

PEER COUNSELING IN COLLEGE MENTAL HEALTH

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I N S T I T U T E

THE MassINC
POLLING GROUP

Survey Background

- Results based on a nationwide survey of 2,011 undergraduate college students in the U.S.
- Conducted online from October 6-20, 2021.
- Data was weighted to estimated demographics of the U.S. population of undergraduate college students.



PEER COUNSELING IN COLLEGE MENTAL HEALTH

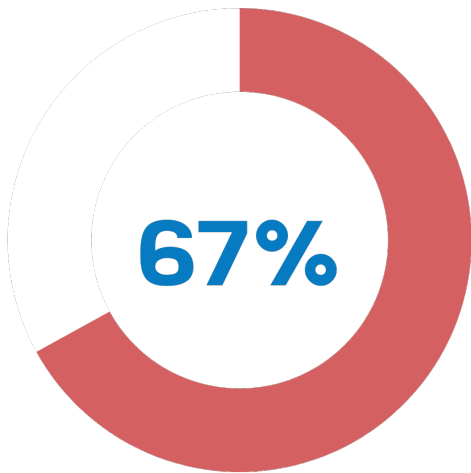
A survey of students' attitudes and experiences with mental health peer counseling

JANUARY 2022

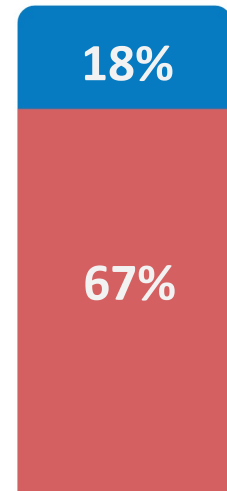


2/3 have faced mental health challenges

- A majority of college students have felt they needed help for mental/emotional health problems over the past 12 months.
- At the same time, 85% agree that mental health is important to overall well-being.



% of college students who needed help over the past year



■ Somewhat agree
■ Strongly agree

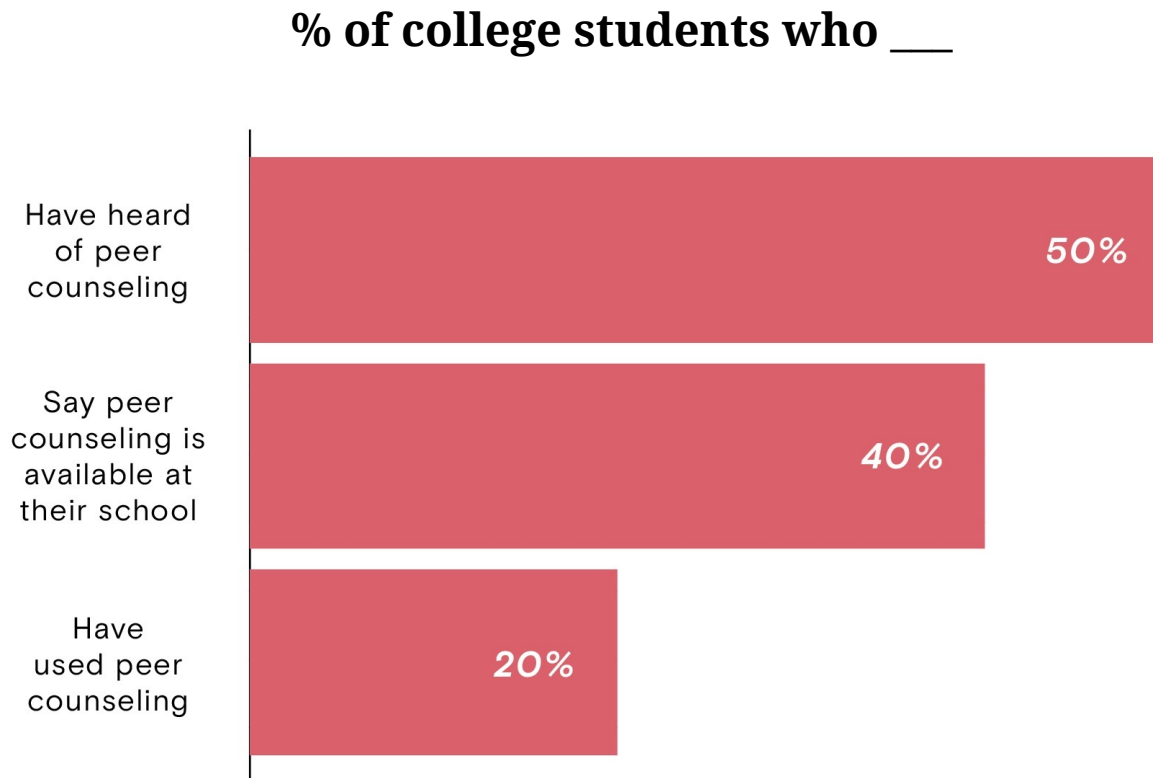
% of college students who ____ “Mental health is important to our overall well-being.”

