



The Impact of COVID-19 on Entering Students in Community Colleges

The work before us is to continue to reflect on what has been learned during the past year—and incorporate these lessons into policies, procedures, and student supports.

Acknowledgments

The Center for Community College Student Engagement (the Center) gratefully acknowledges the Trellis Foundation for funding this study exploring the impact of COVID-19 on entering community college students.

In March of 2020, almost overnight, most community colleges across the country radically shifted the ways in which they were providing instruction to students. The Center commends them for this Herculean task and commends their students for showing great perseverance in these unprecedented times.

The Center for Community College Student Engagement, a service and research initiative in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy in the College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin, provides insights that matter for community colleges. The Center assists institutions and policymakers in using information to promote improvements in student learning, persistence, and attainment.

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On the first day of the fall semester on college campuses across the country, new students are often filled with feelings of hope and anticipation for the opportunities that a college education can bring them and their families. But due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most students did not start college in the fall of 2020 surrounded by other students who were also excited for the journey they were about to collectively undertake. Instead, for the large majority of students, their only interactions with their college campuses were through computer screens—and even for the few who did take classes in person, the campus environment was undoubtedly altered by the pandemic.

To understand the impact of COVID-19 on entering community college students, the Center added a special-focus module to the 2020 administration of the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (*SENSE*), a survey that asks students about their earliest experiences in college.

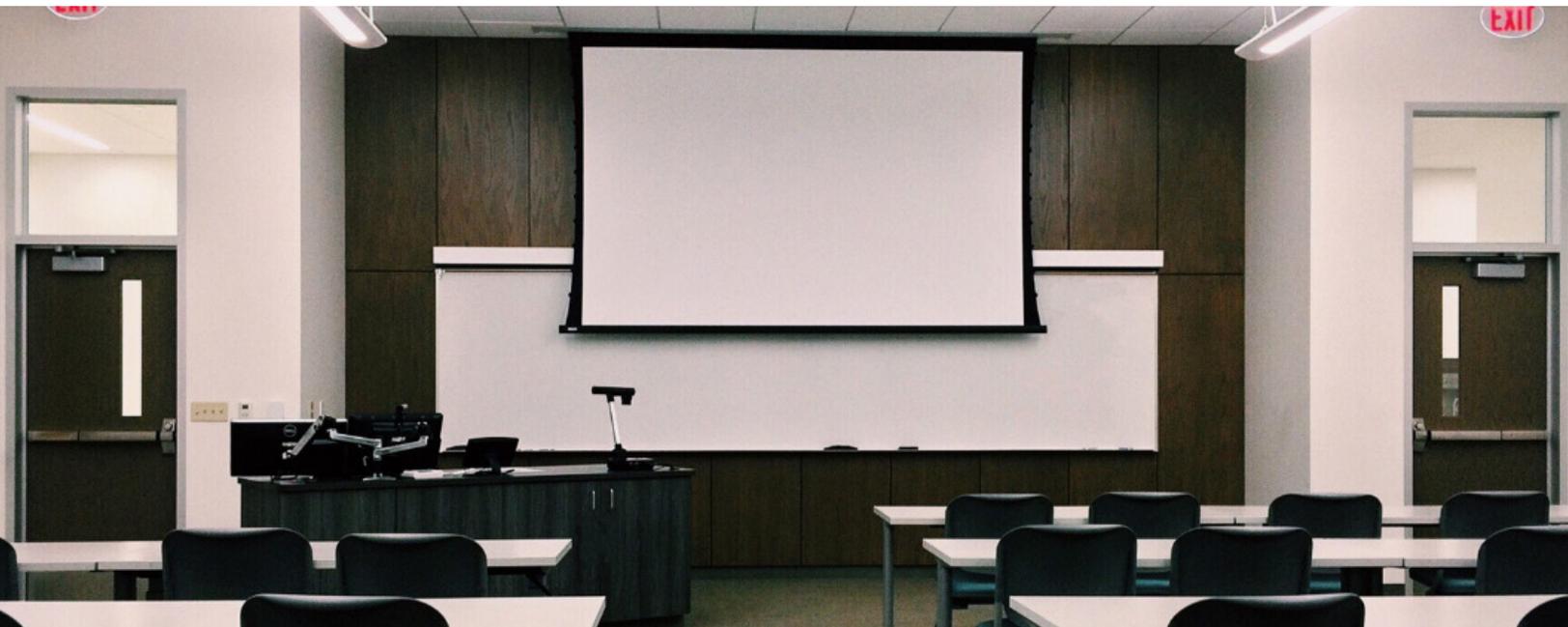
From an analysis of the responses to the module, it is clear that the pandemic has impacted some students

more than others. Most respondents' plans for college were not greatly impacted, and most who took classes online in the fall had reliable Internet access and the necessary devices to complete their coursework. However, it is still too early to know the short- and long-term effects of the shift to the online environment in terms of student outcome measures such as course completion, GPA, and graduation.

