

DATE: January 28, 2021

SUBJECT: COVID Student Survey

INFORMATION UPDATE

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

THEC's Policy, Planning & Research (PPR) Bureau continues to evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Tennessee higher education. Enclosed is a brief memo¹ outlining, in a Question and Answer format, the questions posed by the Commission in November with responses to questions that can be readily answered today with available data and details for questions that will be answerable in the future.

Several of these questions centered on the student experience: How are students faring? Are they taking coursework in-person or online? What are the challenges students are facing in the wake of the pandemic?

THEC staff will present on the COVID-19 student survey conducted in October 2020. The presentation will focus on the student response, seeking to inform the questions posed above and illuminate the student voice during these unprecedented times. Below is an overview of the findings from the survey.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 2020, THEC's PPR Bureau 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.²

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.

¹ Enclosed find a question and answer follow-up to questions posed by the THEC Commission in November 2020.

² This is the second survey of this kind administered by THEC in 2020.

- In general, students were satisfied with the institutional response to COVID-19, though open-ended responses highlighted three potential needs: (1) improvements to online/distance education practices and experiences; (2) supplemental financial aid; and (3) better transparency and communication to students concerning COVID-19 data.

SURVEY SAMPLE

A stratified random sample of 30,000 undergraduates was taken from the fall 2020 census 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.³

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.⁴

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),⁵ and enrolled in full-time hours (64.1 percent).⁶ 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.’

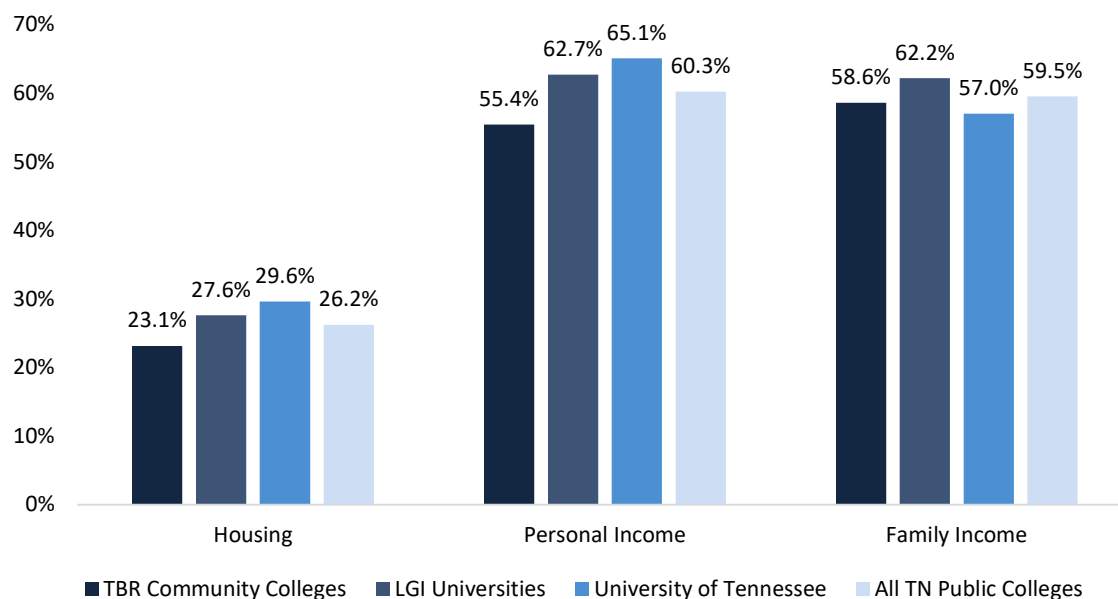
³ More information on e*GRandS may be found here: <https://www.collegefortn.org/resources/egrands/>

⁴ 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.

⁵ Included students classified as “Seniors” and “Fifth-Year Undergraduates”.

⁶ Data on gender, race, and student level come from the fall 2020 14-day census 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.