Peer Counseling Definition

“The process of confiding in trained peers (fellow students, not friends) for mental health support.”

Familiarity with peer counseling

- Peer counseling is familiar to college students – half have heard of it while 20% have personally used it.



Q: Before this survey, had you ever heard of peer counseling services?

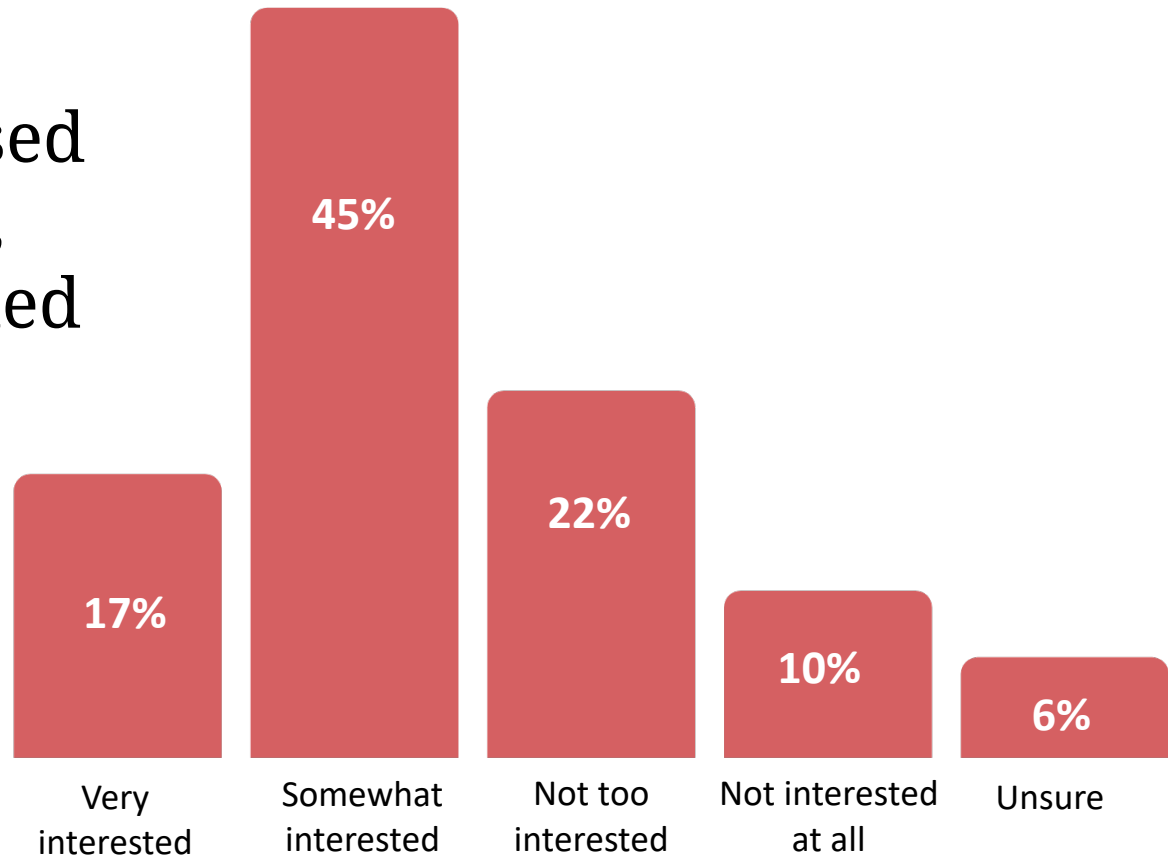
Q: To the best of your knowledge, are peer counseling services available at your school?

Q: Have you used peer counseling services at your school?