While perhaps obvious, it is important to note that we were unable to survey students who delayed beginning college or whose circumstances changed in ways that made it not possible for them to enroll in college as a result of COVID-19. According to the National Student Clearinghouse, in fall of 2020, community colleges experienced the largest enrollment declines of entering students across all segments of higher education. The largest of those declines were among Native American, Black, and Hispanic students,¹ reflecting other disproportionately negative impacts of the pandemic on these populations.^{2,3}

Respondents

The COVID-19 Impact 12-item special-focus module was administered in fall 2020 to 5,193 entering students across 38 colleges. Thirty-three colleges administered the survey online and five colleges administered the survey in person, in the classroom.





The Impact of COVID-19 on Students' Decision-Making About College

Most students' plans about the college they attended, whether they attended part-time or full-time, and their chosen pathway of study did not change due to COVID-19.

When asked if they had changed their plans about the college they attended as a result of the pandemic, over three-quarters of respondents reported that their plans hadn't changed:

- **77%** of respondents reported that they had planned to attend the community college where they took the survey (n=3,646)
- **3%** of respondents reported that they had planned to attend a different community college (n=155)
- **7%** of respondents reported that they had not planned to attend any college or university (n=333)
- **13%** of respondents reported that they had planned to attend a 4-year college or university (n=605)

For the vast majority of students (86%, n=3,410), the decision about whether to enroll part-time or full-time was also not impacted by the pandemic. And 75% (n=3,509) of respondents did not change their plans about their program, major, or pathway of study due to the pandemic.





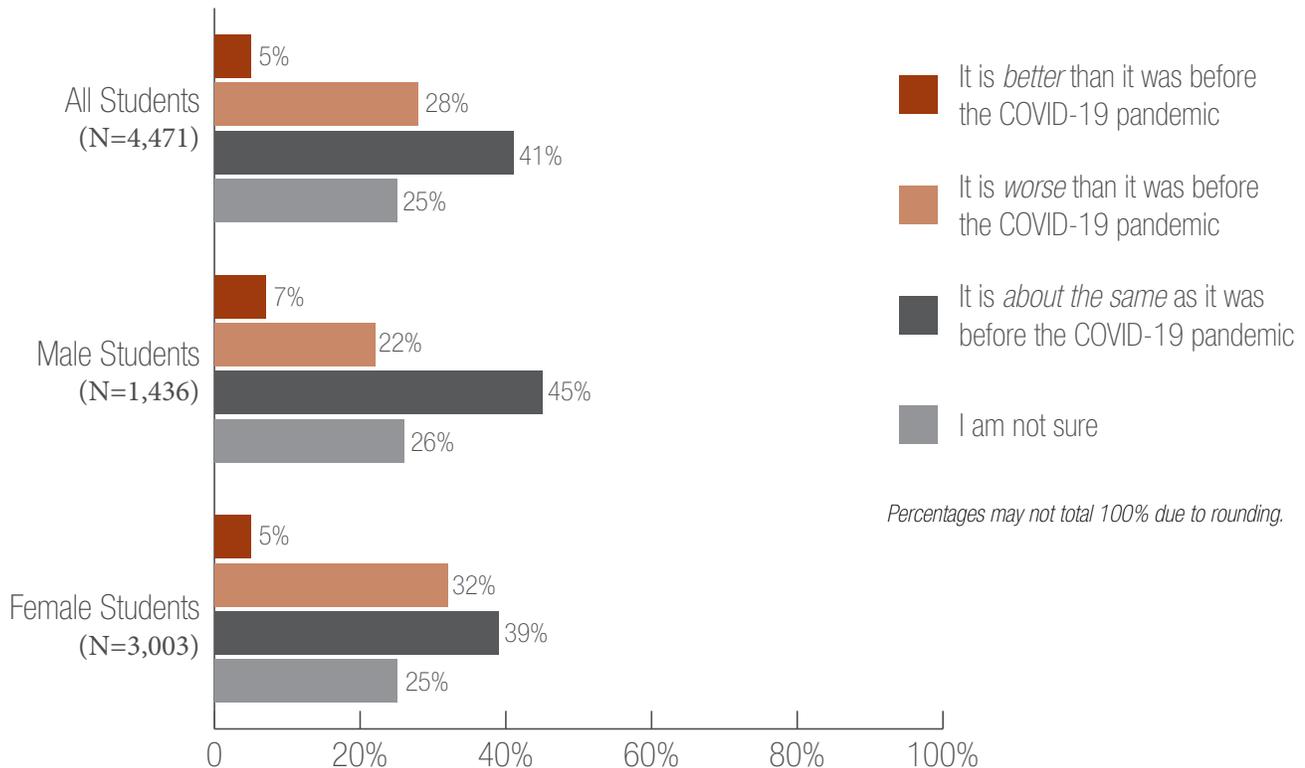
The Impact of COVID-19 on Student Persistence

