

July-Aug College Student Survey During COVID-19

In the US, the COVID-19 epidemic, which began in earnest by March, resulted in significant changes to instruction in the spring semester of the 2019-2020 academic year. It continued to dramatically affect the higher education landscape throughout the early summer months. The evolving nature of the crisis has made decisions about the fall of 2020 a moving target for students, their parents, and institutions. To date, Vermont has avoided the worst of the crisis with respect to the number of positive cases, compared to many regions in the nation. That may have contributed to most students surveyed in June reporting they planned to enroll as rising seniors or returning college students in the fall of 2020.

The Vermont Student Assistance Corp. (VSAC) is an instrumentality of the state, and the agency charged with administering student financial aid. Between July 23 and August 5, 2020 VSAC conducted a second survey of students who had completed the Free Application for Financial Student Aid. FAFSA applicants, in this study, were rising high school seniors and returning undergraduate college students. There were no significant differences in the demographic profile of the June and July samples.

The second survey allowed us to look at changes in the following questions over time:

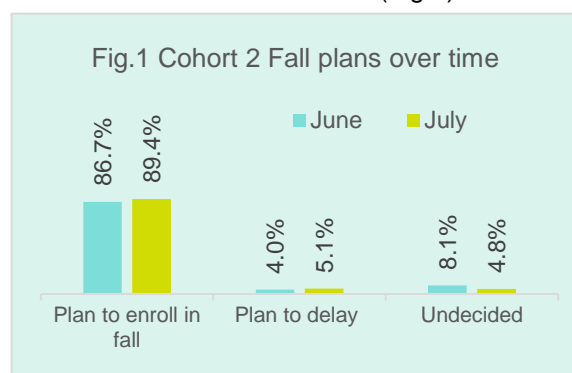
- Did students' fall plans change because of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What was the nature of that change?
- What did students say about the effect on their enrollment plans if an institution were to move to virtual learning?

An even more important focus was to examine adverse economic effects, if any, on students' lives. Given national reports on the disparate COVID-19 outcomes experienced by traditionally disadvantaged communities, we looked at these questions through an equity lens: gender, parental educational attainment (i.e., first- or second-generation), family/student income, and race. In July, we found that the COVID-19 crisis has continued to affect students' plans and their financial resources for the fall of 2020.

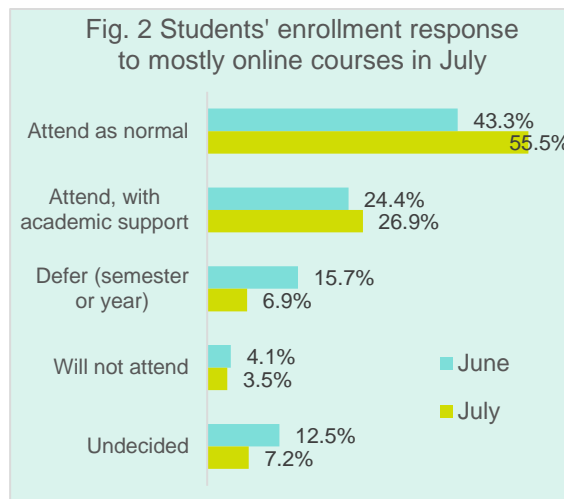
Key Findings

Overall, most students continued to report they planned to enroll in the fall of 2020 (Fig 1).

- **Returning college students surveyed in July solidified their intention to enroll; the percentage of college students who were unsure of their return to campus decreased from 10% in June to 6% in July.**



- **Online instruction gained acceptance.** More than half of students reported they would attend as normal, a significant increase over June respondents (Fig 2). Together with students who would attend, but wanted academic support, fully 83% of those surveyed in July intended to enroll.
- **There was a significant drop in the percentage of students who reported they were undecided or who would defer enrollment if most of their classes were to take place online.**



- There was a dramatic surge from June (19%) to July (54%) in the proportion of students of color who said they would attend as normal if most of their classes were online, but white students also saw an increase over that time period (from 46% to 56%).
- Female students were also more likely in July (57%) to report they would attend as normal than in June (43%). Both first-generation and second-generation students were more likely to plan to enroll as normal in July than in June, and less likely to plan to defer enrollment in the July survey than the groups reported in June. Dependent students also showed a shift in thinking about attending as normal from June (38%) to July (52%).

