

Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Fall Plans for Postsecondary Education

In late August 2021, some 16 percent of adults 18 years old and over who had household members planning to take postsecondary classes in fall 2021 reported that all plans to take classes in the fall had been canceled for at least one household member. The most frequently cited reason they reported for the cancellations was not being able to pay for classes/educational expenses because of changes to income from the pandemic (48 percent).

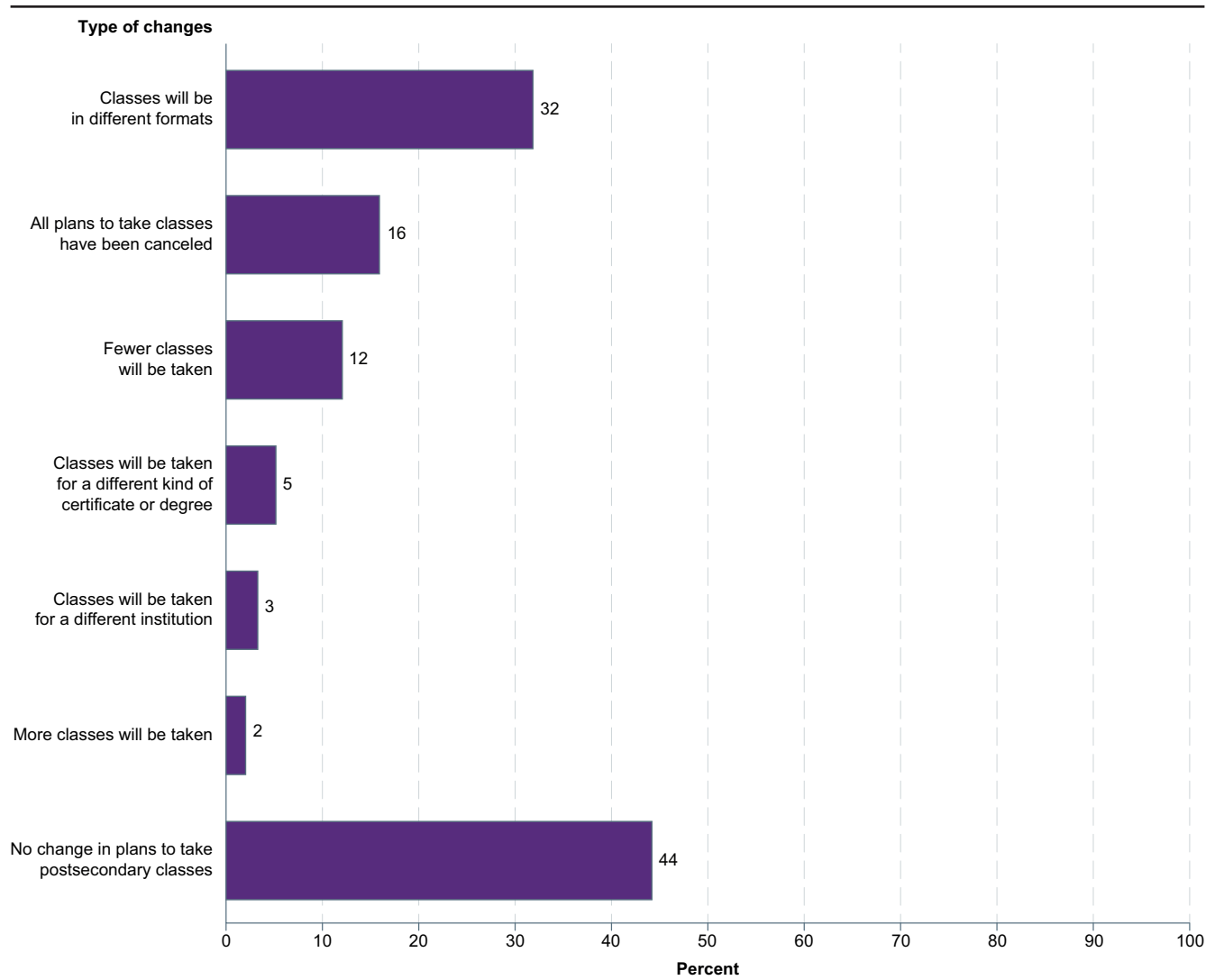
The emergence of the coronavirus pandemic brought major disruptions to American society. Health systems were stressed,¹ millions of jobs were lost,² businesses were shuttered,³ and many public schools were closed.⁴ The pandemic also had a direct impact on postsecondary education. During the spring of 2020, many postsecondary institutions shifted instruction from in-person classes to online-only classes. In fall 2020, many postsecondary institutions began to reintroduce in-person instruction through hybrid education or in-person classes.⁵ Due to ongoing spikes in coronavirus cases, however, some institutions reverted to increased online offerings.⁶ Although the pandemic has persisted into the 2021-22 academic year, near-universal eligibility for the coronavirus vaccine among postsecondary students and faculty may transform plans for both institutions and their students.