The Center's flagship survey, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, asks respondents about issues that could lead to their withdrawal from college. Pre-pandemic, 77% of respondents reported that a lack of finances could be such an issue, and 49% of respondents reported that caring for dependents could lead to withdrawal.⁴

The data suggest that COVID-19 may have exacerbated these challenges for certain students.

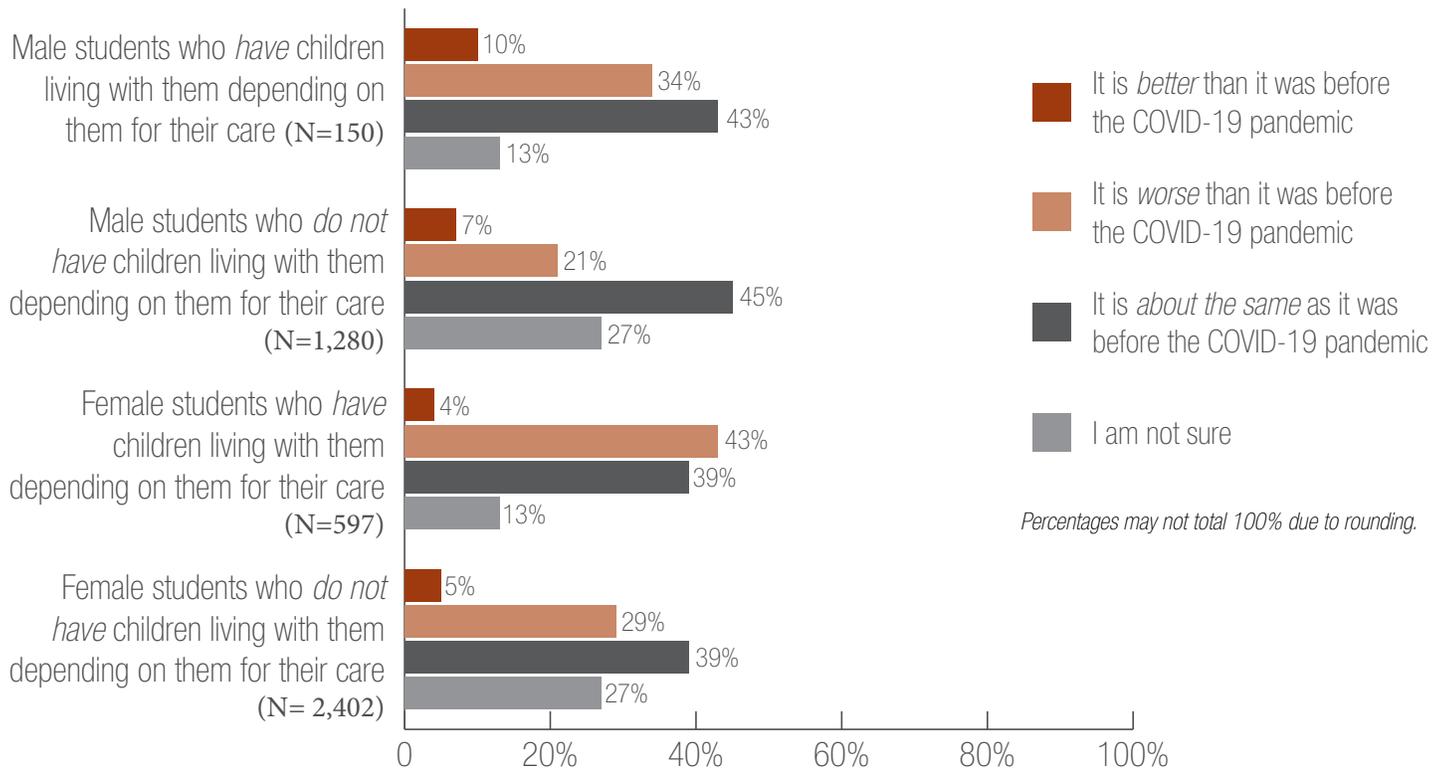
Twenty-eight percent (n=1,273) of respondents described their household's financial situation in fall 2020 as worse than it was before the pandemic. The situation was worse for female students than for male students—and particularly for female students who have children living with them depending on them for their care.

