



**FROM CRISIS TO CONNECTION:**

# Making Financial Health Core to the Student Journey

**ECSI**



**HIGHER ED DIVE**

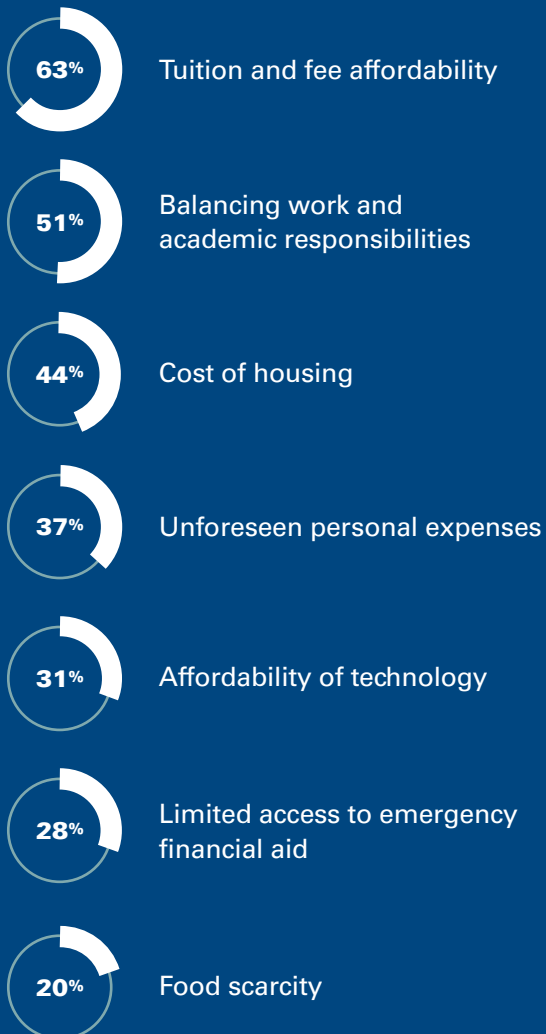
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Higher education institutions offer a wide range of financial tools to support students, including scholarships, tuition payment plans, grants, literacy programs and more. However, despite this seemingly robust approach to financial support, a recent survey of higher ed leaders by ECSI, in partnership with Higher Ed Dive's studioID, finds that more than 30% of students still miss tuition deadlines each term.

Financial stress remains a leading cause of dropout, attrition and academic disengagement. According to survey results, the most cited financial challenges include tuition affordability (63%), balancing work and academics (51%), and the cost of housing (44%).

## Top financial challenges students face

*Note: Respondents could choose multiple answers*





Considering the numerous financial support tools offered by higher ed institutions, it appears that the problem students face isn't that support doesn't exist. It's that support often exists in pieces: resources disconnected from each other, resources difficult to navigate, and/or resources misaligned with students' real financial lives. To address this issue, experts suggest that institutions move beyond just offering tools and begin designing financial support as a timely, human-centered experience integrated across departments.

"We believe that our support systems don't fail because they don't exist, but because they're hard to find or hard to navigate," says Anthony Morrone, associate vice president of student financial services at Nevada State University. This institution recently implemented ECSI's RecoverySelect, a comprehensive account recovery solution focused on student financial health and retention.

**"Support only works when it's easy to see and simple to use. Otherwise, students won't know where to turn, or they'll avoid asking for help until it's too late."**

**ANTHONY MORRONE**

Associate Vice President of Student Financial Services at Nevada State University

This disconnect between available resources and student outcomes isn't random; it's structural. Colleges often offer the right components, but in ways that don't reflect how students experience financial stress. To better understand where things go wrong and bridge the gap, we looked closely at where support systems break down and why they fail to meet students where they are. From inconsistent systems to outdated communication practices, the following six gaps reveal why good intentions aren't translating into better outcomes.

