

# Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Fall Plans for Postsecondary Education

*During the period of August 19 to August 31, 2020, some 31 percent of adults 18 years old and over who had household members planning to take classes in fall 2020 from a postsecondary institution reported that all plans to take classes in the fall had been canceled for at least one household member. The two most frequently cited reasons they reported for the cancelations were having coronavirus or having concerns about getting coronavirus (46 percent) and not being able to pay for classes/educational expenses because of changes to income from the pandemic (42 percent).*

The emergence of the coronavirus pandemic brought major disruptions to American society. Health systems were stressed,<sup>1</sup> millions of jobs were lost,<sup>2</sup> businesses were shuttered,<sup>3</sup> and many public schools were closed.<sup>4</sup> Similar to its impact on elementary and secondary education, the pandemic had a direct impact on postsecondary education. During spring 2020, many postsecondary institutions shifted from in-person classes to online-only classes. College practices and programs also changed in other ways, including new admissions criteria; new policies for on-campus visitation, academic support services, and student housing; and cancellations of athletic programs and in-person student activities.<sup>5</sup> About half (51 percent) of currently enrolled postsecondary students in fall 2020 reported that the coronavirus pandemic was “likely” or “very likely” to negatively affect their ability to complete their degree.<sup>6</sup>

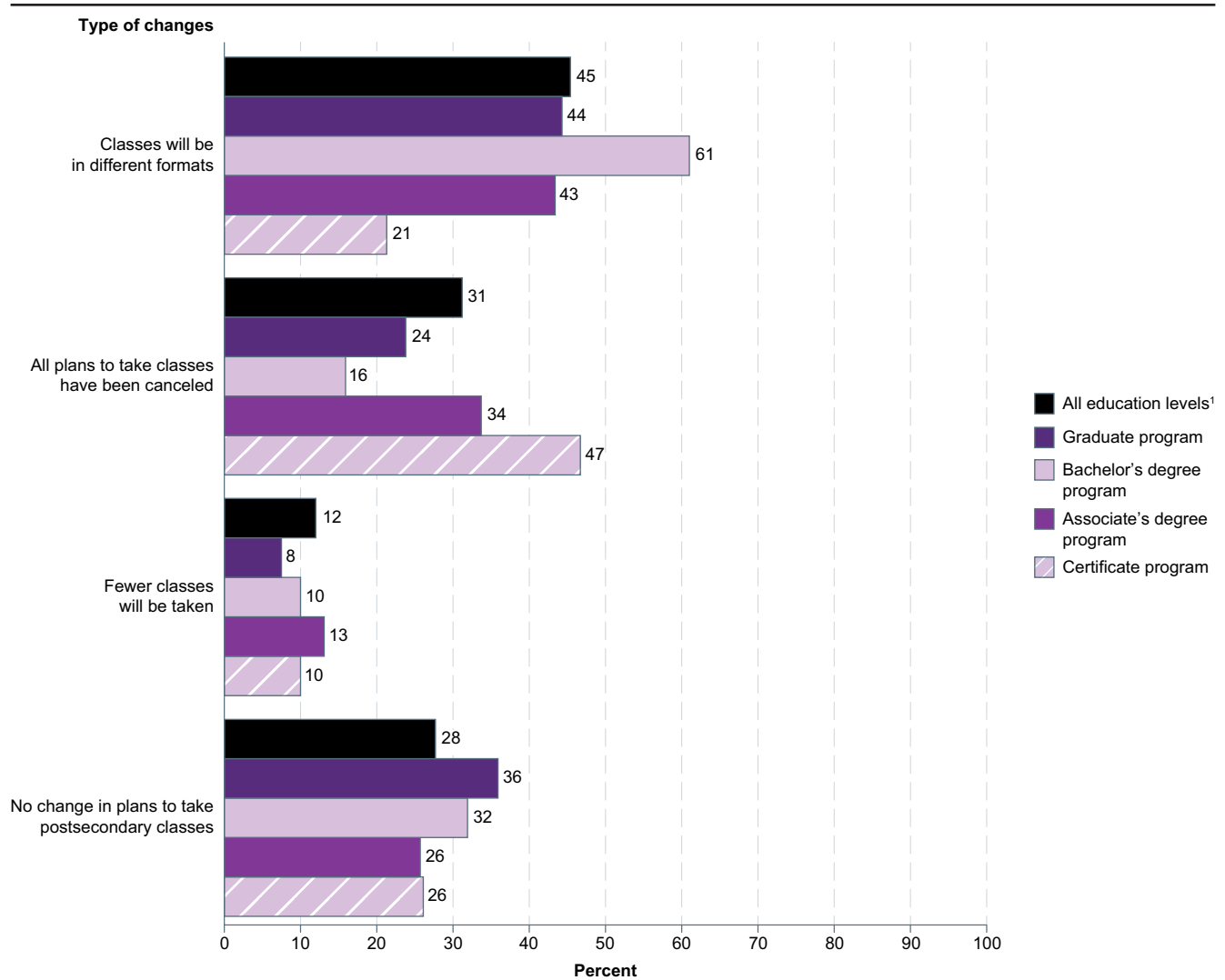
In some respects, postsecondary institutions had made some progress in transitioning to online education prior to the pandemic. In 2018, for instance, about 35 percent of all students in degree-granting institutions were taking at least one of their classes online, and 17 percent were taking all their coursework online.<sup>7</sup> Given the range of entire academic programs that are available online for students, as well as the concerns about the pandemic more generally, there is a strong policy interest in the extent to which students have been modifying their postsecondary attendance plans in response to the pandemic.

