

June College Student Survey During COVID-19

The onset of the COVID-19 epidemic has dramatically altered the higher education landscape, affecting students, their parents, and institutions. National surveys, conducted from March to May, reflected on students' intent for fall 2020 enrollment, reaction to online instruction, as well as the financial toll of the epidemic.ⁱ Economists were predicting record-breaking unemployment and [estimating that as many as 100,000 Vermonters](#) would apply for unemployment benefits, roughly one out of every three workers in the state. That being the case, it was very likely that parents of current and first-year college students would request appeals on schools' financial aid offers and the state's need-based student financial aid program, both of which are based on reported 2018 income, income earned more than a year before the pandemic. The pandemic's impact on employment rates might presage more families applying for student financial aid.

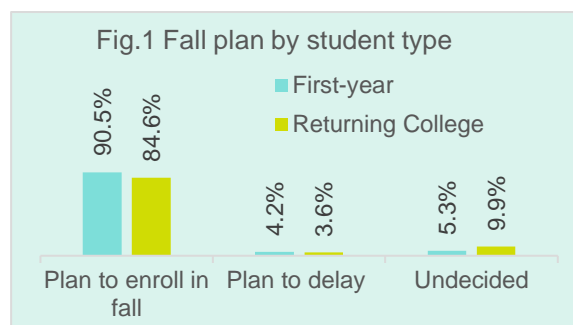
The Vermont Student Assistance Corp. (VSAC) is an instrumentality of the state, and the agency charged with administering student financial aid. In June (June 17-July 2), VSAC surveyed students who had completed the Free Application for Financial Student Aid (i.e., FAFSA applicants made up of rising high school seniors and returning college students) to answer a few key questions:

- Did students' fall plans change because of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What was the nature of that change?
- What did students say about the effect on their enrollment plans if an institution were to move to virtual learning?

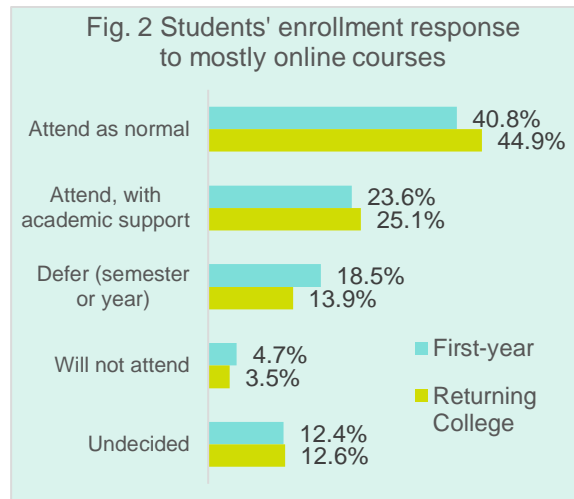
The second aim was to examine adverse economic effects, if any, on students' lives. We looked at these questions through an equity lens: gender, parental educational attainment (i.e., first- or second-generation), family/student income, and race. We have just completed data collection (July 23-August 5) on a second cohort of students to examine changes, if any, over time.

Key Findings

- **Most students** surveyed in June (whether first year or those returning to college) reported they **planned to enroll in the fall of 2020**. (Fig.1) There were no differences in plans for fall by gender, parent education, or race. However, independent students (6%) were more likely to report delaying or cancelling enrollment than dependent students (2%).



- Enrollment plans were less robust once the type of instruction is considered.** Rising high school (or first-year) students and returning college students responded similarly to the question on their enrollment plans if they would have to take most of their classes online: seven of 10 students would still enroll. However, many students (19%) would delay or cancel enrollment. Thirteen percent of students were undecided at the time of the survey.
- Race was associated with enrollment if online instruction were the primary mode of instruction.** White students (46%) were more likely than students of color (20%) to report they would attend as normal. Students of color (43%) were more likely to report attending college, but with academic support in place compared to white students (23%). There were no statistically significant differences by type of student, gender, parent educational attainment or parent AGI.



In contrast to matters of enrollment, there were significant differences in indicators of financial security by student characteristics.

- More than half of all survey respondents (54%) reported that financial aid was “absolutely critical” in their ability to pursue higher education.** An additional 31% of students felt it was “highly important.” Together these students made up 86% of the sample, and yet we found significant differences by demographic variables in the percentage of students reporting that financial aid was highly to critically important (Table1).

Student Characteristic	Financial aid is highly/critically important %
Gender**	
Male	79.7
Female	88.4
Parent ed. attainment***	
First-generation	94.5
Second-generation	81.9
Student Type***	
First-year	79.5
Returning college	89.4
Dependency*	
Dependent student	83.2
Independent student	92.7
Race*	
White students	84.4
Students of color	94.5

* p>.05, **p<.01, *** p<.001

Some groups of students reported being significantly less confident in their ability to afford higher education.

- First-generation** respondents, who had an average parent adjusted gross income (AGI) that was less than half of that of second-generation students, reported being less confident than second-generation students.

