Higher Ed Student Success Survey: Fall 2020

Insight into the impact of COVID-19 and remote learning on higher ed students’ experience inside and outside the classroom
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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on higher education will be felt for years, maybe generations, to come. Colleges and universities are responding to the pandemic in a variety of ways so they can continue to provide a high-quality education. While they are adapting to the new reality as well as they can, students are having a very different college experience than they expected. It's more important than ever for higher education leaders to deepen their understanding of the challenges students face so they can step in to help when needed.

This report presents four key findings about what college life looks like now for students, the challenges they face, and the concerns they have for their future. The results have long-term implications for higher education leaders, faculty, advisors, and everyone involved in driving student success. For each finding, recommendations are provided for interventions and strategies that institutions can use to get students the help they need.

4 Key Findings

Four key findings are examined from Hobsons research:

1. **The pandemic is negatively impacting college academic success.**
   Students report decreased focus, engagement, and impact on their overall learning experience.

2. **Students' wellbeing is suffering.**
   Students are facing new stressors and mental health challenges, and one third of students have trouble paying for food, housing, and school.

3. **Students are more concerned about their future than before COVID-19.**
   They are more concerned about their future academic and career success.

4. **Students aren’t getting the support they need.**
   Students aren’t taking advantage of resources from their institutions, yet they’re most likely to turn to faculty and advisors for help.
Holistic Student Success Framework

Hobsons empowers students to make informed choices throughout their life journeys through partnerships with schools and higher education institutions. Hobsons’ technologies, services, and community support students in finding the right path and realizing their goals.

The Holistic Student Success Framework provides a roadmap for planning, implementing, and evaluating an institution-wide culture of student-centric success, offering recommendations and strategies to use throughout the student journey.
### Methodology

Hobsons partnered with Hanover Research to survey higher education students during the fall semester of 2020. The survey collected responses from a nationally representative sample of over 1,000 students across the United States. Respondents completed an in-depth questionnaire on the experiences and challenges of higher education during COVID-19. Respondents include a mix of part-time and full-time students in their first through sixth year of college, representing a range of backgrounds and ages. Seventy-nine percent attend four-year institutions and 21% attend two-year institutions. Fifty-three percent are fully online, 44% have adopted a hybrid instructional model, and 3% are fully in person during the survey period.

### Survey respondents

This report presents four overall key findings from the data, including differences between various student populations and cohorts such as first-year vs. upperclassmen students, students with different instructional models (in-person, hybrid, fully online), and two-year and four-year institutions. Further research will provide the opportunity to dive deeper on differences in attitudes and experiences between more detailed segmentations of student groups as well.
Key Finding #1

The pandemic is negatively impacting college students’ academic success.

Students struggling to stay focused on academics

Academic performance is one of the top areas of concern for students as they adjust to the “new normal” of college life during a pandemic. Almost three-quarters (71%) are struggling to stay focused on school work and over half (52%) are struggling to complete coursework. Additionally, 40% are struggling even to attend class.

Compared to the pre-pandemic period, returning students (non-first years) report that it is harder to stay focused (67%), complete their coursework (55%), and attend classes (43%).

**Look for early signs that a student is struggling academically and take action before a problem becomes a crisis.**

For example, tracking attendance and participation, especially in online courses, provides insight into how well students are engaged.
Students in hybrid programs with a mix of online and in-person instruction were more likely to report challenges staying focused (75% of students), compared with either fully online (69%) or fully in-person (63%) instructional models. Similarly, 70% of students in hybrid programs reported increased challenges with focus compared to the pre-pandemic period.

While focusing on academics was a challenge for students at all institutions, students at four-year colleges and universities reported higher difficulties with 73% having trouble focusing compared to 66% of students at two-year institutions.
Students were unprepared coming into the semester

In addition to the impact COVID-19 had on instructional models in the fall, students were feeling the impacts of the pandemic before classes began. Coming into the semester, only half of students felt academically prepared. This may be because their previous academic year was disrupted, or due to other long-term reasons.