Using data from the 2020 Household Pulse Survey (HPS),<sup>8</sup> this spotlight explores ways in which student plans for postsecondary education changed for fall 2020. The HPS is conducted by the Census Bureau with seven other federal statistical agency partners, including the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The HPS has provided weekly or biweekly national and state estimates since April 23, 2020, when data collection began. The survey gathers information from adults about their employment status, spending patterns, food security, housing, mental health, access to health care, transportation, and household educational activities.

As of August 19, 2020, the HPS includes new questions regarding (i) household postsecondary attendance plans, (ii) whether those plans shifted as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, and (iii) if the plans shifted, specific reasons why they shifted.

This spotlight focuses on adults 18 years old and over who were in households where a member or members (including the respondents themselves) planned to take classes in fall 2020 from a postsecondary institution. Using data collected during the period of August 19 to August 31, 2020, this indicator examines changes in postsecondary education plans and reasons for canceling the plans. Findings are also presented by level of postsecondary education planned, racial/ethnic group, and household income level.

**Figure 1. Among adults 18 years old and over who reported that household members planned to take classes in fall 2020 from a postsecondary institution, percentage reporting changes in postsecondary plans for fall 2020 for at least one household member, by type of changes and level of postsecondary education planned: August 19 to August 31, 2020**



<sup>1</sup> Includes education levels not separately shown.

NOTE: Because this survey is designed to represent adults 18 years old and over, the estimates indicate the percentages of adults in households with prospective postsecondary students who reported a given change, rather than the percentages of students themselves. Respondents could choose more than one response to reflect the fact that different prospective students within the household may have had distinct changes in postsecondary plans or that an individual prospective student within the household may have had multiple changes in postsecondary plans. Respondents could select multiple planned postsecondary education levels. Those who selected multiple levels are included in the overall totals, but are omitted from individual education levels (see Digest table 302.80 for information on adults selecting multiple education levels). Overall, 20 percent of respondents indicated postsecondary plans at multiple levels in their household. Data in this table are considered experimental and do not meet NCES standards for response rates. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey, August 19 to August 31, 2020. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2020*, table 302.80.

Among those adults 18 years old and over who reported that household members planned to take classes in fall 2020 from a postsecondary institution,<sup>9</sup> 45 percent reported that the classes that at least one household member planned to take would be in different formats in the fall (e.g., formats would change from in-person to online), 31 percent reported that all plans to take classes had been canceled in the fall for at least one household member, and 12 percent reported that at least one household member would take fewer classes in the fall.<sup>10</sup> In addition, 28 percent reported that there was no change for at least one household member in their fall plans for postsecondary classes.

