College Student Homesickness: An Overview

Skyfactor Research Note

College Student Homesickness: An Overview

The concept of homesickness in college students has likely been around for as long as students have been leaving home to go to college. However, there are no universally-accepted definitions. Few measures of homesickness in college students exist. Little research has been conducted connecting homesickness directly to the experiences of college students and their academic success, and those that have been done are typically limited to a single campus.

This note explores the concept of homesickness in college students, using a national dataset of 120,967 first-year college students from 127 two and four-year institutions in the United States.

Key Questions:

1. What is homesickness?
2. How prevalent is homesickness in first-year students?
3. What are the characteristics of students who are homesick?
4. How is homesickness related to key outcomes?

Key Points:

- Homesickness is broken down into two distinct concepts: separation and distress.
- Both separation and distress are related to other aspects of first-year student experience, including commitment, satisfaction, peer connections, and social integration.
- Homesickness, in particular distress, is related to key outcomes, including academic performance and retention.

Defining College Student Homesickness

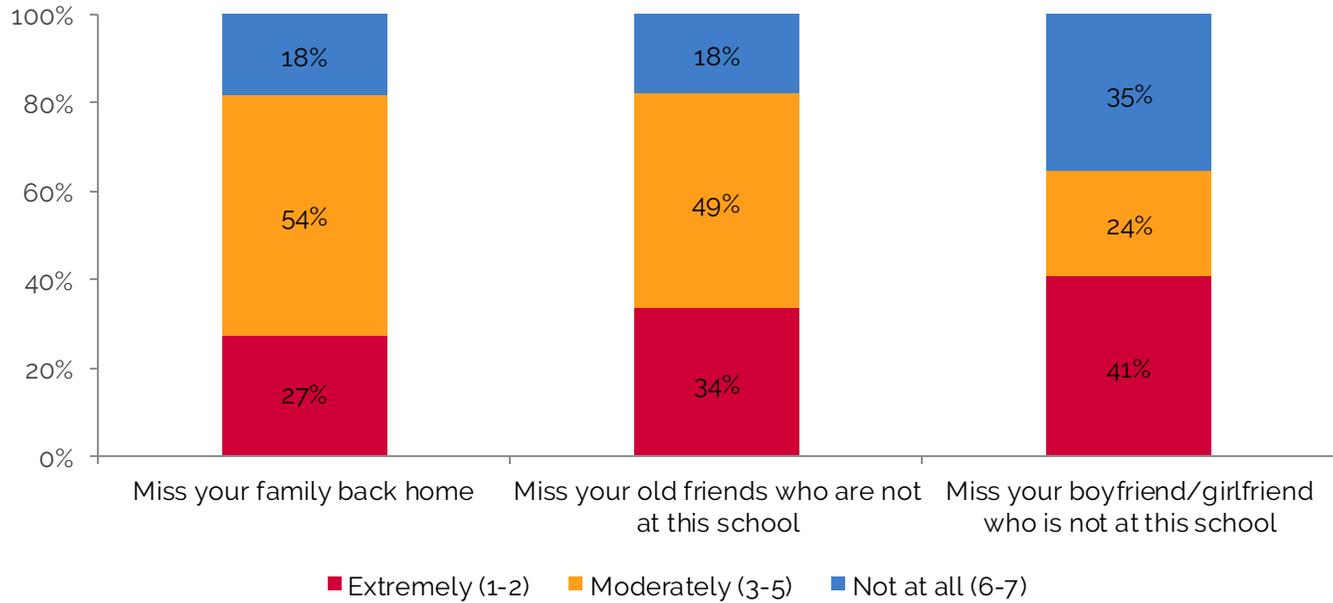Homesickness can be broken down into two factors: separation and distress.

First, a person must be **separated** from something – a location, family, a culture, or something familiar. For instance, kids at camp are physically away from home and family. For international travelers, the separation can be not only from home and family but also familiar culture, food, locations, language, and traditions. Additionally, to be homesick, a person must also have **distress**: negative feelings or regret related to that separation. In other words, one can move away or be separated, but if they are not distressed, then there is no homesickness present. The contrast is also true: one can be distressed or upset and even experience similar symptoms. But, if that distressed is not caused by a separation, it is not homesickness.

