

2026 HEDS Returning Student Survey Information Sheet

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In this information sheet, we detail the survey options available to you, as well as our expectations, practices, fees, and terms of service.

- [Survey Content and Design](#)
- [Survey Administration Window](#)
- [Report and Data Files](#)
 - [Custom Reports](#)
- [Consulting About Survey Results](#)
- [Survey Administration Methods](#)
- [Fees](#)
- [Other Survey Information](#)
 - *Including information about survey contacts, live updates, IRB approval, mandatory participation, unfinished surveys, supplemental questions, changes to survey questions, additional languages, etc.*
- [Data Security](#)
- [Deadlines](#)
- [Registering for the Survey](#)
- [Contact Information](#)

Survey Contents and Design

The [HEDS Returning Student Survey](#) is designed to support your efforts to strengthen your students' connection between their college experiences and their post-college goals. It asks students about their vision of post-college success, their reasons for staying in college, and the college experiences that have most prepared them to accomplish their goals for life.

We designed the survey based on [focus groups with undergraduate students at colleges and universities around the country](#). In our conversations, we asked students to describe their vision of a successful life and talk about experiences in college that were both helping and hindering their pursuit of that vision. Students with different backgrounds and identities who attended different types of institutions all talked about a successful life as having four components: meaningful work, financial stability, positive relationships, and balance. Traditional institutional measures of success often overlook these elements, leading to a disconnect between what students value and how colleges support them. In our conversations, we also heard that students are often reluctant to participate in surveys because 1) they typically don't see data from the surveys and 2) they don't feel like their responses lead to changes at their institutions. We designed this survey to address these two important findings:

To help your institution understand students' motivations, worries, and satisfaction, the survey:

- Helps you understand the underlying "why" which motivates your students to stay in college, by asking them to describe their vision of a successful life after college and reflect on their reasons for staying in college and completing their degree.
- Identifies students' worries and concerns to help you better tailor your institutional support.
- Asks students to identify the college experiences that have most prepared them to accomplish their goals for life after college.
 - You will be able to customize this with your institution-specific high-impact programs.
- Provides survey liaisons with real-time aggregated results the survey is being administered.

To help foster meaningful interaction between your institution and your students, and to help students feel heard, the survey can:

- Provide students with an aggregate summary of how their peers responded. This can help them see that their feelings are normal and show that their responses don't disappear into the void.
- Offer students the chance to form a personal connection with someone at their institution by giving them the option to have a follow-up conversation about their goals and ways to improve their college experience.
- Automatically send a summary of each student's responses to the people you designate for personalized follow-up with students so they can be prepared to talk about their unique responses.
 - We provide you with a conversation guide to assist your faculty and staff with ideas and prompts for having a good conversation with students.

Survey Administration Windows

The survey is for students who have already attended your institution and are eligible to return in the fall. You can administer the HEDS Returning Student Survey for a 3-6-week period between May 18 and October 16, 2026. Please note that you must register at least seven weeks before the date on which you plan to begin administering the survey.

Reports and Data Files

You will receive:

- Unit-record SPSS and Microsoft Excel files with your institution's survey data.
 - You will receive these within 5 business days after your survey closes.
- A report that compares your institution's results to those of all other participating institutions
 - We cannot begin developing these reports until the survey closes at the end of September. We anticipate delivering these reports before the end of the fall semester.

While not a report, you will have access to live updates of student responses to select questions during your survey administration. These ongoing updates will give you an early, overall sense of how students are responding to select parts of the survey. They also allow you to gauge your response rates so you can adjust your communication strategies if necessary. This is the same view that your students who respond will see.

Custom Reports

As time permits, we occasionally create custom reports for institutions. When we have the capacity to create a custom report, the price will be based on the complexity of your request. If you are interested in a custom report, please let us know when we are working with you to set up the administration of your survey.

Consulting About Survey Results

As time permits, we are glad to schedule an hour-long conversation with you and your colleagues to answer questions and provide some guidance for interpreting your survey data. We charge a fee for more extensive support, such as writing a short memo summarizing your institution's survey data or making a presentation on your data to select groups at your institution. For example, we occasionally make virtual presentations on an institution's survey data or visit campuses to make presentations, conduct follow-up focus groups, or work with the institution to consider ways of acting on data from the survey. For the 2026-2027 academic year, our typical fee for up to three virtual presentations is \$3,100 for HEDS institutions and \$4,100 for institutions that don't belong to HEDS. For campus visits, we typically charge \$3,400 plus expenses for HEDS institutions and \$4,500 plus expenses for institutions that don't belong to HEDS. Please note, the fees we list above are examples, and what we charge will vary depending on what you ask us to do. Furthermore, we are a small organization, so the number of consultations we can provide is limited.

Survey Administration Methods

Administration methods are how you invite people to take your survey. For full details about these methods, including the advantages and disadvantages of each, please see our [Administration Methods](#) document.

