

COVID-19 STUDENT SURVEY

COVID-19 Student Survey Report
Tennessee Higher Education Commission
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
SAMPLE AND METHOD	2
<i>Table 1. Sample and Respondents by Public Postsecondary Sector</i>	2
HOW HAS COVID-19 PERSONALLY AFFECTED UNDERGRADUATES?	2
<i>Figure 1. Proportion of survey respondents by sector that indicated having housing, personal income, or family income affected as a result of COVID-19.</i>	3
HOW HAS COVID-19 AFFECTED UNDERGRADUATES' EDUCATIONAL PLANS?	3
<i>Figure 2. The proportion of respondents by sector that indicated being likely or highly likely to make a change to their educational plans.</i>	4
HOW CONCERNED ARE STUDENTS?	4
<i>Table 2. Descriptive Statistics on Survey Respondent Concerns</i>	5
HOW SATISFIED WERE STUDENTS IN THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19?	5
<i>Table 3: Descriptive Statistics on Satisfaction to College Response to COVID-19</i>	5
WHAT COULD COLLEGES DO TO BETTER SUPPORT STUDENTS?	6
<i>Figure 3. Word cloud of open-ended survey responses to the question, "Based on your situation, what could your college do to better support you?"</i>	6
IMPLICATIONS	8
DISSEMINATION AND OUTREACH	8
APPENDIX: Copy of COVID-19 Student Survey	9

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 2020, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) surveyed students across the state in order to understand how COVID-19 has affected them and their educational plans. This survey aimed to provide a student voice to ongoing policy discussion related to the COVID-19 pandemic and Tennessee postsecondary education. This memo outlines the survey findings and implications.

Key findings from the survey include:

- Approximately 1 in 4 respondents indicated their housing was affected due to COVID-19, and 60 percent indicated personal and family finances were affected.
- When asked about the likelihood of making changes to their educational plans due to COVID-19, approximately 30 percent of all respondents indicated that postponing graduation was likely or highly likely.
- When asked their concerns, the greatest proportion of respondents (71 percent) were concerned about their personal well-being, and 68 percent of respondents were concerned about taking full-time coursework.
- In general, students were satisfied with the institutional response to COVID-19, though open-ended responses highlighted three potential areas for support:
 - Improvements to online/distance education practices and experiences;
 - Supplemental financial aid and support;
 - Better transparency and communication to students concerning COVID-19

SAMPLE AND METHOD

A stratified random sample of 30,000 undergraduates was taken from the fall 2020 beginning-of-term enrollment records at public community colleges and universities. Contact information for these students came from financial aid records in e*GRandS, the State of Tennessee’s financial aid data system.¹

The survey, administered via email by QuestionPro, remained open for three weeks. This resulted in 1,943 total responses and 1,717 complete responses. After data cleaning, the sample for analysis consisted of 1,686 responses.²

Table 1. Sample and Respondents by Public Postsecondary Sector

Sector	Random Sample		Responses	
	Count	% of Sample	Count	% of Sample
TBR Community Colleges	12,085	40.3	712	42.0
LGI Universities	11,236	37.5	585	35.0
University of Tennessee	6,680	22.3	389	23.0

Respondents were predominantly women (64.8 percent), White (75.5 percent), classified as Seniors (40.9 percent),³ and enrolled in full-time hours (64.1 percent).⁴ When participants were asked if they anticipated meeting graduating requirements in fall 2020, roughly 75 percent self-reported they would not. A student’s response to this question determined whether they would be asked questions pertaining to changes in their undergraduate educational plans as a result of COVID-19. Regarding their coursework in fall 2020, approximately 54 percent of respondents indicated they enrolled exclusively in online coursework.

HOW HAS COVID-19 PERSONALLY AFFECTED UNDERGRADUATES?

Students were first asked whether the COVID-19 pandemic affected their housing, personal income, and family income. The Figure 1 below displays the proportion of students within each postsecondary sector that answered ‘Yes.’

