DRINK smart®

Campus Pulse Survey

2026 Results Report





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More Than a Survey

This work is about listening to students and using their insights to drive change on campus.

The DrinkSmart Campus Pulse Survey was created to give a voice to the lived experiences of post-secondary students across Ontario. In a time marked by uncertainty, rising costs, and evolving social norms, understanding the challenges students face matters more than ever.

This survey goes beyond basic data. It captures a snapshot of student life, exploring mental health, substance use, academic pressures, and economic stress through a lens of honesty and harm reduction. Our goal is to use this information to guide smarter, more impactful wellness and alcohol education programming across campuses.

As a student-led initiative operated by Smart Serve® Ontario, a registered charity, DrinkSmart is committed to supporting safer, healthier student communities. This report is a tool for campuses and anyone invested in the well-being of Ontario's next generation of leaders.

Now in its second year, the Campus Pulse Survey is becoming a consistent pulse-check on the student experience, revealing shifting conditions, growing pressures, and the most urgent opportunities for change.

Ramp Communications

This survey was brought to life in partnership with Ramp Communications, a Toronto-based social profit agency and Certified B Corporation® that helps purpose-driven organizations drive impact through strategy, storytelling, and design. Ramp supported the development of the survey, led the data analysis, and created the insights report.

Methodology And Sample

The DrinkSmart Campus Pulse Survey was conducted in spring 2026 to explore student well-being, mental health, substance use, gambling, and future outlooks among post-secondary students in Ontario and across Canada.

- Survey Fielded: April 14 to May 20, 2026
- Responses Collected: 3,060
- Institutions Represented: Ontario colleges and universities, with additional participation from institutions in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Quebec, and Atlantic Canada
- Sample includes students across all years of study, living both on-campus and off-campus

Analysis focused on overall trends and differences by institution type and region. Year-over-year comparisons appear inline throughout. Percentages are reported on the base of students who were asked each question. Ontario regional analysis excludes respondents at out-of-province institutions (325) and respondents whose institution could not be classified to a region (139), so the regional base of 2,596 is smaller than the topline base of 3,060.

Recruitment: promoted through social media, email, and youth influencer channels. Participation was voluntary, so the sample reflects students who chose to respond rather than a randomly drawn sample of Ontario post-secondary students.



**Note: This survey was conducted prior to the announcement that OSAP would be changing its grant-to-loan structure for programs starting on or after August 1, 2026.*

What Changed This Year

Students who participated in the 2026 DrinkSmart Campus Pulse Survey are navigating intensifying pressures. Two years of data tell a consistent story: mental health is worsening at Ontario universities and colleges, financial strain is structural, cost of living is the dominant stressor across every region and demographic group, and the gap between pressures students face and available supports remains wide.

The findings also reflect differences across regions and institution types. Where students live and study influences their financial strain, mental health, and substance use. These differences have important implications for campuses and policymakers as they interpret the data and determine where action is needed.

Forces shaping the student experience in 2026

Financial and social pressure

Cost of living, housing, employment, and career uncertainty dominated student life outside the classroom. New this year, students named their single greatest stressor, and cost of living led by a wide margin.

Mental health challenges

Self-rated mental health declined year over year and anxiety increased. Thoughts of self-harm or suicide were more frequently reported than in 2025, and more than one in five students reported taking prescription medication to support their mental health.

Seeking support

Barriers to seeking support rooted in discomfort and trust declined year over year. Barriers rooted in self-reliance, and in practical access such as wait times and scheduling, increased. Students remain far more comfortable helping a friend than seeking help for themselves.

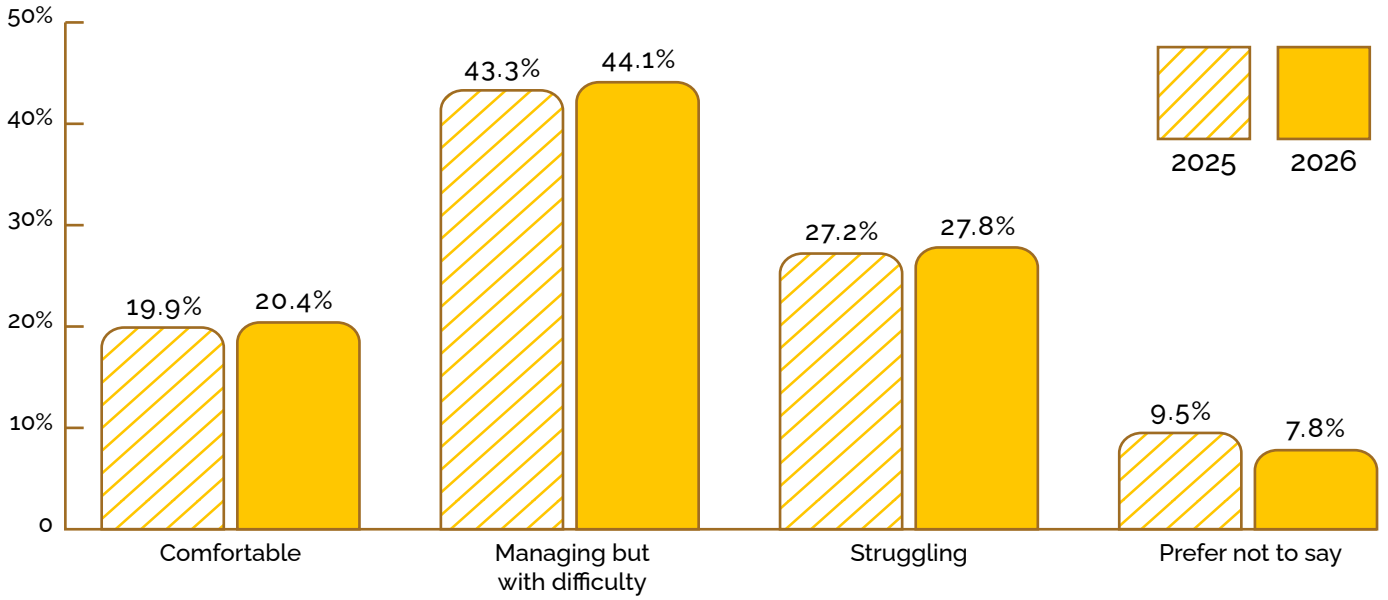
Substance use

Alcohol consumption remains stable and predominantly low. Cannabis use increased modestly, with more pronounced increases in certain regions. Gambling participation did not change from 2025.

Financial Pressure

Financial strain continues to define the day-to-day experience of post-secondary students. Roughly seven in ten respondents described their financial situation as either struggling or managing with difficulty, and only one in five said they are comfortable.

FINANCIAL SITUATION



Base: all respondents (2025 n=4,443; 2026 n=3,060).

Across two years of measurement, roughly seven in ten students described themselves as struggling or managing with difficulty.