The increase in the number of students planning to enroll noted in July, perhaps coupled with the perceived inevitability of institutions moving to some level of online learning, aligns with the overall finding that the epidemic had not changed when the cohort of July students would enroll. However, our survey found there was a **small, but significant shift in the percentage of students who reported that COVID-19 had led them to change where they would enroll**, from 6% in June to 9% in July.

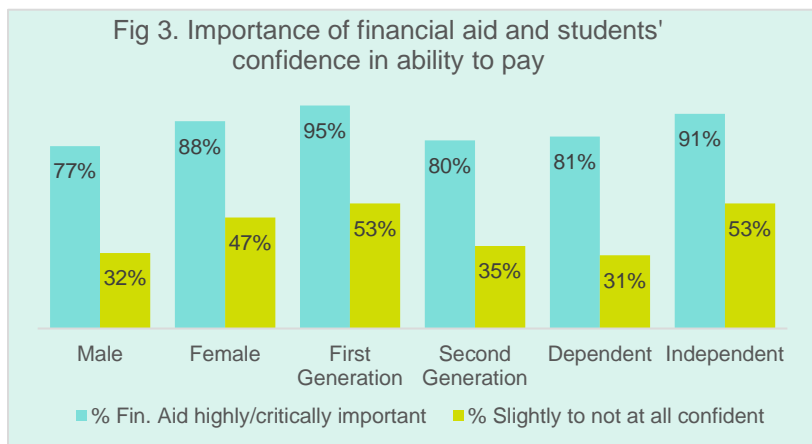
- We examined the type, level, and location of students' first and new institutions. **Our analysis found no statistical evidence that students were moving to attend institutions that differed from their first school.** For example, we did not find students who were originally planning to attend a private, not-for profit school who were then planning to attend a public institution. Nor did we find students who originally planned to attend an out-of-state school deciding to attend a Vermont institution instead or moving from a four-year to a two-year institution.

More than half of July's survey respondents (56%) reported that financial aid was "absolutely critical" in their ability to pursue higher education and 28% of students felt it was "highly important". Together these students made up 84% of the sample.

- Female students were more likely (88%) than male students (77%) to believe financial aid was highly/critically important for them to be able to pay for college. There was a 15-percentage point difference between first-generation students' (95%) and second-generation students' (80%) rating of the importance of financial aid. Students who were financially independent rated the importance of financial aid significantly higher (91%) than dependent students (81%). There were

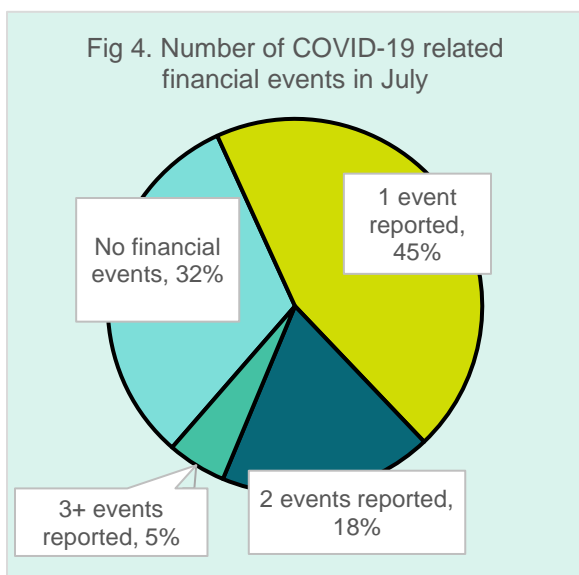
no statistical differences in the level of importance of financial aid by race or student type in the July cohort.