# 6 Gaps in Financial Support Holding Students Back And What Institutions Can Do Differently

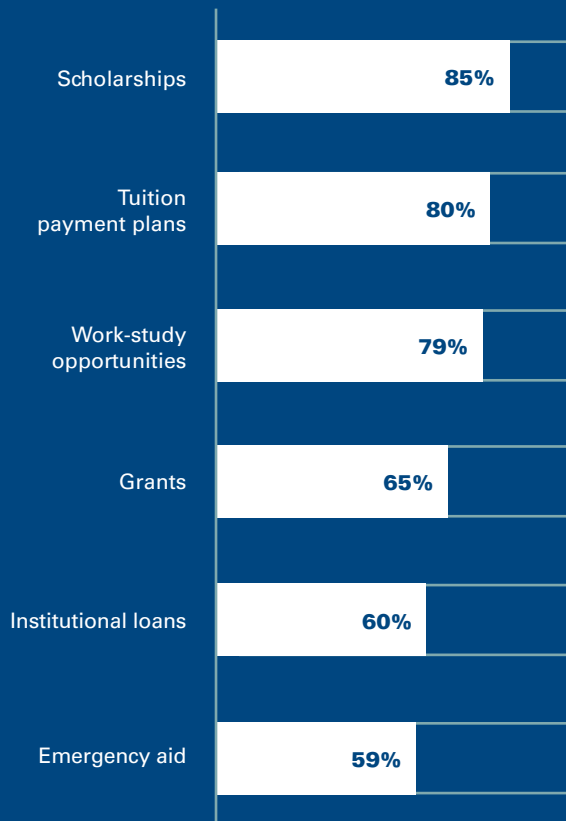
## 1. Good Tools, Disconnected Systems

According to the survey results, 85% of institutions offer scholarships, 80% offer tuition payment plans, and 79% offer work-study opportunities. However, these tools do not translate to uniform success. Grants (58%), scholarships (55%), and work-study (51%) are rated as the most effective supports, but tools like tuition payment plans (42%) and emergency aid (38%) fall short. **Simply offering a resource is not enough for students to make use of it; they must understand it, trust it and find it accessible at the right time.**

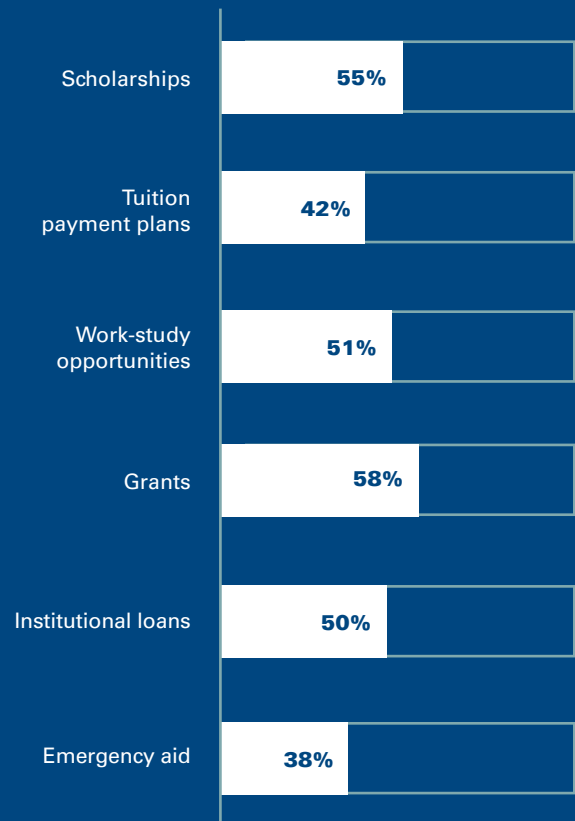
### Provided vs. Extremely Effective Financial Support Mechanisms

*Note: Respondents could choose multiple answers*

**Financial Support Mechanisms Provided by Institutions**



**Financial Support Mechanisms Rated as Extremely Effective by Institutions**



For example, payment plans, while widely available, are often underutilized because they can be hard to access or confusing to navigate. That's an experience Morrone had while reviewing how best to support students at Nevada State University.

"Despite offering payment plans, many students just weren't using them," Morrone explains. "What we realized was that the process itself was the problem: too complex, too disconnected and poorly timed."

**"By simplifying how and when support was offered, we saw a shift in how students responded. Students who had previously ignored communications started enrolling in plans, and we were able to keep more students on track financially and academically in a way that felt supportive and straightforward."**

**ANTHONY MORRONE**

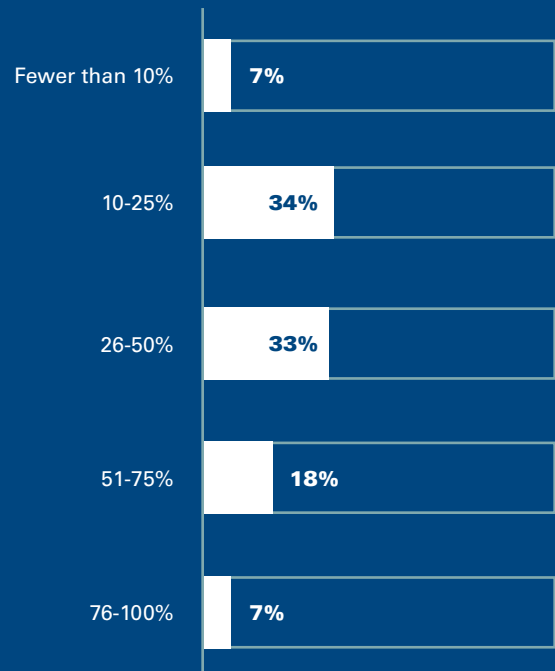
Associate Vice President of Student Financial Services at Nevada State University

Institutions have developed a wide range of support options. However, without a cohesive, clearly communicated system, even the most well-intentioned programs can fall short. Creating meaningful support means connecting these efforts into an experience students can easily understand and navigate. When offerings are fragmented, students face delays, misunderstandings, or complete disengagement.





