

One Year Later: COVID-19's Impact on Current and Future College Students



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Introduction

The past year has been one of the most tumultuous in the modern history of higher education in the United States. In the spring of 2020, most colleges were forced to pivot their operations entirely online due to a deadly pandemic. Practically overnight, many residential college students were displaced, losing their on-campus homes along with their jobs and livelihoods. Others took jobs, risking their health, to help support their families, while some took care of children, siblings, and elderly family members at home. The stress and strain of this past year fell disproportionately on Black and Latinx students, whose communities were hard hit both by COVID-19 and the ensuing economic crisis.¹ Nationwide, enrollment declined about 4 percent at colleges and universities.²

Concernedly, that decline stood at 10 percent at community colleges—the open access institutions that serve a plurality of undergraduates in America.

Spring 2021 stands in stark contrast to spring 2020. In just one year, multiple vaccines have hit the market in the United States, finally turning the tide of the pandemic and bringing the hope that we can enter a new normal over the summer and into the fall with college students returning to campus.

The road to recovery, however, will be long. The economic recession caused by the pandemic has been unequal and vaccination rates remain low among certain regions and demographics nationwide due to lack of vaccine access and confidence.³

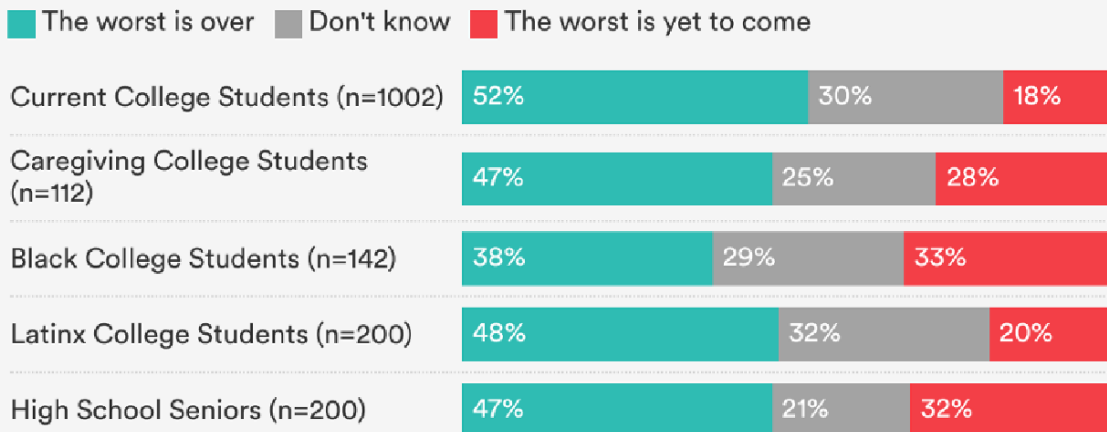
To better understand the past year of students' lives and their future outlook, New America and Third Way partnered with Global Strategy Group to commission three national polls: one in August 2020, one in December 2020, and one in May 2021.⁴ The good news is that our latest survey results show that students believe the worst of the pandemic is over. This optimism about the pandemic, however, does not translate into increased positivity towards higher education. Students feel mixed about whether college is worth the cost anymore, even though they believe their institutions handled the pandemic well. For students, their biggest concerns are centered on the practical needs of online education, the cost, and how a degree will prepare them for a new economy. For this reason, students expect institutions and policymakers to help make higher education more affordable and set better accountability standards.

This poll surveyed 1,002 college students nationwide, including samples of 242 caregivers, 269 Black students, and 325 Latinx students. The survey also included 200 high school seniors. It was conducted April 29 through May 13, 2021. Further details on the methodology can be found at the end of this brief.

Students Believe the Worst of the Pandemic is Over, but Feel Less Optimistic About the Economy

Just over half (53 percent) of college students believe that the worst is over when it comes to the pandemic, though both Black and Latinx students believe this at lower rates (38 percent and 48 percent respectively) (See Figure 1). And, students are less worried about catching COVID-19 and spreading it to others than they were in December (down 9 percentage points to 73 percent).

Figure 1. When it comes to the coronavirus pandemic in the United States, do you personally think that ... ?