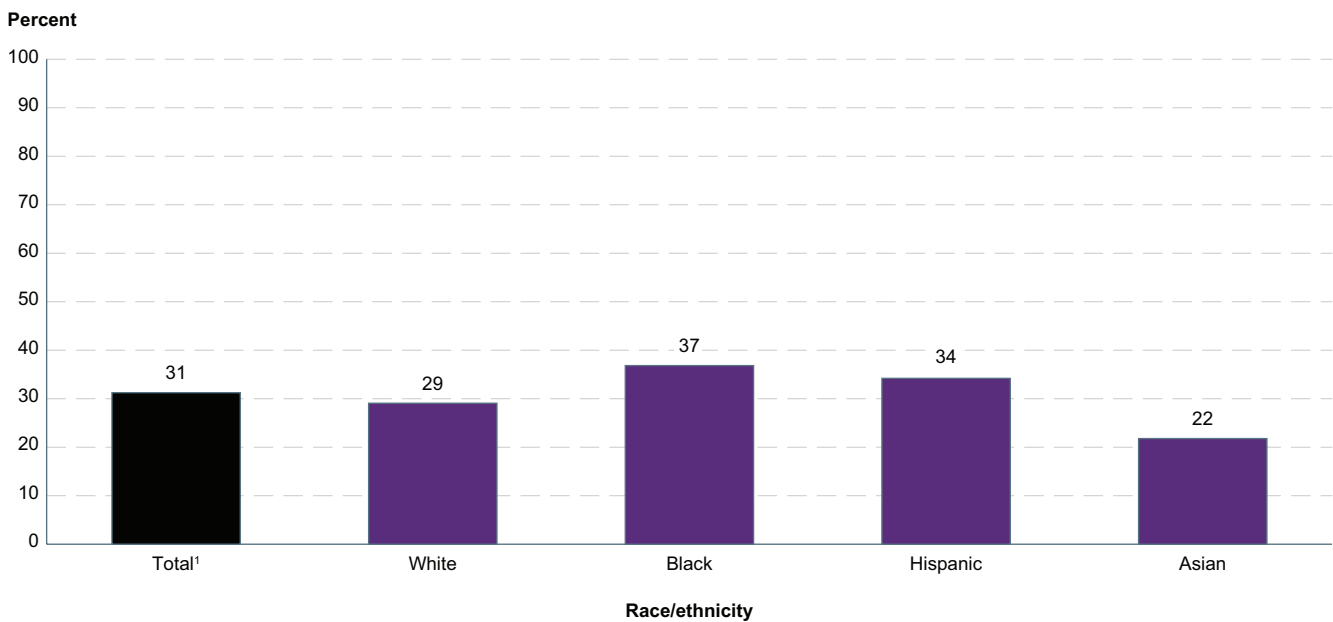
The percentage of adults 18 years old and over who reported that all plans to take classes in fall 2020 had

been canceled for at least one household member was highest for those who reported that at least one household member planned to participate in a certificate program (47 percent), followed by adults who reported a household member planned to participate in an associate's degree program (34 percent), those who reported about plans to participate in a graduate program (24 percent), and lowest for those who reported plans to participate in a bachelor's degree program (16 percent).<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the percentage of adults reporting fewer classes would be taken by at least one household member was higher for adults who reported a household member planned to participate in an associate's degree program (13 percent) than for those who reported about plans to participate in a bachelor's (10 percent) or a graduate program (8 percent).

The percentage of adults reporting that classes would be in different formats for at least one household member was highest for the adults who reported a household member planned to participate in a bachelor’s degree program (61 percent), followed by adults who reported participation in a graduate program (44 percent) or an associate’s degree program (43 percent), and lowest for adults who reported plans to participate in a certificate program (21 percent).

In addition, the percentage of adults 18 years old and over who reported no change in fall 2020 plans to take postsecondary classes for at least one household member was higher for those who reported a household member planned to participate in a graduate program (36 percent) than for adults who reported a household member planned to participate in a bachelor’s degree program (32 percent), which in turn was higher than for participating in an associate’s degree program or a certificate program (26 percent each).

**Figure 2. Among adults 18 years old and over who reported that household members planned to take classes in fall 2020 from a postsecondary institution, percentage reporting all plans to take classes have been canceled for at least one household member, by race/ethnicity: August 19 to August 31, 2020**



<sup>1</sup> Total includes other racial/ethnic groups not separately shown.  
NOTE: Because this survey is designed to represent adults 18 years old and over, the estimates indicate the percentages of adults in households with prospective postsecondary students who reported a given change, rather than the percentages of students themselves. Data in this table are considered experimental and do not meet NCES standards for response rates. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity.  
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey, August 19 to August 31, 2020. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2020*, table 302.80.