Interest in peer counseling

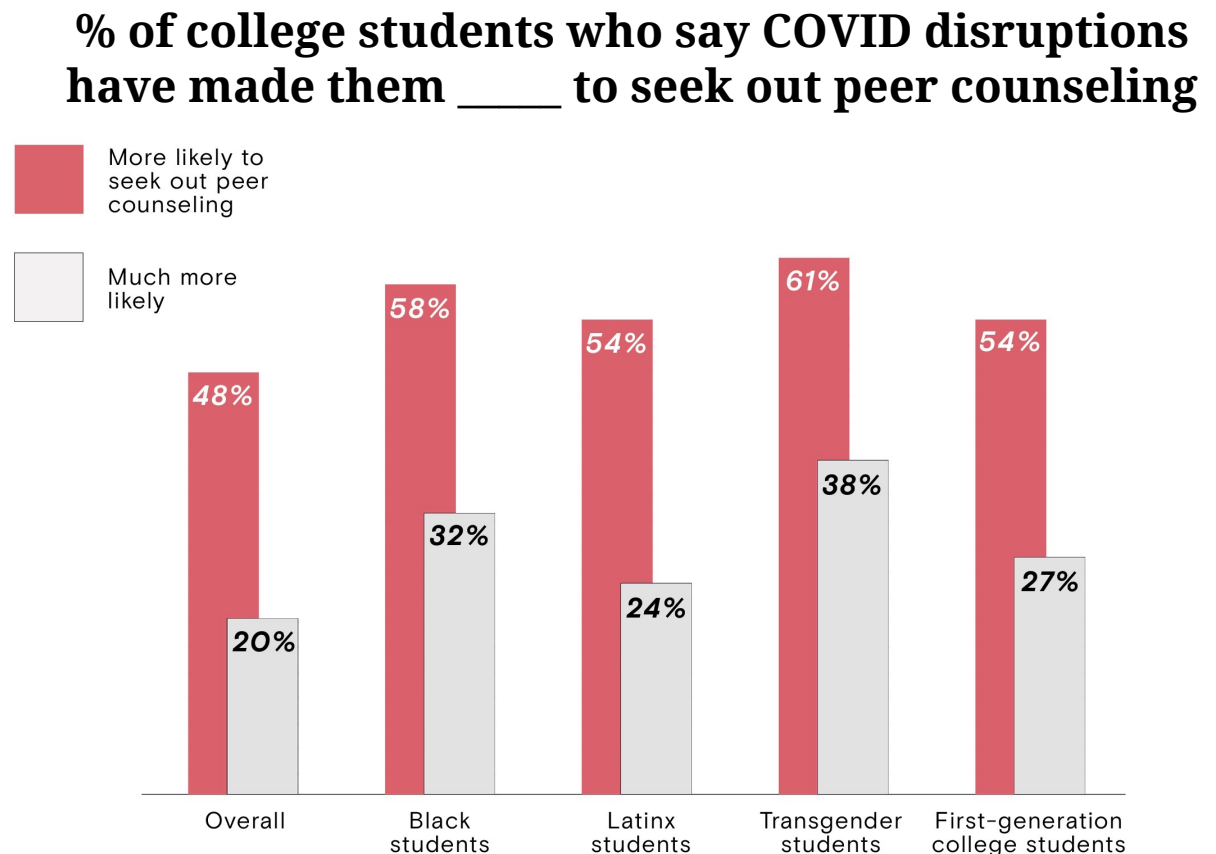
% of college students who have not used peer counseling who are ____ to try it

- Among students who have not used peer counseling, 62% are interested to do so.