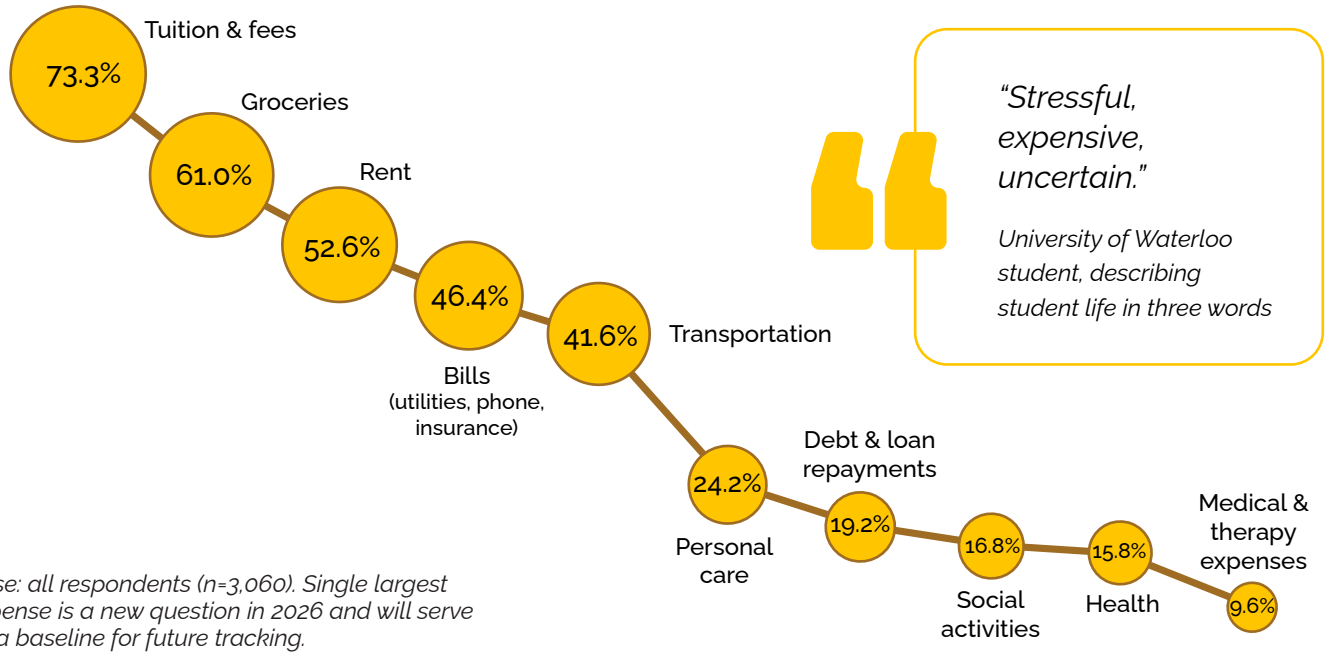
65.5% of students reported financial challenges related to their education, **up from 63.8% in 2025.** When asked to rate how much stress their finances currently cause on a 1 to 5 scale, **62.1% rated it a 4 or 5.**

> *"The cost of living is too much for me, even though I'm working 5 days a week, which also makes it harder to focus on my studies and assignments."*
>
> *University of Waterloo student*

Where the money goes

Tuition and fees represent the most common expense (73.3%), followed by groceries (61.0%) and rent (52.6%). When asked to name their single largest expense, 52.0% identified tuition and fees and 25.6% identified rent.

2026 - WHERE EXPENSES GO (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



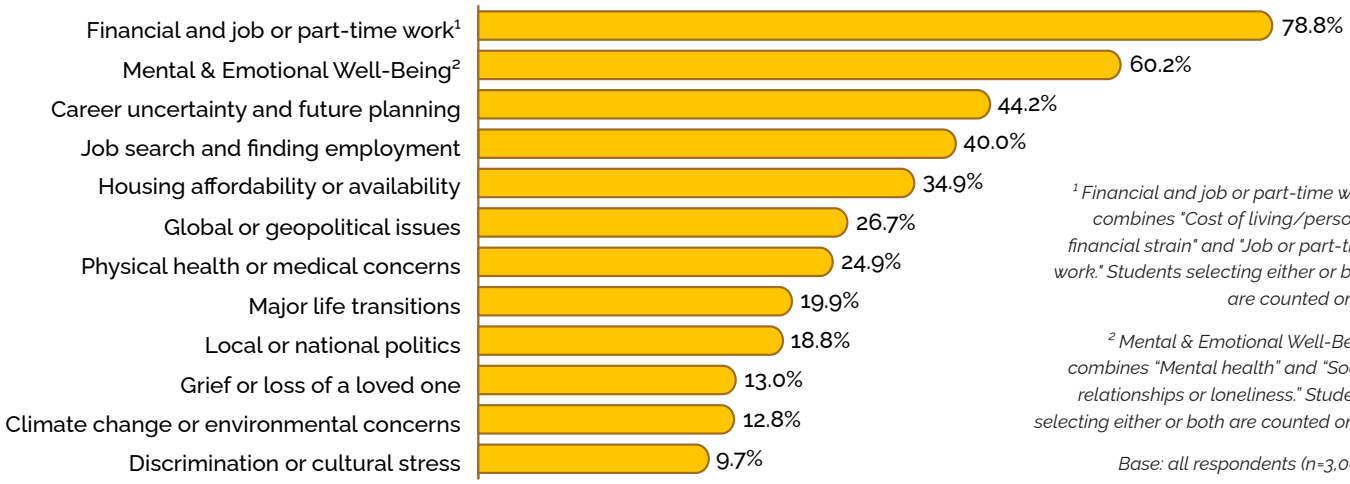
> *"Stressful, expensive, uncertain."*
>
> *University of Waterloo student, describing student life in three words*

Base: all respondents (n=3,060). Single largest expense is a new question in 2026 and will serve as a baseline for future tracking.

The top non-academic stressors

Students were asked to identify sources of stress outside of academics. The first two categories below combine closely related options and count each student once.

2026 - STRESS CATEGORY

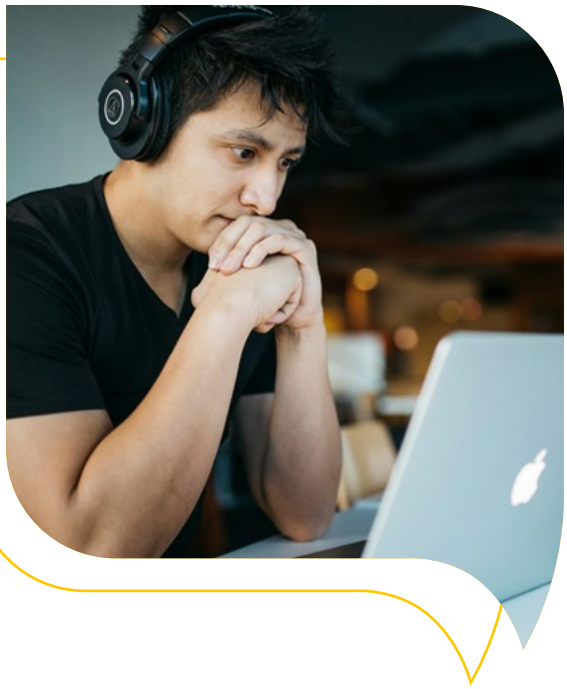


[1] Financial and job or part-time work combines "Cost of living/personal financial strain" and "Job or part-time work." Students selecting either or both are counted once.

[2] Mental & Emotional Well-Being combines "Mental health" and "Social relationships or loneliness." Students selecting either or both are counted once.

Base: all respondents (n=3,060).

How financial pressure shapes student life



Substance use

Students who drink less or not at all named the **cost of alcohol** as their leading reason, ahead of health considerations and academic priorities.

Seeking support

When presented with a scenario in which they were struggling to cover tuition or living expenses, 62.4% said they would be somewhat or very likely to reach out to a campus financial advisor or bursary office.

Base: all respondents. Financial stress rating and the campus financial support scenario are new questions in 2026.

> *"More financial support for students who don't technically qualify due to their parent's finances. I do not qualify for any income based scholarships or bursaries because my dad works too much overtime which puts his income too high above the threshold. However, I do not see any of the money he makes. Nobody recognizes my struggle because they think my parents can afford to pay my way. They can't."*
>
> *Western University student*

> *"Stressful, expensive, uncertain."*
>
> *University of Waterloo student, describing student life in three words*

Looking Forward

Students were asked what they plan to do after their program, how optimistic they feel about their career goals, and, in their own words, what they hope for and worry about.

Plans after graduating



Career optimism

60.7% of students rated their optimism about career goals a 4 or 5 out of 5, with a mean of 3.72.

What students hope for, and what worries them

2,672 students wrote about their future in their own words. Employment was the dominant thread, appearing in half of all responses, followed by financial security and debt in 44%. Housing, mental health and further study appeared less often.

Most students described hope and concern together: a career they want, alongside conditions they are not confident will let them reach it.

Base: students answering each question (plans and optimism n=3,050; open-text responses n=2,672).



"I will have a lot of debt, but hopefully since I'm studying engineering I can find a job? I hope I won't be stuck as a barista. I know too many highly qualified people working minimum wage jobs."

University of Ottawa student

"I hope I am able to get an offer for my dream school after undergrad. On the other hand, I need a job to support these dreams which is more difficult to obtain as the job market is not the best."

University of Guelph student

"My biggest hope is to build a stable, well-paying career as a paramedic where I can help people and feel proud of what I do. I want financial security and eventually the freedom to explore a side business. My main concerns are burnout, mental health from the job, and making enough money early on to support myself without constant stress."