Among students who are NOT the only member of their household ... How would you describe your household's current financial situation?





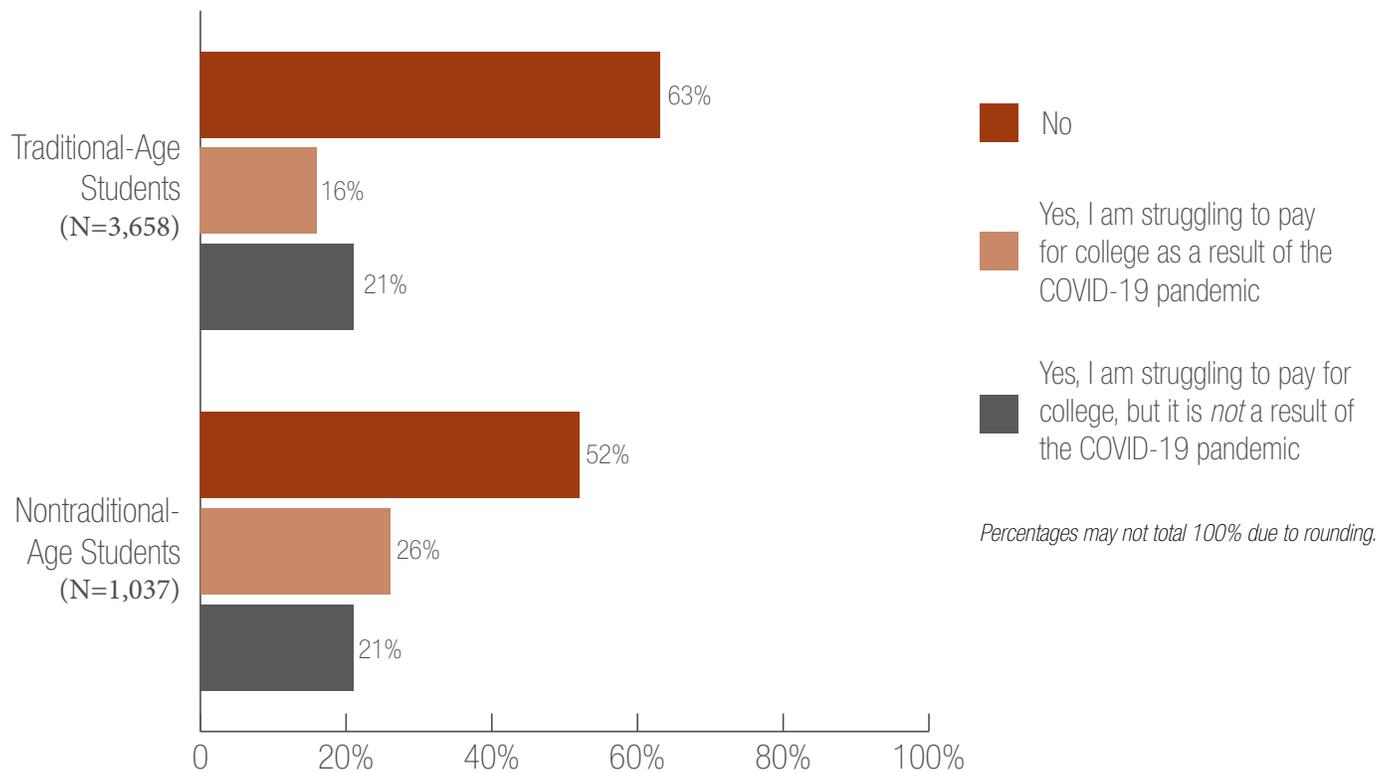
**Among students who are NOT the only member of their household ...
How would you describe your household's current financial situation?**