Prevalence of Homesickness

Figures 1 and 2 display the percentage of students responding extremely (1 or 2 on a seven-point scale), moderately (3-5), and not at all (6-7) on questions in both the separation and homesickness scales. There is a significant difference in the reported prevalence of both homesickness concepts in first-year college students. Separation homesickness is a widespread and common component of the first-year student experience, with 30% of students reporting high levels of separation homesickness. However, distress is not common, as few first-year students reported high levels of distress homesickness.
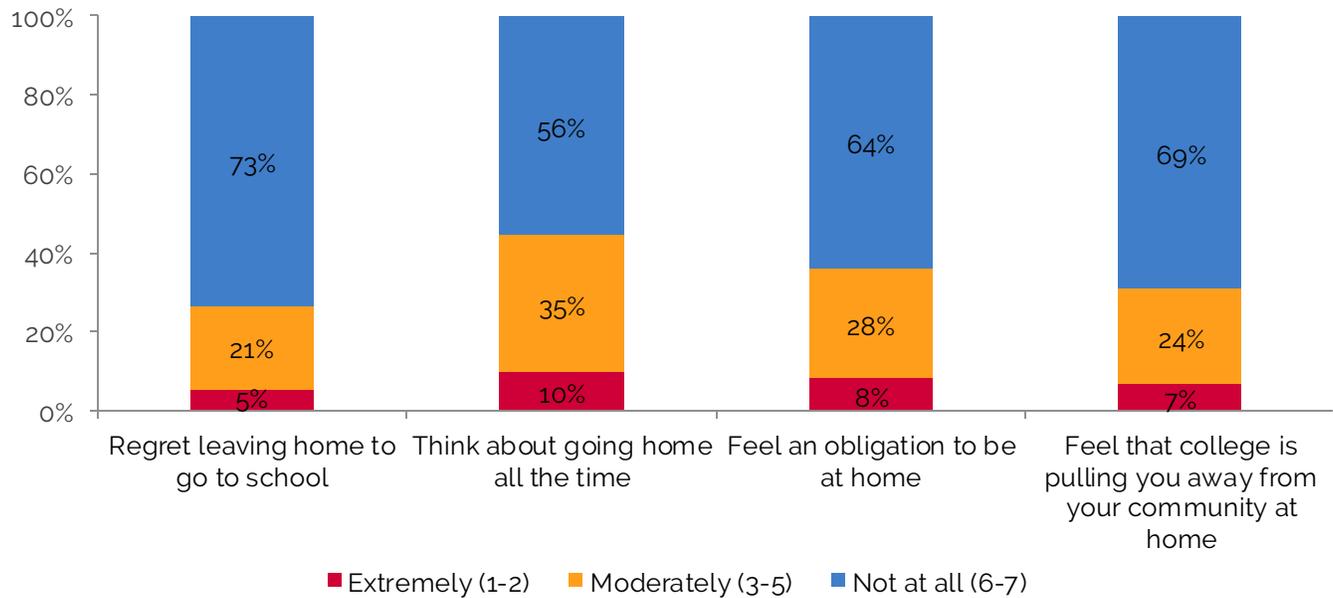
Figure 1: Separation Homesickness

Percentage of students responding extremely (1-2), moderately (3-5), or not at all (6-7) to questions in separation homesickness scale.

	Miss your family back home	Miss your old friends who are not at this school	Miss your boyfriend/girlfriend who is not at this school
Not at all (6-7)	18%	18%	35%
Moderately (3-5)	54%	49%	24%
Extremely (1-2)	27%	34%	41%

■ Extremely (1-2)   ■ Moderately (3-5)   ■ Not at all (6-7)

Figure 2: Distress Homesickness

Percentage of students responding extremely (1-2), moderately (3-5), or not at all (6-7) to questions in distress homesickness scale.

	Regret leaving home to go to school	Think about going home all the time	Feel an obligation to be at home	Feel that college is pulling you away from your community at home
Not at all (6-7)	73%	56%	64%	69%
Moderately (3-5)	21%	35%	28%	24%
Extremely (1-2)	5%	10%	8%	7%

■ Extremely (1-2)   ■ Moderately (3-5)   ■ Not at all (6-7)