### Percentage of students struggling with tuition payment deadlines



## 2. Deadlines Without Design

The survey findings revealed that 93% of higher ed leaders report that at least 10% of their students struggle to meet tuition payment deadlines each term, with a median of 32% of students struggling to meet deadlines. In many cases, these deadlines are rigid and disconnected from when students receive financial aid disbursements — e.g., students are required to pay tuition bills before they have received aid.

Institutions should explore proactive deadline structures built around student needs and timelines. Dropping students for non-payment — especially without proactive communication or flexibility — leads to logistical headaches and long-term disengagement. **Institutions may spend more time and energy trying to re-enroll these students than if they had helped them stay in the first place.**

**“When we started looking for ways to shift our approach to financial support to be more in tune with what students need, we adjusted our tuition deadlines to align with aid disbursement. That small change lowered confusion and stress dramatically.”**

**ANTHONY MORRONE**

Associate Vice President of Student Financial Services at Nevada State University

“We used to drop students at the start of the semester,” notes Morrone. Now, we intervene earlier and give them more time to act, which preserves enrollment and reduces administrative stress.”

### 3. Awareness Without Action

The surveyed higher education leaders cited a wide array of barriers to delivering better financial support: lack of student awareness (39%), uncertainty about federal or state funding (36% and 24%, respectively), administrative constraints (32%), outdated technology (31%) and staff shortages (15%).

#### Top challenges in maintaining/expanding financial support resources for students

Note: Respondents could choose multiple answers



#### Biggest gaps in financial support services for students

Note: Respondents could choose multiple answers





But even when the will to change is present, infrastructure often blocks progress.

“A lot of colleges and universities find themselves with technology that is outdated. They’re working off of older systems. So even if administrators want to offer flexible plans, the system itself won’t let them do it,” explains Gina Santoro, product manager for RecoverySelect at ECSI. “An initial investment, either on technology or student support services, can help administrators identify and intervene to retain those students.”

This mismatch between intention and implementation has cascading effects. When departments are understaffed and underfunded, student support becomes reactive rather than strategic. Unfortunately, **without the right systems and people in place, even the most motivated teams struggle to close the gap.**

## 4. Crisis-Driven Communication

Another gap institutions will want to address is that financial awareness and support begin too late. Past due accounts are often approached in a reactive manner, with action not happening until the missed payment has already occurred. When an institution can proactively identify risk indicators, it gains the opportunity to reach out early, before the first payment is missed and the student disappears. **Success depends on designing those touchpoints to be empathetic and proactive, not punitive.**

According to the survey data, 63% of institutions track increased inquiries about assistance as a sign of financial distress, followed by withdrawal due to financial reasons (56%), increased financial aid appeals (54%), and late or missed payments (51%).

All of these signs take place after students have missed a payment or made an emergency aid request to intervene. This reactive posture means institutions are often operating in damage control mode. Students who could have been retained with a timely nudge or flexible arrangement are instead lost to attrition.

“One thing that really stood out about RecoverySelect is that it gave us one more chance to reach students with empathy,” Morrone highlights. “Instead of punishment, we framed it as problem-solving, and that changed everything.”

### Early indicators of financial distress tracked by the institution

*Note: Respondents could choose multiple answers*



Increased student inquiries about financial assistance



Withdrawal from courses due to financial reasons



Increased financial aid appeals



Late or missed tuition payments



Requests for emergency aid

## Biggest gaps in financial literacy among students

*Note: Respondents could choose multiple answers*



Another key factor is the role of financial literacy. While 64% of institutions offer online financial education tools, and 63% offer budgeting or money management resources, students still lack the skills needed to plan and manage their finances. The most common gaps include planning for long-term financial stability (46%) and creating or sticking to a budget (41%).

Even though 73% of higher ed leaders believe their literacy efforts are very or extremely effective, the persistence of these gaps suggests that literacy is underleveraged as a proactive retention strategy. Institutions must treat financial literacy not as a standalone workshop, but as an integrated, preventative element of the student journey.



## 5. More Programs Don't Always Equate to Better Support

Institutions are eager to fix gaps. When asked what tools or strategies their institution is considering to help address financial support services for students, nearly every respondent indicated wanting to enhance/expand existing capabilities and/or add new ones.

