Student Achievement at Southwestern University

Southwestern University is a leader in innovative undergraduate education; offering a life-enriching residential liberal arts and sciences experience for talented individuals who share a passion for intellectual exploration, engagement, and growth. The University commits to empowering students to think, create, and make meaning through intentional connections, innovative academic pursuits, and a vibrant residential community.

In 2016, Southwestern University initiated its most recent strategic plan, *The Vision, Direction, and Goals for Southwestern University*. One of the primary goals of this strategic plan is to enroll and retain students who have significant potential for academic excellence. In order to track progress towards this goal, Southwestern has established objectives and targets for student graduation, retention, and outcomes. *The Vision, Direction, and Goals for Southwestern University* strategic plan covers a ten-year timeframe from 2016 to 2026, with five-year targets expected to be obtained by fall 2021 and ten-year targets expected to be obtained by fall 2026.

After reviewing data collected on the strategic plan initiatives, the University developed a five-year tactical plan aligned with *The Vision, Direction, and Goals for Southwestern University* strategic plan. The *2021-2026 Tactical Plan* allows the University the opportunity to adjust the tactics being implemented and the measures being used to track progress towards the strategic plan goals.

The following information is published to provide information for prospective and current students, parents, alumni, and all others interested in student achievement at Southwestern University.
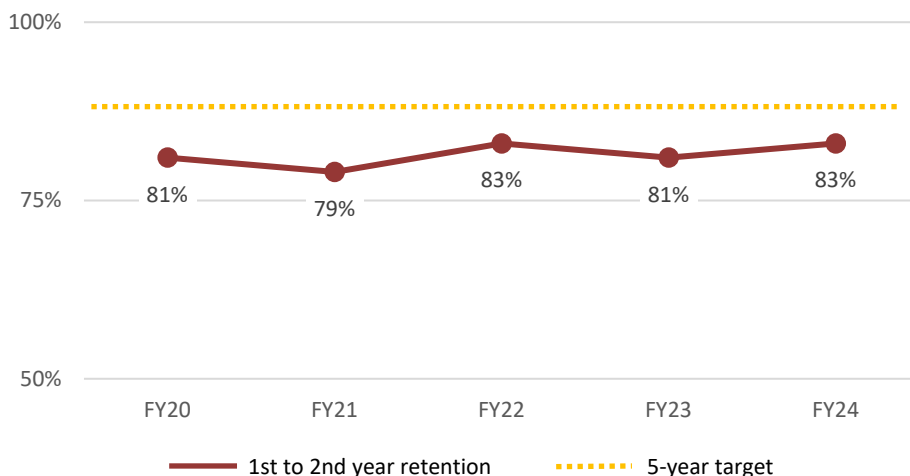
Institutional Objectives for Undergraduate Student Achievement

<u>Retention and Graduation</u>

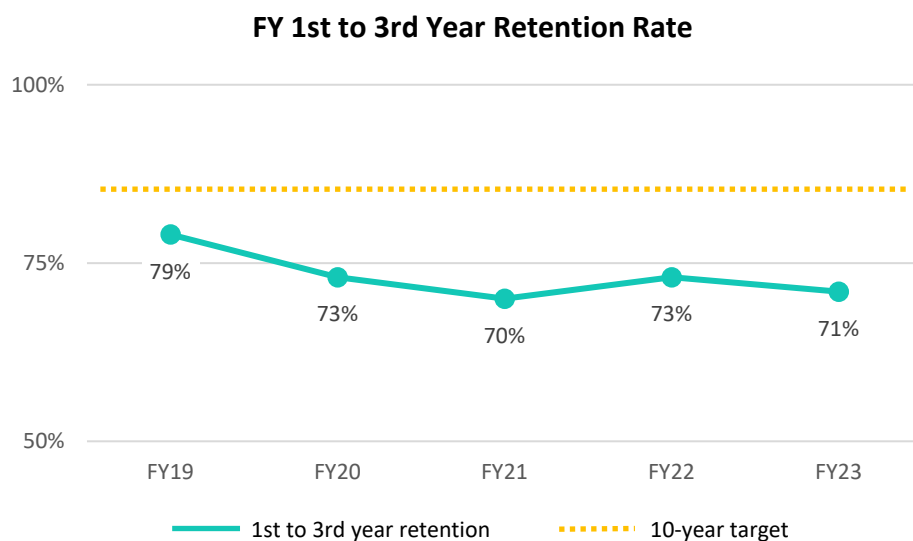**Criterion 1: First-to-Second Year, First-to-Third Year Retention**