Homesickness and the First-Year Experience

Both separation and distress homesickness factors are related to various factors related to first-year student transition, including commitment, social integration, peer connections, and satisfaction with the institution.
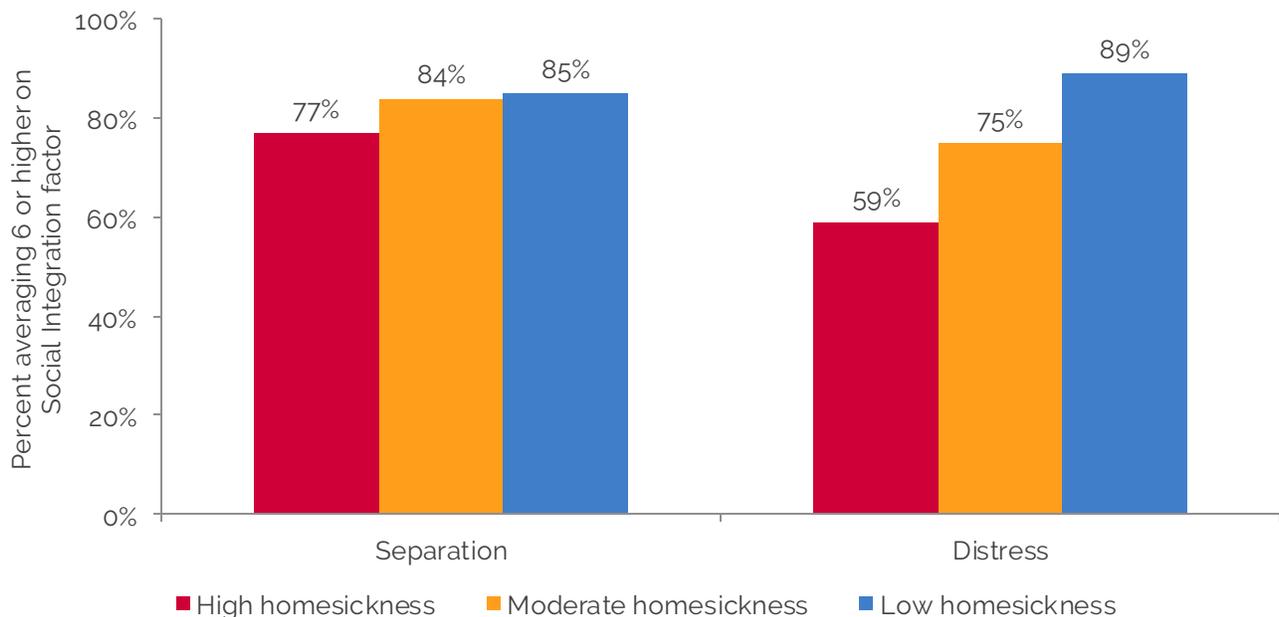
Institutional Commitment

Figure 3 below display the percentage of students with a high mean factor score (6 or higher) on the institutional commitment factor by levels of both separation and distress homesickness. Students with low separation were somewhat more likely to express high levels of institutional commitment than those with high separation. With distress homesickness, the relationship to commitment is even stronger.

- For instance, 77% of students with high levels of separation homesickness had high levels of institutional commitment, compared to 85% of students with low separation homesickness.

- Just 59% of students with high levels of distress homesickness reported high levels of institutional commitment, compared to 89% of students with low distress homesickness.

Figure 3: Commitment and Homesickness

Percentage of first-year students averaging 6 or higher (extremely) on commitment factor questions by level of separation and distress homesickness.
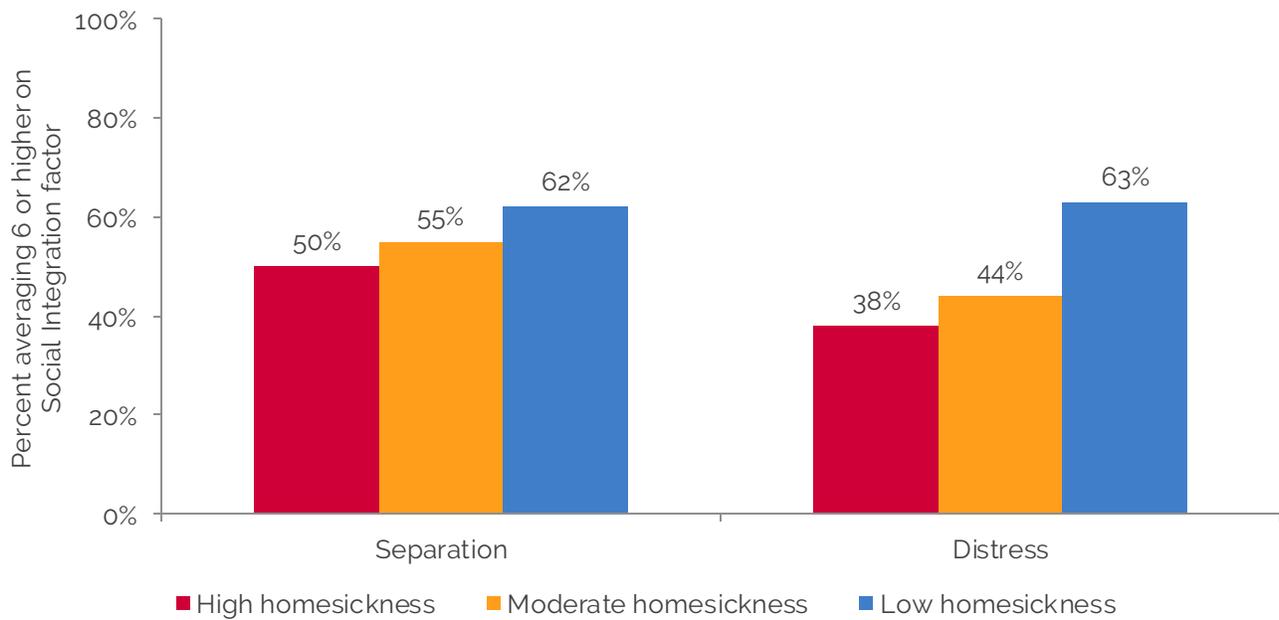
Peer Connections

Figure 4 below displays the percentages of students with a high mean factor score (6 or higher) on the peer connections factor by levels of both separation and distress homesickness. Students with low separation were more likely to report high levels of peer connections than those with high separation. The relationship between distress homesickness and peer connections is significantly stronger

- Just under five in ten students with high separation homesickness had high levels of commitment, compared to over six out of ten students with low levels of separation homesickness.