Students in in-person programs reported the least impact, with only 27% feeling unprepared compared with over a third of students in online (35%) and hybrid (40%) models.

Students at four-year institutions also felt the greater impact coming into the semester; 39% of students felt unprepared compared with 30% of their peers at two-year institutions.
The overall learning experience is worse compared to pre-COVID

When comparing fall semester 2020 to the previous academic year, returning students report reduced satisfaction with many aspects of the academic experience, with over half of students (57%) reporting that their overall learning experience was worse.

- **% Academically Unprepared for the Fall 2020 Semester**
  - Somewhat or Significantly Worse than Previous Year
  - Somewhat or Significantly Better than Previous Year
  - Course Selection and Variety: 30% worse, 16% better
  - Access to Academic Resources: 46% worse, 17% better
  - Interactions with Professors: 48% worse, 17% better
  - Academic Instruction: 49% worse, 17% better
  - Interactions with Classmates: 57% worse, 16% better
  - Overall Learning Experience: 57% worse, 15% better

- **% With Worse Overall Learning Experience**
  - By Instructional Model
    - Hybrid: 63% worse
    - Online: 53% worse
    - In-Person: 38% worse
  - By Institutional type:
    - 4-year: 61% worse
    - 2-year: 37% worse

The decline in overall learning experience was felt more acutely by students in fully online and hybrid instructional programs, with 53% and 62% respectively reporting a decline. Comparatively, only 38% of students in fully in-person programs reported that their learning experience was worse.

Students at four-year institutions were similarly impacted by the new academic environment, with 61% reporting greater challenges compared with 37% of their peers at two-year institutions.
Key Finding #2

Students’ wellbeing is suffering.

COVID-19 is taking a toll on students’ overall wellbeing, particularly in terms of their mental wellness and financial stability.

Students report increased stress and decreased mental wellness

Roughly two-thirds of all students feel that COVID-19 has either somewhat negatively or very negatively impacted their mental health.

How has COVID-19 impacted your mental health?

- Somewhat or Very Negatively: 68%
- Unsure or Neither: 26%
- Somewhat or Very Positively: 6%

Returning students feel the impact on their mental health more than first-year students do, with 70% being negatively impacted compared with 62% of first years.

Check in regularly with students to get a pulse on their concerns and let them know support is available. Give students easy ways to request help, even if they aren’t quite sure who is the best person to turn to.
The impact on mental health is 75% greater for students with remote or hybrid instructional models. Seventy percent of both remote and hybrid students say COVID-19 has impacted their mental health either negatively or very negatively. In comparison, only 40% of fully in-person students say the same.

At four-year institutions, 71% of students felt a negative impact on mental health compared with 59% of their peers at two-year institutions.
Students are also under considerable financial stress

A sizeable number of students say they are struggling to pay for school supplies, food, and housing. These findings echo ongoing research from The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice¹ on the challenges of food, housing, and other basic needs insecurity among students, even in pre-pandemic years.

While basic needs insecurity issues did not begin with the pandemic, roughly a third of students reported increased financial challenges this year compared to previous years.

¹https://hope4college.com/
Financial challenges are affecting students at all institutional types relatively equally, with students at two-year institutions slightly more likely to struggle with the cost of books and other school materials. Students at four-year colleges and universities are more likely to cite challenges with housing costs.
Key Finding #3

Students are feeling uncertain about the future.
While most students remain optimistic about the future, an increasing number feel uncertain about their academic outlook and career plans.

COVID is having an impact on students’ near-term education plans
Nineteen percent were seriously considering not attending college next semester, with 78% citing COVID-19 as the primary reason.

While 25% of community college students were considering not attending compared with 18% of students at four-year institutions, a greater number of four-year students cite COVID as the reason (80%) compared to students at two-year institutions (73%).

Help students build educational plans so they see the sequence of steps ahead and build momentum toward their goals.
Students in fully online programs are both more likely to consider not attending (21%) and more likely to cite COVID as the reason (81%) compared to their peers in hybrid and in-person programs.
Some students are more confident in graduation than others

While 71% of students are confident that they will graduate, the same student populations that are considering pausing their near-term education plans are less confident about their ability to ultimately complete their degree.