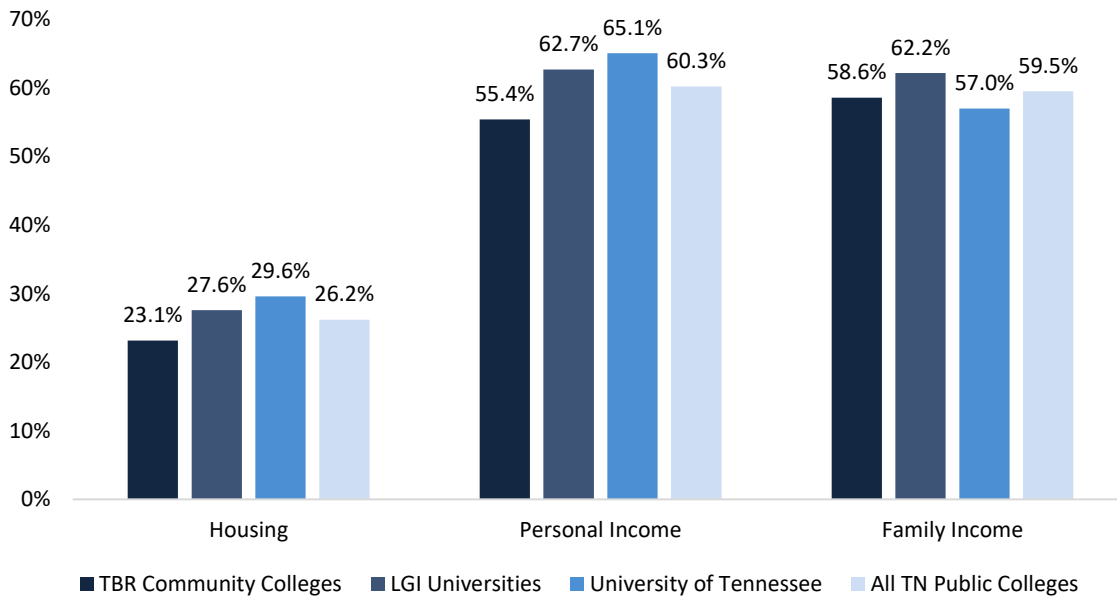
¹ More information on e*GRandS may be found here: <https://www.collegefortn.org/resources/egrands/>

² For cases with missing values, the analyses presented in this memo leveraged pairwise deletion. The resulting sample size is generalizable within a 99% confidence level and approximately a 3% margin of error.

³ Included students classified as “Seniors” and “Fifth-Year Undergraduates.”

⁴ Data on gender, race, and student level come from the fall 2020 beginning-of-term enrollment records.

Figure 1. Proportion of survey respondents by sector that indicated having housing, personal income, or family income affected as a result of COVID-19.



Compared to a similar survey administered during spring 2020,⁵ a smaller proportion of students in the university sector reported having housing affected⁶ in fall 2020. For personal and family income, the proportions of students reporting being affected are largely consistent with the earlier survey. In general, a larger share of university students reported having personal income affected compared to community college students, though the share of students who reported that COVID-19 affected their family's income becomes more consistent by sector .

HOW HAS COVID-19 AFFECTED UNDERGRADUATES' EDUCATIONAL PLANS?

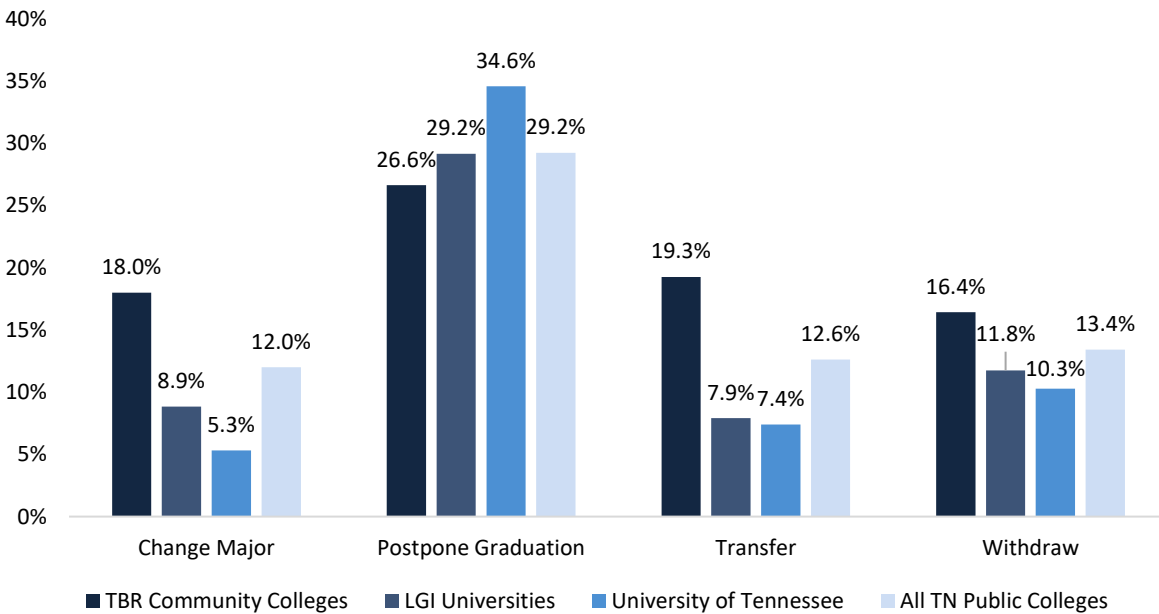
Students who did not self-report meeting graduation requirements in fall 2020 (n=1,272) were asked how likely they were to make changes to their educational plans using a scale of 1 (Highly Unlikely) to 5 (Highly Likely). Figure 2 below displays the proportion of respondents within each sector that indicated that the change was likely or highly likely.