- Only 38% of students reporting high levels of distress homesickness and 44% of students reporting moderate levels of distress homesickness had high levels of peer connections, compared to 63% of students with low distress homesickness.

Figure 4: Peer Connections and Homesickness

Percentage of first-year students averaging 6 or higher (extremely) on peer connections factor questions by level of separation and distress homesickness.
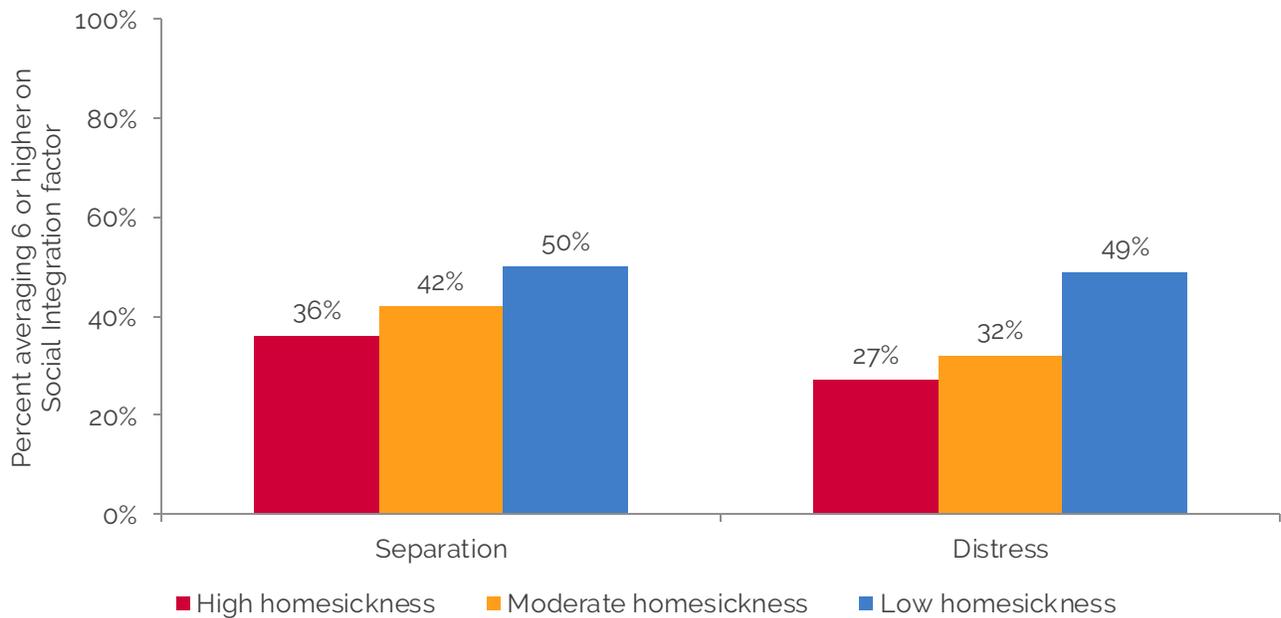

On-Campus Social

Figure 5 below display the percentages of students with a high mean factor score (6 or higher) on the on-campus social factor by levels of both separation and distress homesickness. Students with low separation were more likely to score high on the on-campus social factor than those with high

separation. High distress homesickness has an even larger negative impact on ratings of the on-campus social factor.

- Of students with high levels separation homesickness, 36% scored at least a 6 on the on-campus social factor, compared to half of students with low of separation homesickness.

- 27% of students reporting high levels of distress homesickness and 32% of those with moderate levels of distress homesickness scored highly on the on-campus social factor, compared to 49% of students with low distress homesickness.

Figure 5: On-Campus Social and Homesickness

Percentage of first-year students averaging 6 or higher (extremely) on on-campus social factor questions by level of separation and distress homesickness.


Social Integration

Figure 6 below display the percentages of students with a high mean factor score (6 or higher) on the social integration factor by levels of both separation and distress homesickness. Students with low separation homesickness were more likely to score high on the social integration factor than those with high separation. The relationship between distress homesickness and on-campus social is much larger.

- Of students reporting high separation homesickness, 41% reported high levels of social integration, compared to 65% of students with high levels of separation homesickness.

- A quarter of students reporting high levels of distress homesickness and 36% of students with moderate levels reported high levels of social integration, compared to 65% of students with low distress homesickness.

