Student Loneliness

Examining Student Loneliness at The Ohio State University

Center for the Study of Student Life

—

May 2025

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

Following the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared loneliness as a public health issue due to its association with mental and physical well-being (US HHS, 2023). Research studies consistently show that young adults report the highest rates of loneliness across the population (Ellard et al., 2022).

Loneliness is described as a personal feeling of insufficient close connections in social relationships or having fewer social interactions than one wishes, regardless of the actual level of social engagement one has (Ellard et al., 2023; Yang, 2019). It should therefore be understood as a subjective experience that is not entirely dependent on the number of social interactions. Loneliness has widespread effects on mental health and well-being, and is associated with heart disease and premature death (US HHS, 2023). This report summarizes findings about student loneliness from research studies conducted at The Ohio State University.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Nationally, the prevalence of loneliness in students is on the decline ($p < .001$).
- At Ohio State, the proportion of students categorized as lonely has significantly declined over time, with **53.2%** of students categorized as lonely in 2022 and **43.2%** of students categorized as lonely in 2025.
- At Ohio State, feelings of loneliness at the beginning of a first-year student's first semester significantly predicts feelings of loneliness later in the semester.
- During a first-year student's first semester at Ohio State, strong start-of-semester feelings of community predicted less loneliness mid-semester ($p < .05$).
- Between 2022 and 2025, significantly more students agreed that their social relationships are supportive and rewarding.

FINDINGS

This report begins by explaining the state of current research in student loneliness in higher education and includes trend data on student loneliness in higher education broadly. The report then displays findings on student loneliness from three different research studies conducted at Ohio State and concludes by exploring how to address student loneliness.

General Research on Loneliness in Higher Education

College students are in a unique stage of life and encounter factors that contribute to loneliness as they join new social circles (Asher & Weeks, 2014; Eccles & Roeser, 2003; Renn & Arnold, 2003), experience increased academic stress (Jenkins et al., 2013) and engage in discourse about different ideas (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Although some degree of

loneliness is expected during these transitions, national studies indicate that loneliness among college students is widespread and associated with various physical and mental health issues (Bonsaksen et al., 2022), which can affect retention and completion rates (Zhai & Carney, 2024).

Findings from the National College Health Assessment

Loneliness continues to be an important focus for higher education leaders and practitioners, and monitoring loneliness rates provides important context. The National College Health Assessment provides multi-institutional data on college student loneliness. The American College Health Association (ACHA) conducts the NCHA annually and uses the UCLA 3-item loneliness scale to assess student loneliness (Hughes et al., 2004). The scale is comprised of three questions with the responses "hardly ever", "some of the time" and "often". These three options are worth 1, 2 and 3 points, respectively. The scores for each question are added together to create a total score from 3 to 9. Those with a score of six or greater are categorized as "lonely."

Loneliness in the National NCHA Sample

Recent data from the national sample of university students taking the National College Health Assessment (NCHA) shows that the percentage of students reporting loneliness *nationally* has significantly decreased between 2022 and 2024. Table 1 shows differences in loneliness over time in the national NCHA sample between 2022 and 2024 (ACHA, 2022; ACHA, 2024). In 2024, approximately 75% of participating institutions were public universities and 94% of institutions were 4-year universities. The NCHA began including the loneliness scale after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1. NCHA National reference group loneliness over time: 2022 to 2024

	2022		2024		Statistical Significance
Percentage of Students Categorized as "Lonely"	**National Reference Group *n***	**Percentage**	**National Reference Group *n***	**Percentage**	
All Students	69,131	51.9%	103,639	48.5%	***
Undergraduate Students	54,204	53.6%	79,246	49.7%	***
Graduate and Professional Students	13,600	45.4%	21,844	44.1%	*

Loneliness at Ohio State

The Ohio State University participates in the NCHA every three years, allowing for an in-depth examination of loneliness in addition to an examination of trends in loneliness over time. Table 2 displays the Ohio State loneliness scale questions and the overall percentage of students who screened positive for loneliness in 2025. There are no significant differences between undergraduate and graduate/professional students on the loneliness scale items or the overall loneliness score.