Students who are fully online during COVID (68%) and those at two-year institutions (65%) are less confident in their ability to complete their degrees than their peers.
After college, the future becomes even more uncertain
Two-thirds of students are worried about finding a job after they graduate, and nearly half of students (49%) say they worry more about their job prospects than they did previously.

There aren’t large differences in job confidence across institutional types and instructional models, but upperclassmen students – for whom the post-college future is approaching more rapidly – demonstrate greater concerns than first-year students. They’re less likely to feel confident about finding jobs after graduation.

I’m worried about finding a job after I graduate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly or Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Strongly or Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Unsure or Neither</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>66%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Compared to last year, I’m worried about finding a job after I graduate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agree Less or Much Less</th>
<th>Agree More or Much More</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By instructional model:
- Hybrid: 66%
- Online: 66%
- In-person: 67%

By institutional type:
- 4-year: 67%
- 2-year: 63%
Compared to pre-pandemic, more worried about finding a job

By instructional model
- Hybrid: 43%
- Online: 47%
- In-person: 52%

By institutional type
- 4-year: 49%
- 2-year: 50%

Compared to pre-pandemic, more worried about finding a job

Non-1st year students: 69%
1st year students: 56%
Key Finding #4

Despite these challenges, students aren’t getting the support they need.

Although students are typically aware of resources in a variety of support areas, most aren’t actively seeking to address their concerns.

Students find support for academic concerns, but aren’t sure for help outside the classroom

Almost all students know how to reach their professors and academic advisors for assistance, but substantially fewer understand how to obtain help with mental health and career services.

Help students build educational plans so they see the sequence of steps ahead and build momentum toward their goals.

Students at four-year institutions and those who are still on campus are more likely to know where to find resources for help.

I know where to find/reach the following resources at my college

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health Services</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Services</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Services</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advisors</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors / TAs</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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I know where to find/reach the following resources at my college (by institutional type)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>4-year</th>
<th>2-year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Services</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Services</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advisors</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors / TAs</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students are reaching out to their professors and advisors for support. However, despite the strain many are feeling with academics, career uncertainty, and stress outside the classroom, most are not seeking extra support.

Students at two-year institutions are more likely to seek specialized support on campus: A significantly higher number reached out to mental health (31%) and career services (43%) compared to their peers at four-year institutions. Students at four-year schools were slightly more likely to pursue support from professors, advisors, and tutors.
Support from professors and advisors was similar for students across instructional models, but students still on campus with in-person or hybrid programs were more likely to reach out for tutoring, career, and mental health services.
Students may go to a variety of people for support
Students feel most comfortable seeking help from faculty and academic advisors. Fewer than half feel comfortable reaching out to physical health professionals (45%) or mental health professionals/support groups (37%).

I'm comfortable seeking help from....

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Somewhat or Very Uncomfortable</th>
<th>Somewhat or Very Comfortable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professors / TAs</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advisors</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health Professionals</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutors/Other Academic/Student Support</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Services Staff</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid Staff</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Professionals/Support Groups</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Comfort seeking help with different offices across campus was largely similar across institution types and instructional models. Students at two-year institutions were more comfortable seeking help from financial aid (50%) compared with their four-year institution peers (35%).

I'm comfortable seeking help from....

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Hybrid</th>
<th>Online</th>
<th>In-person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Professionals</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid Staff</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advisors</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors / TAs</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Conclusion

This study takes a broad look at the general college student population to identify trends and areas of concern. The findings highlight the urgent need for action by institutional leadership as well as faculty and advisors on the front lines of driving college student success.

While the results of this study will help you know what issues to look for, they don’t tell you exactly which students need help. Each student is a unique individual who requires personalized support, with resources that match their specific goals, needs, and challenges.

While the data show that students are reaching out to faculty and advisors for help, advisors have hundreds of students on their rosters. In a virtual environment, they may not have the opportunity to get to know students as well as they might in person. Advisors need the ability to prioritize their efforts based on the students most likely to need help, while providing resources aligned to students’ areas of greatest need.

