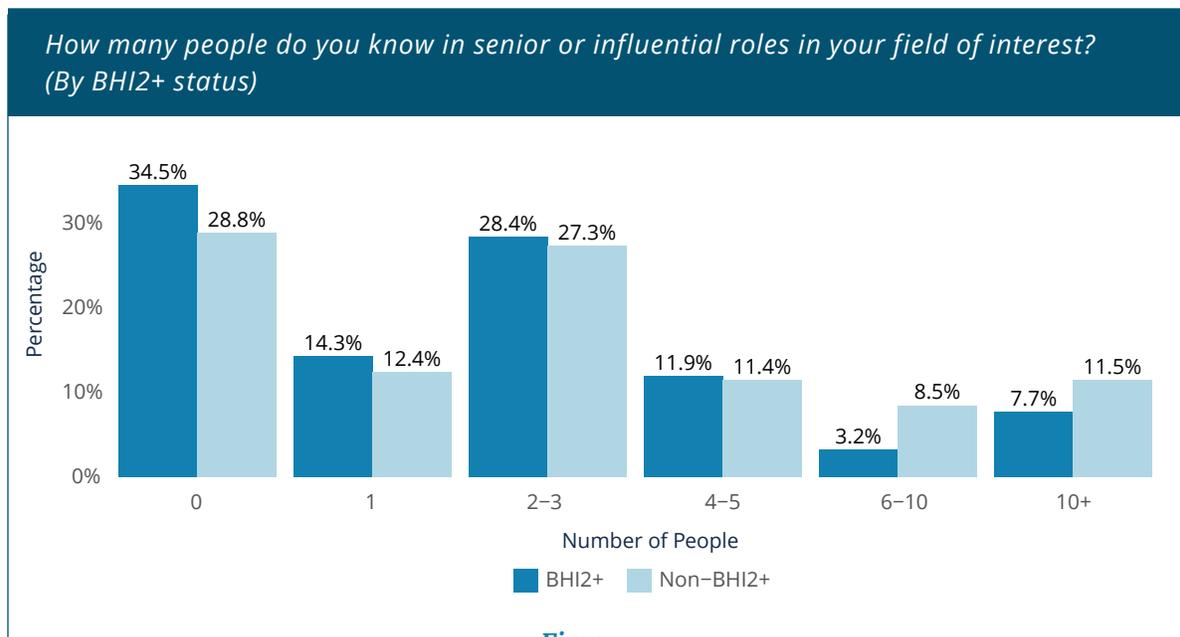
**Figure 13**

## BHI2+ Students Show Mixed Results

Students identifying as Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and/or multiracial (BHI2+) reported both strengths and challenges in developing their professional networks. While a concerning 23% said they knew no one in their desired field (vs. 16.3% of non-BHI2+ students) (**Figure 14**), they were more likely to report frequent conversations about their goals, possibly due to engagement with Employee Resource Groups or other community spaces (**Figure 16**).

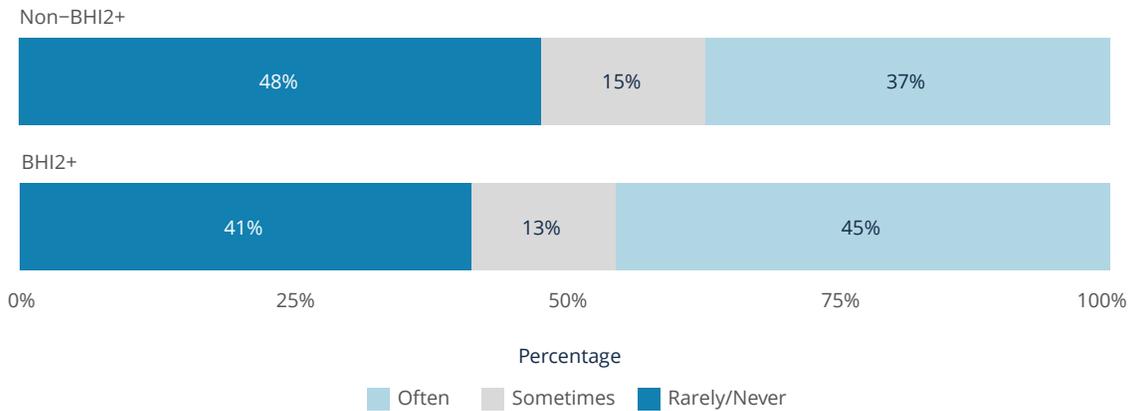


**Figure 14**



**Figure 15**

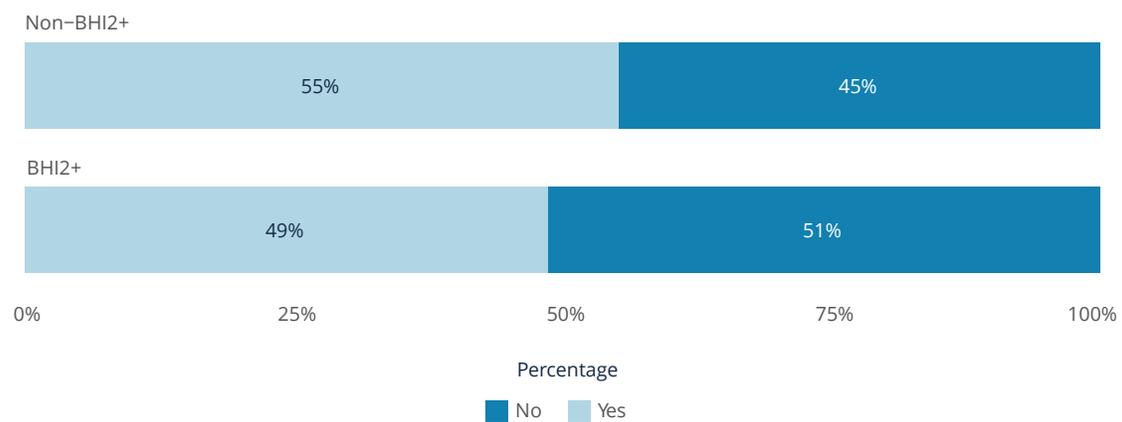
*How often do you discuss your interests or goals with someone at WGU? (by BHI2+ status)*



