

SOCIAL POLICY & POLITICS | EDUCATION

New Polling from New America & Third Way on COVID-19's Impact on Current and Future College Students

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Over the last few weeks colleges and universities across the country have attempted the ultimate juggling act: reopening campuses while working to keep students and their campus communities safe. Unfortunately, it has turned out to be mission impossible. Many colleges have pivoted online at the last minute before students even set foot on campus for the fall. Still others, like the University of North Carolina, tried to open residence halls and hold in-person classes, only to rapidly backtrack mere days later.

We know coronavirus will have long-lasting impacts on our nation's higher education system. But to date, relatively little has been published on how students are adapting to the rapidly evolving changes brought on and exacerbated by the pandemic. Higher education is often slow to respond in the face of crisis. For years now, the system has had to grapple with meeting the needs of a more diverse student population, including more racially and ethnically diverse students, students caring for others, students who are working full time, students with disabilities, and students who are housing and food insecure. These students often struggled through and swirled within a higher education system that was not built to meet their needs. Now the pandemic has only made their lives, and the ability to complete a degree, more complicated.

Higher education institutions were facing intense scrutiny over the value and quality they deliver to students, even before the pandemic abruptly moved learning out of the classroom and onto the internet. Prospective students are making decisions on where – or whether – to attend college based on this new paradigm. And current students are trying to figure out whether they'll maintain enrollment this year, take a gap year, or transfer. This has made it difficult for institutions to predict what the future holds for their enrollments and their bottom lines.

That's why New America and Third Way commissioned Global Strategy Group to survey 1,407 college students with oversamples of 223 caregivers, 253 Black students, and 311 Latinx students, as well as 211 high school seniors nationwide on August 6-17th, 2020 to understand the educational challenges and enrollment decisions they are making due to the coronavirus pandemic.

First, the good news. The value proposition of higher education for current students is remarkably durable. College and high school seniors alike continue to believe their degrees will put them on the path to higher salaries and better career prospects – as a result, there has yet to be a total collapse in enrollment or re-enrollment. But this is also largely driven by perceptions that their institutions have handled the pandemic as best they could be expected to, and that sentiment could wane at any moment especially if students feel like their institutions have given them the bait and switch about fall plans.

Now for the danger ahead: roughly half of college students feel higher education is no longer worth the cost anymore, and four-in-ten believe it is a bad deal now that it has moved online. Students also have high expectations of how institutions receiving coronavirus relief funds should conduct themselves. Should colleges fail to meet these expectations, they report being willing to take a second look at enrollment altogether. And while the retention cliff won't be as steep as perhaps expected at the beginning of the summer for the students in our survey, it's still significant and could have a long-lasting impact on postsecondary education for years to come.

Finding #1: Student Needs Are Not Fully Being Met During the Pivot Online and Beyond

- **A substantial minority of students are “essential” employees.** Our survey found that even during the pandemic, 26 percent of college students and 38 percent of caregivers are employed either part-time or full-time. Among this group, 52 percent of college students and 64 percent of caregivers are working in jobs deemed “essential.” This suggests that college students are forced to divide their attention, and even spend time in jobs that potentially jeopardize their health while also getting their education online.
- **It's not just laptops and wifi students had to purchase to go remote.** Four in ten students had to make purchases to engage in remote learning successfully, and they had to purchase a wide range of items. For those students who needed to purchase something, laptops/computers lead the way (44 percent), followed by headphones/mic (27 percent), and printers (24 percent). One in five said they had to purchase a desk. Unfortunately, most students paid these expenses totally out of pocket-- and almost one quarter of those surveyed said that these purchases came at a very significant cost, with over 40 percent saying it was somewhat significant. Caregivers seemed like they had to purchase more and shoulder more of the cost.
- **The move to online education has meant that basic education needs are a challenge for students to fulfill.** In particular, having access to labs, specialized equipment, clinicals, and internships, as well as

staying motivated to learn, are the biggest challenges for students (53 percent, 50 percent respectively). Caregivers report having enough resources to pay for school (46 percent) and taking care of parents or other family members are also big challenges (44 percent), but taking care of children is less so (39 percent). LatinX college students are more likely to report elevated concern about having enough resources to pay for school (47 percent versus 37 percent overall), getting proper instruction from professors (41 percent versus 34 percent overall), and having a quiet place to focus (39 percent versus 29 percent overall). High schoolers appear more alarmed than college students that they will fall behind – being able to ask questions of their instructors, and getting proper instruction from them, are big challenges (33 percent, 36 percent, respectively).

- **The health crisis and economic crisis could be impacting students disproportionately.** Approximately 6 percent of students said they've been infected with COVID-19. And 16 percent said they have lost their job due to COVID-19.

Finding #2: Student Enrollment, Retention, Completion, and Transfer Plans Remain Steadier than Anticipated, but Dangers May Lie Ahead

Students do not seem as ready to change their higher ed plans as we would have thought...

- **Enrollment will seemingly decline, but perhaps not as significantly as institutions were thinking at the beginning of summer, at least for currently-enrolled students.** Most currently-enrolled students plan to continue their college trajectory. Despite heightened uncertainty and an abrupt shift to online learning, nine-in-ten college students plan to re-enroll in their current school next year (90 percent). Concernedly, an appreciable number expect to transfer, take a gap, or drop out entirely (10 percent, 9 percent, 2 percent respectively).