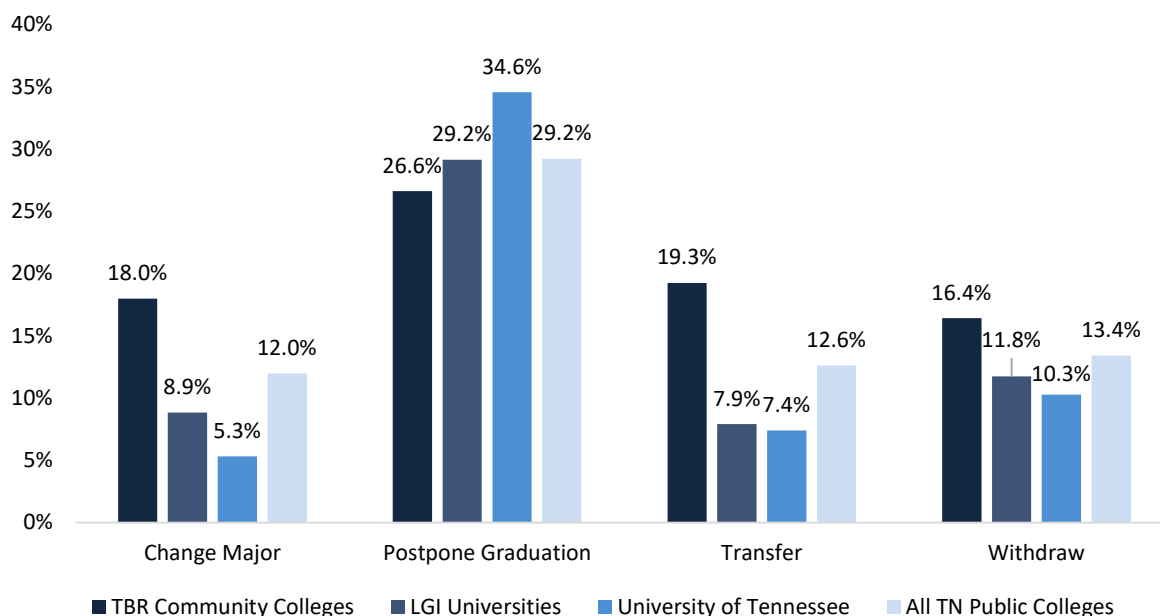
Compared to a similar survey administered during spring 2020, a smaller proportion of students in the university sector reported having housing affected in fall 2020. For personal and family income, the proportions of students reporting being affected are largely consistent with the earlier survey. In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

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.

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 1. 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

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

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 2 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 2. 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.

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.⁹

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

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

⁹ Data on gender, race, and student level come from the fall 2020 14-day census 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.

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 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.

INSTITUTIONAL REPORTS ON SURVEY RESULTS

In early January, Research & Strategy staff assembled descriptive summaries of the survey findings tailored to each institution, 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. These reports were supplied to the institutional research offices at each Locally Governed Institution. Institutional reports for colleges within the University of Tennessee System and the Tennessee Board of Regents were supplied to the system institutional research offices for further dissemination.

State of Tennessee
Tennessee Higher Education Commission
Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation
9th Floor, 312 Rosa L. Parks Avenue
Nashville, TN 37243
(615) 741-3605

THEC's Policy, Planning & Research (PPR) Bureau continues to evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Tennessee higher education. Census enrollment files, provided by Tennessee's public community colleges and universities, provided a first look at enrollment and retention across Tennessee colleges in fall 2020. This memo addresses some questions posed by the Commission in November 2020 and our plans to address remaining questions once requisite data become available.

What is the fall 2020 headcount by institution? See Appendix A for a summary of undergraduate headcount at each public community college and university from fall 2019 through fall 2020.¹ THEC will prepare an institution-level report, in our annual Fact Book, highlighting changes to end-of-term enrollment over time.

What is the FAFSA filing rate among current high school seniors? As of January 10, 53.1 percent of Tennessee Promise applicants have filed a FAFSA. This is down 7.8 percent from the same time last year. On January 8, THEC/TSAC extended the Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Student Assistance Award FAFSA filing deadline to March 1, 2021 to allow students additional time to file. Staff continue to monitor FAFSA filing across the state and offer an array of supports, including webinars, call center assistance, and drive-thru services, to assist students and parents in the completion of the FAFSA.²

How many Hispanic enrollees are paying out-of-state tuition costs? Tennessee public higher education, despite experiencing overall declines in enrollment, continues to see growth in Hispanic undergraduate headcount. There are two ways THEC can estimate student eligibility for in-state tuition and fees: student residency and fee pay status. Using residency data, in-state Hispanic undergraduate enrollment increased nearly 11 percent between fall 2019 and fall 2020. These increases are largest at the Locally Governed Institutions and University of Tennessee system.

¹ Data reported for fall 2019 are reported using THECSIS 14th day enrollment as of the end of term. Fall 2020 data are reported using THEC's special student-level data request. APSU fall 2020 data does not reflect all enrollment for fall 2020 and should be compared to prior records of enrollment with caution.

² THEC's College Access and Success Division updates high school level FAFSA filing rates each week and these data can be found here: <https://www.collegefortn.org/tn-fafsa-frenzy/data-visualizations/>.

How are students doing? Do they feel safe? THEC has conducted two surveys of Tennessee public college students to determine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected them and their educational plans. Students were asked about the effect of the pandemic on their plans, their concerns, and their satisfaction with institutional response. The first was conducted in spring 2020 and a second survey, with minor modifications, was conducted in fall 2020. See Agenda Item IV. for a memo describing the findings of the survey from fall 2020.

Several questions the Commission posed in November about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Tennessee higher education require data not yet available. THEC continues to collect these data, including certified financial aid, end-of-term enrollment, and college-going data. A list of these questions and the required data are found below.