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 2. Ohio State student loneliness question responses in 2025, by educational level

% Some of the time or Often	All Students	Undergraduate Students	Graduate/ Professional Students
How often do you feel a lack of companionship?	55.5%	55.6%	55.1%
How often do you feel left out?	60.9%	62.4%	57.6%
How often do you feel isolated from others?	57.7%	58.3%	56.4%
Percent of students screened positive for loneliness	43.1%	44.0%	41.1%

Note. *N*'s presented in ranges. Undergraduate Students *n* = 664-665; Graduate/Professional Students *n* = 314

Table 3 displays the differences in Ohio State loneliness score over time, comparing the results of the 2022 and 2025 NCHA at Ohio State. The overall percentage of students screening positive for loneliness has gone down significantly between 2022 and 2025, as has the percentage of undergraduate students screening positive for loneliness. The percentage of graduate and professional students screening positive for loneliness has gone down as well, but this difference is not statistically significance.

Table 3. Percentage of Ohio State students who screened positive for loneliness over time

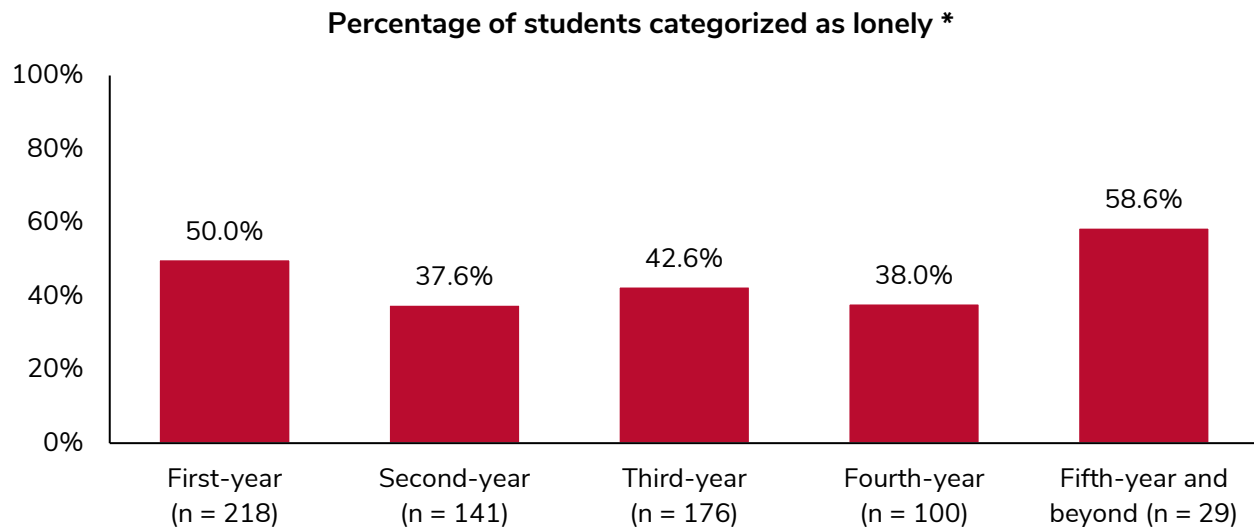|	2022		2025		Statistical Significance
	n	Percentage	*n*	Percentage	
All Students	541	53.2%	429	43.2%	***
Undergraduate	394	56.2%	292	44.0%	***
Graduate/Professional	140	45.9%	129	41.1%	

Loneliness at Ohio State and Year in School

As students may be at higher risk of loneliness based on demographic factors, we explored differences in loneliness by educational level, disability status, generational status, sex and race. There were no significant differences by race and sex using the Ohio State data; however, the broader literature has identified differences by race and sex in loneliness of college-age students. Verdugo et al. (2024) found that Asian American students reported the highest rates of loneliness (65%), followed by Black and Latinx students. Additionally, female young adults are more likely to express that they are lonely than male young adults (Twenge et al., 2019).

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

As displayed in Table 2 above, there is no significant difference in loneliness between undergraduate (44.0%) and graduate and professional students (41.0%). Figure 2 displays differences in loneliness in undergraduate students based on year in school. There is a significant difference between years of school, with fifth-year and beyond students having the highest proportion of students categorized as lonely and second-year students having the lowest proportion of students categorized as lonely.

Figure 2. Differences in Loneliness by Undergraduate Year in School

Percentage of students categorized as lonely *

	First-year (n = 218)	Second-year (n = 141)	Third-year (n = 176)	Fourth-year (n = 100)	Fifth-year and beyond (n = 29)
	50.0%	37.6%	42.6%	38.0%	58.6%

Loneliness at Ohio State and Disability Status

Table 4 displays differences in loneliness between students with and without a disability. There is a significant difference in loneliness, with students with a disability having a significantly higher proportion of students categorized as lonely compared to students without a disability. This is consistent with the literature on loneliness. Bevens et al. (2024) used data from the ACHA-NCHA Spring 2022 survey to examine loneliness among U.S. college students with disabilities. The study found that all disability groups—especially students with autism, speech disabilities and multiple disabilities—had significantly higher odds of loneliness compared to peers without disabilities.