**Figure 16**

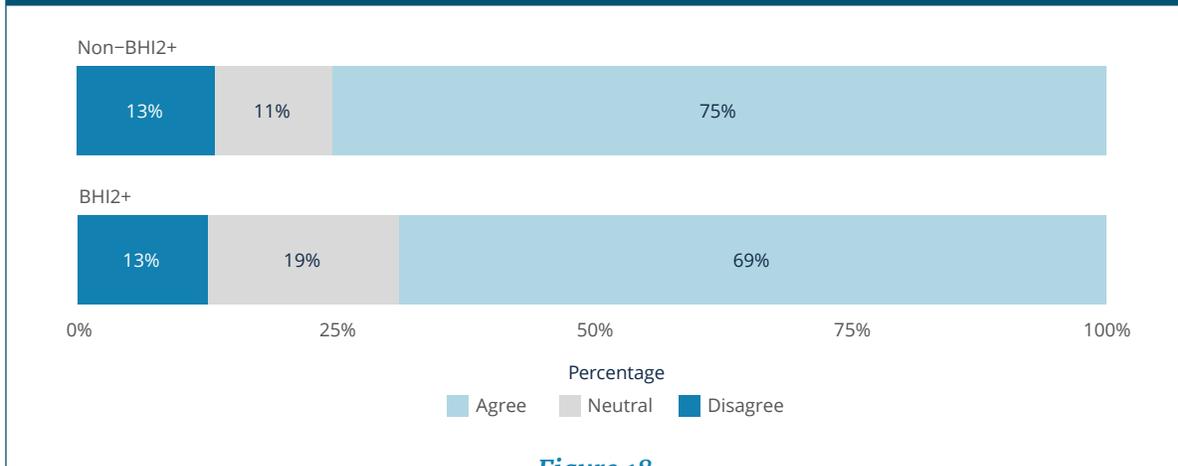
Still, only 49% of BHI2+ students reported having a recent career conversation ([Figure 17](#)), and 69% said they know people whom they can trust to help them pursue their goals, compared to 75% of non-BHI2+ peers ([Figure 18](#)). These findings suggest a potential gap between positive attitudes about help-seeking and actual relationship-building behaviors.

*In the past month, have you talked to anyone in the field you're interested in about advancing your career? (By BHI2+ status)*



**Figure 17**

*How many people do you know whom you can trust to help you pursue your goals?*



**Figure 18**

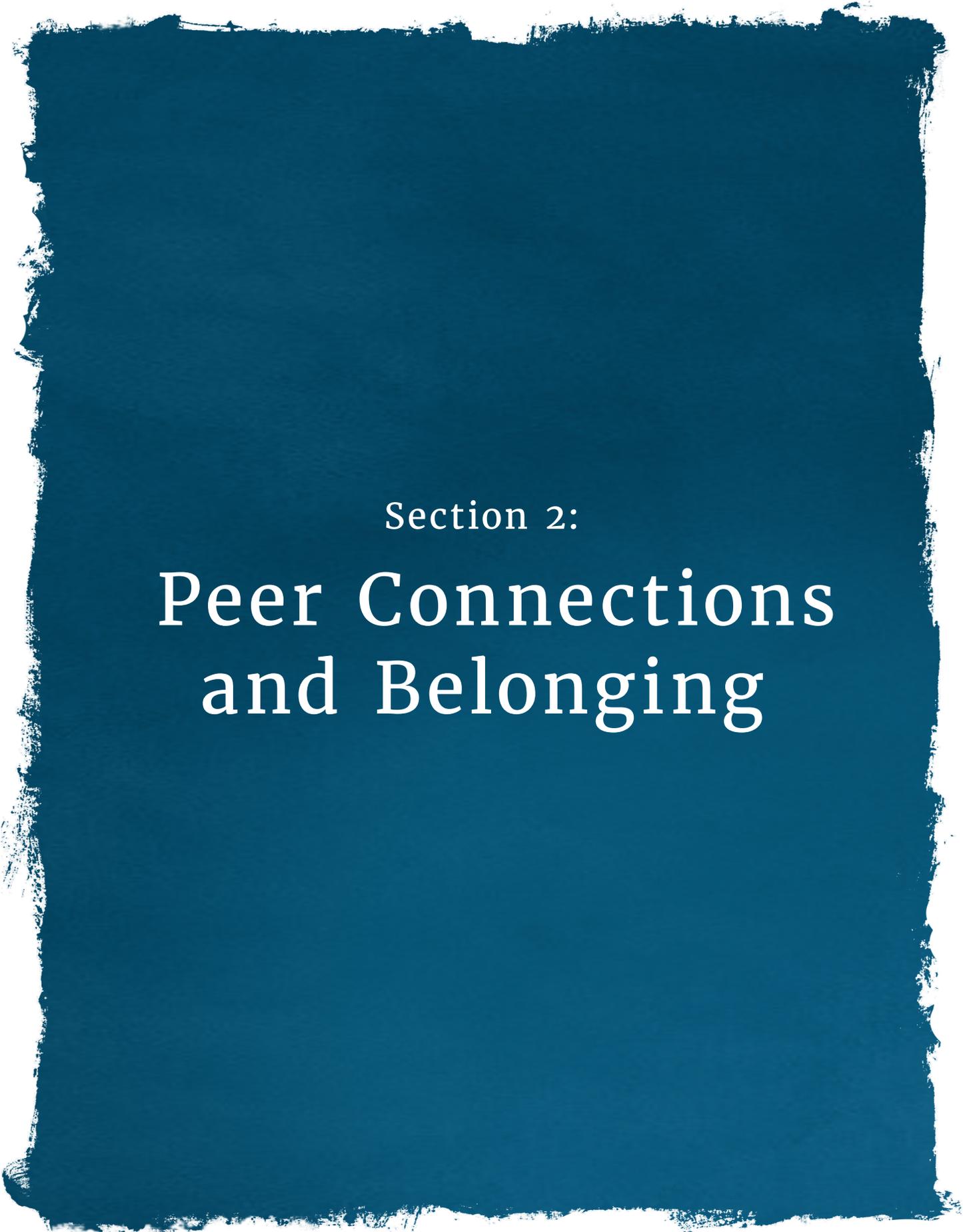
## Why this matters

The promise of higher education as a pathway to opportunity depends not only on academic success but also on students' ability to build relationships that open doors to career advancement. Our findings show that for many WGU students — especially those from low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized backgrounds — access to these relationships is limited from the start and often remains that way throughout their time at WGU.

Students from underserved backgrounds arrive with fewer connections, and our data suggest that the current system does little to help close that gap. These students are less likely to know people in their field, to have influential or supportive contacts, or to receive feedback or guidance on their career plans. Even when they do know someone, the strength and usefulness of those ties (measured by follow-through, trust, or influence) tends to be lower. This pattern is not just about access to resources; it's about access to people, and it has critical implications for social mobility.

In a job market where networking is often a prerequisite for opportunity, the absence of these relationships puts students at a significant disadvantage. They may leave WGU with a degree and strong motivation, but without the connections that help translate those assets into real-world outcomes.

If we are serious about improving equity in outcomes, we must treat relationship-building as a core component of student success, not an optional add-on. Helping students build stronger, more diverse, and more mobilizable networks is not just a career services function; it's a structural equity issue.