The percentage of adults 18 years old and over reporting that all plans to take classes in fall 2020 had been canceled for at least one household member varied by race/ethnicity of the reporting adults. The percentage

was highest for Black (37 percent) and Hispanic adults (34 percent),<sup>12</sup> followed by White adults (29 percent), and lowest for Asian adults (22 percent).

**Figure 3. Among adults 18 years old and over who reported that household members planned to take classes in fall 2020 from a postsecondary institution, percentage reporting all plans to take classes have been canceled for at least one household member, by household income level: August 19 to August 31, 2020**



NOTE: Because this survey is designed to represent adults 18 years old and over, the estimates indicate the percentages of adults in households with prospective postsecondary students who reported a given change, rather than the percentages of students themselves. Data in this table are considered experimental and do not meet NCES standards for response rates.

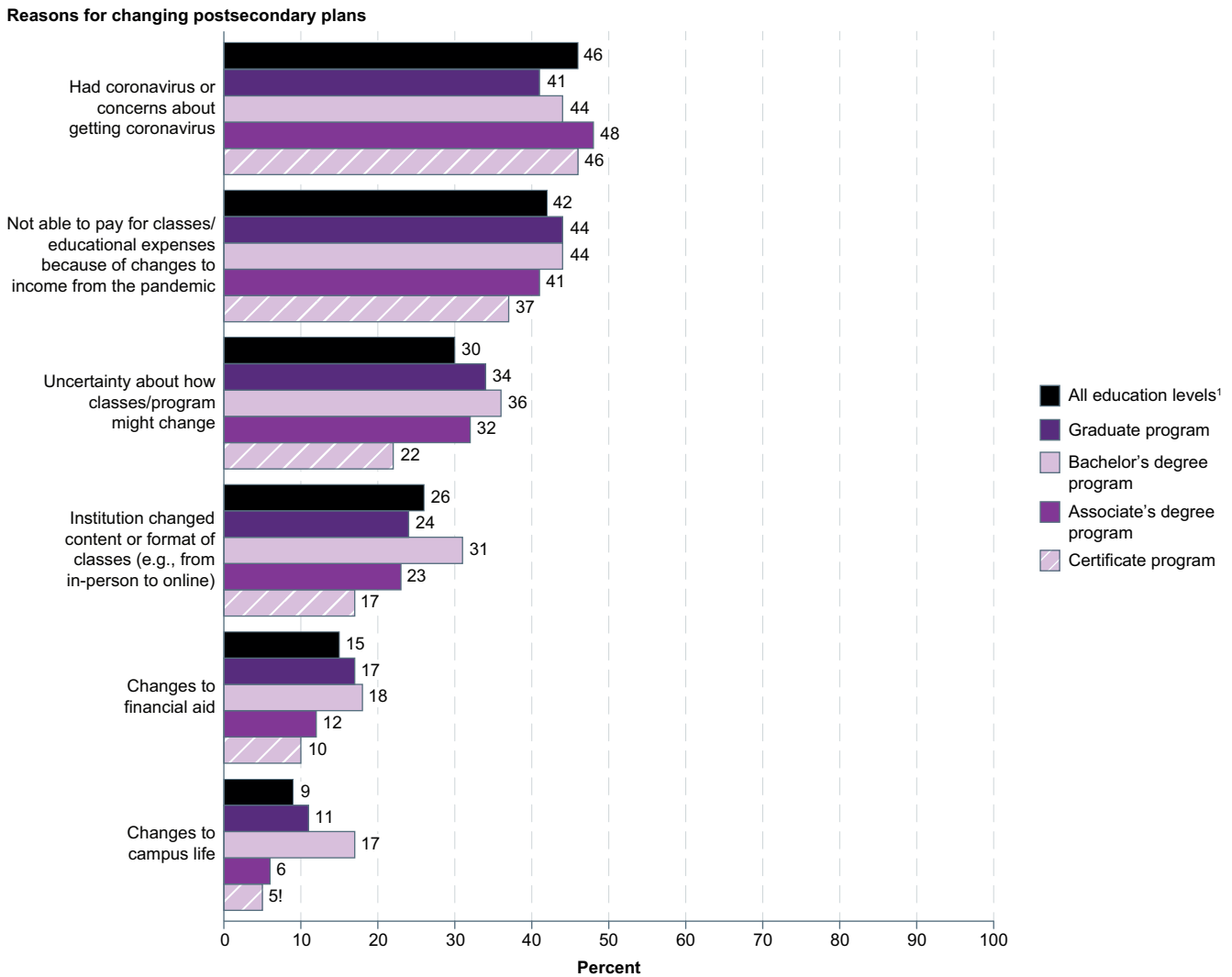
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey, August 19 to August 31, 2020. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2020*, table 302.80.