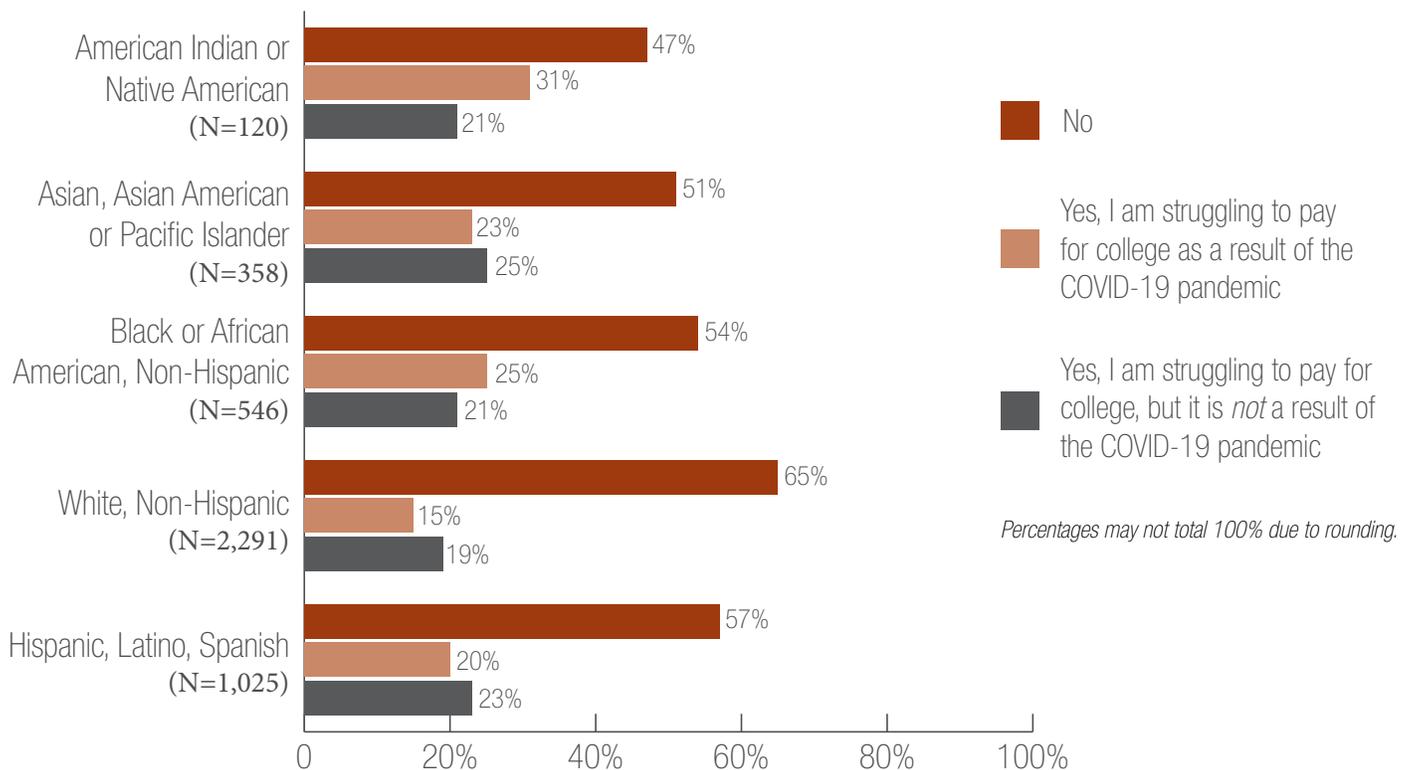
That many community college students struggle financially will not surprise most readers; however, the pandemic has introduced new challenges around affording college. Nineteen percent (n=874) of respondents said they were struggling to pay for college as a result of the pandemic—this is in addition to the 21% (n=995) who said they were struggling, but not as a result of the pandemic.

Older students (25+ years old) reported struggling to pay for college more than traditional-age students (18–24 years old) as a result of COVID-19, and non-White students reported this more than White students.

Are you struggling to pay for college?