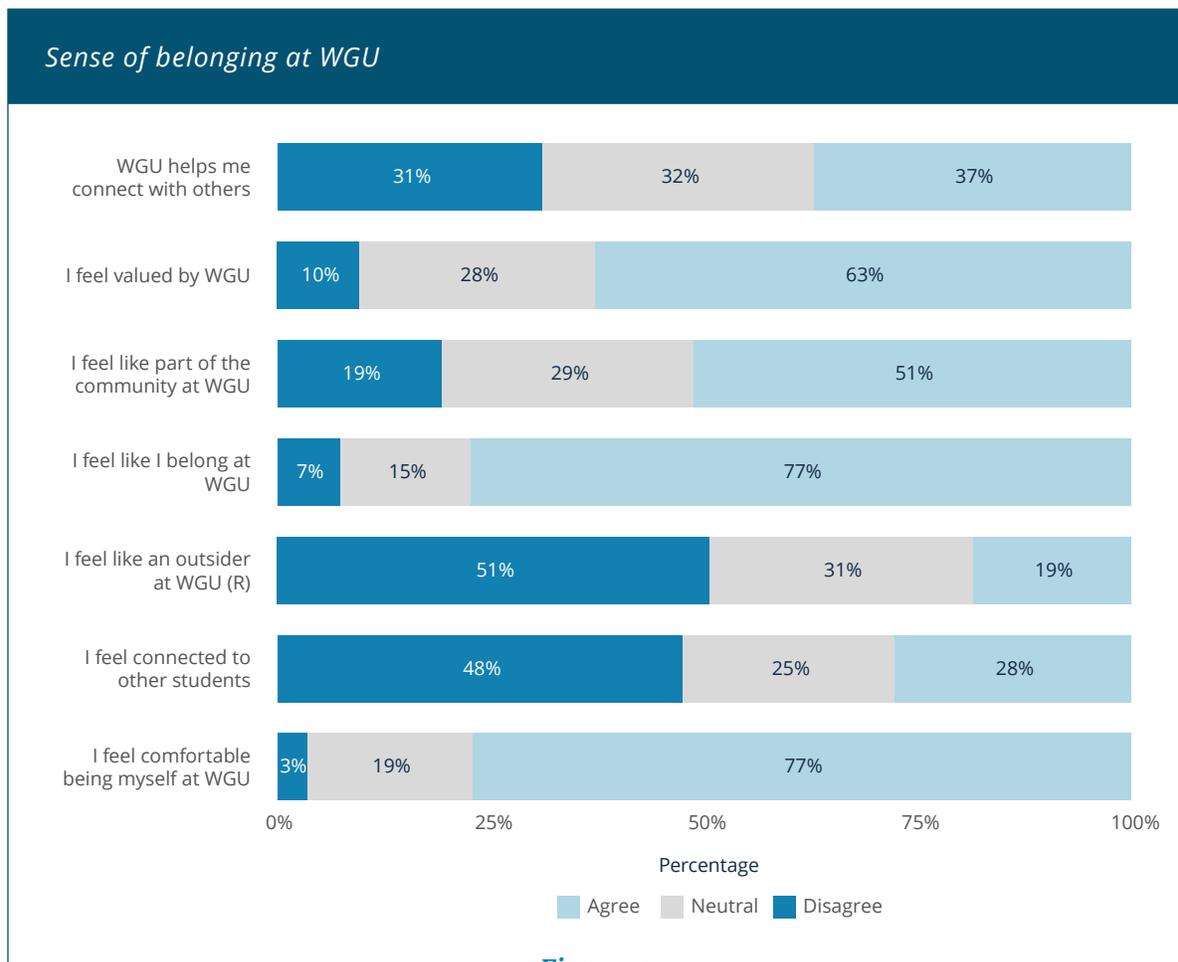
Section 2:

# Peer Connections and Belonging

### Key Takeaway 3:

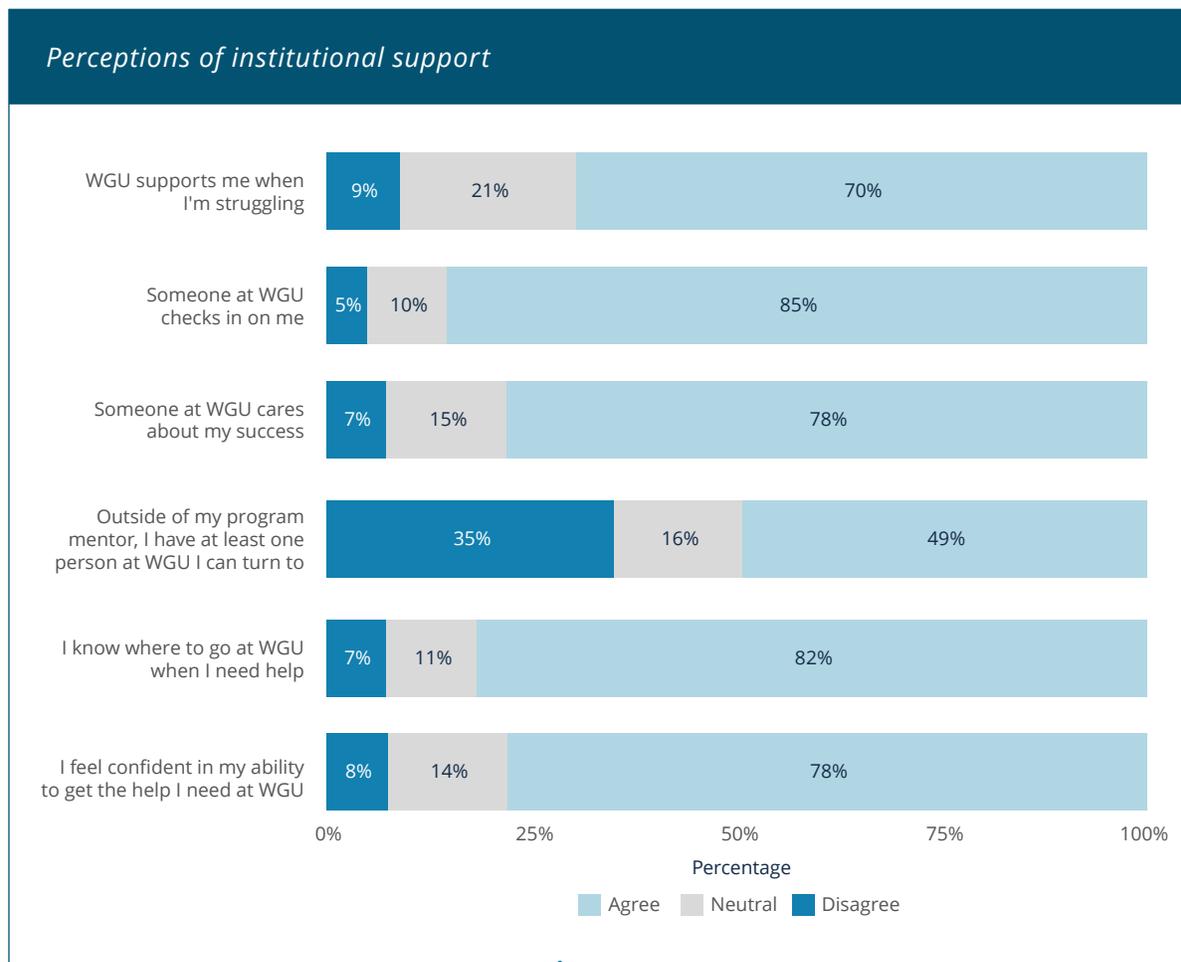
## 77% feel belonging, but only 28% feel connected to other students

Consistent with our previous research, we found that most students reported strong feelings of institutional belonging.<sup>17</sup> Seventy-seven percent of students said they feel they belong at WGU, and 77% also agreed that they feel comfortable being themselves at the institution (**Figure 19**). Sixty-three percent agreed that they feel valued by their institution. Very few students (19%) agreed that they feel like an outsider at their institution. Overall, this suggests that students are largely experiencing high levels of belonging.