- **Email Method** – We send each of your returning students a personalized email invitation with a unique link to the survey. You may send up to three reminders to students who do not complete the survey. You may customize both the invitation and the reminders, and each message appears to come from your institution.
- **Authentication Method** – You provide your returning students with a common link, and they use a unique password, such as their email address and/or student ID number, to log into the survey.

If you want to use both email and authentication, please let us know so we can discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this approach. To ensure consistency in the administration process and the integrity of the comparative data, we do not allow institutions to administer any HEDS survey through their own survey engines.

Follow-up Conversations

We will ask you to list up to three individuals or offices that each student can choose to have a conversation with about their responses—such as their academic advisor, class dean, coaches, the Career Services office, the chaplain, the Academic Support Center, or the dean of student success. You will provide this information in the participant list along with students’ names and email addresses. We will set up the survey so that these people will automatically receive an email stating that the student wants to have a conversation with them, and it will include a summary of that student’s survey responses.

Fees

	HEDS institutions	Institutions not in HEDS
Base cost includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One 3- to 6-week survey administration • One administration method (only email and authentication are options) • Up to 1,000 responses • 3 supplemental questions • Reports and data files as specified above 	Free of Charge	\$1,525
Using both the authentication and email administration methods	+\$150	+ \$200
Surveys beyond the first 1,000. <i>(Count includes all administration methods and partial responses. Invoiced after survey window closes.)</i>	+\$0.65 per additional survey	+ \$0.95 per additional survey
Late registration fee <i>(see explanation in registration section below)</i>	+\$275	+ \$325
Cancellation fee if you cancel <i>after</i> we have set up your survey in our survey engine.	+\$300	+ \$350

*In order to qualify for the HEDS member discounted survey fees listed above, your institution must have paid its HEDS membership fee for 2026-2027 by the time we invoice you, or we will charge you the full survey price. Please talk to us if you are uncertain if your institution is up to date on its membership fee.

Special Fees

Multi-campus/Multi-institution administrations – If you want to administer a survey to people at multiple campuses or within a multi-institution system, please contact us for more information and pricing.

Contracts or survey agreements from your institution – If your institution requires us to use an agreement or contract developed by your institution and we determine that we need our attorney to review that agreement, we will add the cost of that review to your survey fee. The standard rate for a contract review by our counsel is \$500.

Errors in participant list – If you realize that you made an error in the participant list you provided us (e.g., incomplete list, incorrect group of students, emails with incorrect names) after the survey has launched, please notify us immediately. Depending on the scope of the error, we may need to close the survey, clear any responses, and relaunch the survey for an additional fee.

Other Survey Information

Survey Liaison – You will need to identify one individual from your institution to serve as the survey liaison. We'll direct all communication to the survey liaison, and the survey liaison is responsible for contacting other people on their campus about survey logistics. The survey liaison will be responsible for providing the survey materials needed based on the administration method chosen ([see above](#)), testing the survey, and collaborating with us to troubleshoot if technical problems arise.

HEDS Primary Contacts – If you belong to a HEDS member institution, you have a [HEDS Primary Contact](#) who, according to [Section 1.03 of HEDS Bylaws](#), is responsible for approving institutional participation in HEDS surveys. The survey liaison does not need to be the primary contact, but we will need your primary contact to give their consent for your institution to administer the survey. We will include them in the invitation to your set-up call, and they will also receive a copy of all data files and reports from the survey.

IRB approval – The HEDS Returning Student Survey has been [approved](#) by the Wabash College Institutional Review Board (IRB) as a voluntary survey. We encourage your institution's survey liaison to contact the IRB at your institution to determine whether their approval is needed prior to administering the survey. Wabash's IRB does not enter into authorization agreements with institutions that use HEDS surveys.

Mandatory participation – Making the survey mandatory is a sound strategy that can increase your response rate, but please consult your institution's IRB before doing so.

Unfinished surveys – Participants may choose not to answer any question in the survey. They may also stop taking the survey at any time and not submit their data. However, you will receive partial responses in your unit-record data files.

Supplemental questions – You can add up to three supplemental questions related to the survey's subject matter at the end of the survey. Each sub-question on a multipart or matrix question counts as one supplemental question. For more information on how to count and format supplemental questions before submitting them to HEDS, please review our [Supplemental Question Guide](#). Your data file will include participants' responses to these questions, but the HEDS reports will not.

Changes to the survey questions – While you can *add* supplemental questions to the end, we do not modify our survey questions or response options. In order for us to offer the benefit of comparative data between participating institutions in our survey reports, the questions and response options have to be the same across all the colleges and universities using the survey.

Connecting survey and institutional data – Since you will receive a unit record data file with student identifiers, your institution can connect institutional data on grades, progress, retention, and other student success data to the survey results.