Though most students are willing to continue their education this year without disruption, the students who report less certainty about re-enrolling are considering a gap (42 percent) or transferring to another institution entirely (24 percent). Caregivers who report less certainty about re-enrolling are particularly likely to report taking a gap semester or year (53 percent).

- **A majority of colleges and universities say they will be hybrid this fall. But a large proportion of students will choose fully online even if their institution is hybrid, particularly for some of our oversamples.** According to students, most colleges are leaning on the hybrid model where they will offer both in-person and fully online classes. While just 1 percent of college students report their institution will offer in-person classes only, a majority (57 percent) are offering hybrid education, with the remainder (29 percent) moving fully online.

And while most residential institutions claim that students want to be back in class on campus, for those that are offering the hybrid option, a sizable minority want to only enroll on online only courses (38 percent). For LatinX and caregiving students, the percentages were even higher (48 percent and 47 percent respectively).

- **For those institutions providing in-person classes: Significant coronavirus testing, tracing, and PPE makes Black students most likely to re-enroll.** Perhaps due to the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on the Black community, these students would be most likely to re-enroll if the institution provided on-campus coronavirus testing and contact tracing, in addition to offering personal protective equipment to students (77 percent more likely, 51 percent much more), compared to all students (69 percent more likely, 38 percent much more). Similarly, requiring masks and social distancing while on campus also ranks as a high priority for Black students when evaluating enrollment and re-enrollment (68 percent more likely, 50 percent much more), compared to all students (62 percent more likely, 41 percent much more).
- **Charging online class fees is also a deterrent.** College students also report being significantly less likely to re-enroll if they are charged online class fees in addition to regular tuition (61 percent less likely, 37 percent much less).

...But higher ed is not out of the woods yet

- **Incoming high school seniors think twice about college.** When it comes to those prospective students in the pipeline, incoming high school seniors (those who will be in 12th grade during the academic year 2020-2021) are in stark contrast to current college students. Over half say the pandemic has made no difference in their enrollment decisions (54 percent), but a large percentage (32 percent) do say they are now less likely to enroll in a college or university upon graduation. In addition, many high school seniors are changing their college application plans due to COVID. Over four-in-ten students (41 percent) indicated they are deciding to apply to schools closer to home due to the pandemic, while

over one-fifth of students are prioritizing applying to schools that offer online classes (22 percent) or lower tuition rates (21 percent).

- **Students anticipate it will now take them longer to complete.** Around one-in-three college students report definitely or probably needing more time to complete college due to the pandemic (32 percent). And of this group, most estimate they'll need an additional semester (37 percent) or academic year (48 percent) on top of what was already required of them. The United States arguably already had a college completion crisis and the public health crisis is likely to make it worse.
- **Students who are looking to transfer, assume it will be easy to transfer credits.** Students feel confident their transfer credits will be accepted. Despite what is known by those of us who work in higher education policy about the transferability of credits, 42 percent of students feel confident most credits will be accepted if they transfer permanently, and 36 percent feel confident credits from a class will follow them back to their home institution. Just 37 percent report concern about either possibility, and 10 percent assume they will have to spend more time and money in school.

Finding #3: Students' have significant worries about the economic fallout from COVID-19 and the resulting value of a higher education credential

- **COVID-related concerns are highest for students, but finding a job follows closely behind.** In the midst of a pandemic, college students are most intensely concerned about their family and friends catching coronavirus or catching it themselves (56 percent, 52 percent significant concern, respectively). Yet, strikingly, anxiety around the state of the economy and finding a job is nearly as high of a concern to their health safety. They express significant concern about finding any type of job once they graduate (52 percent) and being able to pay non-education related bills in the next year (40 percent). Although they do not seem as intensely concerned about their degree losing value because it was earned online or transferring coursework credits to another school, college students still express broad reservations about both possibilities (54 percent, 40 percent concern overall, respectively), suggesting these issues could rise in importance as students spend more time navigating online higher education.

- In order to retain students, institutions taking COVID relief money need to demonstrate positive employment outcomes.** The overall most effective measure an institution that accepts coronavirus relief money can take in order to get students to re-enroll is to offer discounted tuition if classes are fully online (74 percent more likely to enroll or re-enroll, 51 percent much more likely to enroll or re-enroll). Yet, considering how much students are concerned about the job market, demonstrating positive employment outcomes for students through job placement (72 percent more likely, 39 percent much more) is also nearly as important to students. This suggests that college students are highly sensitive to tuition price, especially when coupled with the fact that they are concerned about their ability to get a job after graduation.
- While degrees and certificates retain their perceived value, there are underlying signs of alarm.** Students still believe that a vocational training certificate, an Associate's degree, and a Bachelor's degree are all worth the investment and usually pay off (82 percent, 70 percent, 80 percent agree, respectively). And as mentioned previously, enrollment patterns do not appear to have shifted dramatically at this point. But there are signs that college students are questioning the value of a degree as well. Most agree that rising student loan debt is a major problem (89 percent), and that the federal government could do more to ensure students succeed in higher education (85 percent), while nearly half believe higher education is not worth the cost anymore (49 percent). Alarming, this number jumps more than 20 points for high school seniors, with 70 percent saying a higher education is not worth the cost to students anymore.

Methodological Statement

Global Strategy Group conducted an online survey of 1,407 college students nationwide, including oversamples 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.