<sup>17</sup> Burgin, A., & Munasinghe, A. (2024). Institutional support matters when it comes to belonging. WGU Labs. <https://www.wgulabs.org/posts/institutional-support-matters-when-it-comes-to-belonging-research-brief>

Students also felt supported by their institution. Indeed, 70% said the institution supports them when they are struggling, 85% reported that someone at WGU checks in on them, and 78% said that someone at the institution cares about their success (*Figure 20*). Eighty-two percent agreed that they know where to go when they need help, and 78% agreed that they feel confident in their ability to get the help they need.



*Figure 20*

These findings suggest that WGU is largely succeeding at creating a supportive environment where students feel recognized and cared for at the institutional level. However, the data also reveal a significant gap: this sense of institutional belonging does not extend into meaningful relationships with peers.

Indeed, only 28% of students reported feeling connected to other students. Just over a third (37%) said the institution helps them connect with others, and only 51% agreed that they feel part of the institution's broader community.



## Why this matters

WGU students overwhelmingly feel a sense of belonging, believe someone at the university cares about their success, and know where to go when they need help. But this institutional support isn't translating into student-to-student connections.

Only a small fraction of students report feeling connected to their peers, and most say the institution doesn't help them build those relationships. This disconnect suggests that students may feel recognized by the institution but not truly part of a community, a distinction with real consequences.

While institutional belonging and support are essential, peer connection plays a different and equally critical role. Peers offer shared experience, real-time encouragement, and informal problem-solving. They help reduce feelings of isolation and foster a sense of being “in it together,” which is especially important in an online, self-paced environment.<sup>18</sup>

This gap prevents students from fully benefiting from postsecondary education. Research shows that both a sense of belonging and strong peer ties contribute to academic success. Students with meaningful relationships are more likely to persist through challenges, stay engaged, and find satisfaction in their educational experience.<sup>19</sup> They're also more likely to become engaged alumni, recommending the institution to others, giving back, and staying involved long term.<sup>20</sup>

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18 Blackmon, S. J., & Major, C. (2012). Student Experiences in Online Courses: A Qualitative Research Synthesis. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 13(2), 77–85.

19 Hausmann, L. R. M., Schofield, J. W., & Woods, R. L. (2007). Sense of Belonging as a Predictor of Intentions to Persist among African American and White First-Year College Students. *Research in Higher Education*, 48(7), 803–839.

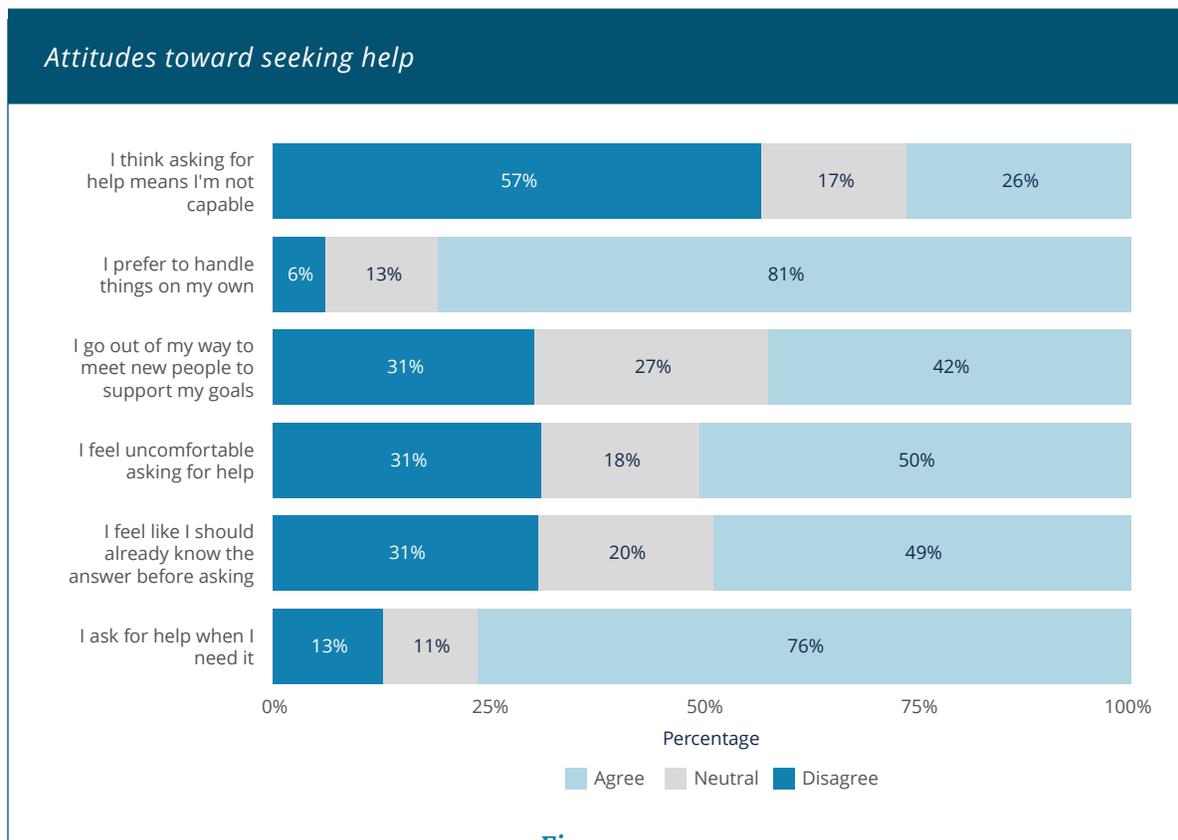
20 Gaier, S. (2005). Alumni Satisfaction with Their Undergraduate Academic Experience and the Impact on Alumni Giving and Participation. *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 5(4), 279–288.

## Key Takeaway 4:

# 76% say they ask for help, yet 81% prefer handling things alone

Help-seeking behaviors shape both peer support and professional network building. Students' comfort with asking for help influences whether they form relationships with classmates and whether they reach out to alumni or industry contacts. Our findings uncovered a core tension in students' help-seeking behaviors. On the surface, attitudes appear positive: 76% of students said they ask for help when they need it, and only 26% agreed that asking for help means they're not capable, suggesting most don't see help-seeking as a sign of weakness (*Figure 21*).