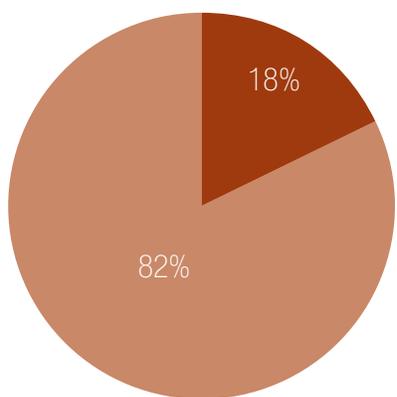
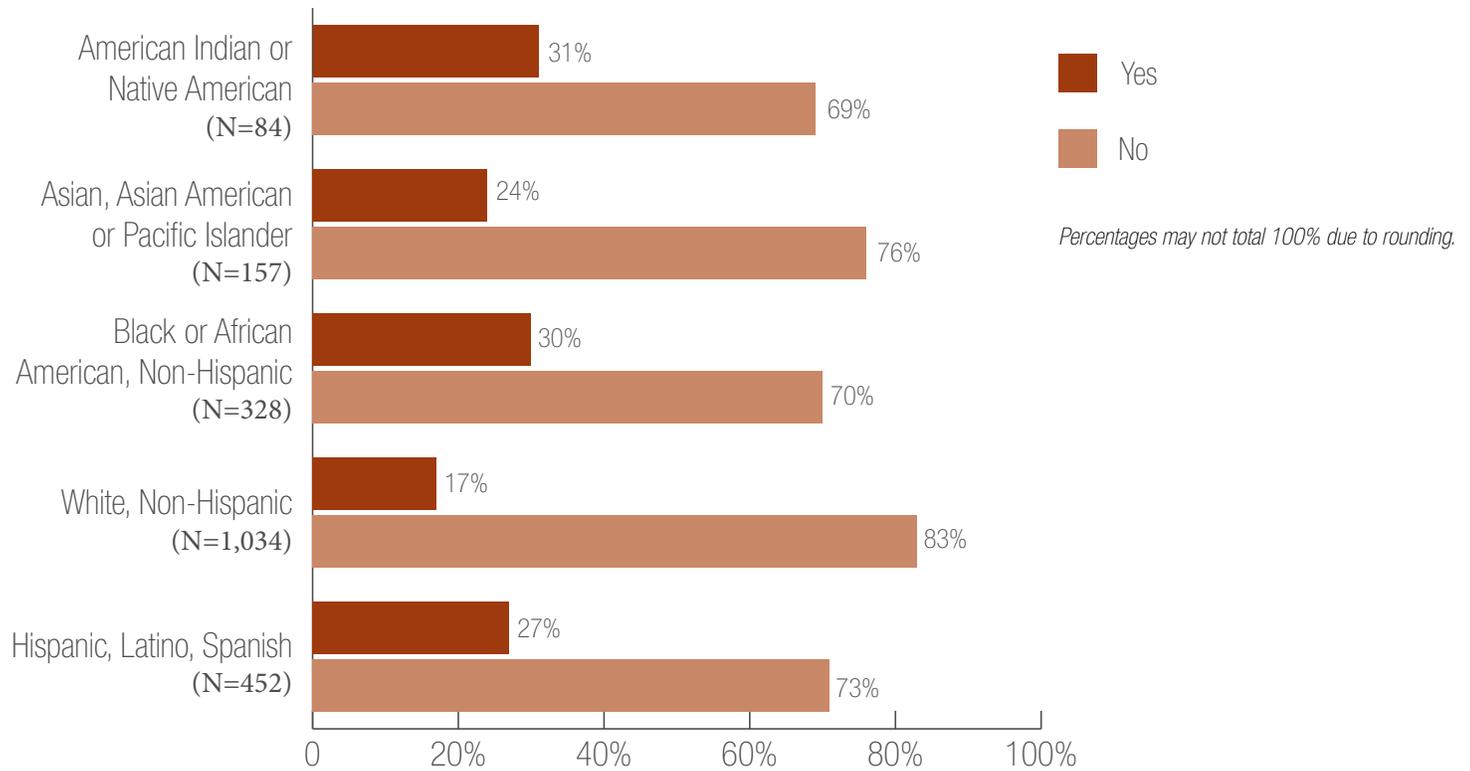
Are you struggling to pay for college?



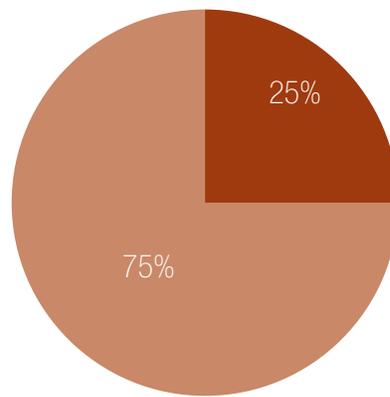
Of the respondents who indicated having children or other dependents, 22% said a lack of child care made it difficult for them to complete their coursework. Thirty-one percent of American Indian or Native American students and 30% of Black or African American students reported that this was an issue for them. And 25% of female students reported this was an issue, compared to 18% of male students.