Note: The numbers in this figure and the narrative may not match due to rounding. In case of mismatch, please refer to the narrative.

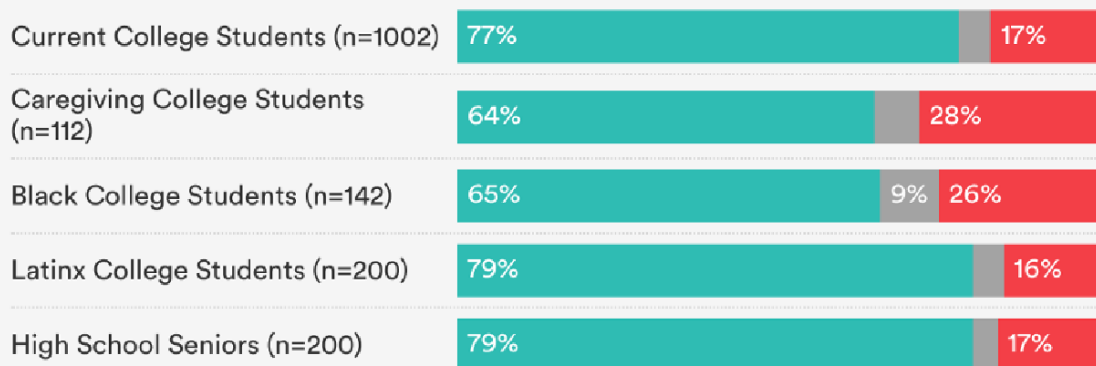
Source: Third Way/New America HigherEd Tracking Survey (May 2021)

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This budding optimism is likely due in part to the wide availability of highly-effective vaccines and the resulting tumbling case counts and deaths nationwide. Among students, approximately half say they have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, though there is a concerning drop in vaccination rates among caregivers (40 percent) and Black students (29 percent). Something to watch for this fall is whether students are open to being vaccinated if it's required for being on campus. The good news: 77 percent of students say they will take the vaccine if required to attend school in the fall, up 9 percentage points from December. And while Black students and caregivers said they would get the vaccine at lower rates in December (49 percent and 54 percent respectively), those rates have increased and now stand at 65 percent for Black students and 64 percent for caregiving students. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Now that there are approved, effective, and widely available COVID-19 vaccines, if your institution required you to be vaccinated for attendance in the fall of 2021, would you take the vaccine?

■ Yes, would definitely/Yes, probably
 ■ Not sure
 ■ No, probably not/No, definitely not



Note: The numbers in this figure and the narrative may not match due to rounding. In case of mismatch, please refer to the narrative.

Source: Third Way/New America HigherEd Survey Tracker (May 2021)

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When it comes to the economy, however, students are feeling less optimistic. Only about one-quarter of students (26 percent) believe the economy is getting better, while a third (33 percent) say it is getting worse. When it comes to their own personal financial situation over the next few months, nearly one-half (47 percent) say they feel uneasy.

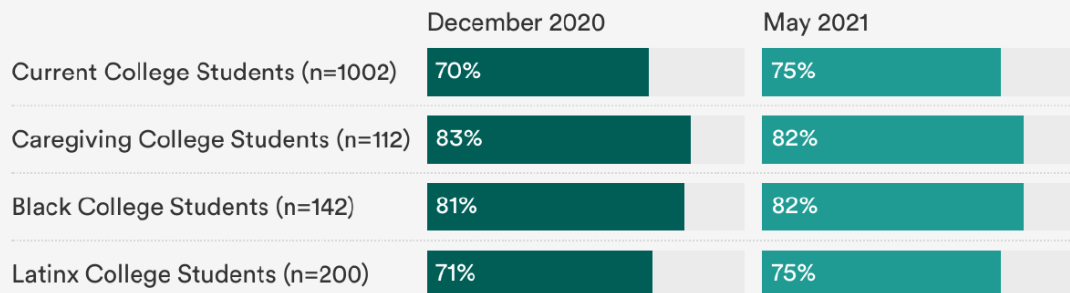
Students Feel Their Institutions Handled the Pandemic Well, But Are Not Sure Higher Education is Worth the Cost When Online

Despite the difficulties of the past year on students’ lives and the disruptions the pandemic caused to their education, most don’t believe these disruptions damaged the return on the investment of their degree. Two-thirds of college students say that their institution delivers a good return on investment, which remains unchanged since December 2020. In addition, there has been some positive movement when it comes to believing that their college degree will be worth the same as

one earned before the pandemic—75 percent believe their degree will be worth the same compared to 70 percent in December. (See Figure 3.)