In some respects, postsecondary institutions had made some progress in transitioning to online education prior to the pandemic. In 2019, for instance, about 37 percent of all students in degree-granting institutions were taking at least one of their classes online, and 18 percent were taking all their coursework online. The range of academic programs that are available online, as well as the concerns about the pandemic more generally, have contributed to a policy-level interest in the extent to which students have modified their postsecondary attendance plans in response to the pandemic.

This spotlight uses data from the 2021 Household Pulse Survey (HPS)⁷ to explore ways in which student plans for fall 2021 postsecondary education changed as a result of the pandemic. The HPS is conducted by the Census Bureau in collaboration with 16 other federal agencies and offices, 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. The HPS includes 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 from a postsecondary institution in fall 2021. This indicator uses data collected during the period of August 18 to August 30, 2021, to examine changes in postsecondary education plans and reasons for canceling those plans. Findings are also presented by 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 2021 from a postsecondary institution, percentage reporting changes in postsecondary plans for fall 2021 for at least one household member, by type of changes: August 18 to August 30, 2021

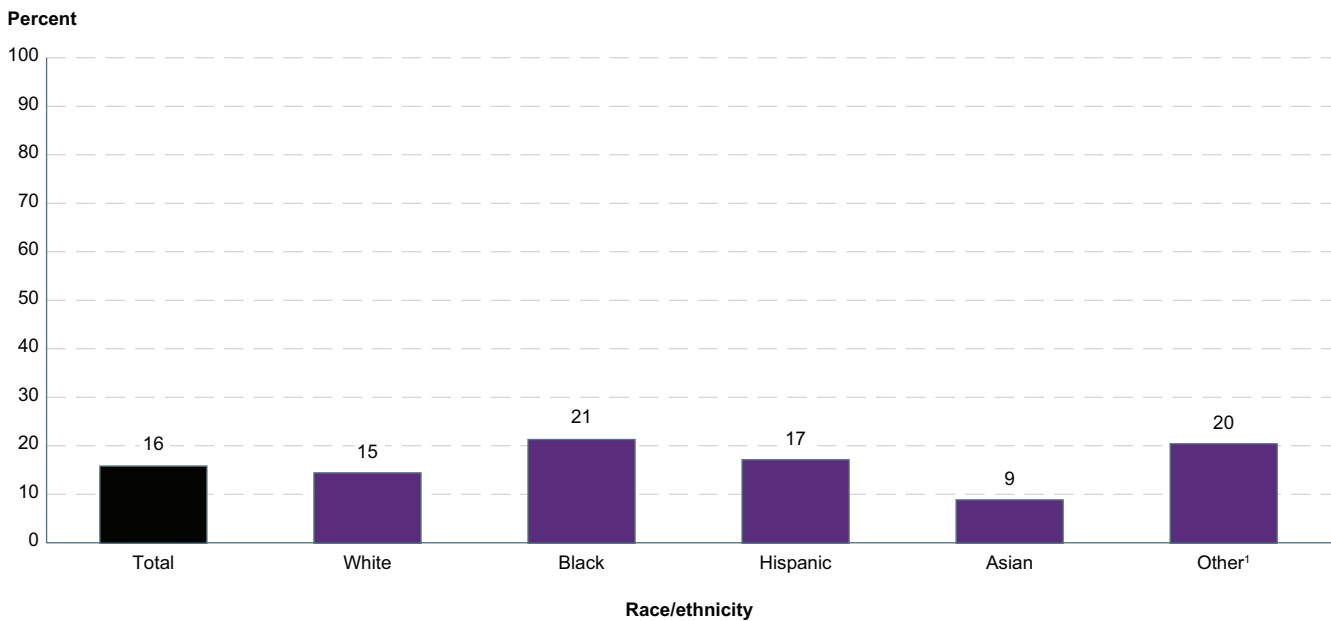


NOTE: Because this survey is designed to represent adults 18 years old and over, the estimates indicate the percentages of adults in households with prospective postsecondary students who reported a given change, rather than the percentages of students themselves. Respondents could choose more than one 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. Data in this figure are considered experimental and do not meet NCES standards for response rates. SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey, August 18 to August 30, 2021. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 302.80.

