

# SPRING ENROLLMENT PLANS DURING COVID-19

## SUMMARY

This research brief is based on data from the last in a series of surveys on the impact of COVID-19 on the postsecondary plans of undergraduate FAFSA filers in the academic year 20-21 cycle.<sup>1</sup>

Research questions included:

- What were students' plans for the spring 2021 semester?
- Did COVID-19 enrollment differ by dependency status?
- What financial impacts did COVID-19 have on them to date?

Overall, few students who applied for financial aid and took part in our survey delayed their 2020-2021 enrollment due to the pandemic. The majority of FAFSA filers surveyed in January 2021 (86%) planned to and did pursue their education plans in the 2020-2021 academic year. But the COVID-19 crisis affected many students' financial resources and may have made the postsecondary experience a difficult one. First-generation, dependent students were significantly more likely to report their parents had suffered a COVID-related financial event (63%) than dependent students from families whose parents had some level of college attainment (47%). Independent students—those who do not rely on parents for financial support – which represented about a third of those surveyed-- were twice as likely to report they changed their plans about when to enroll. Independent students were also significantly more likely to report experiencing some financial burden directly associated with the COVID-19 epidemic.

Of note, the number of undergraduate FAFSA filers for the 2020-2021 cycle was down at the time we pulled our original sample (June 2020), approximately 6% lower compared to the previous year. By comparison, the number of applications filed by June 30 nationally was down 2% (National College Attainment Network). By January 2021, Vermont's FAFSA numbers were still down, but only 2% compared to the previous year. How much of this decrease in FAFSA filing was due to COVID-19 and/or other factors is unknown and is outside of the scope of this research brief. We found that first-time FAFSA filers had decreased by 9% year over year, consistent with the idea that some schools may have had trouble filling their admissions targets for first-year students for the fall of 2020. We found FAFSA filing by dependency status showed independent students slightly behind dependent students in June in number of FAFSA applications filed, but ahead of them and in the positive (3% higher than the previous year) by Jan 2021. Dependent students apply earlier (by June),

so our sample probably underrepresents independent students as a percentage of the full cycle, but not by who had applied by June 2020. The distribution by academic year and dependency status is consistent across the two years. For example, first year students made up 27% of the FAFSA filers in June 2019 and 26% of FAFSA filers in June of 2020. Dependent students made up 73% of FAFSA filers in June 2019 and 73% of FAFSA filers in June 2020.

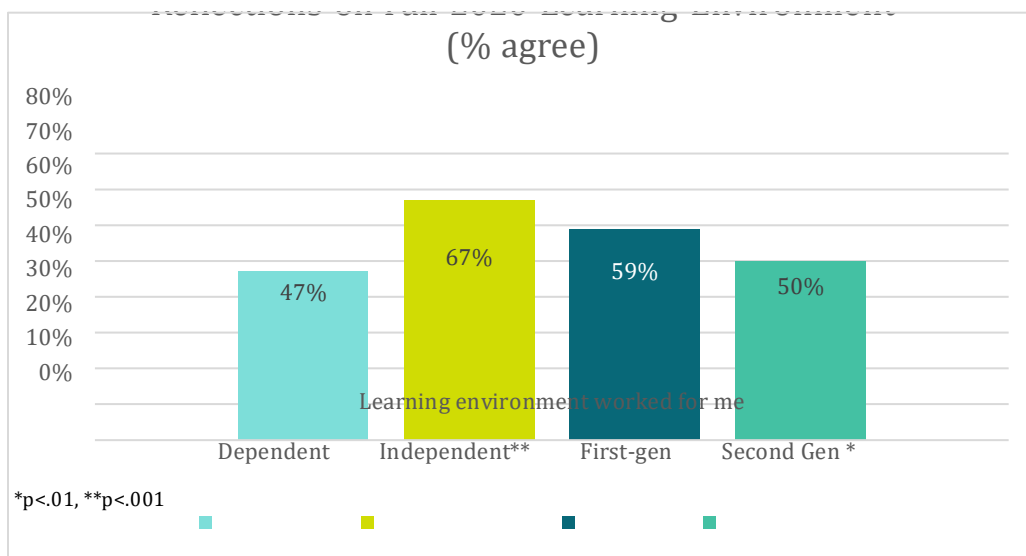
### Enrollment plans for January, 2021

Most survey respondents (86%) had enrolled in the fall of 2020 and were planning to continue their enrollment in the spring. First-generation students<sup>ii</sup> were slightly, but significantly less likely (82%) to report they had enrolled in the fall compared to second-generation students (88%). There were no differences in January enrollment status by academic year, gender, or race. A few students (4% of respondents) reported that they had not enrolled in the fall but were planning to do so in January. Of these, most (71%) had originally planned to enroll in the fall but had changed their mind. In total, 90% of respondents were planning to enroll in the spring semester.

As for the rest: 6% reported they would delay enrollment, 3% were undecided and 1% did not intend to enroll.

We asked students to reflect on their college experience in the fall of 2020, and report how strongly they agreed with the following statements:

- 85% agreed their campus had taken the necessary steps to make them feel safe,
- 85% agreed that pursuing their education would help them find a good job,
- 70% agreed that getting their education was worth the cost,
- 53% agreed that their learning environment worked well for them.