Collège Boréal student

"I want to be stable financially, be able to find a job that allows me to make money as well as continue helping people with mental health as a psychotherapist. I also want to be able to retire my parents. I am getting married this summer and I want to be able to support my wife too."

University of Toronto student

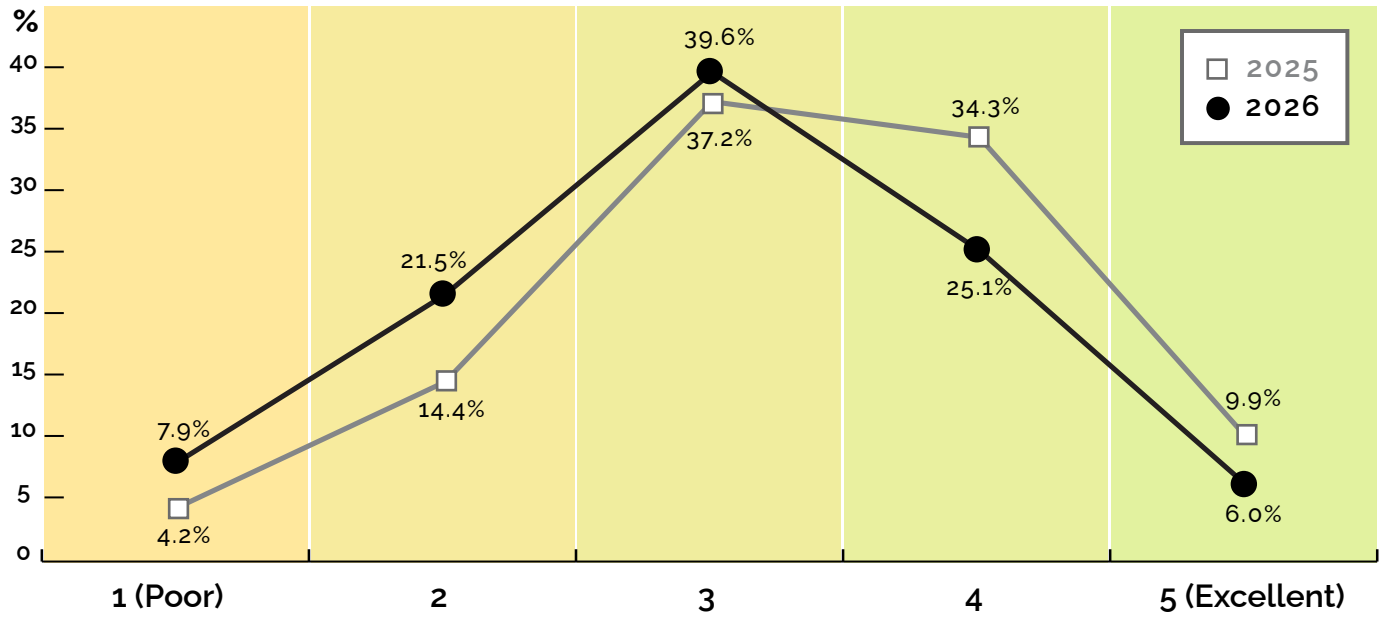
Mental Health And Support

Self-rated mental health declined year over year, anxiety increased, and thoughts of self-harm or suicide were reported more frequently than in 2025. Over the same period, barriers to seeking on-campus support shifted, with discomfort and trust barriers declining while self-reliance and practical access barriers rose. The share of students accessing support barely moved.

How students rated their mental health

Students were asked to rate their general mental health over the past few months on a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent. Responses clustered in the middle, with most students placing themselves at 3 or below.

MENTAL HEALTH SELF-RATING



Base: students rating their mental health (2025 n=4,123; 2026 n=2,687). The 2025 scale was recorded as 0 to 4 and has been aligned to the 1 to 5 scale used in 2026. All means in this report are presented on the 1 to 5 scale.

68.9% of students rated their mental health at 3 or below, and only 6.0% rated it at the highest level. The movement is concentrated in the middle of the distribution: more students rated themselves a 2 this year, up 7.1 points, and fewer rated themselves a 4, down 9.2 points.

The **mean for 2025 was 3.31** which shifted lower to **3.00 in 2026.**

New in 2026, students were asked to compare their current mental health to one year ago. 37.8% rated it higher and 26.1% rated it lower.

Anxiety and stress

Students were asked to rate the frequency of anxiety and stress during the school year on a 0 to 5 scale. More than half of students reported experiencing anxiety or stress frequently or constantly. The share reporting it constantly rose 5.0 points.

Anxiety and stress frequency	2025	2026	Change
Rated 4 or 5 (frequent to constant)	52.0%	58.2%	+6.2
Rated 5 (constant)	21.1%	26.1%	+5.0
Mean score	3.49	3.65	+0.16

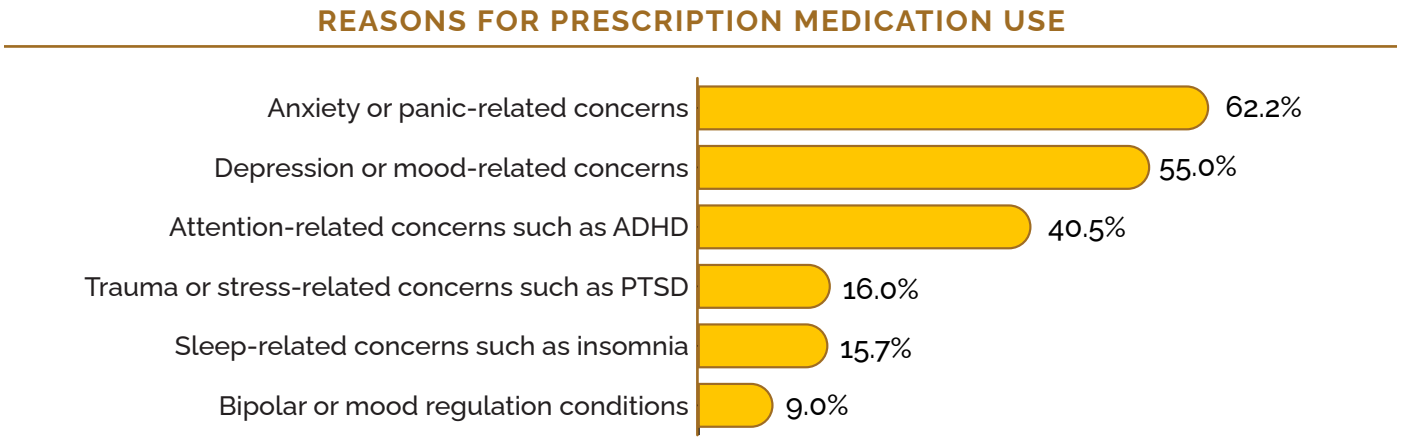
Self-harm and suicide

17.1% of students reported having had thoughts of self-harm or suicide in the past six months, up from 14.9% in 2025. An additional 14.7% preferred not to say.

If you are struggling with thoughts of self-harm or suicide, support is available. Kids Help Phone: call 1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868. Talk Suicide Canada: call 1-833-456-4566 or visit talksuicide.ca.

Prescription medication

New in 2026, students were asked whether they are currently taking prescription medication to support their mental health. 22.5% said they are. Among those students, the reasons reported were anxiety or panic-related concerns (62.2%), depression or mood-related concerns (55.0%), attention-related concerns such as ADHD (40.5%), trauma or stress-related concerns such as PTSD (16.0%), sleep-related concerns such as insomnia (15.7%), and bipolar or mood regulation conditions (9.0%).