Figure 6: Social Integration and Homesickness

Percentage of first-year students averaging 6 or higher (extremely) on social integration factor questions by level of separation and distress homesickness.
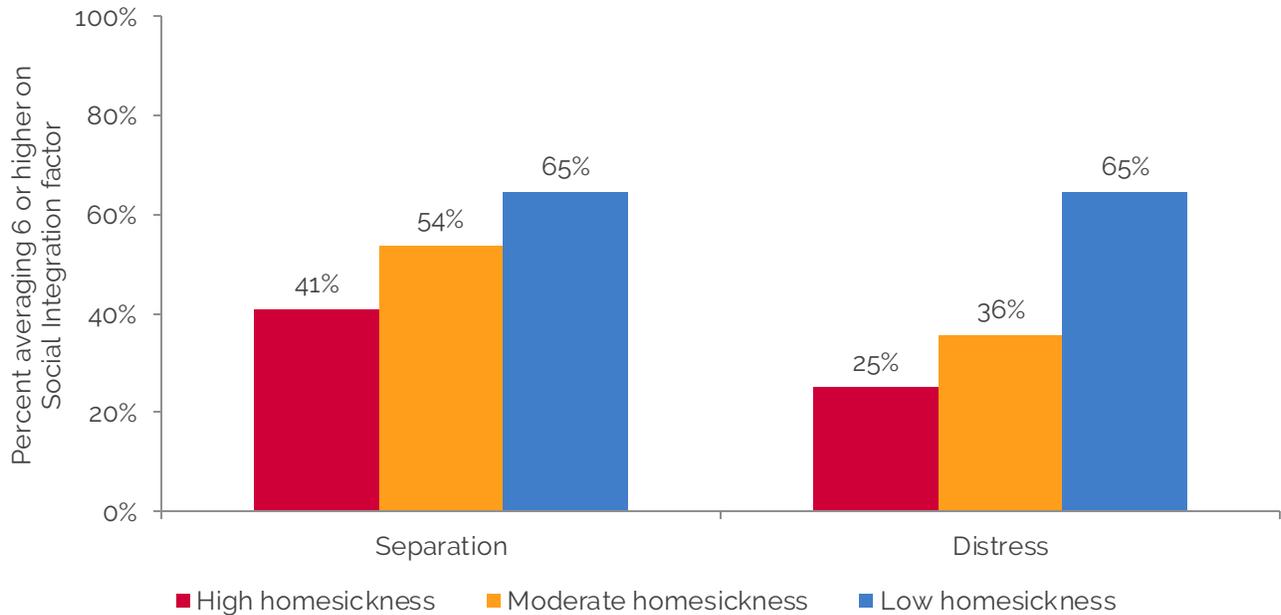

Satisfaction

Figure 7 below display the percentages of students with high scores on the satisfaction factor cross-tabbed with degree of homesickness for both separation and distress. There is a relationship between satisfaction with the institution and both homesickness scales.

- Of students reporting high separation homesickness, 47% of high separation students express high commitment as opposed to only 64% of low separation students.

- There is a 40% difference in satisfaction between high and low distress students, with only 27% of high distress students stating that they are highly satisfied as opposed to 67% of low distress students.

Figure 7: Institutional Satisfaction and Homesickness

Percentage of first-year students averaging 6 or higher (extremely) on institutional satisfaction factor questions by level of separation and distress homesickness.
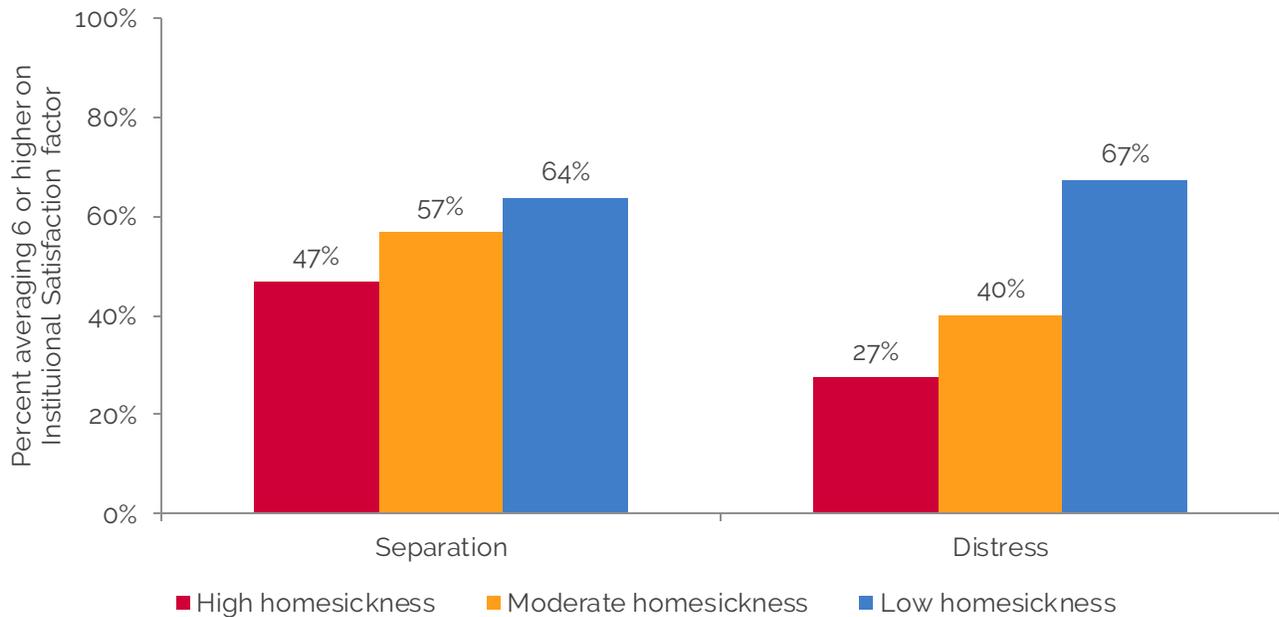
Homesickness and Student Outcomes