⁵ In spring 2020, THEC administered a similar survey to the one outlined in this report but on a smaller scale. While inferences and recommendations were not drawn from earlier survey, the results were considered in the creation and refinement of the survey administered in October 2020. A summary report of the earlier survey is available upon request.

⁶ This observation could be due to alternate living arrangements made for residential students (e.g., on-campus students being sent home before the end of term) in spring 2020.

In general, students enrolled within the University of Tennessee system indicated the lowest likelihood of changing majors ($\bar{x}=1.5$), transferring ($\bar{x}=1.7$), or withdrawing ($\bar{x}=1.8$) but reported the highest likelihood for postponing graduation ($\bar{x}=2.7$). Inversely, community college students reported the highest likelihood of changing majors ($\bar{x}=2.2$), transferring ($\bar{x}=2.3$), or withdrawing ($\bar{x}=2.2$). On average, both community college ($\bar{x}=2.6$) and LGI university ($\bar{x}=2.6$) students indicated lower likelihoods of postponing graduation when compared to University of Tennessee students and to the total sample.

Figure 2. The proportion of respondents by sector that indicated being likely or highly likely to make a change to their educational plans.



HOW CONCERNED ARE STUDENTS?

Survey participants were asked to indicate their level of concern, measured on a scale of 1 (Not Concerned at All) to 5 (Very Concerned), on a list of options. Table 1 below presents the average score and the share of respondents that indicated being somewhat or very concerned for each item.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics on Survey Respondent Concerns

Concern	Average Score	% Concerned
Personal Well-Being	3.8	70.8%
Taking Full-Time Coursework	3.8	67.7%
Caring for Family Members	3.4	57.1%
Paying for Tuition Fees	3.5	53.8%
Paying for Housing & Food	3.1	49.4%
Paying for Internet	2.9	40.2%
Paying for Technology	3.0	39.8%
Paying for Transportation	2.8	36.4%

On average, LGI university students were significantly more concerned about paying for housing and food and about caring for family members than community college students.⁷

Across all items, female students expressed greater concerns than male students. Mean comparisons of gender groups revealed that only the concern of paying for internet was statistically insignificant between males and females.⁸

HOW SATISFIED WERE STUDENTS IN THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19?

Survey respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction, based on a scale of 1 (Very Dissatisfied) to 5 (Very Satisfied), with their postsecondary institution's response to COVID-19 based on the precautions taken by the college, how quickly the college responded to safety concerns, and how well the college kept them informed. Table 3 below displays the average score for each item and the share of students in the total sample who indicated being satisfied or very satisfied.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics on Satisfaction to College Response to COVID-19

Precautions Taken		Speed to Respond		Information Sharing	
Average Response	% Satisfied	Average Response	% Satisfied	Average Response	% Satisfied
3.4	49%	3.6	55%	3.7	58%

Overall, students were generally satisfied with how their institutions responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, though they were least satisfied with the precautions taken.

⁷ Based on Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) results, statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level.

⁸ Based on independent t-test results, statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level.

In general, women were significantly more satisfied than men with how their institution has responded to COVID-19.⁹ On average, White students were less satisfied with the precautions taken by institutions than Black students. Compared to Black students, White students were also significantly less satisfied with the speed in which institutions responded to COVID-19 safety concerns.⁷

WHAT COULD COLLEGES DO TO BETTER SUPPORT STUDENTS?

At the conclusion of the survey, respondents were asked what their college could do to better serve them. A total of 884 students provided qualitative feedback. After data cleaning, 803 were further analyzed.¹⁰ The word cloud in Figure 3 below depicts common responses given to this question. The size of each word represents the frequency in which the word appears across responses.¹¹

Figure 3. Word cloud of open-ended survey responses to the question, “Based on your situation, what could your college do to better support you?”



In general, students indicated a need to improve their online/distance education experience. This was consistently referenced as the greatest need for improvement across

⁹ Data on gender, race, and student level come from the fall 2020 beginning-of-term enrollment records.

¹⁰ Responses used for analysis excluded those who responded with "N/A", "Nothing," etc. and those whose comments were deemed inappropriate.

¹¹ Common words excluded; limited to top 20 words.

all groups of students (by sector, gender, racial group, and student level). Many students were compelled or were encouraged to enroll in online or distance learning coursework in fall 2020 and were concerned with their performance and experience in a virtual environment. One university student described:

"I am falling behind due to only having online [classes] available, I have worked so hard to get into the program but now I feel that I am not getting everything I should be from my courses. I feel that I am missing a lot of pertinent information that will later be needed in the workforce."