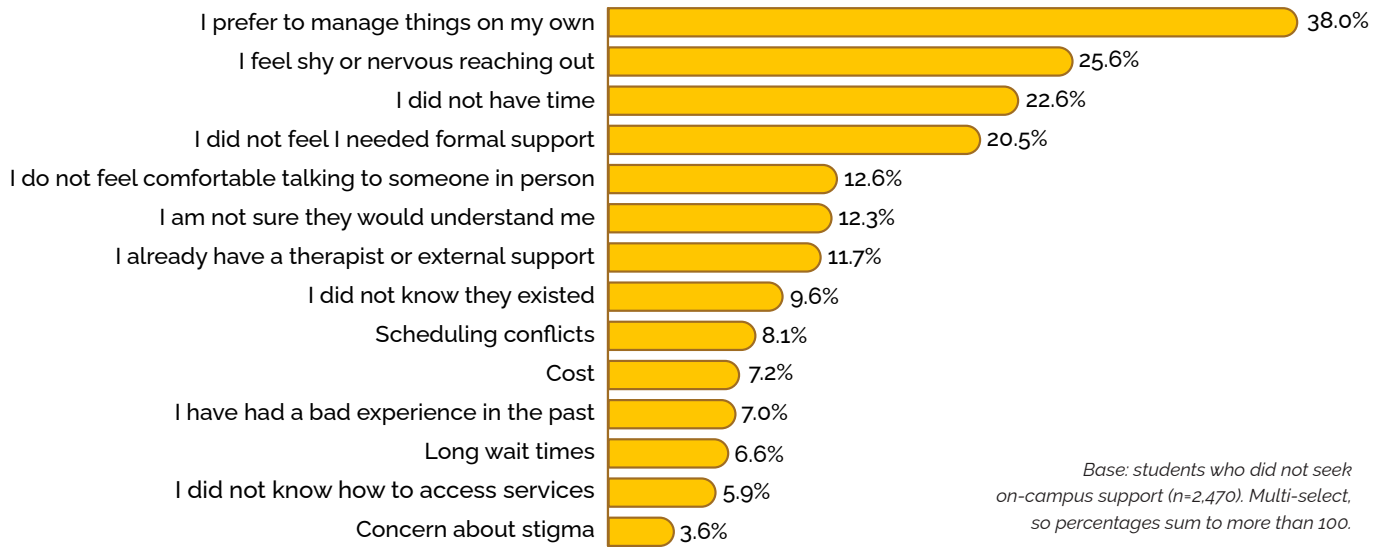
Base: all respondents (n=3,060); reasons based on students taking medication (n=687). Multi-select, so percentages sum to more than 100. New question in 2026, no prior-year equivalent.

Accessing on-campus support

19.0% of students sought on-campus mental health support during the school year, up from 17.7% in 2025. Roughly four in five students did not seek on-campus support in either year.

BARRIERS: Why students do not seek support

2026 - REASON FOR NOT SEEKING ON-CAMPUS SUPPORT

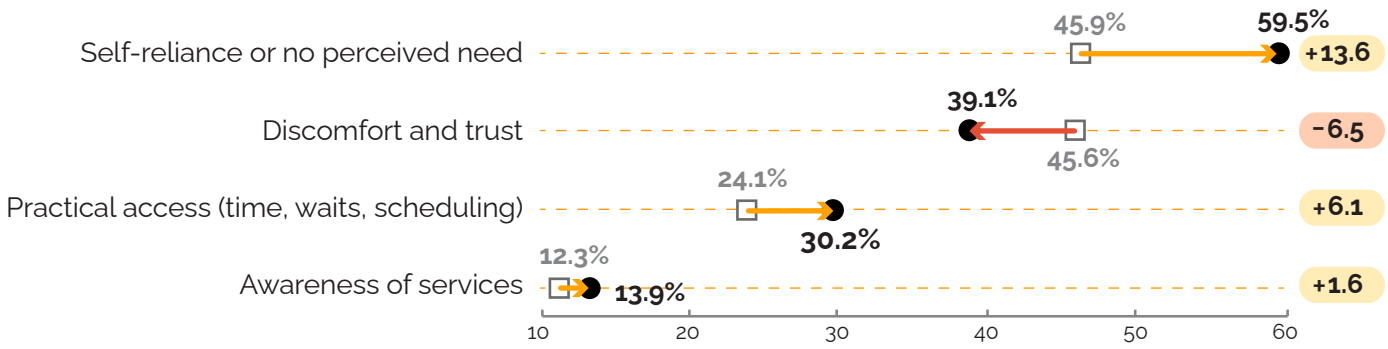


Base: students who did not seek on-campus support (n=2,470). Multi-select, so percentages sum to more than 100.

Grouping related barriers

Seven barrier options were added in 2026: did not feel I needed formal support; already have a therapist or external support; long wait times; scheduling conflicts; did not know how to access services; concern about stigma; and cost. Several sit close in meaning to options that already existed, so individual categories are not directly comparable year over year. Students selected more options on average as a result. Grouping related options gives a comparable read:

2025 - 2026 BARRIER GROUPING



Base: students who did not seek on-campus support (2025 n=3,649; 2026 n=2,470). 2026 groupings include the options added this year. All four changes are statistically significant at 95% confidence.

Grouping breakdown

- **Self-reliance or no perceived need:** prefer to manage things on my own; did not feel I needed formal support (2026); already have a therapist or external support (2026).
- **Discomfort and trust:** shy or nervous reaching out; not comfortable talking to someone in person; not sure they would understand me; had a bad experience in the past; concern about stigma (2026).
- **Practical access:** did not have time; long wait times (2026); scheduling conflicts (2026).
- **Awareness of services:** did not know they existed; did not know how to access services (2026).

Fewer students cited shyness, discomfort talking to someone in person, doubt that they would be understood, or a bad past experience, which accounts for the visible decline in the discomfort and trust grouping.

Over the same period, the share who said they would rather manage on their own or do not feel they need formal support rose, as did barriers related to wait times and scheduling.

What students say would help

When asked what types of support would be most useful, students identified flexible counselling hours including evenings and weekends (57.0%), shorter wait times (55.6%), and clearer information on what services exist and how to access them (46.1%).

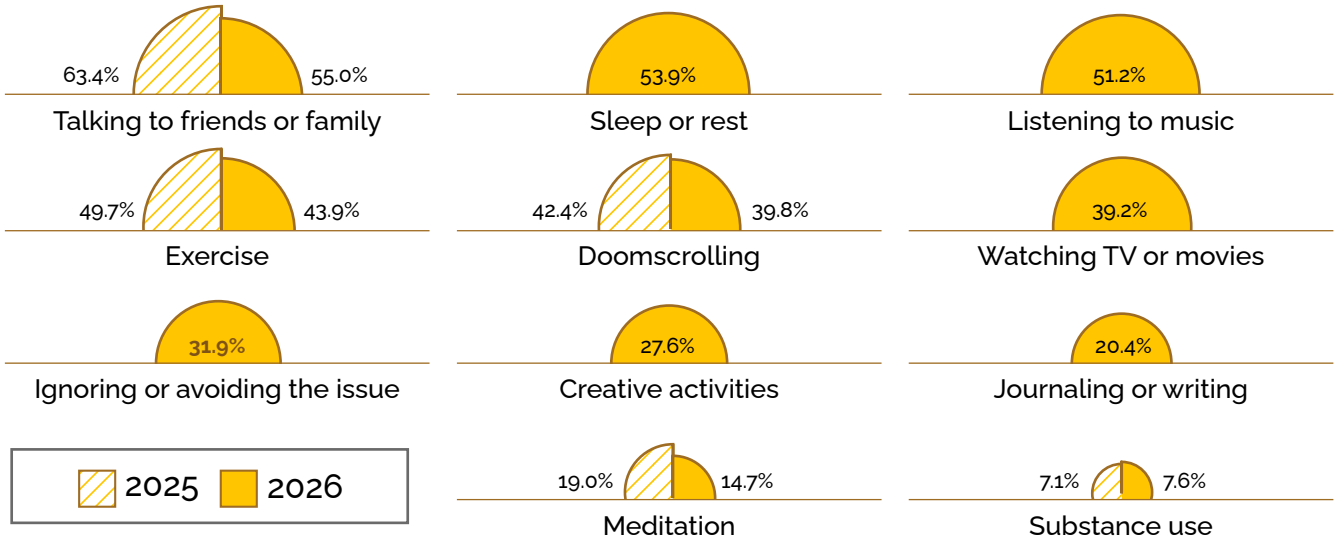
> *"A lot of students struggle with long wait times, sometimes weeks or even months to see someone, which makes it harder to get help when you actually need it."*
>
> *York University student*

> *"Making things not feel so formal. It's too intimidating trying to ask for help. I wish it felt more like talking to a friend."*
>
> *St. Clair College student*

How students cope

Talking to friends and family, sleep or rest, and listening to music were the most commonly reported approaches to managing stress. The latter two were new options this year.