Among those adults 18 years old and over who reported that household members planned to take classes in fall 2021 from a postsecondary institution,⁸ 56 percent reported some change to plans due to the coronavirus pandemic. Nearly one-third (32 percent) reported that the classes that at least one household member planned to take would be taught in different formats in the fall (e.g., formats of instruction would change from in-person to online), 16 percent reported that all plans to take classes in the fall had been canceled for at least one household member, and 12 percent reported that at least one household member would take fewer classes

in the fall. Lower percentages of these adults reported that at least one household member would take classes for a different kind of certificate or degree (5 percent), that classes would be taken from a different institution (3 percent), and/or that more classes would be taken (2 percent).⁹ Some 44 percent reported that there was no change for any household member in their fall plans for postsecondary classes. This is compared with 28 percent who reported no change in plans for at least one household member one year earlier in the pandemic, for fall 2020.

Figure 2. Among adults 18 years old and over who reported that household members planned to take classes in fall 2021 from a postsecondary institution, percentage reporting all plans to take classes have been canceled for at least one household member, by race/ethnicity: August 18 to August 30, 2021

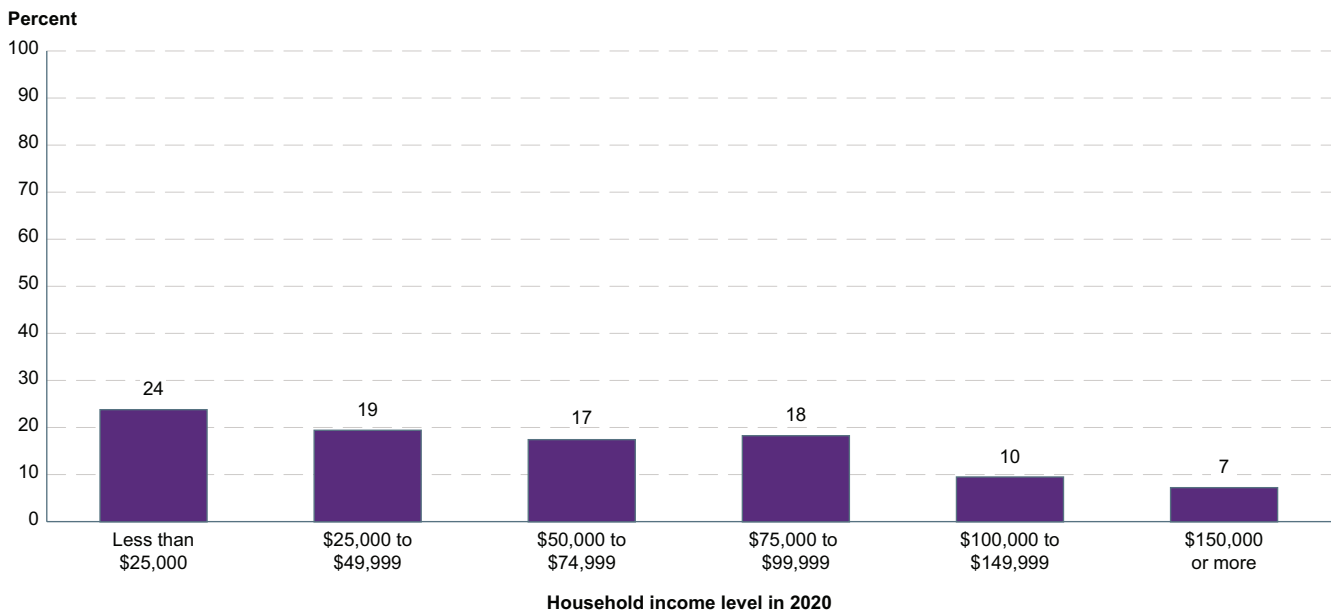


¹ Includes persons reporting Pacific Islander alone, persons reporting American Indian/Alaska Native alone, and persons of Two or more races.
NOTE: Because this survey is designed to represent adults 18 years old and over, the estimates indicate the percentages of adults in households with prospective postsecondary students who reported a given change, rather than the percentages of students themselves. Data in this figure are considered experimental and do not meet NCES standards for response rates. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey, August 18 to August 30, 2021. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 302.80.