Specific suggestions regarding online/distance education experience included improving technology (and student access thereto), better preparing and training instructors to teach in an online environment, more consistent instructor-student interaction, reducing the cost associated with online coursework, and providing more flexibility on grading and completing assignments. Regarding the cost of online courses, one university student mentioned:

"Since most classes are virtual, I would have expected some reduction in tuition and fees. I'm not getting the benefits of the classroom and campus so why should I/we have to pay the same price when classes were all in person?"

Various forms of financial aid were also mentioned frequently by respondents. These included flexibility on financial aid and Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) deadlines and appeals, granting additional aid and funding to students, and reducing tuition and mandatory fees. One community college student mentioned:

"I think there needs to be more financial support for students like the [CARES] emergency funds for needs other than just supplies and school related costs."

Another mentioned:

"Provide easier ways to access financial aid and ways to make the process faster."

Students also echoed a need for better communication and transparency on campus COVID-19 incidences and policies. One community college student mentioned:

"The only thing I could think of is I wish the local campus where I am attending classes would better inform us on what is going on, such as when is campus open, when can we come visit, how is everyone there. Kind of like a 'just checking on you' email and keeping us in the loop."

On COVID-19 reporting, one university student suggested:

“Informing students when a classmate has tested positive for the virus and providing a means of quick and easy testing for students/faculty who may have been exposed. It is difficult getting to campus and seeing almost no students, a little disheartening. Setting up spaces where students can study together or funding students to be able to use video chatting software without having to pay out of pocket.”

IMPLICATIONS

The survey results outlined in this memo help to contextualize the unprecedented situations for students as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the majority of students reporting changes to income, roughly one-quarter reporting changes to housing, and nearly 71 percent expressing concern over personal well-being, students are facing additional stressors outside of their education that affect their health physically, emotionally, financially, and socially.

Regarding educational plans, one-quarter to one-third of students who will not meet graduation requirements by fall 2020 reported the likelihood of postponing graduation. Along with the undergraduate enrollment declines observed across the state, the survey findings imply that institutions may also expect delays in undergraduates’ time to degree.

Should institutions continue to rely on online and distance education classes to provide a safe learning environment, consideration should be given toward improving student experiences while maintaining academic quality. Unlike with the swift transition to emergency remote teaching (ERT) methods in spring 2020, fall 2020 permitted institutions more time to prepare. Even so, survey respondents highlighted areas for improvement including, but not limited to, communicating clear course expectations, providing online student support and access to campus resources, adequately preparing instructors for online teaching, and ensuring regular correspondence between instructors and students.

DISSEMINATION AND OUTREACH

In early January, Research & Strategy staff assembled descriptive summaries of the survey findings tailored to each institution represented in the study, which included a complete listing of the open-ended responses given from students at that institution. The intent of these summary reports was to demonstrate the overall survey findings and to illustrate how the institution was represented within the total sample.

APPENDIX: Copy of COVID-19 Student Survey

Survey Introduction

The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) coordinates the public colleges and universities in Tennessee. We at THEC would like to know more about how the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has affected you and your education. We want you to succeed. Your responses to this survey will help us help you. The following survey should take no more than 5-7 minutes to complete. To learn more about THEC, visit our website: <https://www.tn.gov/thec/about-the-c-tsac.html>.

Has COVID-19 personally affected you in the following ways? For each item below, select a response.

	Yes	No	Prefer Not To Answer
Affected your housing situation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Affected your personal income	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Affected your family's income	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Did you enroll only in online classes in Fall 2020?

- Yes
- No

Do you reside on campus*?

**On-campus housing may refer to any school-sponsored accommodations (e.g., dormitories, fraternity or sorority housing, etc.).*

- Yes
- No

Will you complete program requirements for graduation by the end of Fall 2020?

- Yes
- No

Because of COVID-19, how likely are you to make the following decisions related to your educational plans? For each item below, select a response.

	Highly Unlikely	Unlikely	Unsure	Likely	Highly Likely
Change your major	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Postpone graduation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Transfer to a different institution	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Withdraw from school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Because of COVID-19, how concerned are you about the following options? For each, please select a response.

	Not concerned at all	Not too concerned	Indifferent	Somewhat concerned	Very concerned
Paying for tuition and fees.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paying for housing and food.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paying for transportation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paying for technology.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paying for internet.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Caring for family members.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Taking full-time coursework.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Personal well-being.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**How satisfied are you with your institution's response to COVID-19 this term?
For each item, select a response.**

	Very dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neutral	Somewhat satisfied	Very satisfied
The precautions your college is taking (e.g., limiting on-campus activities)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How quickly your college responds to safety concerns.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How well your college keeps you informed.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Based on your situation, what could your college do to better support you?

[Open Response]

[END SURVEY]