2025 - 2026 COPING METHOD (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



Base: all respondents. Five coping options were added in 2026, which is part of why several existing categories show lower selection rates. Talking to friends or family remains the top response in both years.

When asked what they do first when feeling stressed, talking to friends or family took the lead (20.8%), followed by doomscrolling (14.7%), exercise (14.3%), and sleep or rest (12.9%).

Helping others, and helping themselves

Students rated their comfort seeking help for themselves at a mean of 3.23 out of 5. Their comfort offering support to a friend was considerably higher, at a mean of 4.34 out of 5. This gap is consistent with 2025.

60.9% of students supported a friend with mental health challenges this school year, down from 68.7% in 2025. Among those who did, 70.6% suggested that friend seek professional help, down from 73.5%.

Students remain far more comfortable supporting a friend than seeking help for themselves, and both measures declined this year.

> *"My friend found a therapy group outside of the school, there was no one she knew which made her not feel vulnerable at school."*
>
> *Brandon University student*

Supporting friends	2025	2026	Change
Supported a friend this year	68.7%	60.9%	-7.8
Suggested professional help (among those who did)	73.5%	70.6%	-2.9

Substance Use And Gambling

Alcohol consumption remained stable and predominantly low. Cannabis use increased modestly. Psychedelic use remained rare, and gambling participation did not change. The clearest movement in this section was in driving after substance use, and in riding with someone who has just used.

Alcohol

More than half of students reported never drinking alcohol. Among those who do drink, social gatherings were the most common setting and socializing was the primary reason.

Alcohol consumption frequency	2025	2026	Change
Never	53.4%	52.4%	-1.0
Monthly	35.4%	36.9%	+1.5
Weekly	10.6%	9.6%	-1.0
Daily	0.5%	0.7%	+0.2

Base: all respondents (2025 n=4,443; 2026 n=3,060).

Among students who drink, 57.7% consume one to two drinks per occasion and 56.8% reported never binge drinking.

Students who reported drinking less or not at all cited cost of alcohol (45.3%), health considerations (44.7%), academic priorities (40.7%), and reduced interest (40.4%) as the leading reasons.



45.3%
cost of alcohol



44.7%
health considerations



40.7%
academic priorities



40.4%
reduced interest

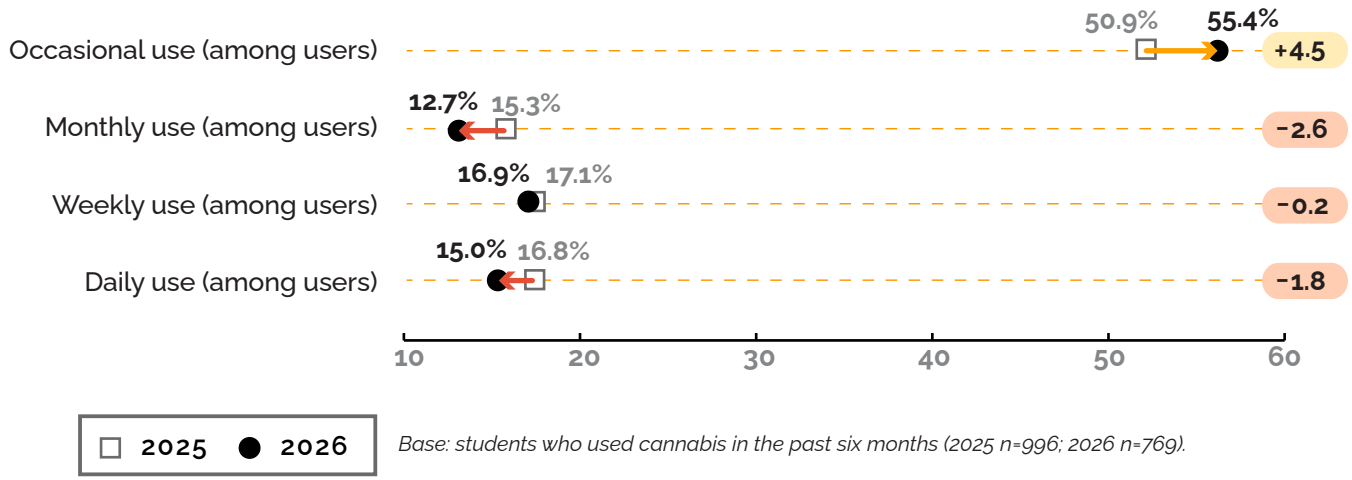
> *"As a bartender you see the other side and it makes you think about how you conduct yourself when drinking."*
>
> *Humber Polytechnic student*

> *"More availability of non-alcoholic cocktails on menus. I want the taste of a good drink, regardless of alcohol content."*
>
> *University of Toronto St. George student*

Cannabis

25.1% of students reported using cannabis in the past six months, up from 22.4% in 2025. Among those students, use shifted toward the lighter end: occasional use rose 4.5 points while monthly, weekly and daily use all declined.

2025 - 2026 CANNABIS USE



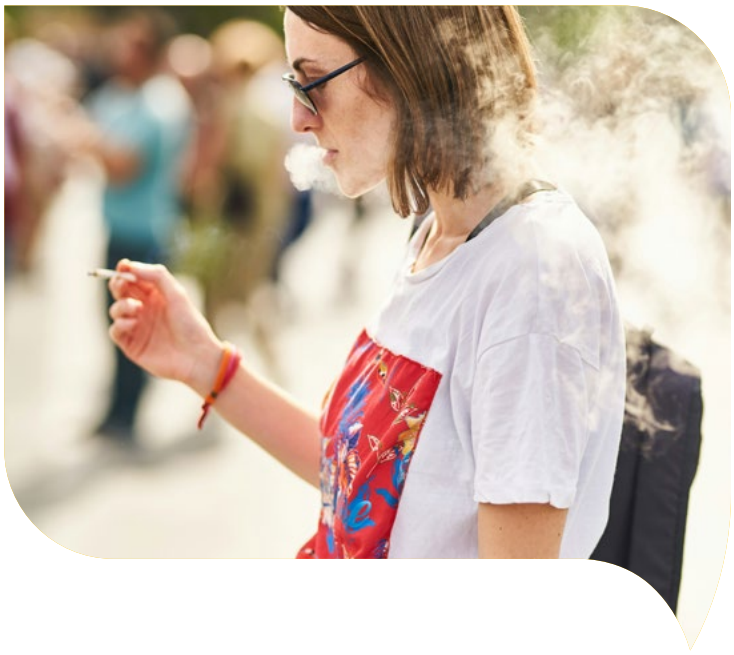
Base: students who used cannabis in the past six months (2025 n=996; 2026 n=769).

Edibles (55.9%) and smoking (54.7%) were the most common forms, followed by vaping (37.5%). Top reasons for use included recreational purposes (50.5%), relaxing or unwinding (48.8%), and stress relief (46.0%).

Psychedelics

96.1% of students reported never using psychedelics in the past six months. Among those who did, mushrooms were most cited (3.9%), followed by LSD (0.5%) and DMT (0.3%). Motivations included curiosity (65.3%), spiritual exploration (50.0%), and therapeutic reasons (46.9%).