$*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001$

Table 4. Loneliness and Disability Status

% Some of the time or Often	Students without a disability	Students with a disability	Statistical Significance
How often do you feel a lack of companionship?	54.4%	60.0%	
How often do you feel left out?	58.6%	70.3%	**
How often do you feel isolated from others?	54.9%	70.4%	***
Percent of students testing positive for loneliness	40.7%	53.3%	**

Note. N's presented in ranges. Students without a disability n = 798-799; Students with a disability n = 195-196

Loneliness at Ohio State and Generational Status

Table 5 displays differences in loneliness by generational status. A significantly higher proportion of first-generation students are categorized as lonely compared to continuing-generation students.

Table 5. Loneliness and Generational Status

% Some of the time or Often	Continuing-generation students	First-generation students	Statistical Significance
How often do you feel a lack of companionship?	54.8%	57.6%	
How often do you feel left out?	58.7%	67.5%	*
How often do you feel isolated from others?	55.4%	65.3%	**
Percent of students testing positive for loneliness	41.2%	49.6%	*

Note. N's presented in ranges. First-generation students n = 242-243; Continuing-generation students n = 746

Findings from the Ohio State Longitudinal Residential Experience Study

The Longitudinal Residential Experience Study (LRES) was first administered at The Ohio State University during 2024-2025. First-year students completed daily diary surveys during two weeks at the beginning of the academic year and these data were linked to the Residential Experience Study administered later in the semester. Linear modeling was used to investigate the relationship between early loneliness and with later outcomes.

Start-of-semester loneliness predicted more loneliness mid-semester (p < .001) and predicted low levels of belonging later in the semester (p < .01). Additionally, number and quality of social interactions predicted feelings of community early in the semester, which

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

in turn predicted loneliness. This means that experiencing loneliness during the first few weeks of a first-year student's first semester leads to increased loneliness and decreased belongingness later in the semester.

Number and quality of social interactions early in the semester → are related to → stronger feelings of community early in the semester → impacting → mid-semester satisfaction, belonging and loneliness.

ADDRESSING LONELINESS

Because loneliness is a topic concern of leaders in higher education, exploring ways to decrease loneliness is paramount. This section first reviews suggestions from the literature, then discusses Ohio State's approach to fostering student belonging.

Research on Loneliness Interventions

Some studies have tried to identify ways to mitigate student loneliness. Ellard et al. (2023) reviewed interventions used to address college student loneliness and found that fostering in-person social interaction has the most impact, although reflective exercises and promoting positive virtual interaction may also be effective. Additionally, changing patterns around social media use could be an effective way to decrease student loneliness. Barry et al. (2024) studied 1,120 NCAA student-athletes across nine U.S. universities to examine how social media use relates to well-being. In this study, loneliness was significantly associated with social media use during daily activities (e.g., in class, before bed) and perceptions that social media interfered with life (e.g., sleep, academics, relationships). However, total screen time was not related to loneliness, suggesting that social media has a greater impact on loneliness rather than overall phone use.

Student Belonging at Ohio State

The most prominent solution to decreasing student loneliness is helping to foster a sense of belonging for students (Asher & Weeks, 2013). Belonging is a feeling of affiliation and meaningful social interactions with others, regardless of the number or frequency of social interactions. Belongingness and loneliness are distinct, but related, concepts (Asher & Weeks, 2013). Practitioners can support students experiencing loneliness by fostering a sense of belonging and addressing both the psychological aspect of loneliness and providing opportunities to avoid social isolation. The following sections describe findings related to belonging and loneliness among students at Ohio State.

Student Life Survey 2025

The Student Life Survey is sent to a random sample of students at The Ohio State University each year and focuses on belonging, involvement and satisfaction. Data from this study are weighted to be representative of the Ohio State student population. The following highlights are from the 2025 Student Life Survey, which was administered in January 2025.

To measure sense of belonging, students were asked to rate their agreement with five statements to create a composite belonging score. Each item was a four-point Likert question (i.e., Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree), meaning that a minimum possible score was one, and a maximum possible score was four. Students were given a score if they answered at least four out of the five questions on the belongingness scale.