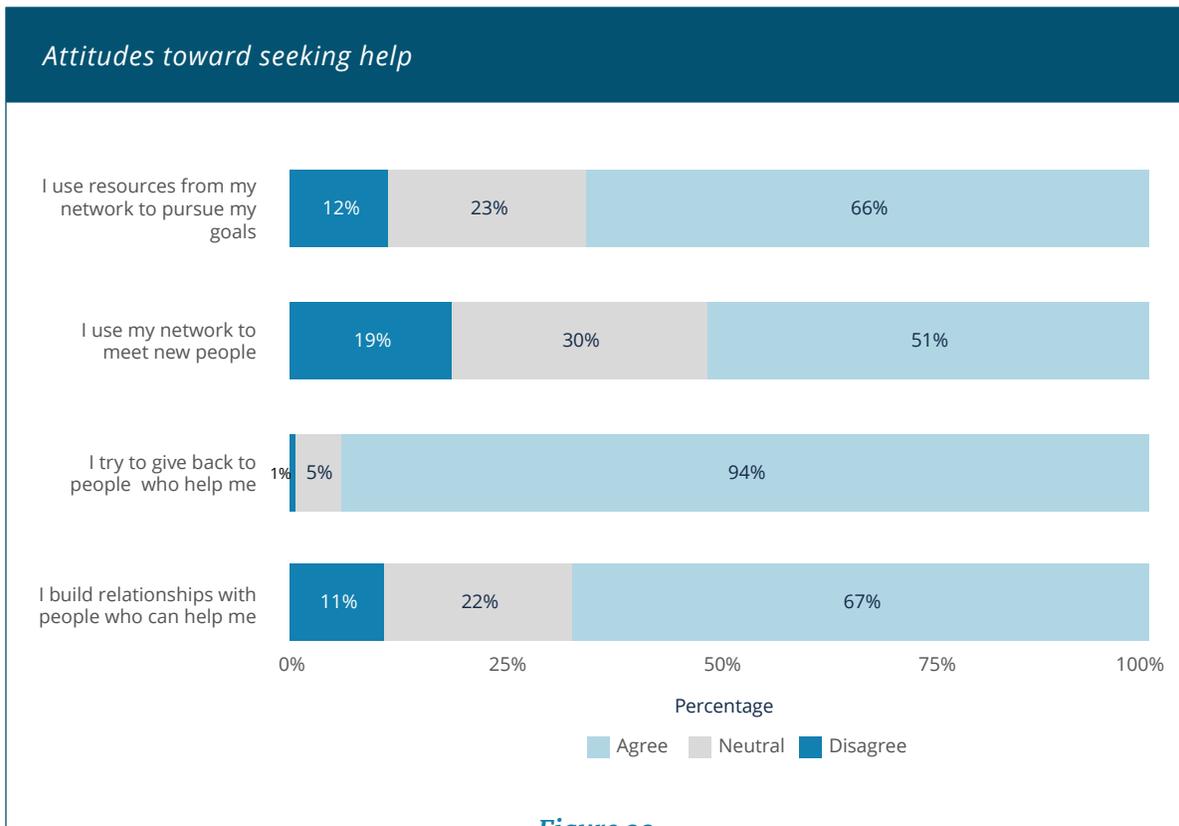
But a deeper look reveals that many students are still holding back. The vast majority (81%) said they prefer to handle things on their own. Half of students said they feel uncomfortable asking for help, and nearly half (49%) felt like they should already know the answer before reaching out. This suggests that even when students believe in the value of help-seeking, they may still resist doing it, especially when they feel unsure or vulnerable.



*Figure 21*



We also saw limited engagement in proactive networking behaviors that help build strong, career-supporting relationships. Only 42% said they go out of their way to meet people who might be supportive ([Figure 22](#)). Just over half reported using their network to meet new people, and while 67% said they build relationships with people who can help them, most are not intentionally expanding beyond their existing networks.



Comfort was a key factor here. Students were generally comfortable asking for help from people already in their circle, such as peers, professors, or mentors. But they were far less comfortable reaching out to WGU alumni (just 36% felt comfortable doing so), connecting with people on LinkedIn (47%), or attending networking events (52%) ([Figure 23](#)).