Figure 3. Percent of students who agreed with the statement "My college degree will be worth the same as one earned before the pandemic"



Note: N-sizes are from the May survey only.

Source: Third Way/New America HigherEd Tracking Survey (December 2020 and May 2021)

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Perhaps this growing positivity is due in part to the belief that their institutions handled the crisis well. The majority (72 percent) of college students agree that, “the way my institution handled the pandemic this past semester made me trust its leadership more.” Caregiving students share this sentiment the most, with 80 percent agreeing, up from 69 percent in December. But, there have been some downward shifts in trust in institutional leadership for Black and Latinx students. Although 78 percent of Black students trust their institutions’ leadership, this is down from 86 percent in December; and 81 percent of Latinx students agree, down slightly from 85 percent in December.

Overall, students also believe that their college or university dealt with the pandemic as best they could (81 percent, up from 76 percent in December), that their institution communicated clearly since the beginning of COVID-19 (79 percent), and that their institution is well-equipped to handle future emergencies (79 percent).

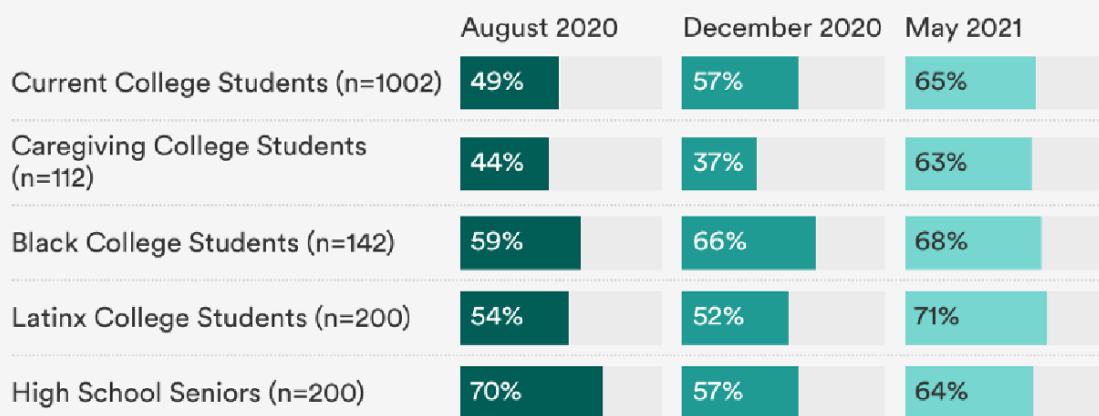
Despite the positivity, students worry that online education degrades the value of their degree. Over half (56 percent) are concerned that their degree is less valuable because it was online. Half (53 percent) also agree that higher education is not good quality now that it has moved partially or entirely online. And in a warning sign for institutions, 65 percent of college-bound high school

seniors agree with that statement (up from 57 percent in December). Similarly, 57 percent of college students believe that the quality of online instruction is worse than in-person instruction.

Alarming, as the pandemic progressed, students have increasingly doubted whether college is worth the cost. Almost two-thirds (65 percent) now say that higher education is not worth the cost to students anymore, up from 57 percent in December and 49 percent in August. (See Figure 4.)



Figure 4. Percent of students who agreed with the statement "Higher education is not worth the cost to students anymore."



Note: N-sizes are from the May survey only.