Strategic Plan Objective 1.2 (Part A): Achieve a 1st to 2nd year retention rate of 88% (by fall 2026). The original target deadline was fall 2021. This deadline has been extended to fall 2026 to align with the new tactical plan.

FY 1st to 2nd Year Retention Rate

Chart showing FY 1st to 2nd Year Retention Rate. Y-axis from 50% to 100%. 1st to 2nd year retention: FY20 81%, FY21 79%, FY22 83%, FY23 81%, FY24 83%. 5-year target shown as dotted line. Legend: 1st to 2nd year retention, 5-year target.

Progress toward Target: Over the last five years the University has not been able to reach the 1st to 2nd year retention rate target. The retention rate will continue to be monitored as the University implements tactical plan initiatives to improve campus amenities, update technology infrastructure, and expand tutoring programs. A Retention Task Force was formed in August 2025 to address retention issues.

Strategic Plan Objective 1.2 (Part B): Achieve a 1st to 3rd year retention rate of 85% (by fall 2026).

FY 1st to 3rd Year Retention Rate

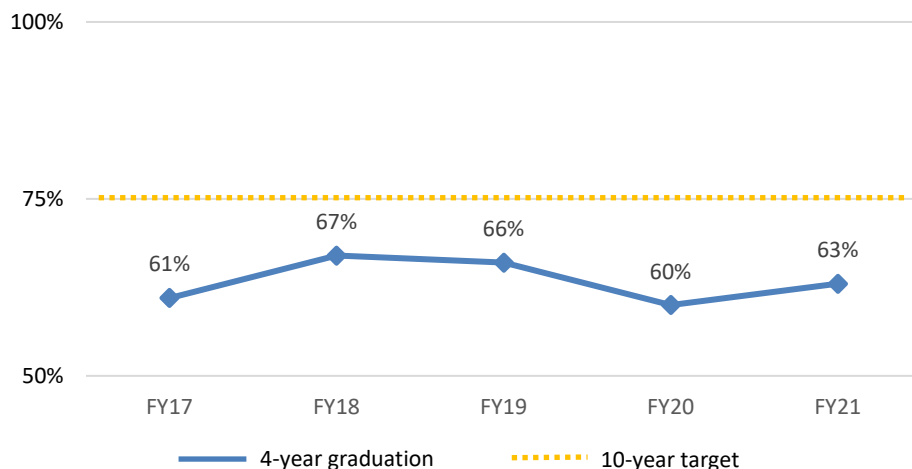*Progress toward Target:* The University has made some progress toward this target, but the 1st to 3rd year retention rate will continue to be monitored as tactical plan initiatives are implemented.

Southwestern University, Office of Institutional Research & Effectiveness   *Jan 2026*