Embedding institution names – We will set up the survey so that your institution's name appears prominently on each page and in questions.

Additional language versions – Qualtrics, our survey engine, can translate your survey into other languages using Google Translate. If you are interested in this option, please let us know. Depending on our survey load, we may have to limit you to using one additional language or charge extra for using more than one additional language.

Data Security

We will secure your survey data and participant information by:

- Using a secure survey engine. Our survey engine, Qualtrics, stores your participant information and responses securely. Qualtrics protects its servers with firewalls, security scans, and nightly data backups. Qualtrics’ security statement is available at <http://www.qualtrics.com/security-statement/>.
- Using Box, a password-protected, encrypted, secure file storage system. We use Box to receive, store, and send files with personally identifiable data. See more information about Box’s privacy and security at <https://www.box.com/business/enterprise-security/>.
- We use TunnelBear as a virtual private network (VPN) to secure our online tasks when we work remotely. Learn more about how TunnelBear secures internet browsing here: <https://www.tunnelbear.com/blog/stronger-encryption/>.
- We will not share any personally identifiable information with any outside individuals or entities.

Deadlines

Below we review your deadlines for each step in our work together to set up a survey. Setting up surveys exactly how you’d like them is complicated, and we may be setting up and running many dozens of surveys at a time. We’ve set the following deadlines to ensure we have enough time to do a good job administering your survey. If you miss a deadline, we will probably have to delay the opening of your survey. The following deadlines are based on the date you wish to start your survey administration.

Task for your institution	Deadline
<p>Register for the Survey</p>	<p>At least seven weeks (35 business days) before the survey start date.</p> <p><i>Earlier is better to allow you more time to work out the details of your survey.</i></p>
<p>Set up Call with HEDS to Discuss Survey Details</p> <p>HEDS will contact you to set up a call to discuss the details of your survey administration, fees, and to let you know what materials you will need to provide.</p>	<p>Call takes place 2–9 business days after registering.</p> <p><i>We will offer you meeting times and dates within this 2–9 day window. If our call occurs during this period, you will have at least ten (10) business days to gather your materials.</i></p>
<p>Provide All Final Survey Materials to HEDS</p> <p>Final means <i>all stakeholders</i> have viewed and approved any of the following submitted to HEDS: how your institution’s name will appear in the survey, information about the survey leader(s) at your institution, administration method(s), a participant list, dates and content of invitations and reminders, incentive options, and supplemental questions.</p>	<p>By end-of-day, sixteen (16) business days before the survey start date.</p> <p><i>This is a very important deadline for meeting your desired survey start date. The earlier you register and meet with your HEDS survey team member, the more</i></p>

<p><i>Once we set up your survey in our survey engine for testing, any changes you make to the content of these materials will result in a significant delay in launching your survey.</i></p>	<p><i>time you will have to gather your materials and get them approved.</i></p>
<p>Provide HEDS with Feedback on Survey Test</p>	<p>By end-of-day, eight (8) business days before the survey start date.</p> <p><i>You will have a minimum of 3 business days to test your survey.</i></p>
<p>Provide HEDS with Feedback on Final Survey Test <i>(only if necessary)</i></p> <p>A second test will <i>only</i> happen if there was a technical difficulty to resolve, or if we made an error when setting up your survey.</p>	<p>By end-of-day, four (4) business days before the survey start date.</p> <p><i>You will have a minimum of 2 business days to review the second test.</i></p>

[Important Note About Survey Testing](#)

The purpose of testing is to ensure that the survey will run smoothly and to fix any technical difficulties (i.e., invitation messages going to spam) before your survey launches. Testing also allows you to check that we entered your invitation message (if using the email method) and supplemental questions exactly as you submitted them to us. We need to work with the final, approved version of all survey materials when setting up your survey for testing. **Testing isn't the time to edit the content of emails or supplemental survey questions. Once we've used the information you've sent us to set up your survey for testing, any changes you make in that information will result in a significant delay, potentially days, in when we can launch your survey.** It is important that you ask anyone at your institution who needs to review and approve your survey materials to do so before sending that material to us.

[Registering for the HEDS Returning Student Survey](#)

You can register for the 2026 HEDS Returning Student Survey using our [online registration form](#). **You must register at least seven weeks from the date you wish your survey to begin.** We will only accept late registrations in rare circumstances, and there will be a late fee ([see the bottom row of the Fees table](#)). The last day to register will be August 7, 2026. Once you submit the registration form, we will contact you to discuss your survey preferences and the associated fees. Following this conversation, we will send an invoice that you can pay by credit card (3.5% fee applies), direct deposit, or check.

[HEDS Returning Student Survey Administration Contact](#)

Please email us at new_returning_surveys@hedsconsortium.org if you have any questions. You can download copies of the survey from our website at: <https://www.hedsconsortium.org/heds-returning-student-survey/>.