Source: Third Way/New America HigherEd Tracking Survey (August 2020, December 2020, and May 2021)

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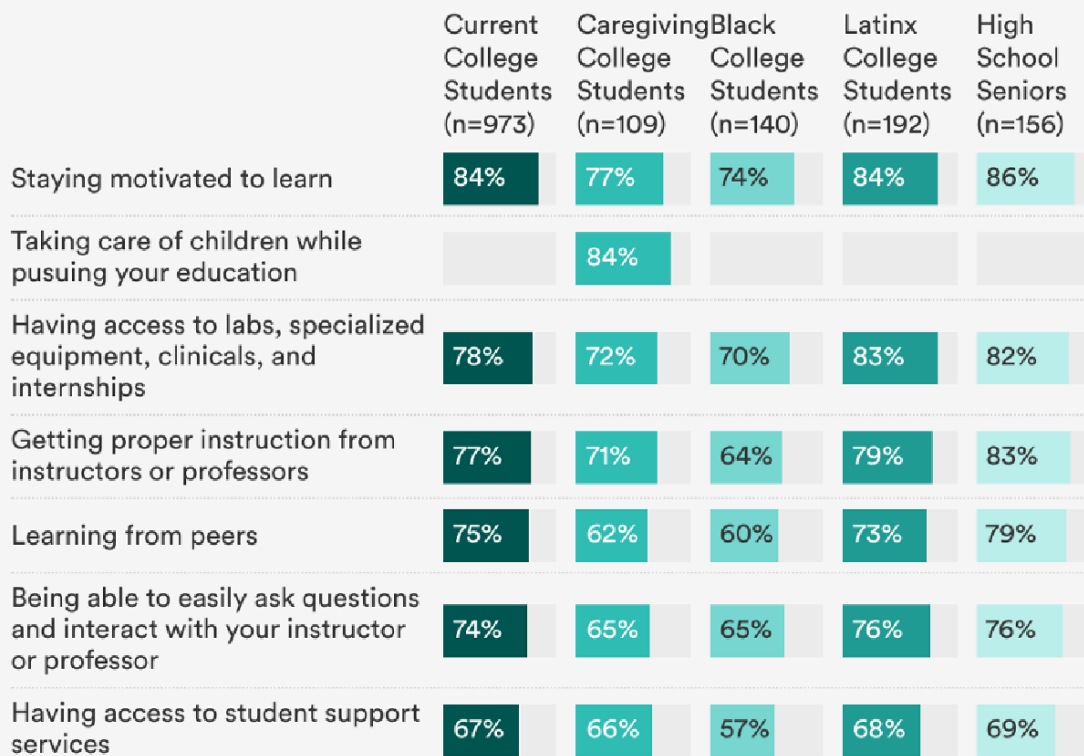
Students' Biggest Concerns Now are Centered on Practical Needs, Cost, and the Future of the Economy

Online learning has been the status quo of higher education in the pandemic year. The [College Crisis Initiative](#) out of Davidson College estimated that in Spring 2021, more than 60 percent of private and public four-year colleges and universities remained at least partially online. In our survey in May, 82 percent of students said that their colleges offered either entirely online classes or a mix of online and in-person classes in the spring semester. While more students were able to experience online learning, their negative perspectives and concerns for online classes remain. Most students stated they had found it challenging to have a fulfilling online learning experience.

Top challenges for current college students include: staying motivated to learn (84 percent), having access to labs, specialized equipment, clinicals, and internships (78 percent), and getting proper instruction from their professors (77 percent). More high school seniors seem to have major challenges with staying motivated to learn and accessing labs and other resources if learning is to continue online compared to current college students (See Figure 5). For caregiver students, taking care of children while pursuing their education remains the top challenge (84 percent). College students also believe that continuing online education will make it a challenge to learn from peers (75 percent), interact with instructors or professors (74 percent), or access student support services (67 percent).



Figure 5. Students find the following items challenging if learning were to continue online



Source: Third Way/ New America HigherEd Tracking Survey (May 2021)