Criterion 2: Four-Year, Six-Year, and Eight-Year Graduation Rates

Strategic Plan Objective 1.3 (Part A): Achieve a 4-year graduation rate of 75% (by fall 2026).
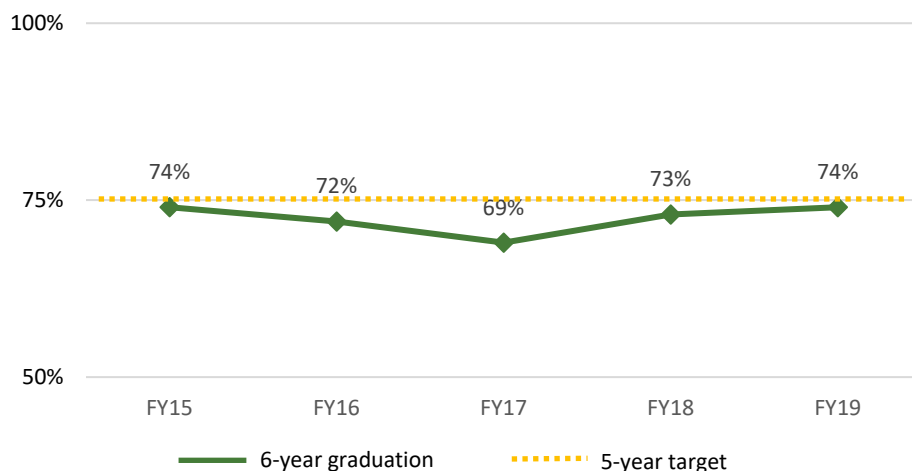
FY Cohort 4-Year Graduation Rate

Progress toward Target: The University has made progress towards this target. The 4-year graduation rate will continue to be monitored and initiatives around advising, need-based student scholarships, and enhanced student supports are being implemented as part of the tactical plan to help increase graduation rates. The pandemic had an impact on rates.
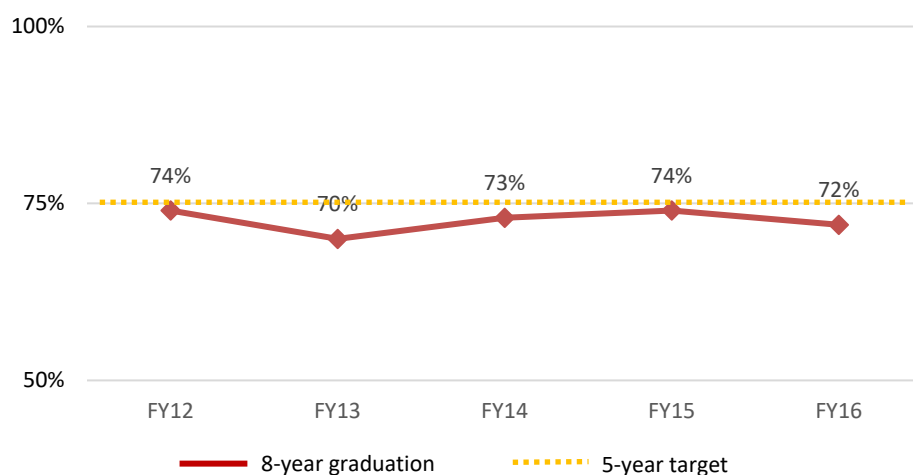
Strategic Plan Objective 1.3 (Part B): Achieve a 6-year graduation rate of 75% (by fall 2026). The original target deadline was fall 2021. This deadline has been extended to fall 2026 to align with the new tactical plan.

FY Cohort 6-Year Graduation Rate

Progress toward Target: The 6-year graduation rate has been just below the target of 75% for four of the last five years. The University has made progress towards this target. The 6-year graduation rate will continue to be monitored and initiatives around advising, need-based student scholarships, gateway courses, and enhanced student support are being implemented as part of the tactical plan to help increase graduation rates. The pandemic had an impact on rates.