The relationship between homesickness and outcomes differs depending on the outcome and the type of homesickness.

Academic Performance

Figure 8 displays the mean fall-term GPA by high, moderate, and low levels of both separation and distress homesickness. There was essentially no difference in fall GPA between the different levels of separation. However, while still relatively small there is a somewhat clearer relationship between fall-term GPA and distress homesickness.

- Students with high levels of separation homesickness had a mean fall-term GPA of approximately 2.92, compared to 2.94 for students with moderate levels of separation homesickness and 2.88 for students with low levels of separation homesickness.

- Students with high levels of distress homesickness had a mean fall-term GPA of approximately 2.74, compared to 2.88 for students with moderate levels of distress homesickness and 2.98 for students reporting low levels of distress homesickness.

Figure 8: Fall-Term GPA and Homesickness

Average fall-term GPA by level of separation and distress homesickness.
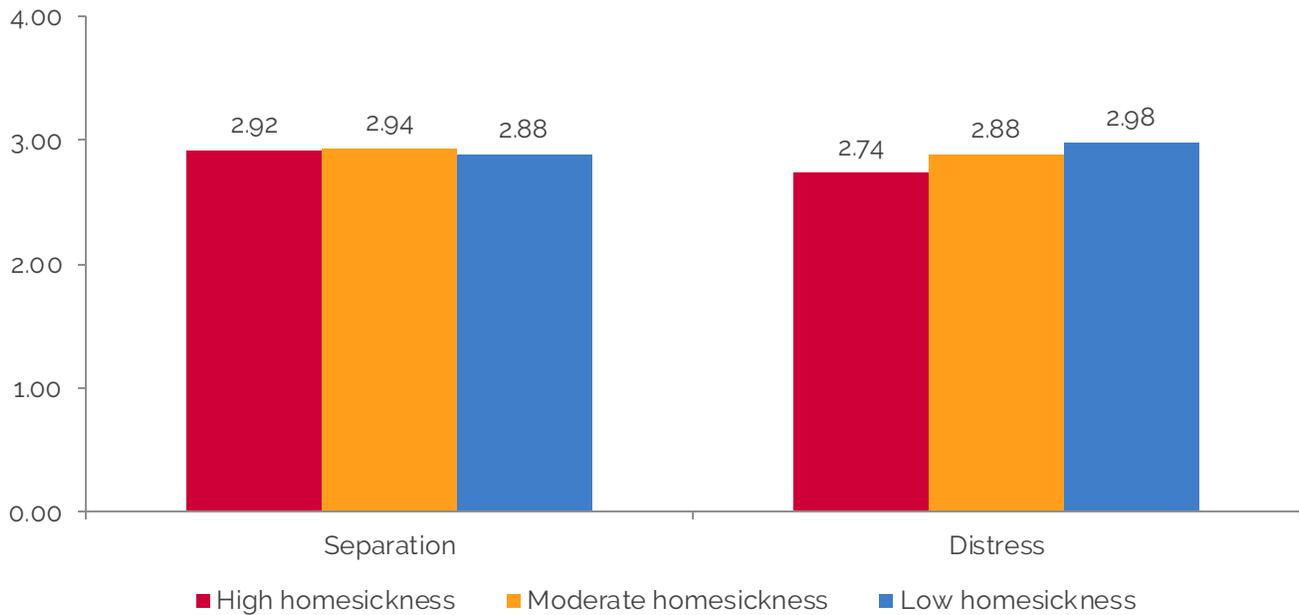

Fall-to-Spring Persistence

Figure 9 display the percentage of first-year students persisting to their spring term by high, moderate, and low levels of homesickness for both separation and distress scales. There was only a slight difference in fall-to-spring persistence rates by level of separation homesickness. However, there is a clearer relationship between distress homesickness and spring persistence

- Of students with high separation homesickness, 89% persisted until the spring semester while 93% of students with low separation homesickness continued.