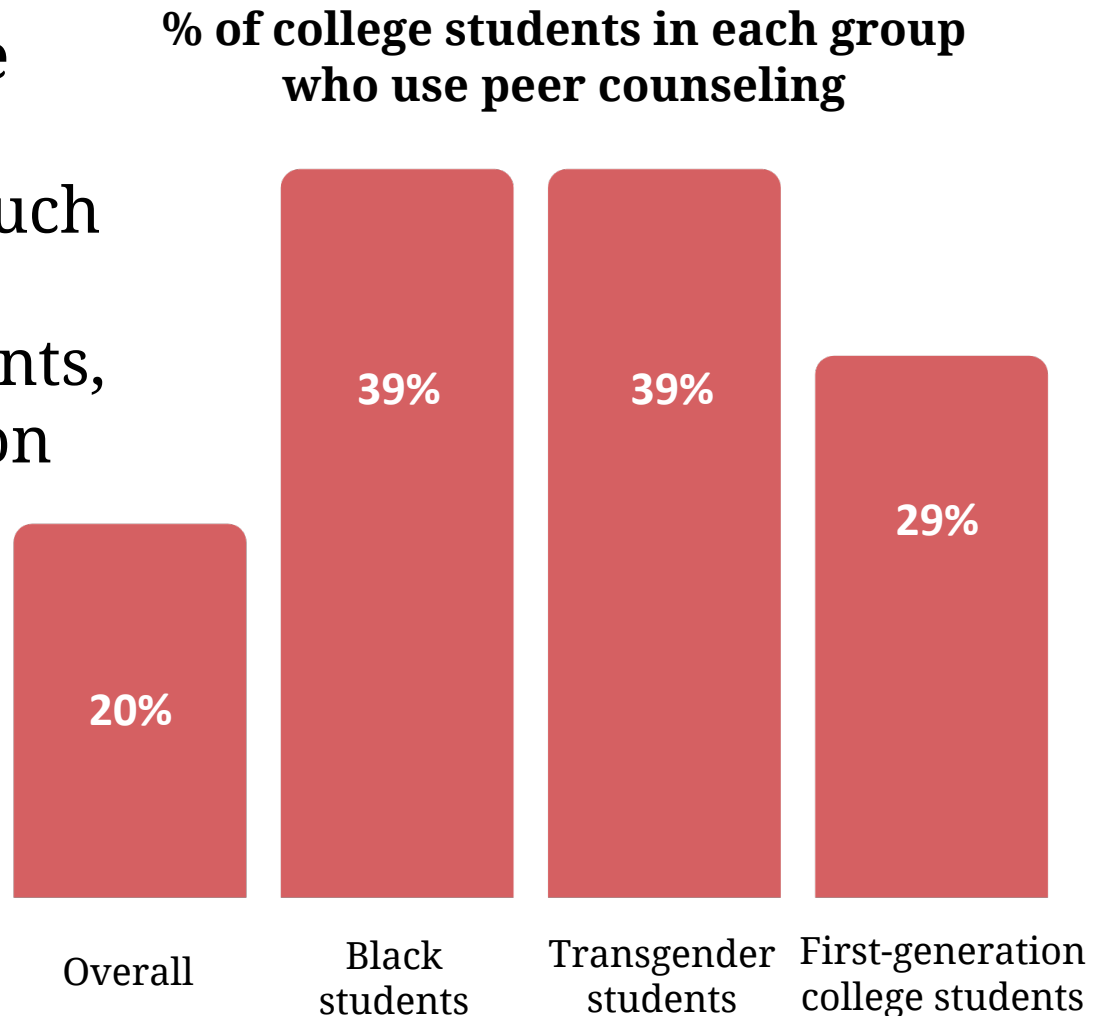
Impact of COVID on peer counseling

- Nearly half of students say the disruptions caused by COVID have made them more likely to seek out peer counseling.
- Students from certain historically marginalized groups are more likely to say COVID has increased their interest.



Who uses peer counseling?

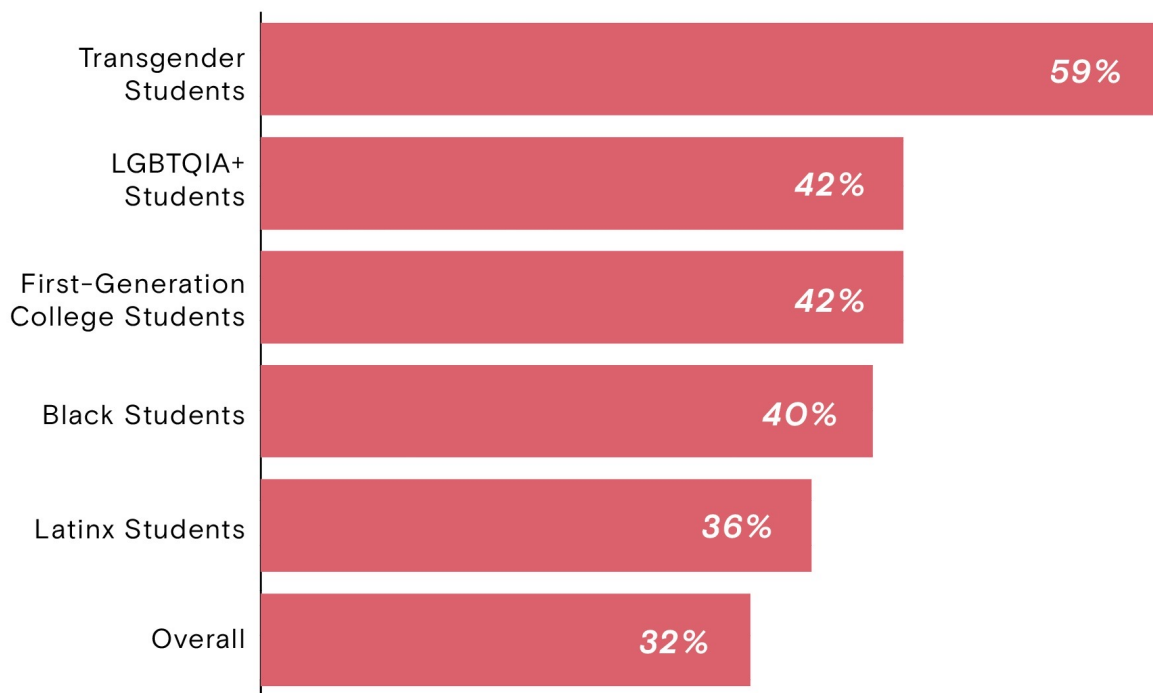
- Certain groups are more likely to use peer counseling, such as Black students, transgender students, and first-generation college students.