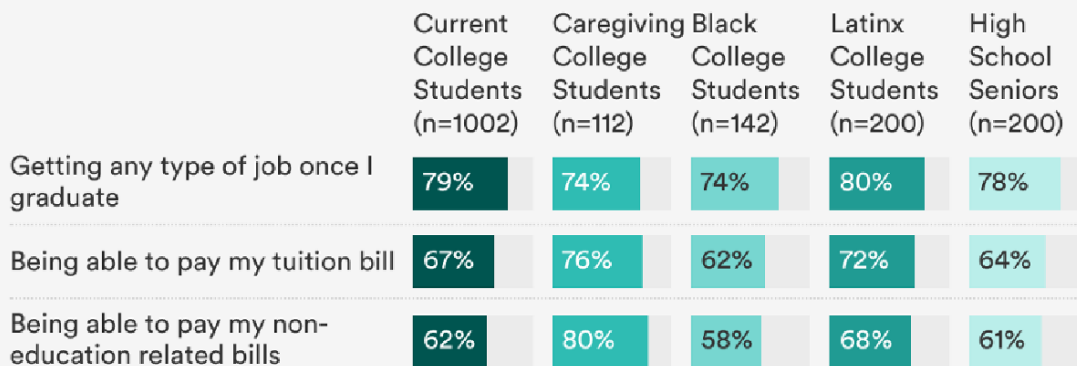
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Given that students feel less optimistic about the economy and their personal financial situations, it is no surprise that they are worried about their ability to pay tuition bills (67 percent) and non-educational bills (62 percent). This is especially true among caregivers—76 and 80 percent are

concerned about paying tuition bills and non-educational bills, respectively. Furthermore, nearly 80 percent of students are still concerned about their job prospects once they graduate. (See Figure 6.)



Figure 6. Due to the pandemic and economic recession, students are concerned with the following items



Source: Third Way/ New America HigherEd Tracking Survey (May 2021)

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This Translates into Clear Next Steps for Institutions and the Federal Government

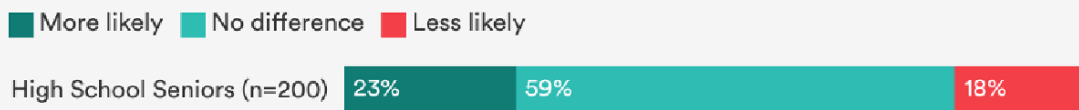
The impact of the pandemic on students’ finances and well-being has led students to adjust their college plans. While 85 percent of college students are likely to re-enroll in their current college for the coming fall semester, nearly one in five (18 percent) say that due to the pandemic they will definitely need more time to complete their degree. Caregivers and Latinx students are more likely to report needing more time—24 percent of caregivers say “definitely” (up from 17 percent in December), and 28 percent of Latinx students say so (up from 21 percent). And among those who report needing more time to complete college due to the pandemic, a growing plurality report needing one more academic year (44 percent, up from 37 percent). This is true of caregivers (44 percent, up from 29 percent), Latinx students (47 percent, up from 36 percent), and Black students (48 percent, up from 36 percent). The numbers signal that students will need substantial support from their institutions—not only financial support, but also academic and career service support to help them graduate on time or shorten their time to degree completion.

As for high school seniors, while 60 percent said the pandemic had made no difference to their intention to enroll in college, a sizable 18 percent said the pandemic made them less likely to enroll (See Figure 7). And for many that do intend to enroll, 20 percent of college-bound seniors decided

to enroll in a two-year public institution in the most recent survey, much more than the 13 percent of seniors when we asked them in December. While it might be too soon to say enrollment will go back up this coming fall semester, the data paints a positive picture for first-time enrollment at colleges and universities.



Figure 7. Has the coronavirus pandemic made you more or less likely to enroll in college?



Note: The numbers in this figure and the narrative may not match due to rounding. In case of mismatch, please refer to the narrative.

Source: Third Way/New America HigherEd Tracking Survey (May 2021)