The percentage of adults 18 years old and over reporting that all plans to take classes in fall 2021 had been canceled for at least one household member varied by race/ethnicity of the reporting adults. The percentage was higher for Black adults (21 percent) than for White adults (15 percent), which was in turn higher than the percentage for Asian adults (9 percent). The percentage for Hispanic

adults (17 percent) was not measurably different from the percentages for Black and White adults. However, it was higher than the percentage for Asian adults. Additionally, compared with White and Asian adults, a higher percentage of adults of Other¹⁰ racial/ethnic groups reported that all plans to take classes were canceled for at least one household member (21 percent).

Figure 3. Among adults 18 years old and over who reported that household members planned to take classes in fall 2021 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 18 to August 30, 2021



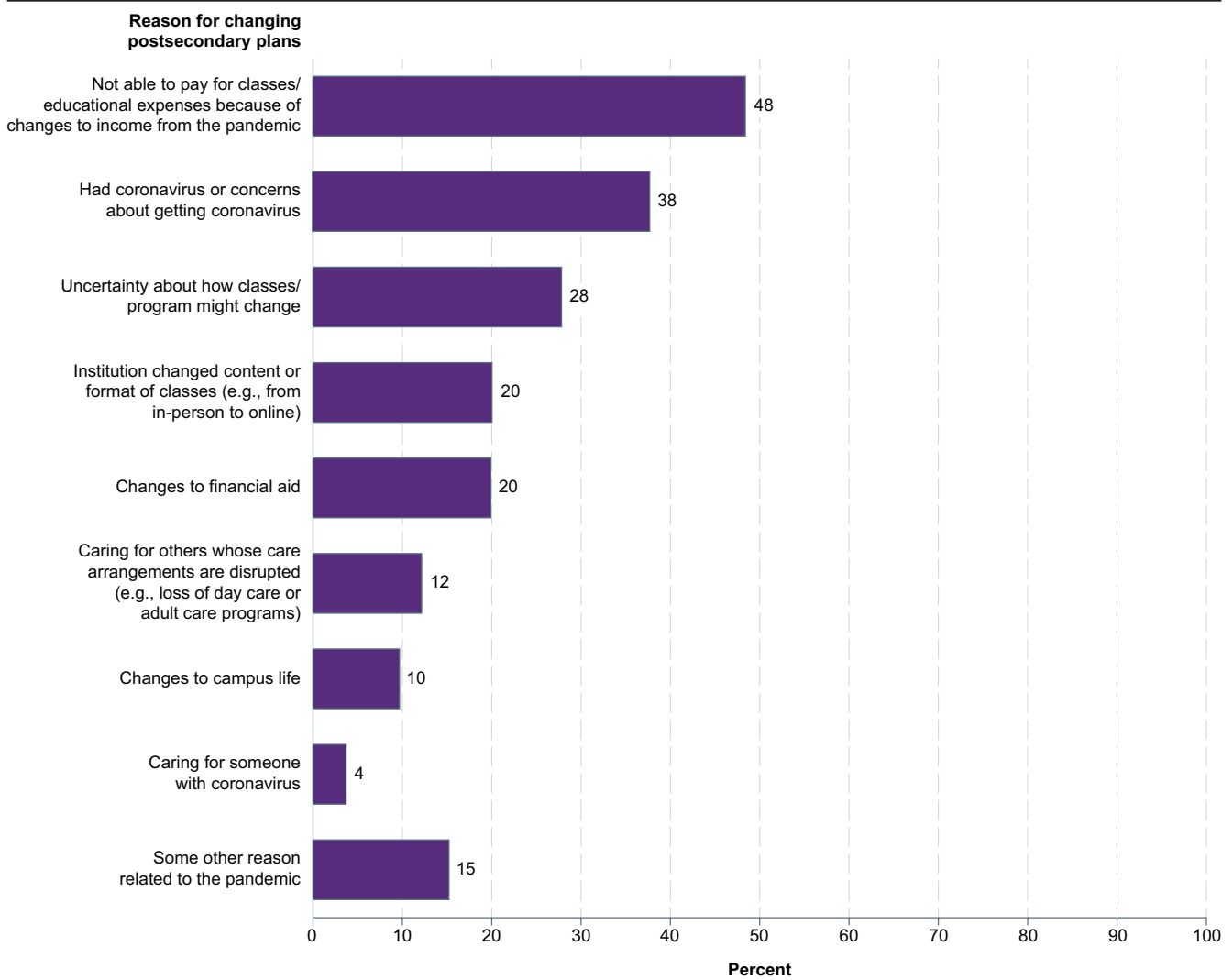
NOTE: Because this survey is designed to represent adults 18 years old and over, the estimates indicate the percentages of adults in households with prospective postsecondary students who reported a given change, rather than the percentages of students themselves. Data in this figure are considered experimental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

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey, August 18 to August 30, 2021. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 302.80.