However, layering more tools onto already fragmented systems only adds complexity. Too often, financial aid, student accounts, and enrollment offices operate in silos. Students receive inconsistent information, miss opportunities for help or fall through the cracks.

**“A lot of times you’ll see the financial aid office not talking to the business office, not talking to the VP. There’s that lack of communication. But when departments work together, you can support students in a way that helps them move forward and graduate.”**

**GINA SANTORO**

Product Manager for RecoverySelect at ECSI

Institutions may increasingly find that the problem isn't a lack of programs. It's a lack of thinking of programs as systems that inhibits those programs from being introduced to students at the right time and in the right way. **Shifting to coordinated design and shared responsibility will help students get what they need faster, saving the relationship and empowering them to continue pursuing their education.**

### Tools or strategies that could help address gaps in student financial support services

*Note: Respondents could choose multiple answers*



## 6. Recovery Is Part of the Journey

Past-due account recovery is a financial imperative, but successful institutions also see it as a student success strategy. 80% of institutions say it's a top priority this year, and 96% offer past-due payment plans.

Along with prioritizing awareness and access to financial support services, institutions need to start treating these moments as opportunities to reconnect. **When institutions partner with students to find solutions — rather than enforce consequences — they preserve enrollment, improve cash flow, and build trust.**

### SPOTLIGHT: A Holistic Shift at Nevada State University

Anthony Morrone, associate vice president of student financial services at Nevada State University, offers a compelling example of what a systems-level change looks like in action. His team embraced technology as a way to support students more effectively. By aligning communication across departments, revising tuition deadlines to match financial aid disbursements, and leveraging tools like RecoverySelect, they redefined how and when they engage students.

“We wanted our past due outreach to feel like a continuation of support rather than punishment,” says Morrone. “We had a student come back simply because our tone had changed from ‘you owe us’ to ‘let’s solve this together.’ Now, financial recovery is part of student success and not separate from it.”





## Rethink the System, Redesign the Experience

When institutions commit to proactive, coordinated support, it has a transformational effect on students experiencing financial struggles. But to create this change, leaders must go beyond offering more support. They must rethink how, when, and why support is offered, and align it with students' realities. This includes simplifying financial processes, creating aligned timelines across departments and building feedback loops that incorporate the student voice.

Another opportunity for institutions lies in surfacing insights through better data. More than half of higher ed leaders — 59% — say they want more visibility into why students struggle, using data and analysis to guide action. This statistic reflects a growing recognition that awareness is not enough. Decision-making must be informed by real-time student behavior, feedback and system-wide signals.

**“There needs to be transparency, flexibility, and personalization. Give students a chance to catch up if they fall behind. Make it easy for them to understand their options and get help without feeling ashamed.”**

**GINA SANTORO**

Product Manager for RecoverySelect at ECSI

When institutions design systems around student needs instead of administrative structure, they unlock new possibilities for retention, satisfaction, and long-term success.

# Every Student Deserves a System That Helps Them Succeed

Higher education institutions aren't falling short due to a lack of effort. Most offer a wide range of financial tools — scholarships, payment plans, grants, literacy programs and more. However, our research shows that a median of more than 30% of students still miss tuition deadlines each term, and financial stress continues to drive attrition and disengagement. These stressors persist despite available support.

The disconnect is not about whether resources exist; it's about whether they function as a system. Our findings reveal that many tools are underutilized, misaligned, or hidden behind outdated processes. Students face not just financial strain but also the strain of navigating disconnected systems that fail to support them when it matters most.

Higher education leaders increasingly recognize the need for earlier outreach, more flexibility, and better communication. Solving for this requires more than adding new tools. It calls for redesigning how support is delivered — making it more timely, more human-centered and more deeply integrated across departments.

ECSI's RecoverySelect is a past-due account recovery solution focused on student retention and reduced administrative workload. Learn more: <https://home.ecsi.net/solutions/recoveryselect>



## About the Research

This report is based on a survey of 150 higher education leaders conducted in April 2025 by ECSI in partnership with Higher Ed Dive's studioID. The majority of respondents (70%) work at institutions with more than 3,000 students, and 59% hold C-suite or executive-level roles, ensuring insights reflect high-level institutional priorities and large-scale operational challenges.



# ECSI

ECSI is a Global Payments Inc. company (NYSE: GPN), and a leading provider of technology-based services for institutions of higher education. With more than 50 years in the higher education industry, ECSI offers solutions that combine service + software to provide schools with the necessary tools to engage and retain students, increase revenue, and reduce administrative workload. For more information about ECSI and its solutions, including RecoverySelect, please visit [home.ecsi.net](https://home.ecsi.net).

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