- 82% of first-year students reporting high levels of distress homesickness returned for their spring term, compared to 94% of students reporting low levels of distress homesickness.

Figure 9: Fall-to-Spring Persistence and Homesickness

Percentage of first-year students returning for spring term by level of separation and distress homesickness.
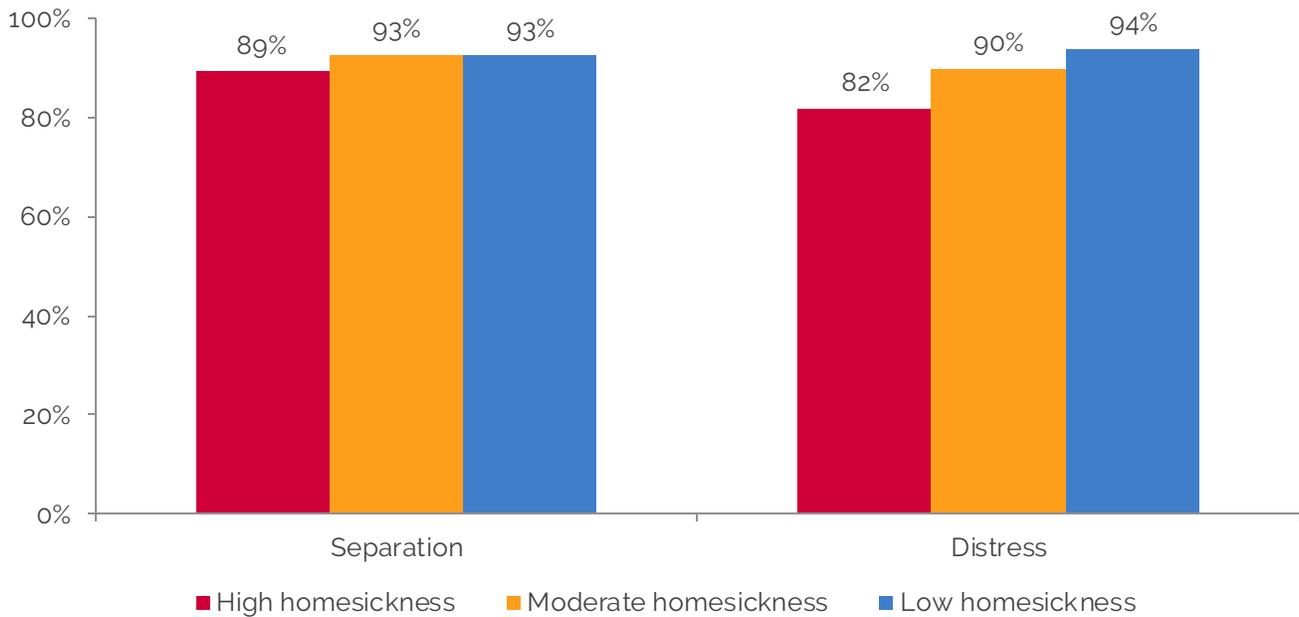
Fall-to-Fall Retention

Figure 10 below display the percentage of students retained to their second academic year by high, moderate, and low levels of homesickness for both separation and distress scales. Students with low separation homesickness were more likely to return for their second academic year than students with high separation homesickness. There is a stronger relationship between fall-to-fall retention rates and distress homesickness.

- 76% of students reporting high separation homesickness returned for their second academic year, compared to 80% of students with both moderate and low levels of separation homesickness.

- Approximately 66% of students reporting high levels of distress homesickness returned for their second academic year, compared to 82% of students reporting low levels of distress homesickness.