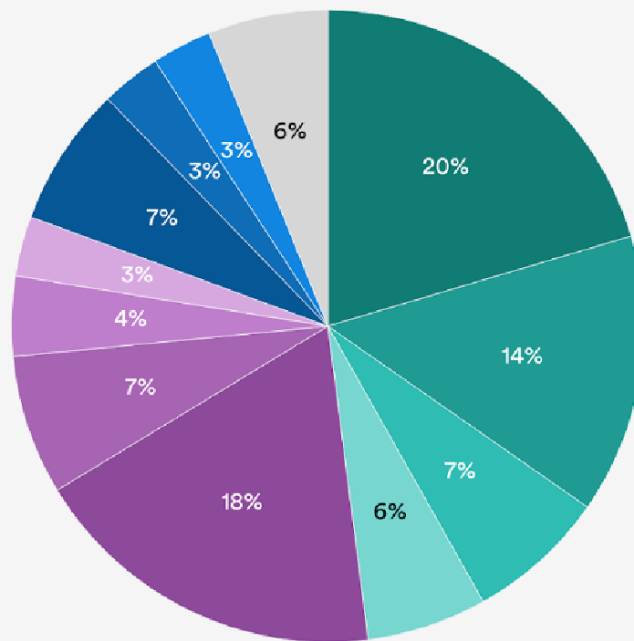
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The Biden administration and Congress must act too. Based on the [extensive proposal](#) the President has for higher education and other domestic infrastructure, the survey asked students what policy should be the most important for the administration and Congress to implement. Collectively, nearly half (47 percent) of students chose to prioritize policies that can make higher education more affordable, a third (32 percent) wanted to prioritize policies that alleviate the student loan repayment burden for borrowers, and one in ten (13 percent) would like to see policies that strengthen accountability measures at colleges and universities (See Figure 8).

Figure 8. Which of the following do you believe is the most important higher education policy for President Biden and Congress to implement?

(n=1002)

- Making the cost of higher education more affordable for all students
- Tuition-free public four-year colleges and universities
- Doubling the federal Pell Grant maximum from \$6,000 to \$12,000 for the lowest income students
- Tuition-free public two-year community colleges
- Cancelling all student loan debt
- \$10,000 of federal student loan debt forgiveness for all borrowers
- Improving federal student loan debt forgiveness for public servants (e.g., teachers and nonprofit employees)
- Expanding access to affordable repayment plans that are based on a percentage of borrowers' income
- Ensuring higher education provides a good value to students
- Setting quality standards for online higher education programs
- Giving students and families more information about where tuition dollars are going
- None of the above



Source: Third Way/New America HigherEd Tracking Survey (May 2021)

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Affordability policies that most students are interested in include making the cost of higher education more affordable for all students (20 percent), making public four-year colleges and universities tuition-free (14 percent), and doubling the amount of the Pell Grant for the lowest-income students (7 percent). The most popular loan policies include cancelling all student loan debt

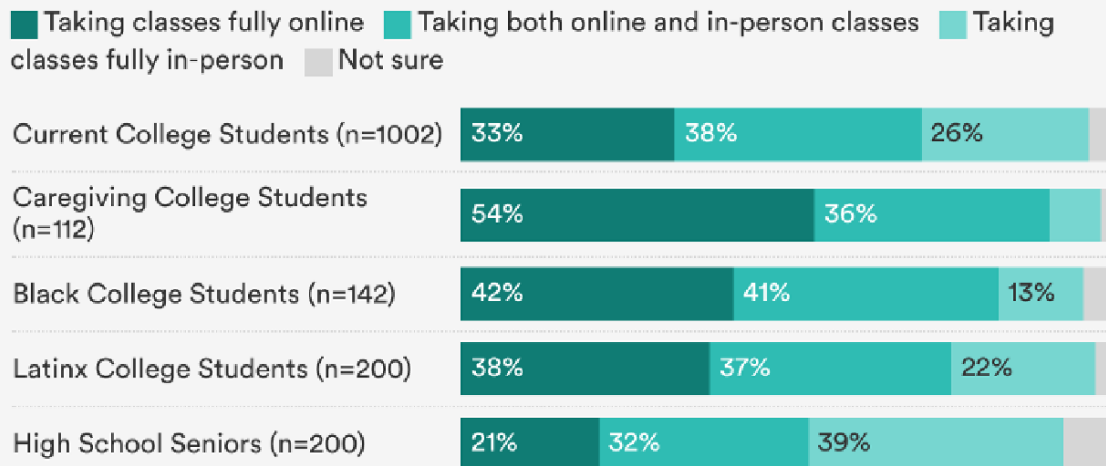
(18 percent), forgiving \$10,000 of federal student loans for all borrowers (7 percent), and improving the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program (4 percent). And while fewer students chose accountability over affordability and loan repayment policies, accountability policies that students support include ensuring higher education provides a good value to students (7 percent), setting quality standards for online higher education programs (3 percent), and providing students and families with more information about where their tuition dollars are going (3 percent).