Shared identity key appeal of peer counseling

- Students from certain historically marginalized groups are more likely to say finding a peer counselor with similar identities or life experiences is very important to them.

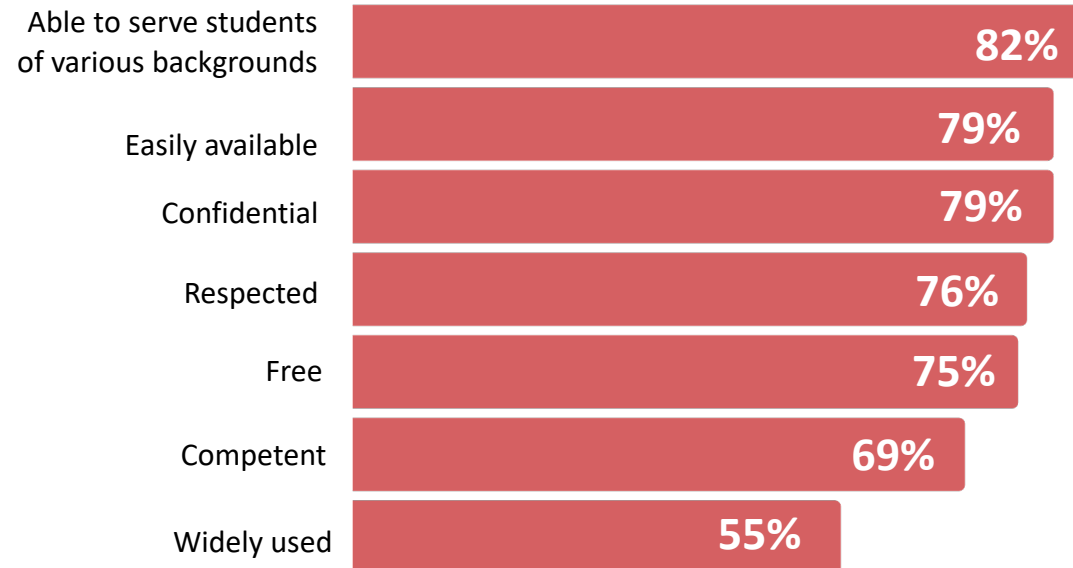
% of college students who say it is "very important" to find a peer counselor with similar identities or life experiences



Positive impressions of peer counseling

- Among students who use peer counseling, 58% call it helpful, including 23% who say it is “very helpful.”
- Where available, students agree peer counseling is able to serve a variety of students, among other positive attributes.

Among college students who say peer counseling is available on their campus, % who say it is...



Students turn to peers first

- Over a third of students (36%) turn either to a friend or romantic partner when they need to talk about a serious mental health issue.
- This reinforces the importance of peers who can relate directly to students' problems.

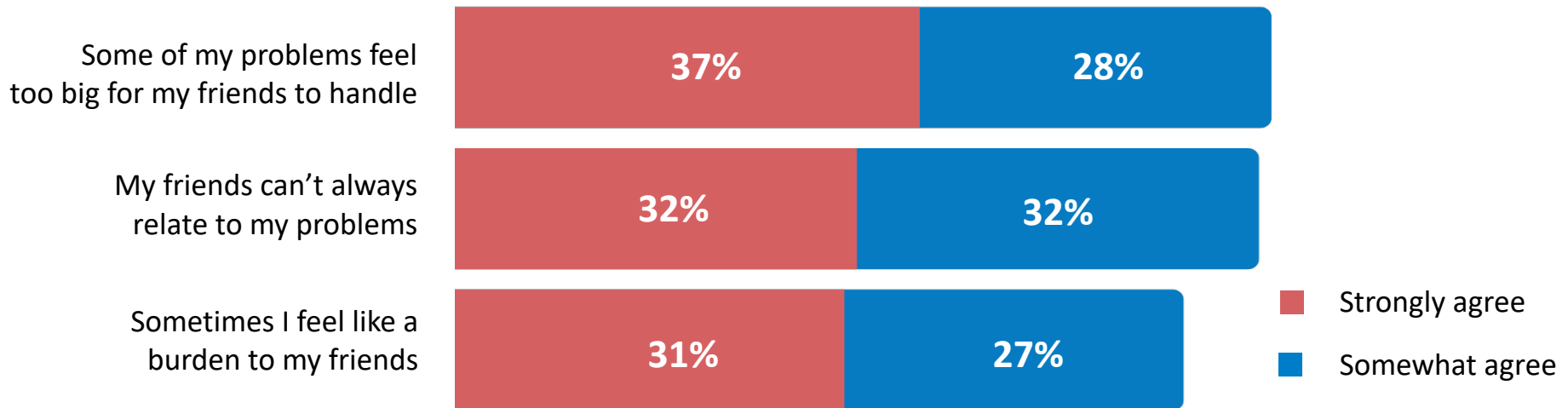
% of students who ranked ___ as who they would be most likely to talk to about a serious mental health issue