- **Female students** reported being less confident about affording college than male students.
- **Students of color and independent students** also reported being less confident in their ability to afford higher education than white or dependent students, respectively.

Impact of COVID-19 on personal finances

More than a quarter of all students reported losing their job, albeit temporarily. One in four dependent students reported one or both parents losing a job either temporarily or permanently because of the COVID-19 crisis. There were no significant racial differences in the reporting of any specific events.

However:

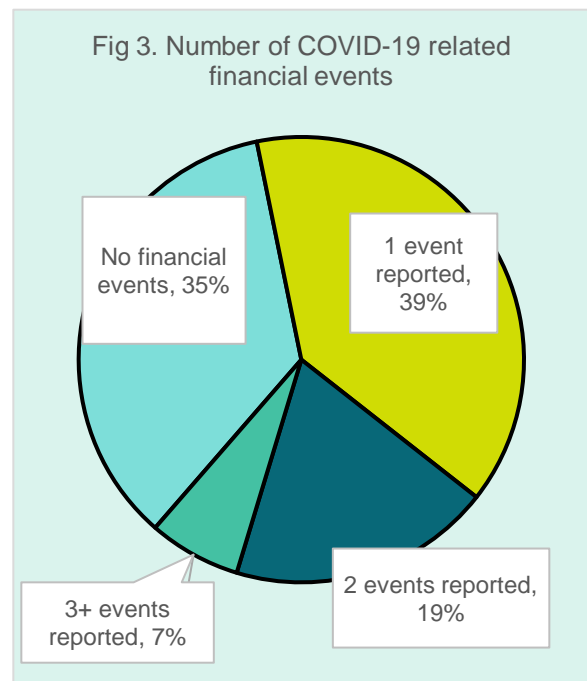
- Female students (30%) were more likely than male students (18%) to report a temporary stoppage in work.
- First-generation students (31%) were more likely than second-generation students (24%) to report a temporary stoppage in work.
- Dependent students (27.6%) were more likely to report not being able find a summer job as of the time they completed the survey compared to independent students (16%).

We asked students to report if they had experienced the any of following because of COVID-19:

- Losing a job temporarily; losing a job permanently,
- One or both parents losing a job temporarily; their losing a job permanently,
- Being unable to find a summer job,
- An epidemic-related loss of academic or athletic scholarship,
- Loss of value in their investments/529 plan, or
- A COVID-19 diagnosis, either for themselves or in their immediate family.

When we tallied the number of these events, the plurality of students reported at least one COVID-19-related event affecting their financial security (65%, Fig 3).

- **Students with three or more COVID-related financial events were significantly less likely to report planning to enroll in the fall (67%)** compared to students reporting one or two financial stressors (87%) or no stressors (90%).
- **Thirty-one percent of students with three or more COVID-related financial events reported that the outbreak had changed when they had planned to enroll; this is double the overall rate of the sample (15%).** These students were also the least confident in their ability to be able to afford their education (68%, rating of slightly to not at all confident) compared to 18% of students with no reported indicators, 37% of students with one financial indicator and 51% of students with two indicators.



Conclusion

We undertook this study to examine the effects that the COVID-19 crisis might have on students' educational plans for the fall of 2020 and to assess the potential impact of the pandemic on students' financial resources, both key factors in the administration of student financial aid. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on their lives, these Vermonters, like other students nationwide, are expressing a commitment to continuing their education despite the challenges they may face in the fall. Yet, some segments of the FAFSA applicants surveyed in June were more likely to report changes in enrollment plans and have had adverse financial situations due to the COVID-19 epidemic. Policymakers and other stakeholders can use the information on how these students (in terms of gender, parental educational attainment, race, dependency, and student type) are thinking about the coming year. Taken together, these findings suggest that the need for campus support and student financial aid will be greater than in previous years. A report based on a more recent survey conducted from July 23 to August 5 will be forthcoming.

Methodology

We randomly selected 4,999 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 June 17 to July 2, 2020. A total of 675 respondents took part in the survey, which has a margin of error of +/- 3.5%.

Demographics	Respondents
Age (mean)	22.3
Parent AGI (mean)	\$97,660
Student AGI (mean)	\$28,700
Female	68%
First-generation	30%
HS senior	27%
Dependent	72%
Ethnicity*	
Hispanic	4%
Race*	
Persons of color	10%
White	90%

*Respondents' self-report

Note: To date the FAFSA submission rate among recent high school graduates for AY20-21 was 6 percentage points lower than last year, despite a slight growth in the number of high school seniors in the state. This suggests that amid the COVID-19 epidemic families may be weighing the probability of sending their students to college or not. As such, using FAFSA applications as the basis for this research may not fully address the effect of COVID-19 on fall enrollment on recent high school graduates.

ⁱ See reports by [Carnegie Dartlet \(2020 a, b\)](#), [College Reaction \(2020\)](#), and [Simpson Scarborough \(2020\)](#).