The Coming Academic Year

As vaccines for COVID-19 have become widely available, colleges and universities, especially those that remained online last spring semester, are planning to welcome students back to campus starting this fall. But the return to in-person instruction does not mean that online learning will go away. In the survey, a majority of students (62 percent) said that their college would offer both online and in-person classes in the coming fall 2021 semester, only 14 percent said that their college would offer online classes only, and only 12 percent would offer in-person classes only.

And while students are still not completely convinced of the quality and experience of online education, a majority do not mind continuing with some form of online education come fall: 33 percent want to take classes fully online in the fall of 2021 (down from 40 percent in the December survey), 38 percent want to take both online and in-person classes (almost unchanged from the 36 percent in December), and 26 percent want to take classes fully in-person (up from 18 percent in December). Among all college student groups, more caregivers want to take classes fully online - 54 percent, compared to 38 percent of Latinx students and 42 percent of Black students. At the same time, high school seniors are not as eager about continuing with online classes as current college students - only 21 percent of high school seniors would prefer taking classes fully online this fall. (See Figure 9.)

Figure 9. Based on your experience this past year and where we are at with the pandemic, if you had the option, what would you prefer for the upcoming academic year beginning in the fall of 2021?



Note: The numbers in this figure and the narrative may not match due to rounding. In case of mismatch, please refer to the narrative.

Source: Third Way/New America HigherEd Tracking Survey (May 2021)

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Conclusion

After a year battling with the pandemic and its impacts on students’ finances and well-being, New America and Third Way’s latest survey shows that students are beginning to feel optimistic that the end of the pandemic is near. However, students are less confident about their own economic prospects—the ability to find jobs or afford college bills and living expenses remain some of their most significant concerns. And while students are overall satisfied with how their institutions managed the online learning transition during the pandemic, many are still doubtful about the value of their degrees and of higher education in general. As many colleges and universities are planning for a return to a new normal this fall, students will want more support from their colleges, not only in the form of financial aid, but also advising and counselling to help them graduate on time. Students want the Biden administration and Congress to act too—they would like to see the President and Congress prioritize affordability and accountability policies to ensure that a college degree maintains its value in a changing economy.

Methodology

Global Strategy Group conducted an online survey of 1,002 college students nationwide, including samples of 242 caregivers, 269 Black students, and 325 Latinx students. The survey also included 200 high school seniors nationwide. The survey was conducted April 29 through May 13, 2021. The precision of online surveys is measured using a credibility interval and, in this case, the interval is $\pm 3.1\%$. The margin on the subsamples is larger. Care has been taken to ensure the geographic and demographic divisions of the student population are properly represented.

Previously, Global Strategy Group conducted an online survey of 1,008 college students nationwide, including samples of 144 caregivers, 136 Black students, and 198 Latinx students. The survey also oversampled 90 caregivers, 165 Black students, and 112 Latinx students. The survey included 207 high school seniors nationwide. It was conducted December 2 through 15, 2020. The precision of online surveys is measured using a credibility interval and, in this case, the interval is $\pm 3.1\%$. The margin on the subsamples is larger. Care has been taken to ensure the geographic and demographic divisions of the student population are properly represented.

Prior to that, GSG also conducted an online survey of 1,407 college students nationwide, including samples of 223 caregivers, 253 Black students, and 311 Latinx students. The survey also included 211 high school seniors nationwide. The survey was conducted August 6 through 17, 2020. The precision of online surveys is measured using a credibility interval and, in this case, the interval is $\pm 3.1\%$. The margin on the subsamples is larger. Care has been taken to ensure the geographic and demographic divisions of the expected national electorate are properly represented based on historical turnout.

Full topline of the survey can be found [here](#).

Appendix

Expanded figures 5, 6, and 9.