A friend	18%
A significant other / romantic partner	18%
A mental health professional	18%
A parent	15%
A family member other than a parent	7%
A peer counselor	6%
A school staff member (e.g., professor, coach)	5%
A religious leader	3%
Someone else	2%
None of these	5%
Unsure	4%

Students wary of becoming a burden

- While students rely on their friends, they are concerned that their problems may be too difficult or not relatable.
- 83% of students who use peer counseling agree it “lets me talk to someone who can understand but is not directly involved in my personal life.”

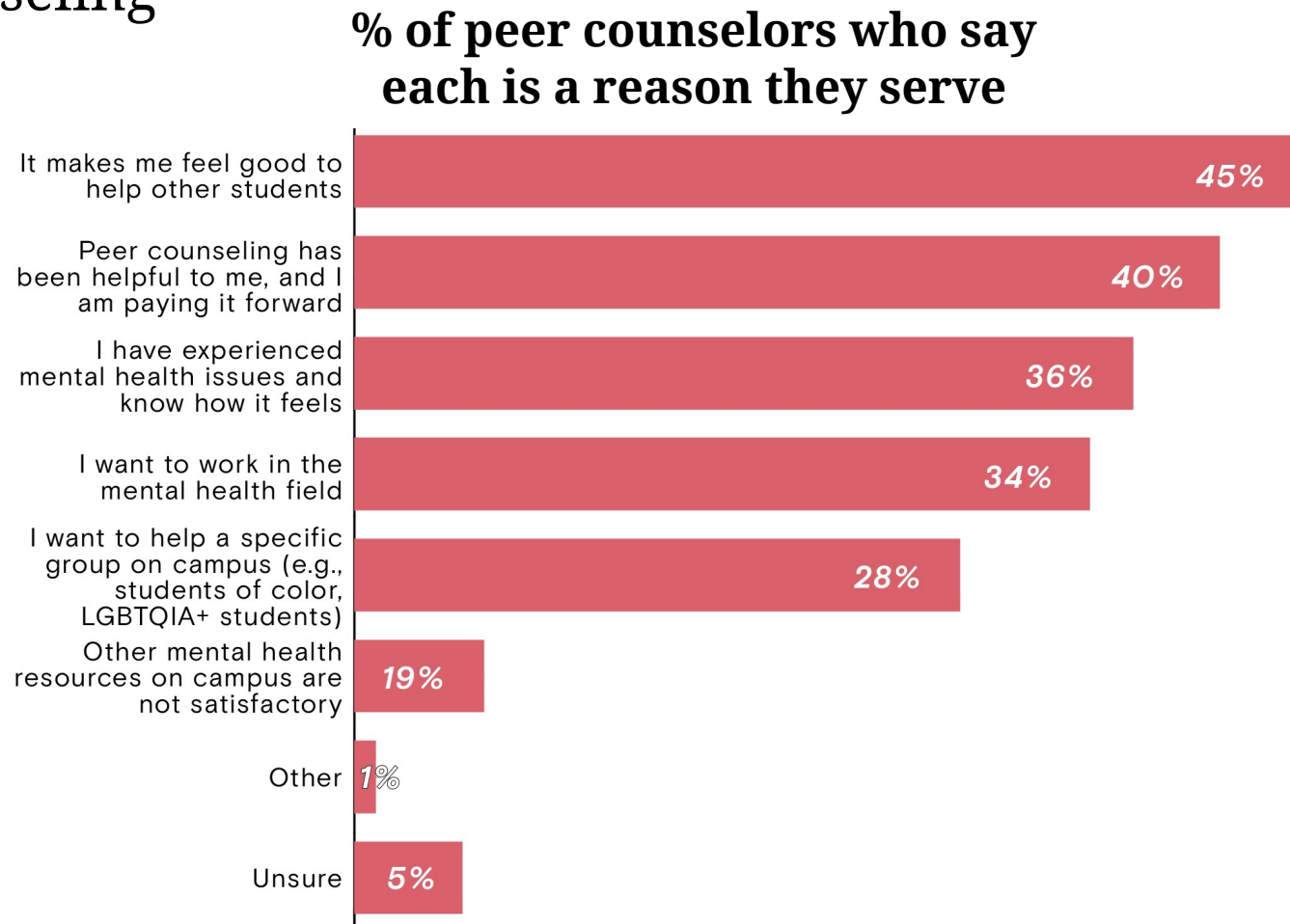
% of college students who strongly / somewhat agree that _____