## Comfort levels with different types of outreach

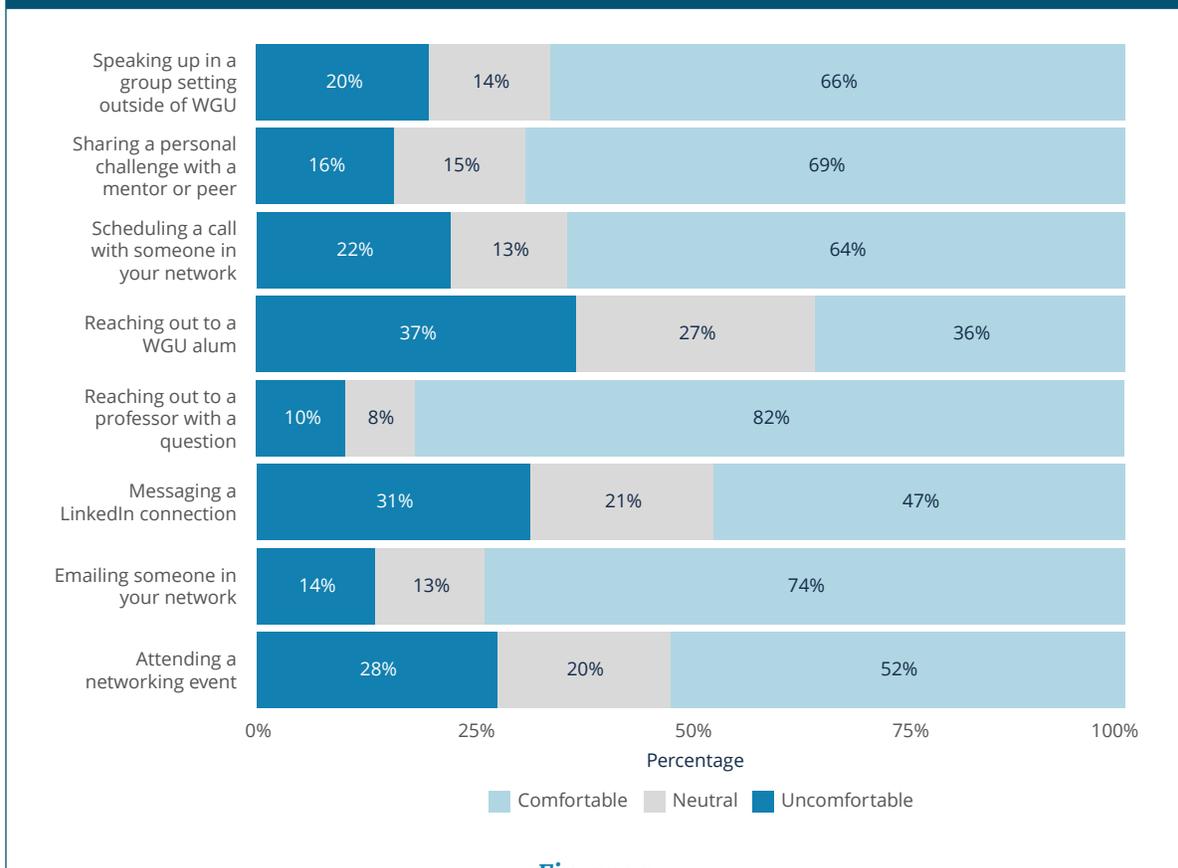


Figure 23

## Why this matters

Help-seeking isn't just about getting academic support: it's a key mechanism for building the kinds of professional relationships that open doors. Asking for advice, exchanging favors, and offering support are how relationships form, strengthen, and lead to opportunity.<sup>21</sup> But if students aren't reaching out, especially to people outside their immediate network, they may be missing out on critical connections that could help them advance.

This hesitancy is especially concerning given that many WGU students already start with smaller networks. If they aren't actively expanding them and are uncomfortable asking for help, they may be unintentionally limiting their own opportunities. In a job market where relationships are often the bridge to new roles, this mindset gap could have real consequences for career mobility.

21 Brooks, A. W., Gino, F., & Schweitzer, M. E. (2015). Smart People Ask for (My) Advice: Seeking Advice Boosts Perceptions of Competence. *Management Science*, 61(6), 1421–1435.

## Key Takeaway 5: 64% of students made zero connections outside of courses

While 71% of students said they want more meaningful connections ([Figure 24](#)), the vast majority aren't forming them, whether with peers or professionals.

On the peer side, nearly two-thirds (64%) said they had not made a single connection with a fellow student outside of coursework ([Figure 25](#)). Fewer than half (49%) said they have someone at the institution they can turn to for advice outside of their assigned program mentor.

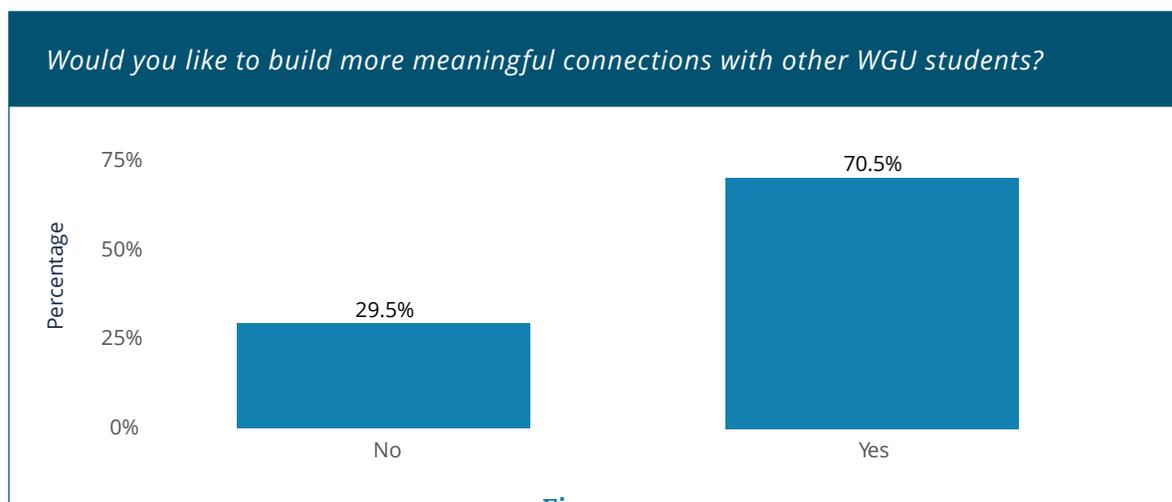


Figure 24

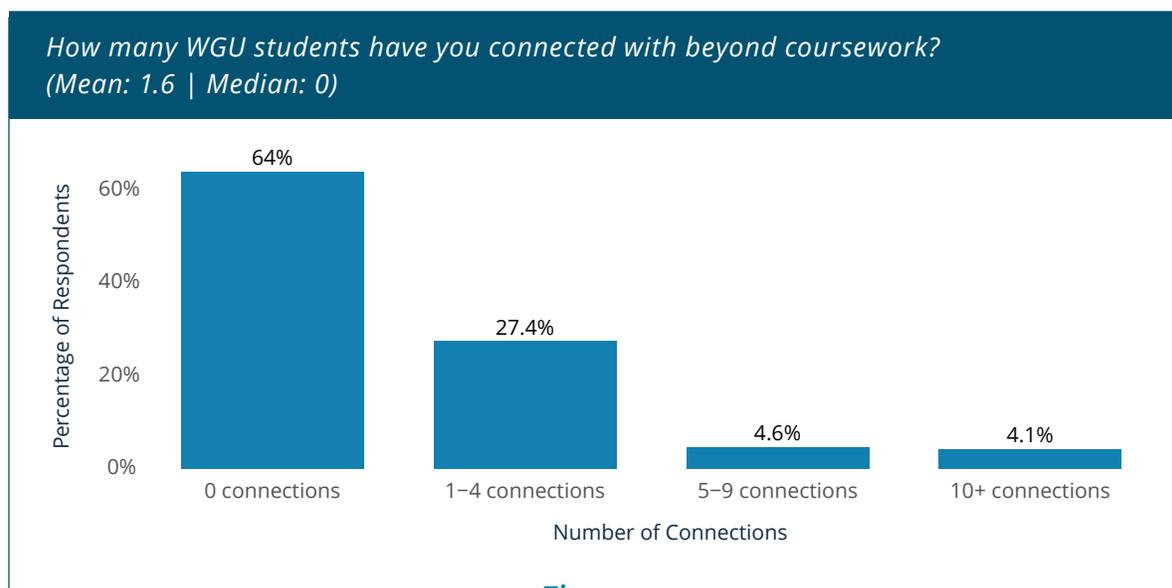
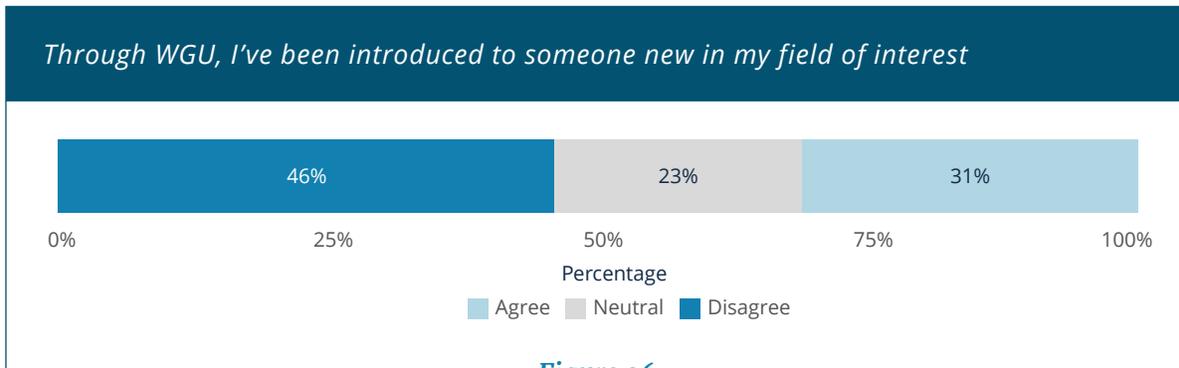