Figure 5 (expanded). Students find the following items challenging if learning were to continue online

	Current College Students (n=973)	Caregiving College Students (n=109)	Black College Students (n=140)	Latinx College Students (n=192)	High School Seniors (n=156)
Staying motivated to learn	84%	77%	74%	84%	86%
Taking care of children while pursuing your education		84%			
Having access to labs, specialized equipment, clinicals, and internships	78%	72%	70%	83%	82%
Getting proper instruction from instructors or professors	77%	71%	64%	79%	83%
Learning from peers	75%	62%	60%	73%	79%
Being able to easily ask questions and interact with your instructor or professor	74%	65%	65%	76%	76%
Taking care of parents or other family members while pursuing your education		73%			
Having enough resources to pay for school	73%	80%	66%	76%	63%
Having access to high-quality learning materials	69%	67%	61%	72%	67%
Balancing work and school	68%	76%	67%	74%	64%
Fulfilling class requirements like readings and assignments	67%	66%	60%	74%	70%
Having access to student support services	67%	66%	57%	68%	69%
Having a quiet place to focus	62%	76%	52%	71%	62%
Having access to stable, high-speed internet connection	58%	57%	49%	60%	53%
Having a high-quality camera and microphone on your computer	51%	54%	48%	59%	56%
Having access to food or shelter	26%	40%	35%	31%	20%

Source: Third Way/ New America HigherEd Tracking Survey (May 2021)

Figure 6 (expanded). Due to the pandemic and economic recession, students are concerned with the following items

	Current College Students (n=1002)	Caregiving College Students (n=112)	Black College Students (n=142)	Latinx College Students (n=200)	High School Seniors (n=200)
Getting a job that fits my degree once I graduate	79%	69%	63%	81%	77%
Getting any type of job once I graduate	79%	74%	74%	80%	78%
My mental health	78%	77%	65%	76%	79%
My friends and family catching the coronavirus	78%	76%	78%	79%	69%
Catching the coronavirus or spreading it to others	73%	74%	75%	76%	72%
Being able to pay my tuition bill	67%	76%	62%	72%	64%
Paying off my student loan debt in the future	64%	72%	62%	65%	64%
Getting a full-time or part-time job in the next few months	64%	61%	57%	68%	65%
Having to help with distance learning for my children while I work or go to school		63%			
Being able to pay my non-education related bills	62%	80%	58%	68%	61%
Abrupt closures of colleges and universities	62%	58%	58%	64%	55%
Having access to childcare while I am in school or while I work		57%			
Getting a degree that is less valuable because it was online	56%	55%	53%	63%	39%
My institution not giving me timely updates on coronavirus outbreaks at my school	46%	49%	49%	56%	50%
My institution not providing proper protective equipment or testing to keep me and my classmate safe	44%	51%	52%	57%	46%
Transferring coursework credits to another school	41%	54%	53%	56%	49%

Source: Third Way/ New America HigherEd Tracking Survey (May 2021)

Figure 9 (expanded). Based on your experience this past year and where we are at with the pandemic, if you had the option, what would you prefer for the upcoming academic year beginning in the fall of 2021?

■ Taking classes fully online
 ■ Taking both online and in-person classes
 ■ Taking classes fully in-person
 ■ Not sure

Current College Students



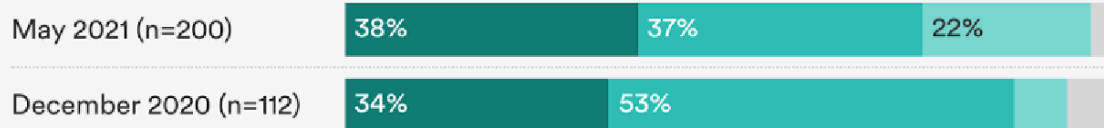
Caregiving College Students



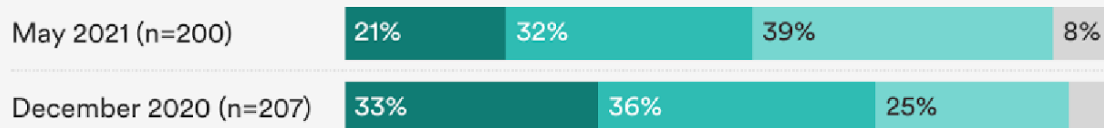
Black College Students



Latinx College Students



High School Seniors



Note: The numbers in this figure and the narrative may not match due to rounding. In case of mismatch, please refer to the narrative.

Source: Third Way/New America HigherEd Tracking Survey (December 2020 and May 2021)

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TOPICS

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ENDNOTES

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