Peer counselors motivated to help others

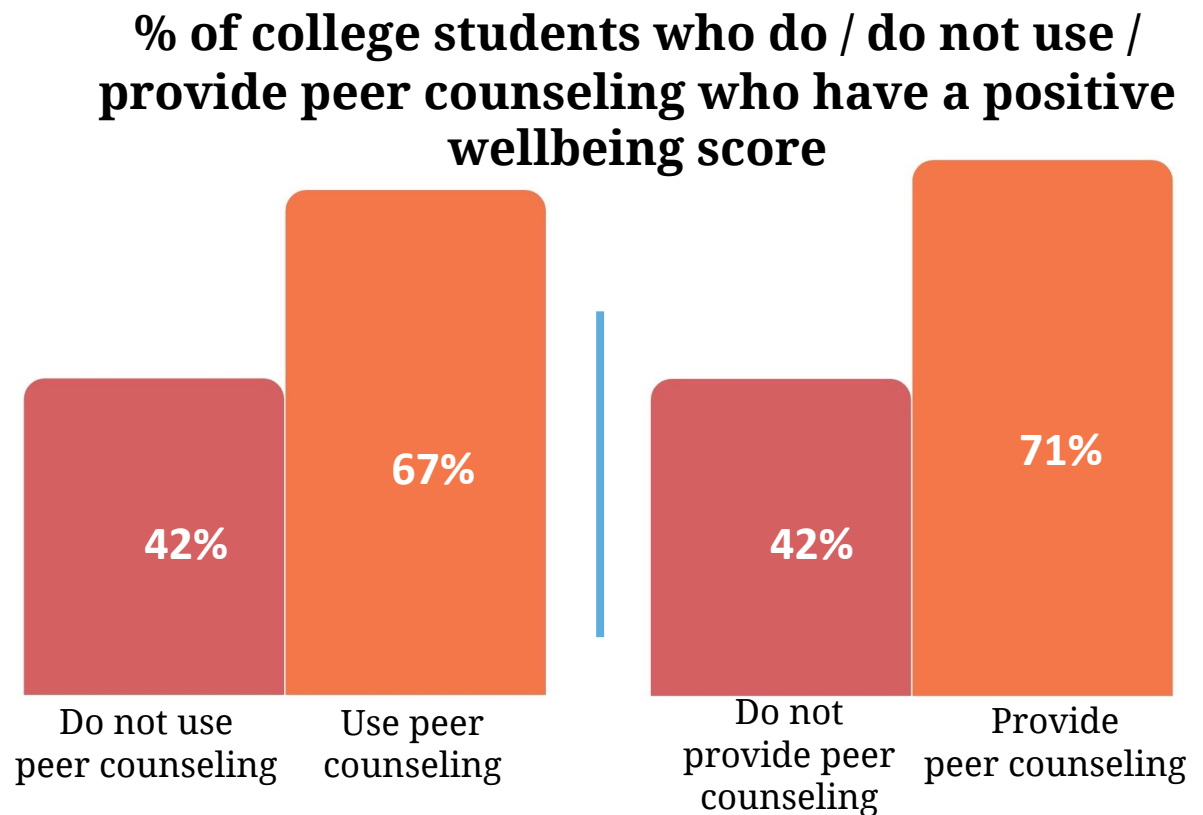
- Peer counselors serve because it makes them feel good to help others and many want to “pay it forward” after Using peer counseling themselves.

- Nearly all peer counselors (92%) are satisfied with their experience.