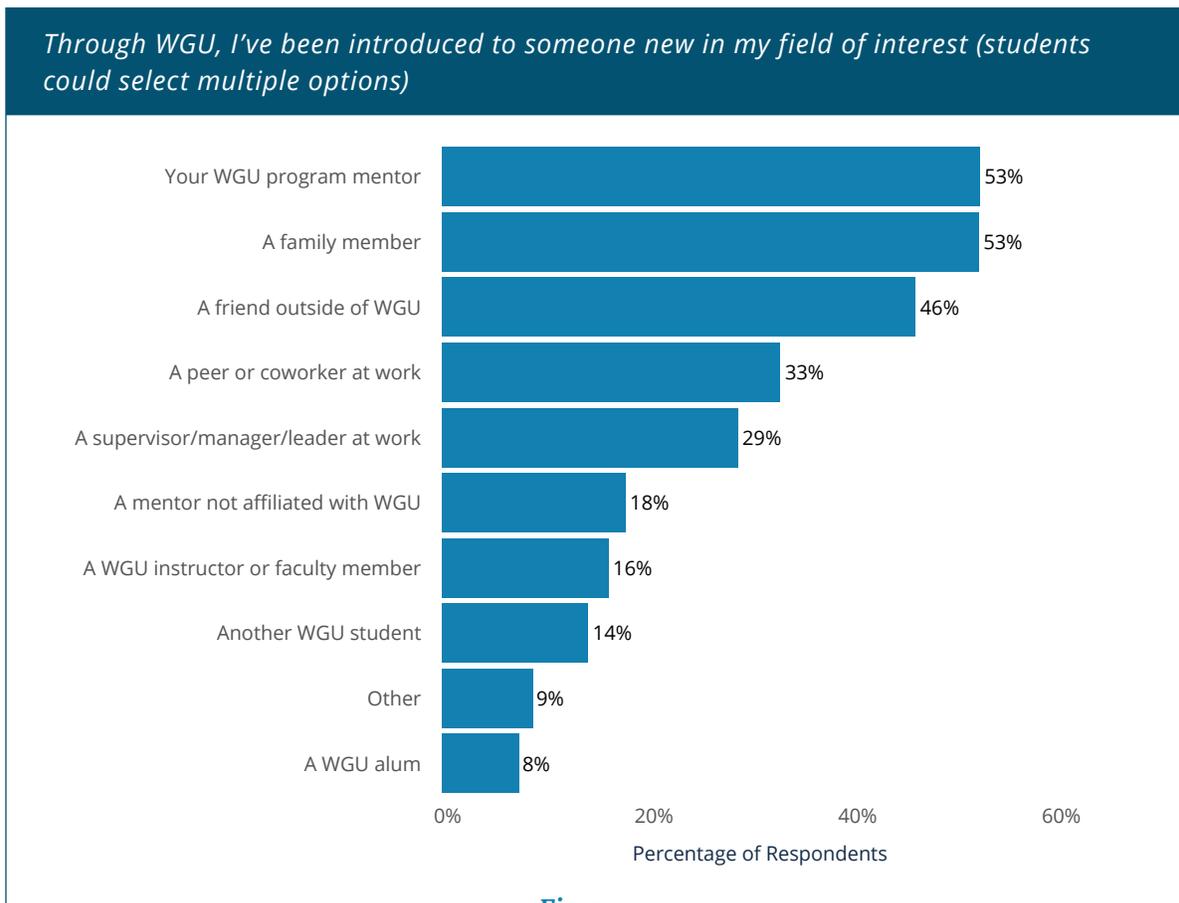
Figure 25

On the professional side, only 30% reported being introduced to someone in their field through WGU (**Figure 26**).