Among students who have children or other dependents ...

Since the beginning of this academic term at this college, have you had trouble completing homework and other assignments because you do not have adequate care for your children or other dependents?



Male Students
(N=706)



Female Students
(N= 1,533)

Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.



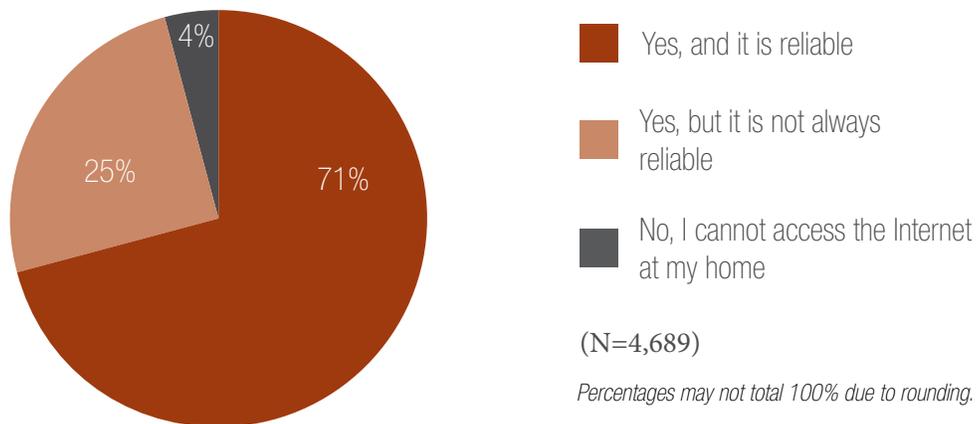
The Impact of COVID-19 on Instruction

As with other sectors of education, the vast majority of community colleges moved almost all instruction online in fall 2020. Among respondents who took online classes, most reported that they had reliable Internet access. However, a quarter of respondents indicated that their Internet access was not always reliable and a small group of students reported not being able to access the Internet at all from their homes.

Almost all (nine in 10) students who took online classes reported using a computer to do so. A small percentage reported using a cell phone or a tablet, and 1% said they did not have a device for working online.

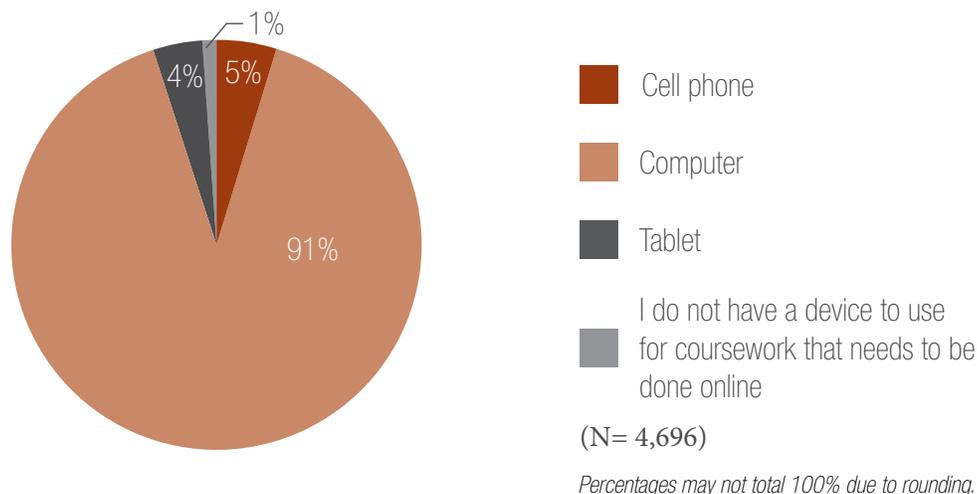
Among students who take classes online ...

Are you able to access the Internet at your home when you need it for your coursework at this college?



Among students whose coursework requires them to work online ...

When your coursework at this college requires you to work online, which device do you primarily use?



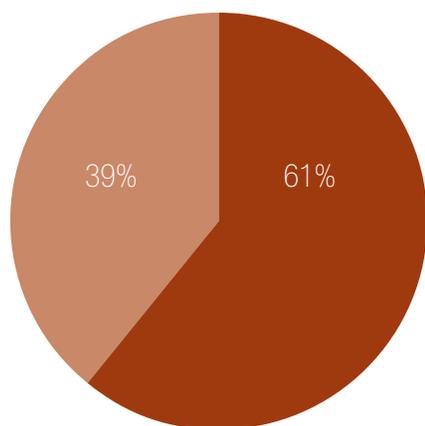
When it comes to online course delivery methods, students reported a mix of approaches. Thirty-nine percent (n=1,670) of students reported that all of their online classes were live in real time, 35% (n=1,484) reported that some were, and 26% (n=1,117) reported that none were. Colleges may want to further investigate data such as these to ascertain if one delivery method is more beneficial to students than another.



