

#REALCOLLEGE DURING THE PANDEMIC: Preview of Fall 2020 Survey Findings

DECEMBER 2020

The coronavirus pandemic continues to challenge American higher education, adversely affecting both students and educators and compromising institutions' financial health. Enrollment and retention rates are down, and disengagement in learning is profound.¹ Widespread inequality is deepening; while average enrollment is down 4%, enrollment among minoritized students is down by as much as 10.7%.²

CHANGES IN STUDENT ENROLLMENT BY RACE/ETHNICITY, FALL 2019 TO FALL 2020:³

- 10.7% AMERICAN INDIAN AND NATIVE ALASKAN
- 7.9% BLACK
- 7.6% WHITE
- 6.1% HISPANIC OR LATINX
- 4.0% ASIAN

Any path to an inclusive recovery must address disparities in job losses, infection rates, and mental health supports, as well as the toll the crisis has taken on family stability.

Most of all, leaders must remember that students are humans first, and in order to focus on college they need basic needs security. How are students faring with regard to food and housing, childcare, mental health, and transportation? To what extent have federal, state, and philanthropic efforts to distribute emergency aid helped, and what additional help is needed? With support from the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#) and [Gates Philanthropy Partners](#), The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice has just completed a nationwide survey of students and institutions addressing these critical questions. The full results will be published in March 2021.⁴

THE #REALCOLLEGE SURVEY

Established in 2015, the [#RealCollege Survey](#) is the nation's largest annual assessment of students' basic needs. It offers college and university leaders an up-close look at challenges that are often invisible to educators. It also offers policymakers insights into obstacles undermining college attainment that are not available from administrative data systems.

THIS FALL'S SURVEY, FIELDED FROM SEPTEMBER TO NOVEMBER, CAPTURED THE EXPERIENCES OF:



195K STUDENTS IN



42 STATES AT

202 COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

- 130 COMMUNITY COLLEGES
- 51 PUBLIC FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES
- 14 HBCUs
- 5 TRIBAL COLLEGES



DR. LISA SKARI, PRESIDENT OF MT. HOOD COMMUNITY COLLEGE, SAID:

"The findings of [the] [#RealCollege Survey](#) reaffirm the need for us as leaders and teammates in higher education to be hyper-focused on supporting our students, now more than ever."

OUR SURVEY SAMPLE INCLUDED DIVERSE VOICES

20K

BLACK OR
AFRICAN
AMERICAN

38K

HISPANIC
OR LATINX

2K

INDIGENOUS

28K

LGBTQ

32K

PARENTS

2K

ATHLETES

8K

SYSTEM- INVOLVED
(FOSTER CARE OR
CRIMINAL JUSTICE)

WHAT #REALCOLLEGE STUDENTS ARE TEACHING US

Access to basic needs supports that students rely on has been compromised.

“I would prefer classes on campus as I am homeless and it gives me more sense of security.”

“I used to be able to get food daily at school with the lunch and dinner program but that’s not happening anymore.”

“I’m always tired and hungry but can’t sleep or afford food.”

Some students are losing hope in their education and their lives. Mental health challenges are widespread. Many students feel uncared for and unwanted. Suicidal ideation is prevalent.

“We need help, y’all. We really need help. We need adults to love us enough to reach out to us and be gentle with us.”

“I attempted suicide in May. I am filling out this survey because I believe other students experiencing the same thing may not have the motivation or may be too anxious to fill it out.”

“I’m considering killing myself so I don’t have to suffer through struggling to be part of such an unrealistic workforce.”

The CARES Act helped students, but they need additional emergency aid. Moreover, to be effective, this aid must be easier to find.

“As a mother of a young child who is also learning online, I have had to add more roles to my plate. I’m having to help my young son more during the day...so I can’t work...and am limited to evenings for my virtual classes. More emergency grants being available would help me worry less about bills and have more time to focus on school and family.”

“Colleges don’t make emergency aid easily available or easy to learn about.”

“Being a single parent while trying to juggle school and jobs is very stressful. If there are emergency grants out there, it’s hard to hear about them because I don’t always have time to look or search for them. I have to tend to a child and work.”



“We are all risking our lives to get an education in the middle of a pandemic, words which I feel have lost all meaning, and we are suffering.”

THE WORK AHEAD

As President-Elect Joe Biden and Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris prepare to assume leadership in January 2021, and as colleges and universities prepare for yet another academic term during the pandemic, the needs of #RealCollege students must be centered.

The full findings of this 2020 survey will be available in March 2021 and should inform these efforts. In the meantime, college leaders, student advocates, and policy makers can take the following steps to support #RealCollege students:

- Understand who college students are and the challenges they face
- Advocate for access to resources, particularly emergency aid, that support students' basic needs
- Share practices on the equitable and efficient distribution of emergency aid

We also offer the following resources:

- A [guide](#) to the equitable distribution of emergency aid
- A #RealCollege [guide](#) to institutional practice during the pandemic
- A [guide](#) for students to survive during the pandemic
- Access to [technical assistance](#) from experienced professionals

The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation or Gates Philanthropy Partners.



About Us

The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University is redefining what it means to be a student-ready college, with a national movement centering #RealCollege students' basic needs. Food, affordable housing, transportation, childcare, and mental health are central conditions for learning. Without those needs being met, too many students leave college in debt and/or without a degree. To learn about the 2021 #RealCollege Survey, visit hope4college.com/realcollege-survey/.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ [Stay informed with the latest enrollment information](#). (2020). *National Student Clearinghouse Research Center*.

² Sedmak, T. (2020). [Fall 2020 undergraduate enrollment down 4% compared to same time last year](#). *National Student Clearinghouse*.

³ Sedmak, T.

⁴ Numbers presented in this summary are preliminary as of December 2020 and subject to change in our forthcoming report.



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