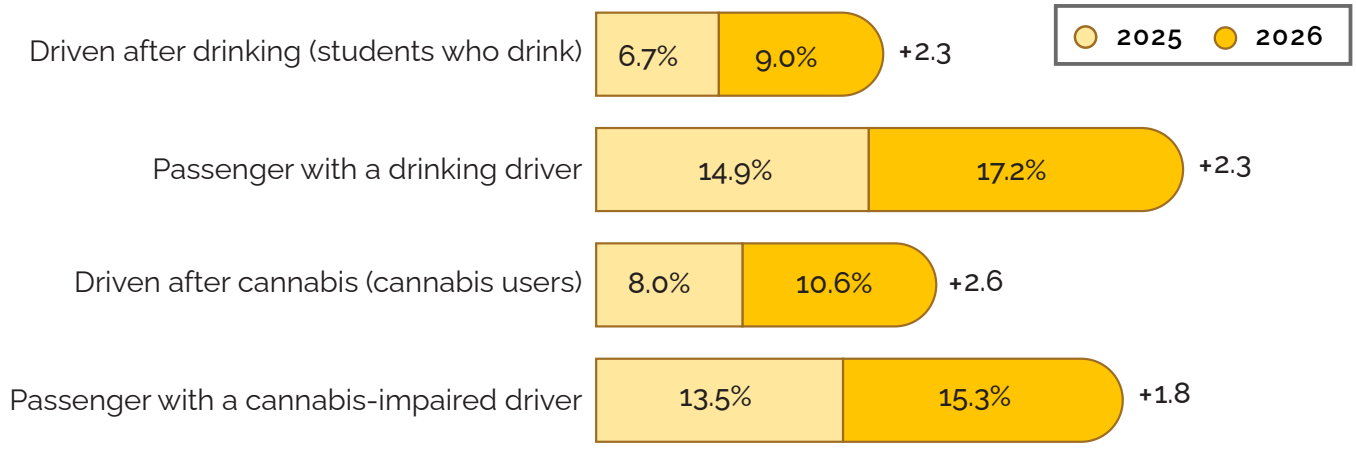
In 2025 the psychedelics question was a single multi-select that allowed students to indicate only one substance. In 2026 it was restructured as separate yes/no questions per substance. This change was a deliberate correction, and it means the two years are not directly comparable on prevalence. 2026 serves as the new baseline.



Driving and riding after use

The driving questions were shown only to students who drink or who use cannabis. The passenger questions were shown more broadly. Bases are stated below, and match the convention used in the 2025 report.

2025 - 2026 DRIVING AND RIDING AFTER USE



Base: driving after alcohol, students who drink (2025 n=2,022; 2026 n=1,397). Driving after cannabis, students who used cannabis (2025 n=962; 2026 n=733). Passenger with a drinking driver, students answering (2025 n=4,175; 2026 n=2,715). Passenger with a cannabis-impaired driver, all respondents. Across all students surveyed, driving after alcohol represents 3.0% in 2025 and 4.1% in 2026, and driving after cannabis represents 1.7% and 2.6%. The difference between the two views reflects that roughly half of students do not drink at all.

The increases in driving after alcohol, riding with a drinking driver, and riding with a cannabis-impaired driver are statistically significant at 95% confidence. The increase in driving after cannabis is directional and should be read with caution.

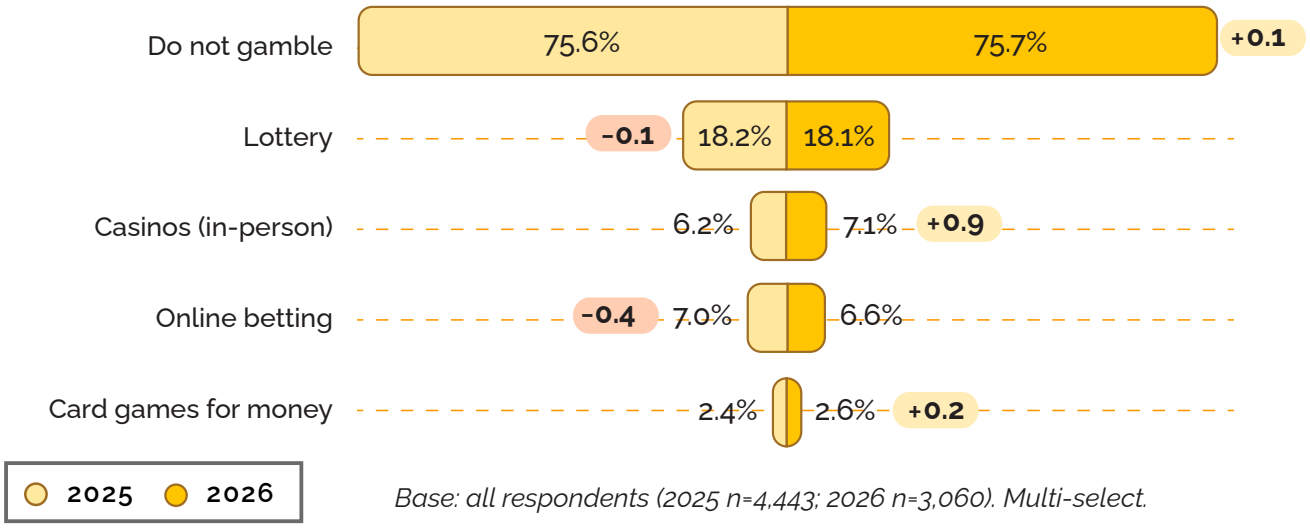
9.0% of student drinkers reported having driven after consuming alcohol, up from 6.7% last year. Alongside stable and low overall consumption, this movement in the substance use data is most relevant to harm reduction programming.



Gambling

Three quarters of students reported not gambling, and participation did not change compared to 2025.

2025 - 2026 GAMBLING PARTICIPATION



Base: all respondents (2025 n=4,443; 2026 n=3,060). Multi-select.

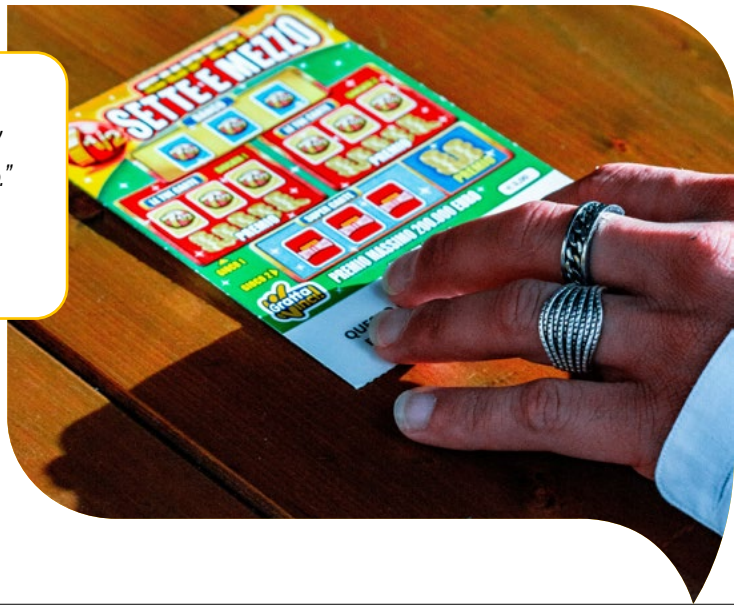
Among those who gamble, lottery participation was most common.

Among students who gamble, the primary motivations reported were winning money (42.2%) and entertainment (40.9%). Frequency eased year over year: 71.0% gambled rarely, up from 68.5%, and weekly gambling fell from 12.3% to 9.1%.

4.9% of students who gamble expressed concern about their own gambling behaviour, close to unchanged from 5.2% in 2025.

Base for frequency and concern: students who gamble (2025 n=1,084; 2026 n=740).

> *"I just buy a lottery ticket every week, my parents did it so I do."*
>
> *Laurentian University student*



Where Experience Differs

Where students live and the type of institution they attend shape their experiences with financial strain, mental health, and substance use. This section reports the differences that are large enough to act on.

A cut is reported here only where the spread between groups is larger than the uncertainty in the measurement. Several differences examined during analysis, including regional variation in self-harm thoughts and in average mental health rating, fall within a range too narrow to distinguish from sampling variation and are summarised in text rather than shown as tables.

Regional base: Ontario post-secondary institutions only (n=2,596). GTA (999), Central Ontario (436), Eastern Ontario (438), Hamilton and Niagara (296), Southwestern Ontario (262), Northern Ontario (165). Figures elsewhere in this report include all respondents, 85% of whom attend Ontario institutions, so regional and overall percentages for the same measure will not always match exactly.

Northern Ontario results are directional and should not be read as year-over-year change. That region's base declined 57.7% from 2025, and the mix of institutions represented within it also changed, so movements in the Northern numbers may reflect a different set of campuses responding rather than a change among students.