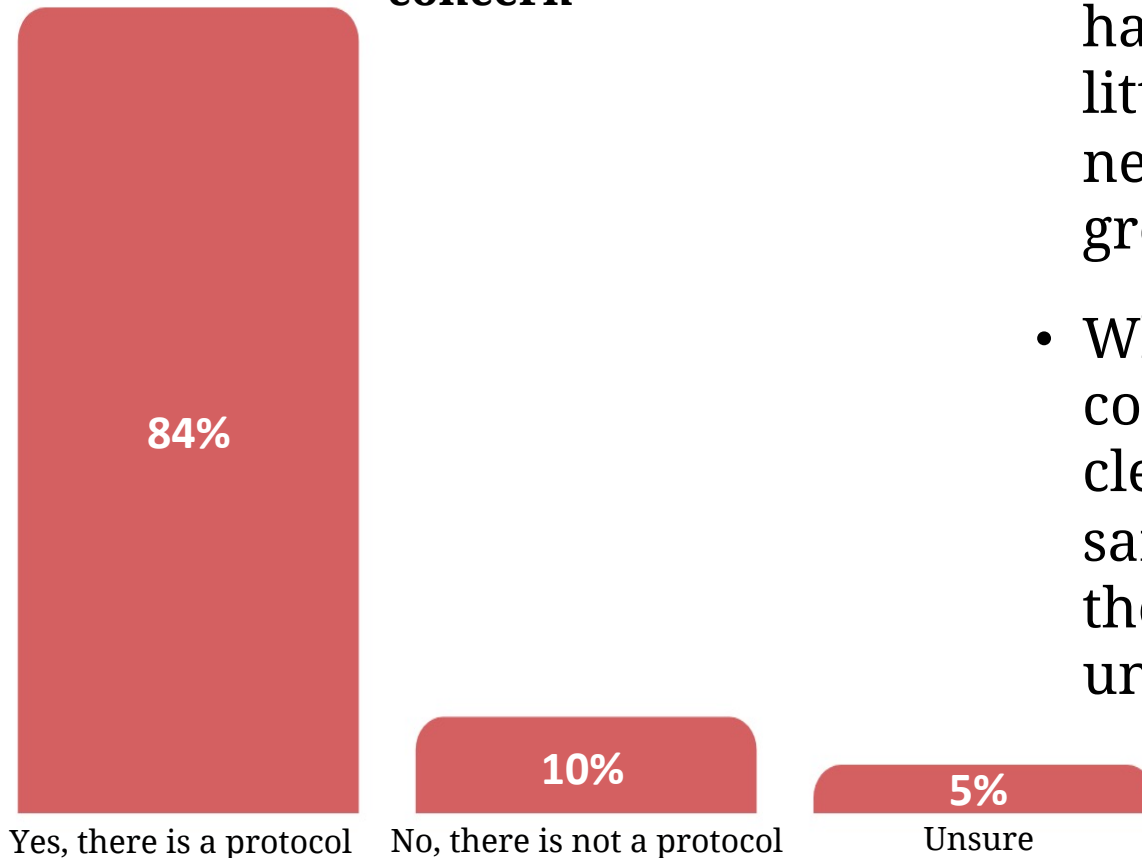
Peer counselors report a higher sense of well-being

- A “well-being score” was calculated based on a series of questions assessing outlook and self-regard.
- Those who use or provide peer counseling are more likely to have a positive well-being score.



Peer counselor training is common, but not universal

**% of peer counselors who say there is / is not
a clear protocol in place if there is a safety
concern**



- Most peer counselors (93%) have received at least “a little” training, including nearly half (48%) with “a great deal” of training.
- While a majority of peer counselors say there is a clear protocol in place for safety concerns, 16% say there is not one or are unsure.

IMPLICATIONS

Positive view of students' beliefs and behaviors around peer counseling

- Students are utilizing the service
- Satisfaction is high
- Peer counselors score high on the Well-Being scale



**STUDENTS WHO PROVIDE
PEER COUNSELING ARE
LARGELY MENTALLY AND
EMOTIONALLY STRONG AND
DO SO WITH APPROPRIATE
MOTIVATIONS—MAINLY A
SENSE OF ALTRUISM.”**

Some Cause for Caution

- Students turning to friends for help – indicating a need for universal mental health training
- Peer counseling training not universal and emergency protocols not foolproof; clearer guidance on crisis situations may be needed
- Important to recognize the emotional burden placed on peer counselors, themselves students
- Considerations around compensation

Promise of Peer Counseling

Providing support to students who would not otherwise be reached through traditional counseling

- Students represent an untapped resource
- College student body is often more diverse than faculty and staff
- Students are already relying on their peers for emotional support

**“EVERY STUDENT SHOULD
HAVE SOMEONE ON CAMPUS
THEY CAN TALK TO WHEN
THEY NEED EMOTIONAL
SUPPORT.”**

THANK YOU!

The report is available online at:

bornthisway.foundation/research/peer-counseling-in-college/

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marychristieinstitute.org/reports/peer-counseling-in-college-mental-health/

Please email any questions or comments to
dhumphrey@marychristieinstitute.org

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