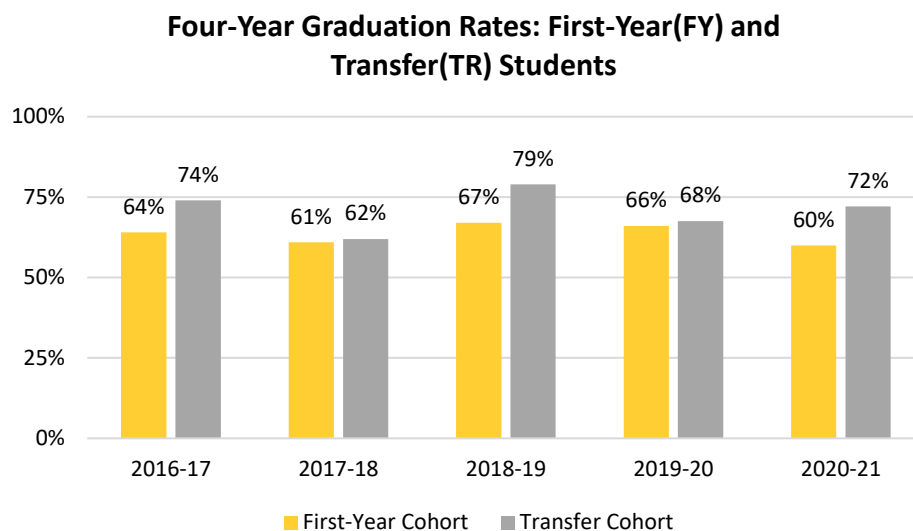**FY Cohort 8-Year Graduation Rate**

The FY Cohort 8-Year Graduation Rate typically mirrors the 6-Year Graduation Rate as the majority of Southwestern graduates do so within six years. FY15, FY16, and FY17 cohorts have the same 6-year and 8-year graduation rates.

Progress toward Target: The University has made progress towards this target. The 8-year graduation rate will continue to be monitored and initiatives around advising, need-based student scholarships, gateway courses, and enhanced student support are being implemented as part of the tactical plan to help increase graduation rates. The pandemic had an impact on rates.

Criterion 3: Transfer (TR) Student Quality

Linked to Strategic Plan Objective 1.4: Recruit transfer students of similar academic quality as first-year students, determined by a comparison of four-year graduation rates.

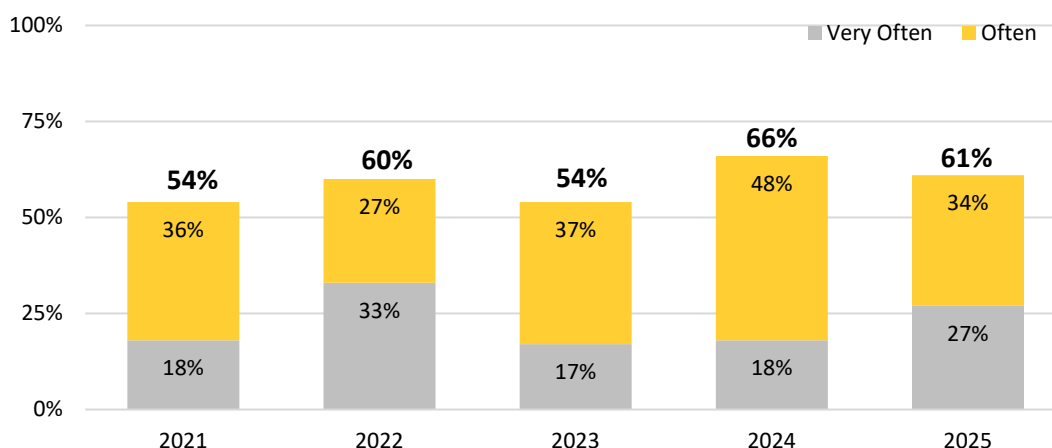**Four-Year Graduation Rates: First-Year(FY) and Transfer(TR) Students**