Based on the findings of this survey, recommendations for better supporting students are:

1. **Offer proactive support for students’ academic success.**
   It’s critical for everyone involved in student success to look for early signs that a student is struggling academically and take action before a problem becomes a crisis. For example, tracking attendance and participation, especially in online courses, provides insight into how well students are engaged. Faculty and instructors can also make sure students know about academic support resources, such as tutoring and writing centers, that can help them get back on track. Ideally, you can guide students to sign up for appointments and follow through to confirm they attend. It’s also possible to leverage combinations of data points – missed attendance, missing assignments, class withdrawals, etc., to understand which students may need additional support.

2. **Pay special attention to students’ wellbeing.**
   When students are faced with additional stressors outside the classroom, it’s difficult for them to learn. Student mental health, as well as food and housing insecurity, have been issues even before the COVID-19 pandemic. The subsequent increase in financial uncertainty, health concerns, and social isolation could increase the risks for the most vulnerable populations.

   You may not know your students are struggling before their challenges have a big impact on their academic goals. It’s important to be proactive. Check in regularly with students to get a pulse on their concerns and let them know support is available. This can involve additional remote advising sessions or setting up a regular cadence of faculty or advising surveys. Give students easy ways to request help, even if they aren’t quite sure who is the best person to help.
3. **Help students chart a course for their academic and career future.**

   When students connect the dots between their academic and career goals, they’re more likely to persist and graduate. Make sure they have access to comprehensive career assessments, as well as data on careers in different industries and geographies so they can plan for the future. Help them build educational plans so they see the sequence of steps ahead and build momentum toward their goals.

4. **Build a support ecosystem surrounding each student.**

   As the school year progresses and uncertainty regarding the pandemic persists, it’s important that support resources are readily available to all students, especially those attending college online or via a hybrid format.

   Faculty are on the front lines; all students must interact with faculty and instructors on a more regular basis than with advisors, student service leaders, or others on campus. While faculty typically aren't trained as advisors or counselors, they may be the first to notice when a student is struggling. Therefore, faculty need ready access to ways where they can share and refer resources and programs on campus in order to guide students to relevant support. They need ways to communicate with other staff and the ability to see whether students have taken advantage of support resources.

   Student services and student affairs teams play a critical role in helping students feel supported and connected to campus, but their job is made more difficult in the virtual environment. Overall, you can't accurately predict who students will choose to go to with their concerns. It takes a community of people to support student success. The more integrated that community is, the better everyone can share information and resources, and the stronger your student success program will be.
About Starfish
The Starfish Enterprise Success Solution helps nearly 500 colleges and universities – more than all other organizations in the industry – scale their student success efforts so more students can achieve their academic and life goals. By helping higher education institutions leverage reliable data to pinpoint areas of concern and opportunity within courses and student populations, as well as institutional programs and services, Starfish connects these findings to action by identifying at-risk students, connecting students with valuable resources, and building career and academic plans to achieve student goals with the least momentum lost. To learn more about Starfish, visit hobsons.com/starfish.

About Hanover Research
Founded in 2003, Hanover Research is a global research and analytics firm that delivers market intelligence through a unique, fixed-fee model to more than 1,200 clients. Headquartered in Arlington, Virginia, Hanover employs high-caliber market researchers, analysts, and account executives to provide a service that is revolutionary in its combination of flexibility and affordability. Hanover was named a Top 50 Market Research Firm by the American Marketing Association in 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018, and has also been twice named a Washington Business Journal Fastest Growing Company. To learn more about Hanover Research, visit www.hanoverresearch.com.
ABOUT HOBSONS

Hobsons helps students identify their strengths, explore careers, create academic plans, match to best-fit educational opportunities, and reach their education and life goals. Through our solutions, Hobsons enables thousands of educational institutions to improve college and career planning, admission and enrollment management, and student success and advising for millions of students around the globe.

Learn more at Hobsons.com