In addition, the percentage of adults 18 years old and over who reported that all plans to take classes in fall 2020 had been canceled for at least one household member was generally higher for those with lower 2019 household income levels. For instance, the percentage was higher for those in the three household income levels under \$75,000 (ranging from 36 to 40 percent),<sup>13</sup> compared with the three household income levels of \$75,000 or more (ranging from 17 to 30 percent).<sup>14</sup> The percentage was lowest for those in a household with an income of \$150,000 or more (17 percent).

For those adults 18 years old and over who reported that all plans to take classes in fall 2020 had been canceled for at least one household member, the two most frequently

cited reasons for the cancellation of plans were having the coronavirus or having concerns about getting the coronavirus (46 percent), followed by not being able to pay for classes/educational expenses because of changes to income from the pandemic (42 percent).<sup>15</sup> Other reasons for the cancellation of postsecondary attendance plans included the following: uncertainty about how classes/programs might change (30 percent), the institution’s changing of the content or format of classes (e.g., from an in-person to an online format) (26 percent), changes to financial aid (15 percent), caring for others whose care arrangements had been disrupted (11 percent),<sup>16</sup> changes to campus life (9 percent), the responsibility of care for someone with the coronavirus (2 percent), and some other reason related to the pandemic (12 percent).

**Figure 4. Among adults who reported that all plans to take classes in the fall have been canceled for at least one household member, percentage reporting various reasons for changing postsecondary plans for fall 2020, by level of postsecondary education planned: August 19 to August 31, 2020**



! Interpret data with caution. The coefficient of variation (CV) for this estimate is between 30 and 50 percent.

<sup>1</sup> Includes education levels not separately shown.

NOTE: Because this survey is designed to represent adults 18 years old and over, the estimates indicate the percentages of adults in households with prospective postsecondary students who reported a given change, rather than the percentages of students themselves. Respondents could choose more than one response to reflect the fact that different prospective students within the household may have had distinct changes in postsecondary plans or that an individual prospective student within the household may have had multiple changes in postsecondary plans. Respondents could select multiple planned postsecondary education levels. Those who selected multiple levels are included in the overall totals, but are omitted from individual education levels (see Digest table 302.80 for information on adults selecting multiple education levels). Overall, 20 percent of respondents indicated postsecondary plans at multiple levels in their household. Data in this table are considered experimental and do not meet NCES standards for response rates. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Household Pulse Survey, August 19 to August 31, 2020. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2020*, table 302.85.

There were no measurable differences, across any level of postsecondary education planned, in the percentages of adults who reported that at least one household member canceled plans for either of the two most frequently cited reasons overall: having coronavirus or having concerns about getting coronavirus and not being able to pay for classes/educational expenses because of changes to income from the pandemic.<sup>17</sup> Further, those two reasons were the most cited for every level of postsecondary education. However, there were variations by level of postsecondary education planned in terms of how frequently other reasons were cited. For example, the percentage reporting that the reason for the cancellation of plans was uncertainty about how classes/programs might change was lower for adults who reported a household member planned to participate in a certificate program (22 percent) than for other levels. Similarly, the

percentage reporting that the reason for the cancellation of plans was changes to financial aid was higher for those who reported a household member planned to participate in a bachelor's degree program (18 percent) and a graduate program (17 percent) than for those who reported about plans to participate in a certificate program (10 percent). The percentage reporting that the reason for the cancellation of plans was the institution's changing of the content or format of classes was higher for those who reported about plans to participate in a bachelor's degree program (31 percent) than for those who reported about plans to participate in a certificate program (17 percent). The percentage reporting that the reason for the cancellation of plans was changes to campus life was also higher for bachelor's degree programs (17 percent) than for associate's degree programs (6 percent) or certificate programs (5 percent).