Progress toward Target: TR cohort graduation rates have been similar to and slightly higher than FY graduation rates over the last five-years. Southwestern University will continue to monitor graduation rates of TR and FY cohorts and tactical plan initiatives to fund TR and FY cohorts to ensure the success of both types on incoming students.
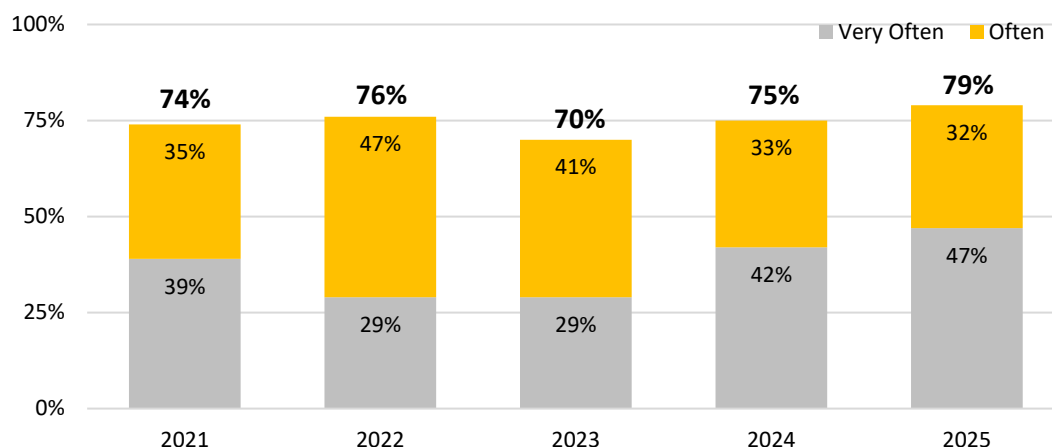
Skill Development

Criterion 4: Foster Intentional Connections

Linked to Strategic Plan Objective 2.4: Increase the percentage of students indicating that they have 'often' or 'very often' combined ideas from different courses when completing assignments and connected idea from courses to prior experience and knowledge.
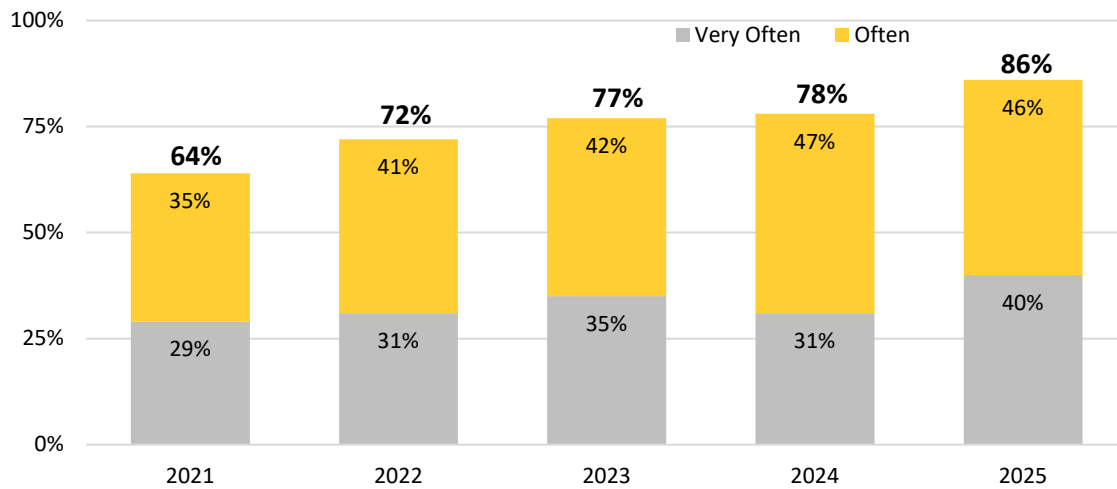
FY - During the current school year, about how often did you combine ideas from different courses when completing assignments? (NSSE 2.a)
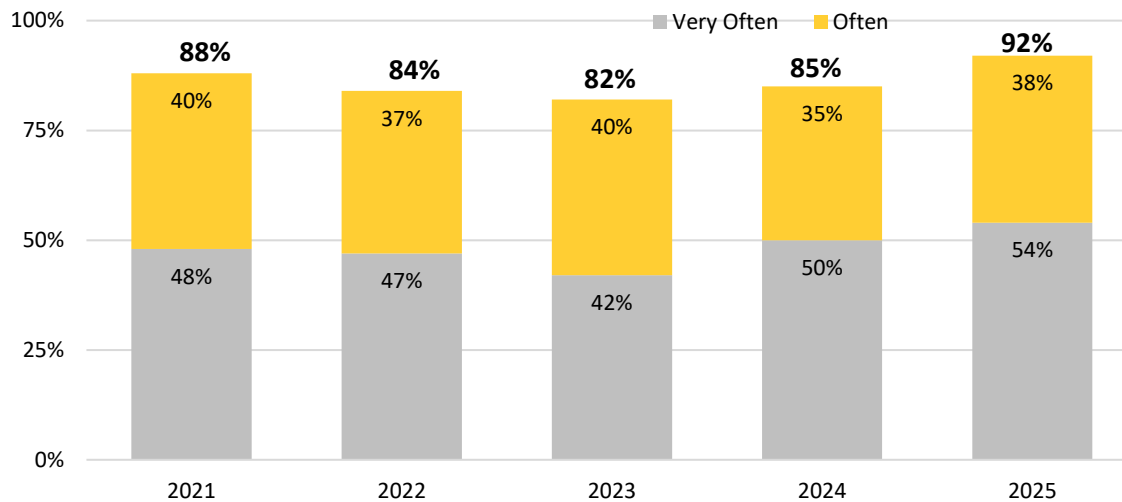