- **More than half of first-generation students and independent students reported being significantly less confident in their ability to afford higher education** (% who responded slightly to not at all confident, Fig 3.)



Impact of COVID-19 on personal finances

Seven out of 10 students reported experiencing a COVID-19 related event¹ in their lives (Fig 4). There were no significant differences in the number of events students reported by gender, race, dependency, or parent education.



In terms of specific events we found three out of ten students surveyed in July reported losing their job, most temporarily. One in five could not find a summer job. Female students (32%) were more likely than male students (25%) to report a losing a job, most temporarily. Two percent of respondents reported having a COVID-19 diagnosis, either for themselves or in their immediate family.

One in four dependent students reported one or both parents losing a job either temporarily or permanently because of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Dependent students from families with AGI in the first quartile (\$0-43K) were more likely (33%) to report their parents lost a job than students from wealthier families: 19% of students in the third quartile (AGI of \$81-124K) and 17% of those in the top quartile**

(AGI over \$124K).

In a reversal of the June cohort, second-generation students (21%) were more likely than first-generation students (14%) to report their parent(s) losing work. Second-generation students and dependent students were more likely to report a loss of economic support for education expenses (e.g., the value of their college savings declined or losing scholarships) compared to first-generation students or independent students.

- **More students responded to the open-ended question about other impacts of the epidemic in July (14%) than in June (11%), which described other notable events affecting students and their families.** These included, for example, a spouse losing their job, a reduction in hours or pay for

parents, stopping work because of need for child care, students moving from full-time to part-time work, having to move back in with family or have family move in with the respondent.

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. We were also interested to see if these findings would change over time. Data collection in July coincided with many institutions having put forth their first versions of re-opening plans. Our findings suggest that these Vermonters are overwhelmingly planning to continue their education, including embracing (or at least accepting) the possibility of online instruction either on campus or at home.

In July we saw an increase in the percentage of second-generation students reporting parents’ job loss, perhaps reflecting that the first wave of job loss affected different types of jobs (primarily in the retail, hospitality and service sectors) and the ongoing crisis may be beginning to affect families in job sectors requiring higher levels of education. These students, who may be more likely to have savings or scholarships to begin with, reported a decline in the value of their college savings, investments and to a lesser degree the scholarships they may have been awarded. Together, this suggests that a broader group of families may have increased need for financial aid in the upcoming year. To date these survey results have not found disparate COVID-19 outcomes related to race among Vermont students in terms of fall 2020 education plans or economic resources. National reports, however, are citing a potential drop in enrollment by race/ethnicity (especially for Latinx and Black students) this year.

With the fall semester upon us, students who are returning to campuses or getting ready for remote online instruction are doing so within a rapidly evolving higher education landscape. In the wings, a confluence of an annual flu season and the COVID-19 epidemic continues to raise concerns about the academic year as well as the long-term impact on public health and the economy. We hope to survey another cohort of FAFSA applicants later in December to gain a better understanding of what students did in the fall of 2020 and what their plans might be for the spring of 2021.

Methodology

We randomly selected 5,000 degree/certificate seeking undergraduate students from the population of 2020-2021 cycle FAFSA applicants to take part in the July study.

We used Qualtrics software (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) to deploy the survey between July 23 through August 5, 2020. A total of 752 respondents took part in the survey, which has a margin of error of +/- 3.0%.

**Respondents’ self-report*

Demographics	Respondents
Age (mean)	23.6
Parent AGI (mean)	\$94,200
Student AGI (mean)	\$18,700
Female	66%
First-generation	32%
HS senior	29%
Dependent	70%
*Ethnicity Hispanic	2%
*Persons of color	10%

ⁱ These events included: 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, a COVID-19 diagnosis, either for themselves or in their immediate family, or another event they could specify.