College and university students

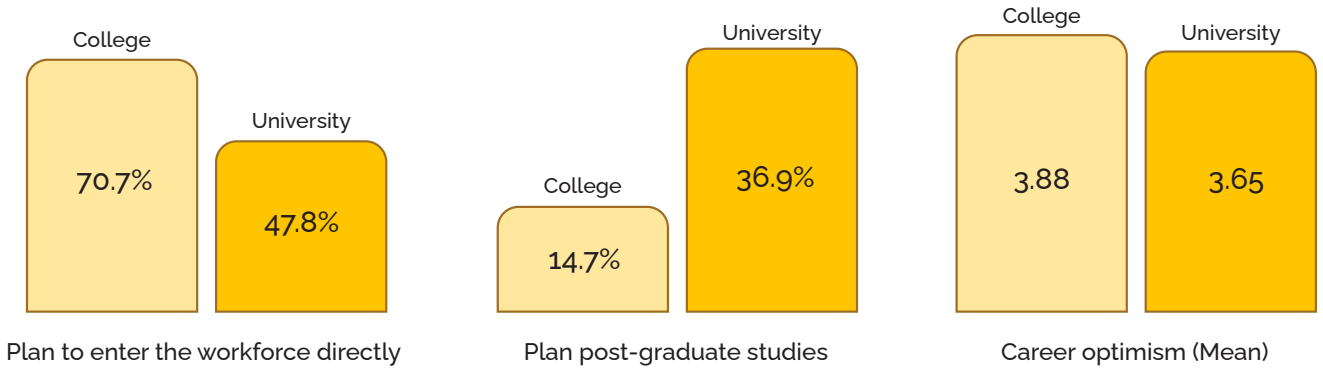
The financial gap is the largest difference in the dataset

70.6% of college students reported facing financial challenges related to their education, compared to 71.0% in 2025. University students experiencing financial challenges decreased to 63.5% from 67.0%, widening the gap between the two groups. When asked to name their single greatest stressor, cost of living led for both groups, though more strongly among college students (47.1%) than university students (35.2%).

College and university students plan differently

70.7% of college students said they plan to enter the workforce directly, compared to 47.8% of university students. University students were significantly more likely to plan post-graduate studies (36.9% vs. 14.7%). College students reported slightly higher career optimism (mean 3.88 vs. 3.65).

PLANS AFTER GRADUATION



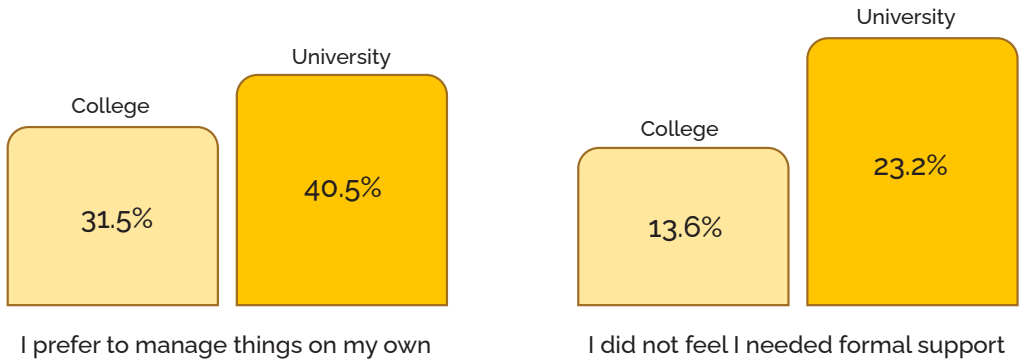
Mental health outcomes are largely similar, with two exceptions

Anxiety and self-harm reporting were close between the two groups. 56.0% of college students and 59.1% of university students rated anxiety a 4 or 5. Thoughts of self-harm or suicide were reported by 15.9% of college students and 17.6% of university students. Support-seeking was also close, at 18.0% and 19.4%.

Two stand-out differences between college and university students were prescription medication use, which was higher among college students at 26.5% against 21.0%, and the reasons given for not seeking on-campus support.

University students were more likely to say they handle it themselves. College students were more likely to be taking medication. Both groups reached out to on-campus services at close to the same rate.

REASON FOR NOT SEEKING SUPPORT



Substance use and gambling

Alcohol consumption was nearly identical across both groups, with 53.8% of college students and 52.1% of university students reporting they never drink. Cannabis use was somewhat higher among college students (28.0% vs. 24.2%), and among users the gap widens considerably: 21.4% of college cannabis users reported daily use, compared to 12.1% of university users.

College students were more likely to have been a passenger with a cannabis-impaired driver (20.3% vs. 13.5%) and with a driver who had been drinking (21.3% vs. 15.7%).

College students were also more likely to gamble. 71.1% reported not gambling, compared to 77.5% of university students, and lottery participation was higher (23.5% vs. 16.1%).

When it comes to coping, university students said they lean more on doomscrolling (41.8% vs. 34.5%) and on ignoring or avoiding the issue (33.0% vs. 28.8%), while college students reported higher use of meditation (18.8% vs. 13.1%) and substances (9.2% vs. 7.0%). The share of students coping by talking to friends or family, listening to music, and sleep or rest were close to identical between the groups.

Regional differences

Financial situation

Students in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Eastern Ontario, and Northern Ontario reported the highest rates of financial struggling, above Central Ontario, Southwestern Ontario, and Hamilton and Niagara.

The number of students facing financial challenges rose in five of six regions, consistent with the overall increase. Northern Ontario shows the largest movement, though that region's base and its mix of institutions both changed between 2025 and 2026, so the size of the shift should not be relied on.

2026 financial situation	GTA	Central Ontario	Hamilton and Niagara	Southwestern Ontario	Eastern Ontario	Northern Ontario*
Comfortable	16.1%	24.5%	18.9%	24.4%	23.5%	20.0%
Managing	43.9%	45.0%	47.6%	47.3%	40.0%	36.4%
Struggling	**30.5%**	22.0%	26.4%	23.7%	**29.0%**	**38.2%**
Struggling, year over year						
Struggling 2025	28.6%	24.5%	23.4%	27.7%	27.8%	26.5%
Struggling 2026	**30.5%**	22.0%	26.4%	23.7%	**29.0%**	**38.2%**
Change	+1.9	-2.5	+3.0	-4.0	+1.2	+11.7
Faced financial challenges, year over year						
Faced challenges 2025	66.6%	59.8%	61.8%	59.7%	63.7%	68.3%
Faced challenges 2026	**68.1%**	61.5%	**66.9%**	62.6%	**64.4%**	64.2%
Change	+1.5	+1.7	+5.1	+2.9	+0.7	-4.1

*Base: Ontario respondents (n=2,596). The 2025 regional columns were recalculated from the 2025 response file for this report. Regional results were not included in the published 2025 report, so these figures appear here for the first time. *Directional. See regional base note.*

Alcohol and cannabis

Share of Students	GTA	Central Ontario	Hamilton and Niagara	Southwestern Ontario	Eastern Ontario	Northern Ontario*
Alcohol						
Never drink, 2025	59.0%	51.0%	58.0%	50.0%	50.0%	48.0%
Never drink, 2026	60.3%	45.6%	48.0%	46.2%	48.2%	52.1%
Cannabis						
Used cannabis, 2025	21.2%	22.2%	19.8%	23.6%	23.9%	25.1%
Used cannabis, 2026	22.0%	28.7%	24.7%	30.2%	28.5%	34.5%

*Base: Ontario respondents (n=2,596). *Directional. See regional base note.*

Hamilton and Niagara recorded the largest decline in the share of students who never drink of any region, down 10.0 points, meaning more students there reported drinking than in 2025. The GTA remains the region with both the highest non-drinking rate and the lowest cannabis use.

Cannabis use rose in every region, with the largest increase in Northern Ontario at 9.4 points and the smallest in the GTA at 0.8 points. The Northern Ontario figure is directional given the size of that region's base. Daily use among cannabis users is higher in Eastern Ontario (19.2%) than in the GTA, Central Ontario, Southwestern Ontario, and Hamilton and Niagara, which range between 11.8% and 15.1%. The Northern Ontario figure for daily use is not reported here because it rests on 56 cannabis users in the region.

Anxiety and support access

Anxiety rose in every region, by at least 4 points everywhere and by 10.9 points in Northern Ontario. Southwestern Ontario recorded the largest increase in support access, at 6.9 points. The GTA and Central Ontario were close to flat on support access while anxiety rose in both.

Southwestern Ontario and Hamilton and Niagara reported both the highest anxiety rates and the highest rates of on-campus support access. Northern Ontario also appears in the higher group on both measures, on a smaller base. The GTA and Central Ontario reported the lowest of both.