SR - During the current school year, about how often did you combine ideas from different courses when completing assignments? (NSSE 2.a)

FY - During the current school year, about how often did you connect ideas from your courses to your prior experiences and knowledge? (NSSE 2.g)

Legend: ■ Very Often ■ Often

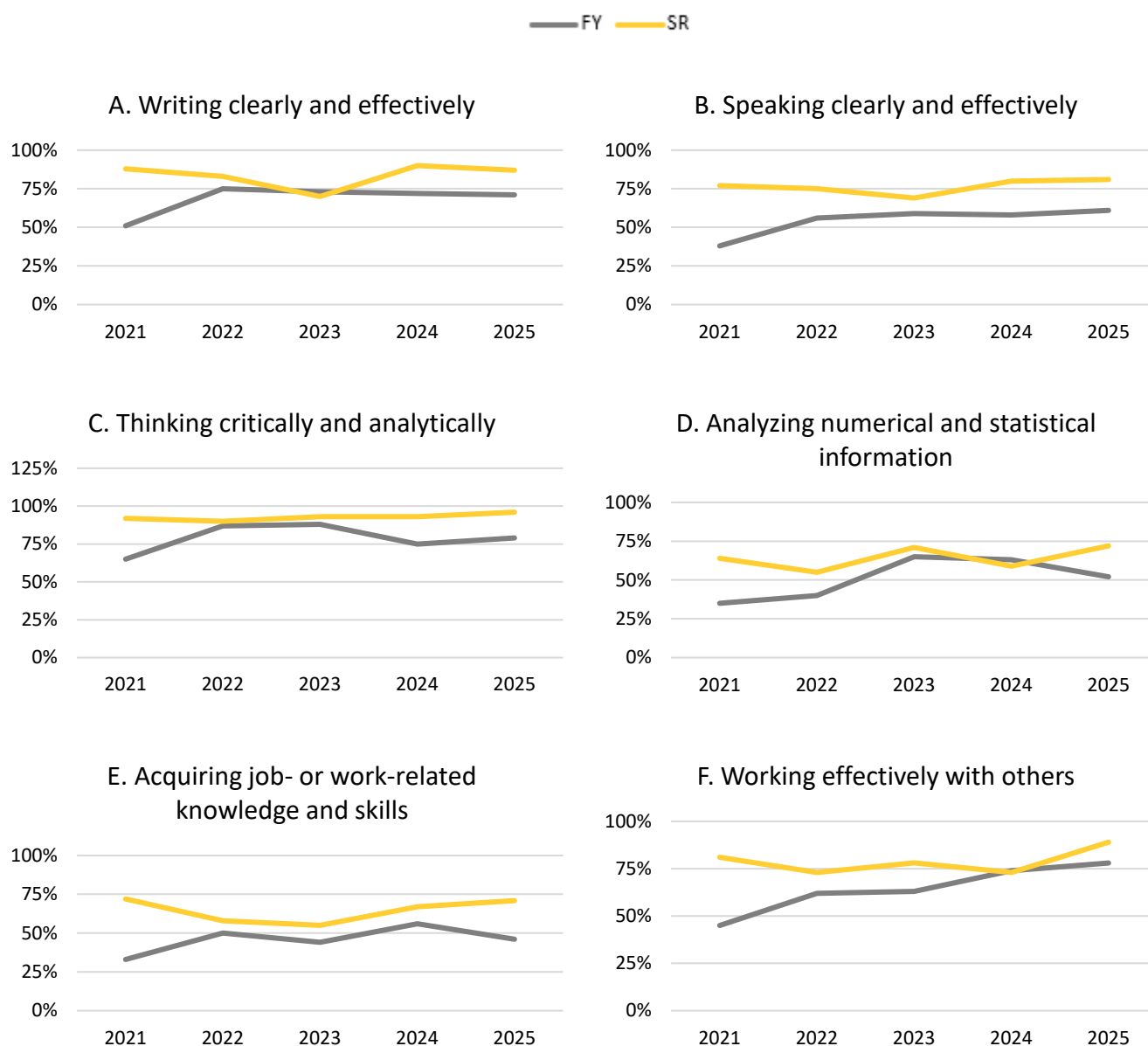| Year	Very Often	Often	Total
2021	29%	35%	64%
2022	31%	41%	72%
2023	35%	42%	77%
2024	31%	47%	78%
2025	40%	46%	86%

