

# 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20)

First Look at the Impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19)  
Pandemic on Undergraduate Student Enrollment, Housing,  
and Finances (Preliminary Data)—Summary

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# Introduction

This First Look report presents basic findings about undergraduate student experiences during the coronavirus pandemic (referred to in this report as COVID-19) in spring 2020. These findings are based on preliminary data from the 2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20), a national survey of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled any time between July 1, 2019, and June 30, 2020, in institutions that can participate in federal financial aid programs.

The findings in this report provide the first national estimates of the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on postsecondary students. Researchers have previously collected and reported data at institution, state, and international levels (Aristovnik et al. 2020; Aucejo et al. 2020; California Student Aid Commission 2020). The Census Household Pulse Survey also collects limited data on postsecondary experiences but is not designed to be representative of students.

The main purpose of NPSAS:20 is to measure how students and their families pay for postsecondary education at Title IV eligible institutions, with a focus on federal student aid given through Title IV of the Higher Education Act. NPSAS:20 student surveys started in March 2020, just as the pandemic began affecting students’ educational experiences. Items about COVID-19 were added in April to collect information about these effects on students between January 1 and June 30, 2020. Because these items were based on effects seen early in the pandemic, they likely do not reflect all possible student experiences.

Data used in this report are from 61,000 NPSAS undergraduate respondents who completed the survey after the COVID-19 items were added.<sup>1</sup> Data from students who answered before the COVID-19 items were added are not included; however, the data for those who answered after the items were added are weighted to represent all undergraduates in the United States enrolled between January and June 2020. This report presents estimates using preliminary data because of the urgency of the issues surrounding the pandemic. As such, estimates in this report

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<sup>1</sup> The NPSAS:20 student survey sample included 145,490 undergraduate students, 80,760 of whom were survey respondents. Respondents not included in this report were excluded due to issues such as not being enrolled in postsecondary education between January and June 2020. For further details on the total NPSAS:20 sample, please see the Sample Design section of appendix B.



may differ from those that will be available in the full NPSAS:20 sample and dataset released in 2022, which will address missing data in these findings.<sup>2</sup>

Topics about COVID-19 and postsecondary education covered in this report are

- Enrollment—withdrawing or taking a leave of absence, extended school breaks, changes to study-abroad programs, and classes being canceled or moved online;
- Housing—moving and difficulty finding safe and stable housing;
- Finances—getting emergency financial assistance from the postsecondary institution, losing a job or losing income due to reduced hours, and difficulty accessing or paying for food;
- Institutional response—student reports about how helpful their postsecondary institution was at communicating COVID-19 information; and
- Other—receiving technical services from the postsecondary institution, difficulty finding safe and stable child care, and receiving tuition or room-and-board refunds.

When these items were added to the NPSAS:20 survey, many students and institutions were in a period of flux and uncertainty because of the pandemic. Changes to how students were accessing and paying for education began in March: Institutions closed or moved to online instruction; new rules about how student aid could be used were released (Office of Postsecondary Education 2020); and Congress enacted the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The CARES Act suspended federal student loan payments, paused collections on defaulted loans, and waived interest on federal loans through September 30, 2020.<sup>3</sup>

These developments and guidance from a wide range of education experts were the basis for the COVID-19 items in the NPSAS:20 student survey. These experts also shared ideas about the types of students who might be more likely to experience challenges because of COVID-19. The information shared in this report about institutions and students—control and level of institution, institution

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<sup>2</sup> For further details on how final NPSAS:20 data may differ from the estimates in this report, please see the Cautions for Analysts section of appendix B.

<sup>3</sup> As of this report's publication, these CARES Act emergency relief measures have been extended through September 30, 2021.

region, Pell Grant recipient status,<sup>4</sup> race/ethnicity, citizenship, gender, age, dependency and family status, and veteran status—are based on this expert input.

Results shown in this report are not causal. Many of the variables in the report relate to one another, but only simple comparisons are presented, which do not account for all possible relationships. The variables in this report are just a few of the several hundred that will be available in the full NPSAS:20 datafile to be released in summer 2022.

For readers interested in appendixes with estimate and standard error tables, definitions of terms used in the findings and tables, and additional information about the survey from which the findings are drawn, please see the “View full report” link at <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2021456>.

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<sup>4</sup> Because federal Pell Grants are given based on student financial need, Pell Grant recipient status functions in this report as a proxy for student income.

## Selected Findings

- Overall, 87 percent of students experienced a disruption or change in their enrollment, with 84 percent having some or all classes moved to online-only instruction ([table A-1](#)).
- Unmarried students with or without dependents withdrew from their institution at higher rates (7 to 8 percent) than dependent students, married students with no dependents, and married students with dependents (3 to 4 percent) ([table A-1](#)).
- Twenty-two percent of students at private for-profit less-than-2-year institutions took a leave of absence, in contrast to students at other types of institutions (2 to 10 percent) ([table A-1](#)).
- Students without Pell Grants moved back to their permanent address at higher rates (26 percent) than students with Pell Grants (16 percent) ([table A-2](#)).
- Students who identified as genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or a different identity had difficulty finding safe and stable housing at three times the rates (9 percent) of students who identified as male or female (3 percent each) ([table A-2](#)).
- Students with Pell Grants received emergency financial assistance from their institution at over twice the rate (22 percent) of students without Pell Grants (9 percent) ([table A-3](#)).
- Black students, Hispanic or Latino students, American Indian or Alaska Native students, and students of two or more races had difficulty accessing food or paying for food at higher rates (10 to 14 percent) than either White or Asian students (7 percent) ([table A-3](#)).
- Students who identified as female had difficulty finding safe and stable child care at higher rates (24 percent) than students who identified as male (14 percent) ([table A-3](#)).
- Students who were U.S. citizens or resident aliens received tuition refunds from their institutions at higher rates (28 percent) than foreign or international students (19 percent) ([table A-4](#)).



- Overall, students agreed that their institutions gave helpful communication on academic impacts (70 percent on access to coursework and 58 percent on degree program progress) at higher rates than on financial impacts (45 percent on financial aid and 39 percent on employment at the institution). They also agreed that their institutions gave helpful communication on coursework at higher rates than on on-campus or college-owned housing (56 percent) ([table A-5](#)).
- Two-fifths of students attending public 2-year (43 percent) and public 4-year institutions (39 percent) agreed that their institution gave information needed to access food assistance. Students at public less-than-2-year institutions, private nonprofit 4-year institutions, and all levels of private for-profit institutions had lower rates of agreement (20 to 29 percent) ([table A-6](#)).