Table 6 illustrates which items were incorporated into the scale and shows the association of the individual scale items with educational level using chi-square tests of independence. Additional analyses demonstrated that the items had an acceptable reliability score ($\alpha = 0.79$) and loaded onto a single factor, indicating this is a reliable scale for measuring sense of belonging. Figure 3 shows the average belonging score by each educational level. A linear regression was used to test for overall significant differences between educational levels.

Overall, students have high levels of agreement that they feel a sense of belonging and that they have relationships with others at Ohio State. Professional students report the highest level of agreement among these items and have the highest average belonging score.

Table 6: Sense of Belonging Scale Items by Educational Level

% Agree or Strongly Agree	Undergraduate students ($n = 676$)	Graduate students ($n = 484$)	Professional students ($n = 98$)	Significance
I feel a sense of belonging at Ohio State	86.7%	82.0%	93.8%	*
I feel that I am a member of the Ohio State community	88.8%	82.0%	91.3%	**
I have relationships with other Ohio State students	90.5%	85.4%	97.2%	**
I have relationships with Ohio State faculty (e.g., professors)	66.9%	85.8%	88.9%	***
I have relationships with Ohio State staff (e.g., academic advisors, hall directors, Student Life employees)	65.2%	73.0%	72.0%	*

$*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001$

Figure 3: Average Belonging Score by Educational Level
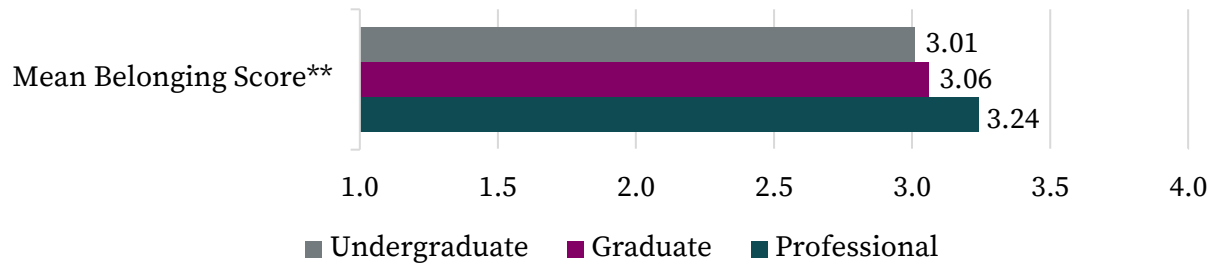
These belonging data were combined with involvement data also found in the Student Life Study. These analyses found that for undergraduate and graduate students, students who are involved on campus have a significantly higher sense of belonging compared to students who are not involved. There is not a statistically significant difference in belongingness between involved and uninvolved professional students.

National College Health Association 2025

In addition to providing data about loneliness, the NCHA also included a couple of questions about social relationships and belongingness. Table 7 displays the differences in the percentage of students who agree that their social relationships are supportive and rewarding between 2022 and 2025 at Ohio State. Both undergraduate and graduate/professional students experienced a significant growth in the percentage of students who report having supportive social relationships.

Table 7. "My social relationships are supportive and rewarding"

% Agree	2022		2025		Statistical Significance
	n	Percentage	*n*	Percentage	
All Students	852	83.5%	882	88.7%	**
Undergraduate	581	82.7%	585	88.0%	**
Graduate/Professional	262	86.2%	286	91.4%	*

Table 8 displays the differences in the percentage of students who agree that they belong at Ohio State between 2022 and 2025. Undergraduate students experienced a significant growth in the percentage of students who agree that they feel that they belong at Ohio State.

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 8. "I feel that I belong at my college/university"

% Agree	2022		2025		Statistical Significance
	n	Percentage	*n*	Percentage	
All Students	899	87.8%	916	91.6%	**
Undergraduate	622	88.5%	618	92.9%	**
Graduate/Professional	264	86.6%	279	89.7%	

Longitudinal Residential Experience Study

The Longitudinal Residential Experience Study findings support the connection between belonging early in a first-year student's first semester and loneliness. Strong start-of-semester feelings of community predicted less loneliness mid-semester ($p < .05$). Additionally, strong feelings of community early in the semester significantly predicted strong belonging later in the semester ($p < .001$).

CONCLUSION

Although the overall number of students experiencing loneliness at Ohio State is declining over time, addressing loneliness should remain a priority because of its connection to mental and physical well-being (US HHS, 2023). Some groups of students, such as students with disabilities and first-generation students, are more likely to experience loneliness. An important solution to decreasing student loneliness is bolstering sense of belonging for students (Asher & Weeks, 2013).

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*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

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