The Impact of COVID-19 on Students' Feelings of Safety and Support

Students who did attend in-person classes in fall 2020 (N=808 from five colleges) reported varying levels of comfort with being on campus. Overall, 61% of these respondents agreed that they tried to avoid situations on campus in which they were unable to stay six feet away from others.

Since the beginning of this academic term at this college, I have tried to avoid situations on campus in which I am unable to stay six feet away from another person.



- Strongly agree or Agree
- Strongly disagree or Disagree

(N=763)

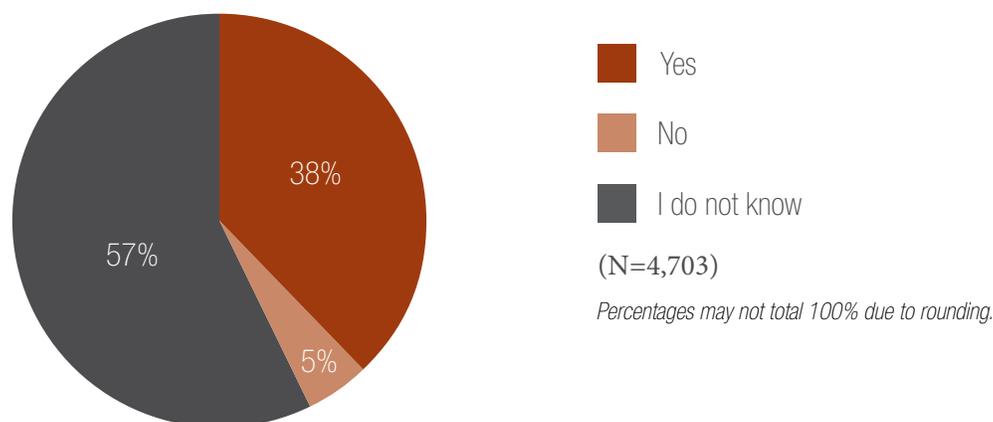
Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.



Community college students' typical struggles of juggling classes with work and family have always been barriers to their persistence and success. Now that those struggles have intersected with additional challenges brought on by the pandemic, students will likely need to lean on particular support systems at their colleges—such as emergency aid programs, food pantries, mental health services, and assistance with technology—more than ever.

When asked if their college had support services to help students cope with stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 5% said no. However, over half said that they didn't know if their college had such services. As communication has become more difficult in the virtual world, colleges may need to be more intentional around messaging about available services that can help students cope with stresses caused by and exacerbated by the pandemic.

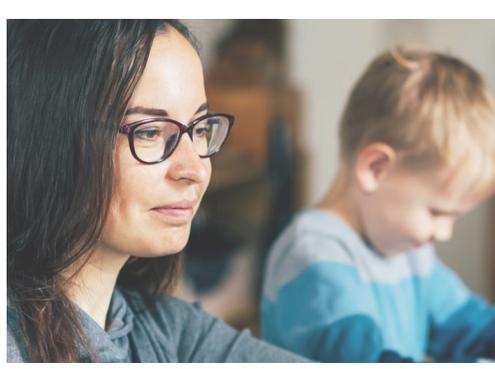
Does this college have support services to help students cope with stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic?



The impact of COVID-19 will likely be long-lasting across all facets of life, including our educational systems. The pandemic has certainly illuminated inequities that already existed for many students, and the community college charge to close equity gaps has become even more urgent. Exactly when the majority of students across the country will return to community college campuses for in-person classes remains unclear. But the work before us is to continue to reflect on what has been learned during the past year—and incorporate these lessons into policies, procedures, and student supports.

Endnotes

1. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2020, October 22). *COVID-19: Stay informed with the latest enrollment information: Previous reports: Fall 2020 (As of Oct 22)*. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/>
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021, February 12). *Health equity considerations and racial and ethnic minority groups*. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>
3. The COVID Tracking Project. (n.d.). *The COVID racial data tracker*. <https://covidtracking.com/race>
4. Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2019). *Standard reports for all students-2019 cohort*. <https://www.ccsse.org/survey/reports/2019/reports.cfm>



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