Share of Students	GTA	Central Ontario	Hamilton and Niagara	Southwestern Ontario	Eastern Ontario	Northern Ontario*
High anxiety, 2025	53.0%	50.1%	55.4%	53.8%	53.7%	50.3%
High anxiety, 2026	57.2%	58.0%	61.5%	62.6%	58.2%	61.2%
Sought support, 2025	17.2%	18.2%	21.2%	16.4%	19.2%	15.1%
Sought support, 2026	16.7%	18.1%	22.0%	23.3%	21.5%	23.6%

*Base: Ontario respondents (n=2,596). Anxiety is the share rating anxiety or stress a 4 or 5. Support is the share who sought on-campus mental health support this school year. *Directional. See regional base note.*

Differences too small to report separately

Thoughts of self-harm or suicide ranged from 16.2% to 18.9% across the six regions, a spread narrower than the variation we can distinguish at these base sizes. Eastern Ontario recorded the highest rate in both years, a pattern of consistency rather than change. Average self-rated mental health declined in every region by a similar amount, with no region diverging meaningfully from the overall trend.

Student Insights & Suggestions

At the end of the survey, students were asked in their own words what would improve mental health support for students in Ontario. Three themes dominated the responses.

Cost

Students described support as something they cannot afford, and eligibility thresholds that do not reflect their circumstances.

> *"Therapy that's publicly funded. Students are already financially struggling and we can't afford good therapy."*
>
> *Humber Polytechnic student*

> *"Counselling and help for financially struggling students like me who can't find a job with international education and work experience."*
>
> *Seneca Polytechnic student*

Stigma and formality

Students described formal services as intimidating and asked for support that feels closer to a conversation than an appointment.

> *"Make services feel like a community. People need community in order to thrive, and a lot of the time, support feels more professional and cold rather than warm and personal."*
>
> *University of Toronto student*

> *"I like the idea of peer led student support groups, like AA but more focused for students and on campus."*
>
> *University of Waterloo student*

Access without a gatekeeper

Anonymous, text-based, and after-hours options came up repeatedly, tied closely to the discomfort barriers reported earlier in this report.

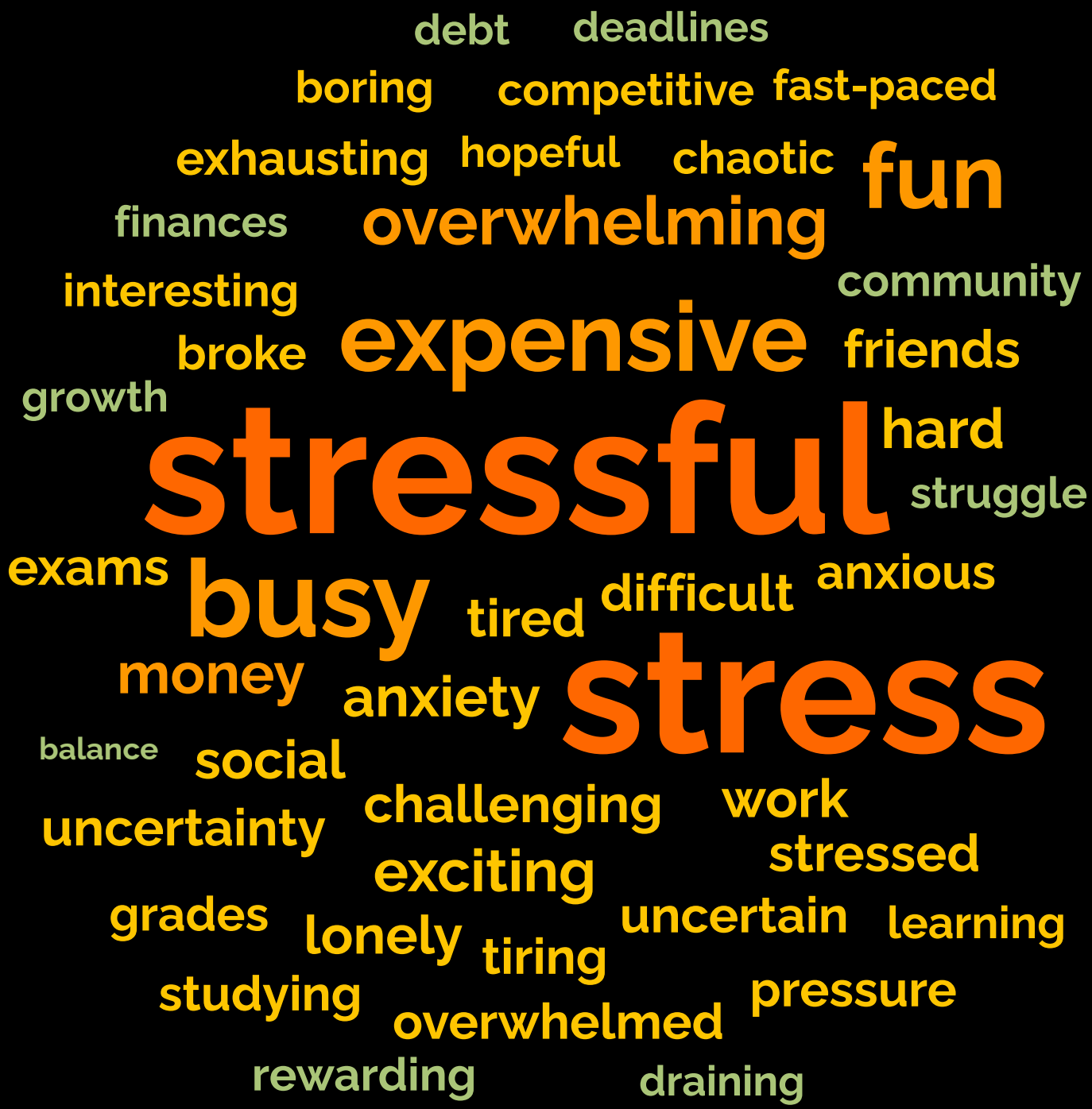
> *"An anonymous 24/7 online chat service with a therapist. Something that does not require a sign-in or account so it would allow for easy, stigma-free access."*
>
> *University of Toronto student*

> *"I do prefer texting people I don't know because then I won't feel awkward when I would have to see them."*
>
> *Humber Polytechnic student*

> *"I think being more proactive with making resources visible and easier to access is key. Its hard to do anything when struggling, if there is a hurdle to get help, its often too hard to push yourself to do."*
>
> *Canadore College student*



Word frequency from open-text responses



What We Are Left Asking

The 2026 Campus Pulse Survey reinforces the picture that emerged in 2025 and adds new clarity to it. Financial strain is structural, with two consecutive years at roughly 70% of students struggling or managing with difficulty. Anxiety is rising on a consistent, comparable measure. Self-rated mental health declined year over year. The share of students reporting thoughts of self-harm or suicide increased by 2.2 points.

Against that, the data offers a narrower positive signal. Students are less likely to cite discomfort and trust as barriers to seeking support than they did a year ago. This may suggest that discomfort and trust are becoming less prominent barriers to accessing campus services. What has grown alongside it is the share of students who say they would rather manage on their own, and the share citing wait times and scheduling. Students remain far more comfortable supporting a friend than seeking help for themselves, though the share taking on that role declined this year.

The gap between students' comfort helping others (mean 4.34 out of 5) and their comfort seeking help for themselves (mean 3.23 out of 5) points to an opportunity. Students are telling us what would close it: lower cost, shorter waits, flexible hours, and support that feels less formal. The question the data leaves us with is whether services and access points are keeping pace with a student body that is under more pressure and, by its own account, increasingly inclined to handle that pressure alone.

Questions to be answered

How do campuses reach students who have decided they would rather manage on their own, when that group is growing?

If discomfort is falling while wait times and scheduling challenges are rising, is the constraint now capacity rather than culture?

What does support look like for the students who will not walk into an office, and who told us so in their own words?

The 2026 survey introduced more precise measurement tools, including the single greatest stressor question, prescription medication tracking, expanded coping options, and an expanded barrier list. These will strengthen year-over-year comparisons in 2027 and beyond.



> *"The only real solution is not band-aid fixes but to provide hope for our generation rather than selling it out."*
>
> *Seneca Polytechnic student*