SR - During the current school year, about how often did you connect ideas from your courses to your prior experiences and knowledge? (NSSE 2.g)
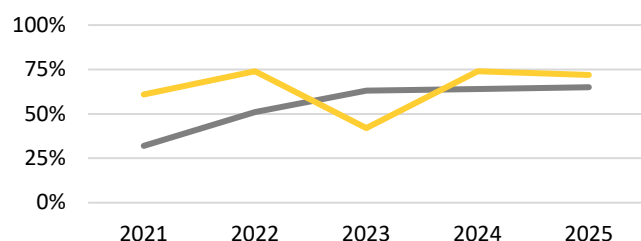

Legend: ■ Very Often ■ Often

Year	Very Often	Often	Total
2021	48%	40%	88%
2022	47%	37%	84%
2023	42%	40%	82%
2024	50%	35%	85%
2025	54%	38%	92%

Progress toward Target: There has been an increase in responding 'often' or 'very often' to each question between FY and SR students for all years. To continue these efforts, tactical plan initiatives include creation of a more robust student training and employment program. Fostering intentional connections across the curriculum is a focus of Southwestern's general education and Paideia program, internship programs, study abroad, undergraduate research, and community-engaged learning programs. Initiatives to strengthen these programs and offerings will positively impact skill development.
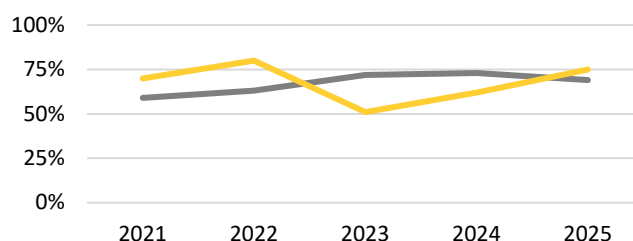
Criterion 5: Personal Development