## Enrollment by Dependency Status

Dependent students: Most respondents (68%) were dependent students, average age 20 years old. Of those surveyed, 89% enrolled in the fall and spring, 3% had not enrolled in the fall, but were planning to start in Jan. '21; 5% were delaying enrollment (the majority planning to enroll by fall '21), 3% were either not planning to enroll in the spring or were unsure.

Overall, about 13% of dependent students reported that the COVID-19 outbreak had affected their decision about when and/or where they had planned to enroll. Recent high school graduates (Class of 2020) were significantly more likely (23%) to report they had changed where they would attend compared to dependent returning students (10%).

Independent students: Nearly a third of respondents (32%) were independent for financial aid purposes. Their average age was 34 years. Most independent students surveyed in January (79%) were enrolled in the fall and spring, 7% had not enrolled in the fall, but were planning to start in Jan. '21. Seven percent were delaying enrollment (38% planning to enroll by fall '21, but nearly as many (31%) while 7% were either not planning to enroll in the spring or were unsure.

Overall, about 27% of independent students reported that the COVID-19 outbreak had affected their plans about when to enroll for the year, 14% about where to enroll. A third of independent first-generation students (34%) reported that COVID-19 had changed their plans about when to enroll, compared to second-generation students (18%).

## COVID-19 and Family Finances

Overall, respondents felt only somewhat confident (an average of 2.6 on a scale from 1 'not at all confident' to 5 'completely confident') in their ability to afford to pay for higher education. But returning students, students of color and female students reported being significantly less confident in their ability to afford higher education. Independent students were more likely to report being slightly or not at all confident in their ability to afford higher education (56%) compared to dependent students (38%). Most independent students (93%) and dependent students (88%) however, reported that financial aid is either "highly important" or "absolutely critical" to their ability to pay for college.

About half of dependent students reported that the pandemic had affected their family's finances. One in three reported that at least one of their parents had lost income due to a reduction in hours at some point during the pandemic. Nearly a quarter (23%) reported a parent's job loss.

First-generation, dependent students were significantly more likely to report their parents had suffered a COVID-related financial event (63%) than dependent students from families whose parents had some level of college attainment (47%).

Seven out of ten independent students reported at least one adverse economic impact due to the COVID-19: 28% lost their job either temporarily or permanently since the beginning of the pandemic, while 22% had been able to continue to work but lost income due to a reduction in hours. In addition, 19% of respondents reported their spouse or partner had suffered loss of

income due to reduction in hours or job loss. Of special note, three out of four female independent students reported at least one financial challenge, compared to 59% of male students.

## Conclusion

This research brief describes findings from a third survey of postsecondary enrollment during COVID among Vermont residents who filed a FAFSA for the 2020-2021 academic cycle. The findings confirm that most students who planned to enroll, despite the uncertainty of COVID's impact on the academic year, did continue with those plans. Slightly more than half of those surveyed reported that the learning environment worked well for them meaning nearly as many faced problems. In open-ended responses, students mentioned difficulties with technology, as well as missing out of in-person learning experiences that could delay degree attainment (e.g., internships, clinical rounds, study abroad). Respondents also reported stresses related to lack of child-care and needing to help their own children with remote learning.

In addition to challenges with the learning environment the findings confirm the ongoing impact of COVID on family finances among dependent students, particularly those whose parents do not have college degrees and on independent students. Regardless of family circumstances, most survey respondents have concerns about their ability to pay for college and rely on financial aid. Half of all dependent students and seven out of ten independent students reported some income or job loss in their family over the last year, the financial impact being particularly hard on independent female students. Because the FAFSA uses income tax information from prior years to estimate need, these findings suggest growth in demand for need-based financial aid (federal, state, and institutional) to college students in the coming years.

## Methodology

We randomly selected 5,680 degree-certificate seeking undergraduate students from the population of 2020-2021 cycle FAFSA applicants to take part in the study. We used Qualtrics software (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) to deploy the survey between January 14-31, 2021. A total of 737 respondents took part in the survey, which has a margin of error of +/- 3.4%.

| Demographics              | Respondents |
|---------------------------|-------------|
| <i>Age (mean)</i>         | 24.4        |
| <i>Parent AGI (mean)</i>  | \$88,046    |
| <i>Student AGI (mean)</i> | \$19,041    |
| <i>Female</i>             | 69%         |
| <i>First-generation</i>   | 37%         |
| <i>First-year student</i> | 24%         |
| <i>Dependent</i>          | 69%         |
| <i>Ethnicity*</i>         |             |
| <i>Hispanic</i>           | 3%          |
| <i>Race*</i>              |             |
| <i>Persons of color</i>   | 12%         |
| <i>White</i>              | 88%         |

*\*Respondents' self-report*

<sup>i</sup> Earlier reports in the series can be found here ([COVID-June-FINAL.pdf](#)) and here ([COVID-JUL-FINAL.pdf](#)).

<sup>ii</sup> The FAFSA defines first-generation students as those whose parents have not completed any college.