How has COVID-19 affected the State's attainment goals? THEC's Master Plan, updated in January 2020, outlines key strategic initiatives with the overarching goal to increase the number of Tennesseans with a postsecondary credential. Measuring our progress on these initiatives and intervening benchmarks will begin to illuminate the impact of COVID-19 on our larger, strategic goals, including student readiness, college access, retention, completion, and employment. THEC will receive end-of-term enrollment, college-going, and awards data throughout 2021 to lay the groundwork to address these questions.

What are the effects of the pandemic on enrollment among adult students? How has take-up of programs, like Reconnect, changed this fall? THEC will receive end-of-term enrollment and certified financial aid payments to address these questions. THEC will release its Reconnect Report in spring/summer 2021, which will analyze the fall 2020 enrollment patterns among adult students and the take-up of Reconnect over time.

What are the effects of the pandemic on enrollment among low-income students? How has take-up of financial aid programs changed? THEC, through its Fact Book, Promise, and Lottery reports, as well as FAFSA filing initiatives, will assess how participation in higher education has changed for low-income students. THEC will be able to assess the share of low-income students (ever Pell eligible) enrolled in fall 2020 using end-of-term enrollment data.

Where are high school graduates going? Do we see fewer high school graduates enrolling in higher education? Who is not enrolling? THEC will receive a report of high school graduates from the Class of 2020 and their postsecondary enrollment in spring of this year. THEC will be able to assess college-going patterns upon receipt of this data.

Where did students enroll this fall? How did students enroll this fall? How did enrollment at off-campus locations change in Fall 2020? Analysis for this question relies on end-of-term enrollment data from the systems and institutions. THEC will receive these data in spring 2021.

How do we re-engage students who chose not to enroll or re-enroll during the pandemic? THEC continues to innovate on ways to encourage more students to participate in higher education. Currently, THEC's Adult Learner team is facilitating direct outreach to individuals applying for unemployment benefits. Recent survey work has also been shared with institutions to improve awareness of student needs to maximize student retention and completion. THEC will continue to use data and resources available to target outreach and intervention to students who were unable to enroll or did not remain enrolled. End-of-term enrollment data and college-going information will further illuminate who is missing from higher education.

APPENDIX A: Census Date Undergraduate Enrollment at TN Community Colleges and Universities from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020

Census Date Undergraduate Enrollment at TN Community Colleges and Universities Fall 2019 through Fall 2020				
	Institution Name	Fall 2019 Headcount	Fall 2020 Headcount	1YR Change
	Chattanooga State Community College	6,777	6,121	-9.68%
	Cleveland State Community College	2,449	2,284	-6.74%
	Columbia State Community College	5,092	4,829	-5.16%
	Dyersburg State Community College	2,175	2,050	-5.75%
	Jackson State Community College	3,620	3,045	-15.88%
	Motlow State Community College	5,189	4,683	-9.75%
	Nashville State Community College	6,843	6,174	-9.78%
	Northeast State Community College	5,044	4,546	-9.87%
	Pellissippi State Community College	9,246	8,112	-12.26%
	Roane State Community College	4,419	3,920	-11.29%
	Southwest Tennessee Community College	8,443	6,732	-20.27%
	Volunteer State Community College	7,483	7,022	-6.16%
	Walters State Community College	4,775	4,244	-11.12%
TBR Community Colleges	Total	71,555	63,762	-10.89%
	Austin Peay State University [^]	9,009	7,939	-11.88%
	East Tennessee State University	10,656	10,287	-3.46%
	Middle Tennessee State University	18,240	18,070	-0.93%
	Tennessee State University	5,697	5,791	1.65%
	Tennessee Technological University	8,829	8,611	-2.47%
	University of Memphis	15,729	15,601	-0.81%
LGI Universities	Total	68,160	66,299	-2.73%
LGI Universities (less APSU)	LGI Total (less APSU)	59,151	58,360	-1.34%
	University of Tennessee, Chattanooga	10,216	10,304	0.86%
	University of Tennessee, Knoxville	22,988	24,633	7.16%
	University of Tennessee, Martin	5,327	5,227	-1.88%
	University of Tennessee, Medical Health Sci Center [^]	296	224	-24.32%
University of Tennessee	Total	38,827	40,388	4.02%
University of Tennessee (less UTHSC)	Total (less UTHSC)	38,531	40,164	4.24%
All Public TN Colleges	University Total	106,987	106,687	-0.28%
All Public TN Colleges	University Total (less APSU & UTHSC)	97,682	98,524	0.86%
All Public TN Colleges	Total	178,542	170,449	-4.53%
All Public TN Colleges	All Public TN Colleges (less APSU & UTHSC)	169,237	162,286	-4.11%

Source: Fall 2020 Census Files and THECSIS Census Enrollment

Notes: This analysis uses student-level 14th day fall 2020 census files, as provided by system and institution offices for fall 2020 headcount. Historical data relies on census enrollment reported as of end-of-term to THECSIS.

[^]APSU fall 2020 data does not reflect all enrollment for fall 2020 and should be compared to prior year records of enrollment with caution. The majority of UTHSC students are graduate students and they are excluded from some summary analyses for this reason.