Linked to Strategic Plan Objectives 2.4 and 2.5: Increase the percentage of students indicating that Southwestern University has contributed 'quite a bit' or 'very much' to their knowledge, skills, and personal development in specified areas. (Source of data: NSSE Q18)
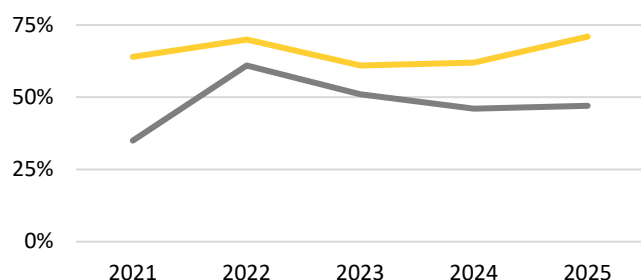
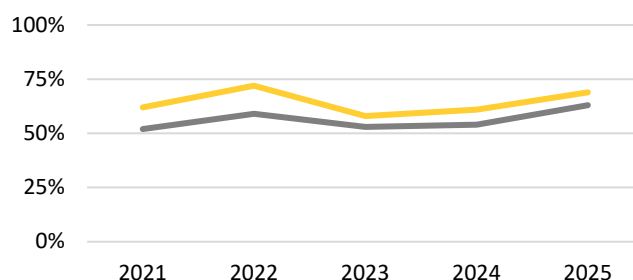## G. Developing or clarifying a personal code of values and ethics

H. Understanding people of other backgrounds

I. Solving complex real-world problems

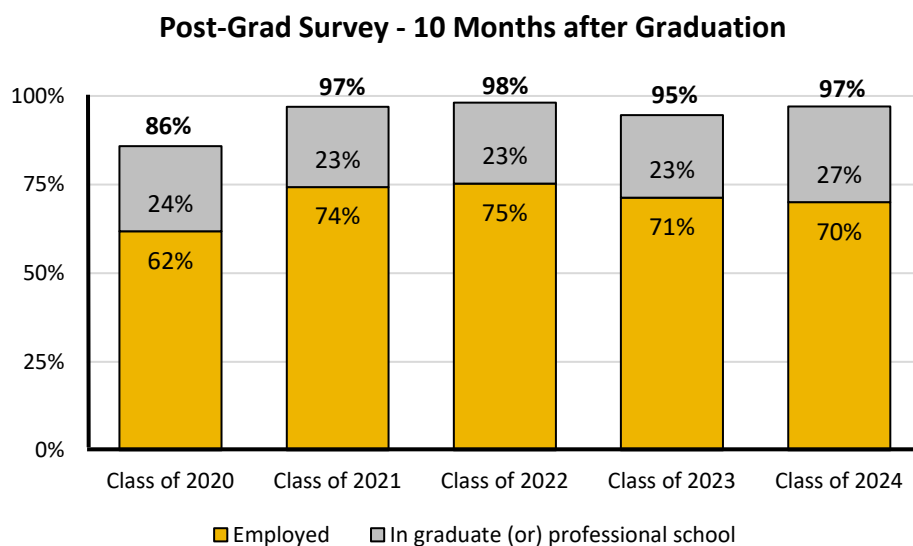## J. Being an informed and active citizen

Progress toward Target: In general, more students indicated that Southwestern University contributed towards development of skills as a senior rather than a first-year student. This positive trend will continue to be monitored. Tactical plan initiatives promoting study abroad, increased tutoring offerings, and diversity should help to increase positive responses from senior students. Faculty are considering ways to improve student supports and outcomes in gateway courses. Gateway courses are foundational, often higher enrollment courses essential for progressing in a major, acting as key indicators in student success and progress to the degree. Improving outcomes of gateway courses will have a positive impact on students and their skill development.

Accomplishments After Graduation

Criterion 6: Center for Career and Professional Development Survey Results

Linked to Strategic Plan Goal 2: The percentage of graduates who are employed or attend graduate/professional school ten months after graduation should remain at or above 90%.

Post-Grad Survey - 10 Months after Graduation

Progress toward Target: The percentage of students currently employed or in graduate/professional school decreased for the classes of 2019 and 2020. Results may have been impacted by the pandemic and will be monitored to determine needed adjustments to resources available to students after graduation. Tactical plan initiatives that could directly impact this metric include the creation of a more robust student training and employment program and strengthening student tutoring offerings.