Figure 10: Fall-to-Fall Retention and Homesickness

Percentage of first-year students returning for their second academic year by level of separation and distress homesickness.
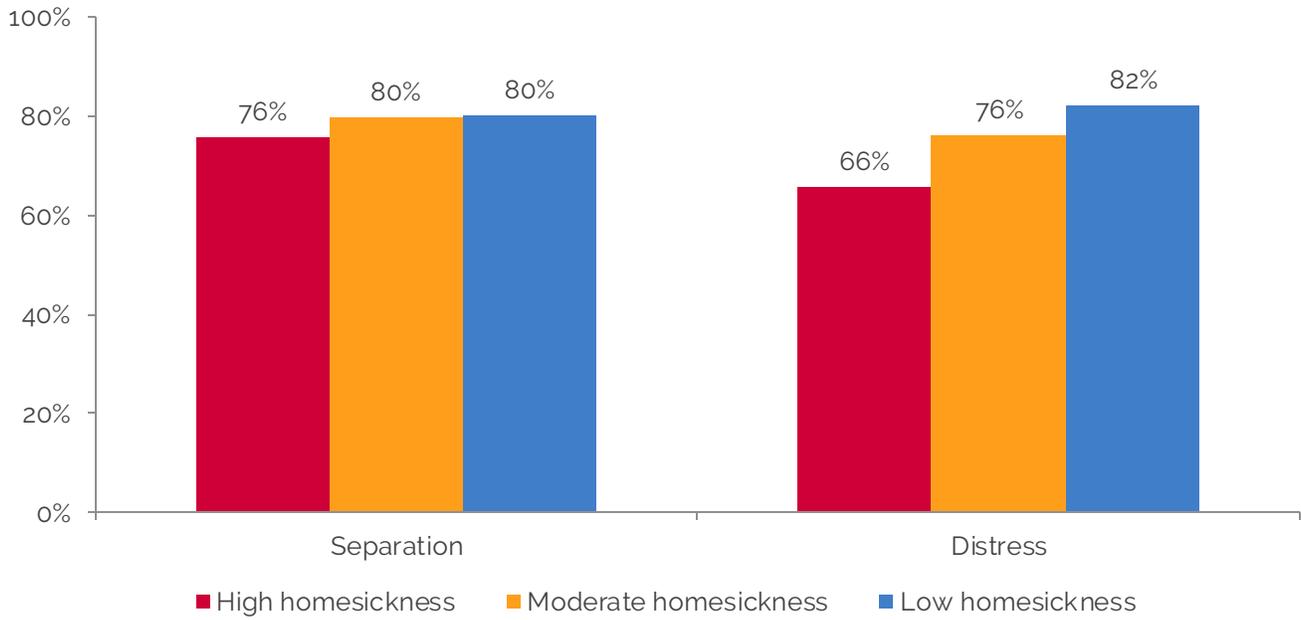
Conclusion

Overall, high distress had a stronger relationship to the different factors and outcomes than did separation. Mostly, separation had small or no differences between the different levels of separation. Only when considering social resources was there a moderately large difference found for separation.

The variables that do have a relationship with separation homesickness in which low separation students rate higher than high separation students are peer connections (12% difference), on-campus social (14% difference), and social integration (24% difference). There are also differences in satisfaction and commitment, with a 17% difference in satisfaction between low and high separation students and an 8% difference in commitment. Separation homesickness was not closely related to fall GPA, but was slightly related to spring and fall retention by a 4% difference between high and low separation (fewer high separation students returned for the spring semester than low separation students).

First year experiences, however, were closely related to distress homesickness. Students with higher distress were less likely to have high intent to return for both the spring semester and the next fall semester. They were also more likely to have more social resources than other students, with more low distress students rating themselves highly satisfied with peer connections (25% difference), on-campus social (22% difference), and social integration (40% difference). There is also a strong connection between distress and satisfaction, with 40% more low distress students rating themselves as highly satisfied overall than high distress students. Low distress students are also 30% more likely to rate themselves as highly committed when compared to high distress students. In regard to outcomes, distress relates to both GPA and retention. Low distress students on average have a GPA of .24 higher than those with high homesickness distress. Additionally, 12% more students with low distress return for the next semester and 16% more continue on to the following fall semester compared to those with high homesickness distress.

About the Data

The data used in this research note is from the 2014-2015 Mapworks Fall Transition Survey. The survey was jointly designed by the survey development team at Skyfactor and researchers at Ball State University. The Transition Survey measures the behaviors and expectations of students entering a college or university. Data is typically collected beginning three to four weeks into the fall term via Skyfactor's online survey system. The data in this note is from 120,967 first-year college students from 127 two and four-year institutions in the United States. The note also used student profile data uploaded by participating institutions during the 2014-2015 academic year, including but not limited to term GPA and retention.

About Skyfactor and Mapworks

Since 1994, Skyfactor (formerly EBI MAP-Works) has been dedicated to improving retention, student success, and the quality of the college student experience. Our products and services have empowered over 1,500 college and universities to positively impact student development, learning, retention and satisfaction through the Mapworks student success and retention system, and through Benchworks national benchmarking assessments.

Mapworks® is a research-based, comprehensive, student retention and success platform created through a partnership between Skyfactor and Ball State University. It capitalizes on Ball State's 20+ years of experience with the original Making Achievement Possible (MAP) program and Skyfactor's expertise in national benchmarking assessments. Mapworks leverages predictive analytics to identify at-risk students. It presents that information in a format that makes it easy for an institution's faculty and staff to focus on the needs of students early in the term and to have a positive impact on student success and retention.

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For more information about Skyfactor Mapworks and services, to schedule a demonstration, or to sign up for a webinar, please write to us at info@Skyfactor.com or visit Skyfactor.com