The percentage of adults 18 years old and over who reported that all plans to take classes in fall 2021 had been canceled for at least one household member was generally higher for those with lower 2020 household income levels. For instance, the percentage was higher for

those in the four household income levels that are under \$100,000 (ranging from 17 to 24 percent),¹¹ compared with the household income levels of \$100,000 to \$149,999 (10 percent) and \$150,000 or more (7 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 2021: August 18 to August 30, 2021



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 reasons for changes in postsecondary plans or that an individual prospective student within the household may have had multiple reasons for changes in postsecondary plans. Data in this figure 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 18 to August 30, 2021. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 302.85.

For those adults 18 years old and over who reported that all plans to take classes in fall 2021 had been canceled for at least one household member, the most frequently cited reason for these cancellations was not being able to pay for classes/educational expenses because of changes to income from the pandemic (48 percent).¹² The second most common reason was having the coronavirus or having concerns about getting the coronavirus (38 percent). These were also the two most frequently cited reasons for the cancellations of postsecondary plans reported in fall 2020, although the order was reversed. Specifically, 46 percent reported having coronavirus or having concerns about getting coronavirus and 42 percent reported not being able to pay for classes/educational expenses as the reason postsecondary plans were cancelled in fall 2020.

Additionally, in fall 2021, some 20 percent or more of adults cited each of the following reasons for the cancellation of plans: uncertainty about how classes/programs might change (28 percent), the institution's changes in the content or format of classes (e.g., from an in-person to an online format) (20 percent) and changes to financial aid (20 percent). Other reasons for the cancellation of postsecondary attendance plans included: caring for others whose care arrangements had been disrupted (12 percent),¹³ changes to campus life (10 percent), caring for someone with the coronavirus (4 percent), and some other reason related to the pandemic (15 percent).

Endnotes:

¹ 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 December 3, 2021, from https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2020/20_0256.htm. 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 December 3, 2021, from <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/nejmsb2021088>.

² 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 December 3, 2021, from <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2020/article/employment-recovery.htm>.

³ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021, January 27). *Quarterly Data Series on Business Employment Dynamics News Release* (Economic News Release). Retrieved December 3, 2021, from https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/cewbd_01272021.htm. Leer, J., deRitis, C., Sweet, R., DeAntonio, D., and Zandi, M. (2020, November). *Business Closures and Entrepreneurship During COVID-19*. Moody's Analytics. Retrieved December 3, 2021, from <https://www.moodysanalytics.com/-/media/article/2020/business-closures-and-entrepreneurship.pdf>.

⁴ Education Week. (2020, March 6). *Map: Coronavirus and School Closures in 2019-2020*. Retrieved December 3, 2021, from <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures-in-2019-2020/2020/03>.

⁵ Smalley, A. (2021, March 22). *Higher Education Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19)*. National Conference of State Legislatures. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.ncsl.org/research/education/higher-education-responses-to-coronavirus-covid-19.aspx>.

⁶ Quintana, C. (2020, July 29). *'The Virus Beat Us': Colleges Are Increasingly Going Online for Fall 2020 Semester as COVID-19 Cases*

Rise, USA Today. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2020/07/29/covid-college-fall-semester-2020-reopening-online/5530096002/>.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Includes college, university, community college, trade school, or other occupational school (such as a cosmetology school or a school of culinary arts).

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Includes persons reporting Pacific Islander alone, persons reporting American Indian/Alaska Native alone, and persons of Two or more races.

¹¹ These family income levels are “Less than \$25,000,” “\$25,000 to \$49,999,” “\$50,000 to \$74,999,” and “\$75,000 to \$99,999.”

¹² Respondents could choose more than one reason.

¹³ Examples include loss of day care or adult care programs.

Reference tables: *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, tables 302.80 and 302.85; *Digest of Education Statistics 2020*, tables 302.80, 302.85, and 311.15

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

Glossary: Distance education; Household; Postsecondary education; Racial/ethnic group