**Endnotes:**

- <sup>1</sup> Melvin, S.C., Wiggins, C., Burse, N., Thompson, E., and Monger, M. (2020, July). *The Role of Public Health in COVID-19 Emergency Response Efforts From a Rural Health Perspective* (Preventing Chronic Disease, Vol. 17, E70), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved February 9, 2021 from [https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2020/20\\_0256.htm#T2\\_down](https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2020/20_0256.htm#T2_down). Blumenthal, D., Fowler, E.J., Abrams, M., and Collins, S.R. (2020, July). COVID-19—Implications for the Health Care System, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 383, 1438-1488. Retrieved February 9, 2021, from <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/nejmsb2021088>.
- <sup>2</sup> Handwerker, E.W., Meyer, P.B., Piacentini, J., Schultz, M., and Sveikauskas, L. (2020, December). *Employment Recovery in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Monthly Labor Review), U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retrieved February 9, 2021, from <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2020/article/employment-recovery.htm>.
- <sup>3</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021, January 27). *Quarterly Data Series on Business Employment Dynamics News Release* (Economic News Release). Retrieved February 9, 2021, from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/cewbd.htm>.
- <sup>4</sup> Education Week. (2020, March 6). *Map: Coronavirus and School Closures in 2019-2020*. Retrieved February 9, 2021, from <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures-in-2019-2020/2020/03>.
- <sup>5</sup> Smalley, A. (2020, December 28). *Higher Education Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19)*. National Conference of State Legislatures. Retrieved February 9, 2021, from <https://www.ncsl.org/research/education/higher-education-responses-to-coronavirus-covid-19.aspx>.
- <sup>6</sup> Gallup. (2020). *State of the Student Experience: Fall 2020*. Retrieved February 9, 2021, from <https://www.gallup.com/education/327485/state-of-the-student-experience-fall-2020.aspx>.
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 2019*, table 311.15. Retrieved February 9, 2021, from [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19\\_311.15.asp?current=yes](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_311.15.asp?current=yes).
- <sup>8</sup> The speed of the survey development and the pace of the data collection efforts led to policies and procedures for the experimental HPS that were not always consistent with traditional federal survey operations. For example, the timeline for the surveys meant that opportunities to follow up with nonrespondents were very limited. This has led to response rates

of 1 to 10 percent, which are much lower than the typical target response rate set in most federal surveys. While the responses have been statistically adjusted so that they represent the nation and states in terms of geographic distribution, sex, race/ethnicity, age, and educational attainment, the impact of survey bias has not been fully explored.

<sup>9</sup> Includes college, university, community college, trade school, or other occupational school (such as a cosmetology school or a school of culinary arts).

<sup>10</sup> Because this survey is designed to represent adults 18 years old and over, the estimates indicate the percentages of adults in households with prospective postsecondary students who reported a given change, rather than the percentages of students themselves. Respondents could choose more than one response to reflect the fact that different prospective students within the household may have had distinct changes in postsecondary plans or that an individual prospective student within the household may have had multiple changes in postsecondary plans.

<sup>11</sup> Respondents could select multiple planned postsecondary education levels. Those who selected multiple levels are included in the overall totals, but are omitted from individual education levels (see Digest table 302.80 for information on adults selecting multiple education levels). Overall, 20 percent of respondents indicated postsecondary plans at multiple levels in their household.

<sup>12</sup> The percentage of adults who selected “Other” as their race/ethnicity who reported that all plans to take classes were canceled for at least one household member (40 percent) was also higher than the percentages for White and Asian adults.

<sup>13</sup> These family income levels are “Less than \$25,000,” “\$25,000 to \$49,999,” and “\$50,000 to \$74,999.”

<sup>14</sup> These family income levels are “\$75,000 to \$99,999,” “\$100,000 to \$149,999,” and “\$150,000 or more.”

<sup>15</sup> Respondents could choose more than one reason.

<sup>16</sup> Examples include loss of day care or adult care programs.

<sup>17</sup> For those who reported at least one household member planned to participate in a bachelor’s degree or graduate program, there was no measurable difference between the percentages who reported cancellation of plans due to having coronavirus or concerns about getting coronavirus and uncertainty about how classes/program might change.

**Reference tables:** *Digest of Education Statistics 2020*, tables 302.80 and 302.85

**Related indicators and resources:** [Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on the Elementary and Secondary Education System](#); [Postbaccalaureate Enrollment](#); [Undergraduate Enrollment](#)

**Glossary:** Associate’s degree; Bachelor’s degree; Distance education; Household; Postsecondary education; Racial/ethnic group