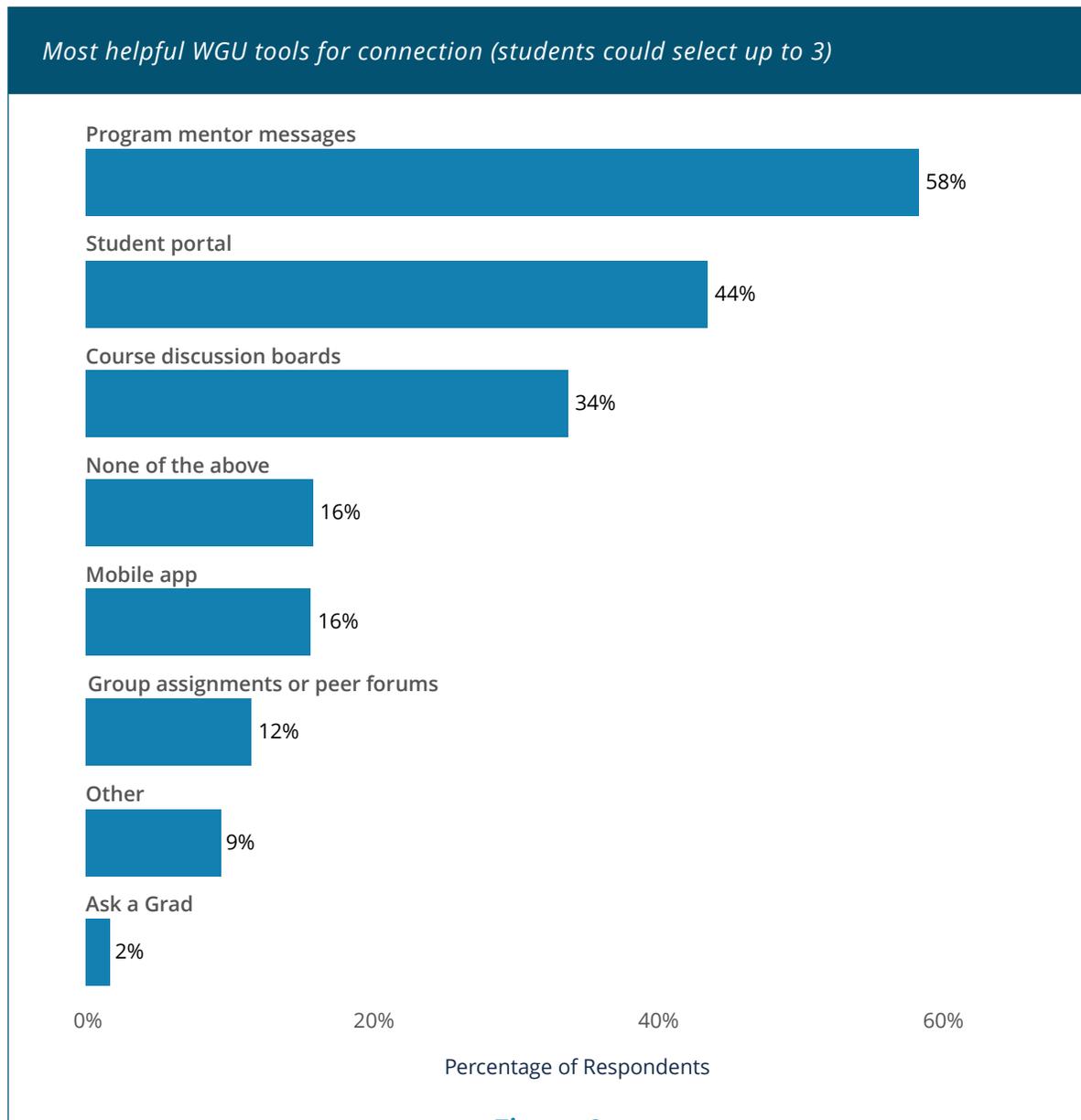
**Figure 26**

When students seek support, they're most likely to turn to program mentors, family members, or friends outside of WGU. Just 14% said they typically turn to another WGU student, and only 8% cited a WGU alum (**Figure 27**). When asked about their most recent helpful interaction, only 4.5% said it was with another WGU student or graduate.



**Figure 27**

Students also report limited awareness or use of tools designed to facilitate connection. When asked which tools helped them feel connected, the most common responses were program mentor messages (58%), the student portal (44%), and course discussion boards (34%) (*Figure 28*). Tools meant to encourage peer-to-peer or alumni engagement were rarely chosen.



These findings point to a deeper disconnect between students' intentions and experiences. Most students want to form connections. But the systems designed to support those connections, whether technological, relational, or programmatic, aren't meeting that need.

## Why This Matters

Students overwhelmingly say they want to build relationships, especially with others in their field. But many aren't forming those connections, and very few are using institutional tools meant to facilitate them. This gap matters.

Research shows that most jobs are filled through networks, not applications. Professional connections, especially those with alumni or others already working in the field, can help students learn industry norms, get insider advice, and find job opportunities. But students can't access those benefits if they aren't building new relationships beyond their existing circle.

The problem isn't just limited to career outcomes. Students who feel connected to others at their institution are more likely to persist through challenges, feel a sense of belonging, and report higher satisfaction with their educational experience. They're also more likely to stay engaged as alumni, recommending the school to others, mentoring future students, and giving back.

For adult online learners who often juggle work and family responsibilities, traditional campus-based opportunities to form relationships simply don't exist. That makes it even more important for WGU to create intentional, accessible, and effective pathways for connection with peers, mentors, alumni, and industry professionals alike.



# Conclusion: The Hidden Curriculum Gap



**W**GU students are clear about what they want from their education and are highly motivated to achieve their goals. But for many, the educational experience remains transactional: get the degree, get the job. What’s missing is the “hidden curriculum”: the unspoken but essential knowledge about how to navigate professional spaces, build networks, and ask for help in ways that create opportunity.<sup>22</sup>

Technology alone isn’t solving the problem. Tools to facilitate connections are largely underused or unknown. What students need isn’t more tech, but better scaffolding: intentional, structured, human-supported pathways that help them build the relationships that matter.

These findings carry significant implications for higher education, particularly institutions serving adult and online learners. Unlike traditional residential students, adult learners don’t have the luxury of time, proximity, or campus infrastructure to build networks organically. They’re fitting education around jobs and families, often logging in late at night or between shifts. If connection isn’t intentionally built into the experience, it simply won’t happen.

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22 Gable, R. (2021). *The Hidden Curriculum: First Generation Students at Legacy Universities*. Princeton University Press.

## Recommendations

### 1. Make the hidden curriculum visible and central

Students can't act on what they don't know. Professional norms like networking, help-seeking, and informational interviewing should be made visible and taught with the same intentionality as academic content. Institutions should embed networking competencies as learning outcomes, build career-connected experiences into the curriculum early on, and train faculty and staff to facilitate real introductions. Measuring network development alongside academic performance would signal that relationship-building is not an optional soft skill, but a core component of postsecondary success.

### 2. Create structured opportunities for connection

Students struggle to connect because online learning systems aren't set up to make connection easy, natural, or worthwhile.<sup>23</sup> Peer cohorts organized by shared goals or industries, structured networking events, facilitated introductions to alumni, and mentorship models that proactively match students to working professionals can all help. These structures should balance peer-to-peer connection (which supports academic belonging and retention) with professional connections (which open doors to opportunity).<sup>24</sup>



### 3. Teach help-seeking and networking as professional skills

Many students see asking for help as a sign of weakness or a burden on others. Institutions need to actively challenge these beliefs by reframing help-seeking as a strategic, professional behavior. Short-form courses or modules should teach how to reach out, what to say, how to build relationships over time, and how offering or requesting support can create “relationship debt” that makes others more willing to help in return. Faculty and mentors can play a key role here by modeling their own networking stories and showing how professional relationships are built.

23 Croft, N., Dalton, A., & Grant, M. (2010). Overcoming isolation in distance learning: Building a learning community through time and space. *Journal of Education in the Built Environment*, 5(1), 27–64.

24 Altermatt, E.R. (2019). Academic support from peers as a predictor of academic self-efficacy among college students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 21(1), 21–37.

#### **4. Measure connection outcomes, not just belonging**

Tracking whether students feel like they belong isn't enough. Institutions need to know whether they're building real relationships that support academic and career success. Institutions should regularly assess the number, type, and quality of connections students make throughout their journey. This includes monitoring peer and mentor connections, network diversity, and access to field-specific professionals. Creating virtual third spaces where students can build community and reviewing all student touchpoints for connection-building opportunities can help integrate this mindset throughout the student experience.

#### **5. Redesign technology with connection at the center**

Students are not using the digital tools meant to help them connect. These tools are underutilized because they're not well-integrated, actively facilitated, or designed with student behaviors in mind. Institutions should evaluate technology not just for functionality but for its ability to support meaningful human connection. That means designing tech that brokers introductions, offers conversation prompts, follows up, and integrates networking cues into students' existing workflows.

It's time to reimagine connection as part of the core curriculum. Building a professional network shouldn't be left to chance, especially for students who come to college without one. If we want to fulfill the promise of higher education as a ladder to opportunity, we need to give every student the tools, confidence, and relationships they need to climb.





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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

This report was authored by Stephanie Reeves, with valuable contributions from Natalie Berkey, Betheny Gross, Mattie Jennings, and visual design by CallyAnn Hamilton.