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The Impact of COVID on College-going: Equity Implications for the Classes of 2020 and 2021

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The COVID-19 pandemic raises serious concerns about post-secondary education for students across the country. While college-going rates had been increasing in aggregate over the past decade, the pandemic has reversed this trend. In Massachusetts, high school graduates in the class of 2020 enrolled at the same rate as those in the class of 2005, essentially erasing 15 years of progress. These negative impacts on college enrollment are concentrated among students from low-income families and underrepresented minority (URM) groups, and for students who typically enroll in community colleges.

We document these trends in Massachusetts, a state with historically high rates of college enrollment and a highly educated labor force that rewards college credentials. We focus on two groups of high school graduates: those in the high school class of 2020, whose final year of high school and entry into college was severely disrupted by the onset of the pandemic, and those in the class of 2021, whose junior and senior years have looked dramatically different than expected as most high schools have relied on remote or hybrid instruction.

These patterns in Massachusetts directly echo those in states across the country. But given the role that post-secondary education plays in structuring students' labor market options, these recent patterns are concerning for Massachusetts students and for the Commonwealth's workforce. In particular, they have serious implications for equity and suggest that the dramatic inequalities intensified by the pandemic may continue to grow for these students in future years.

Key Findings

The share of 2020 high school graduates who enrolled in college fell by 7 percentage points overall, with greater declines for low-income Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students.

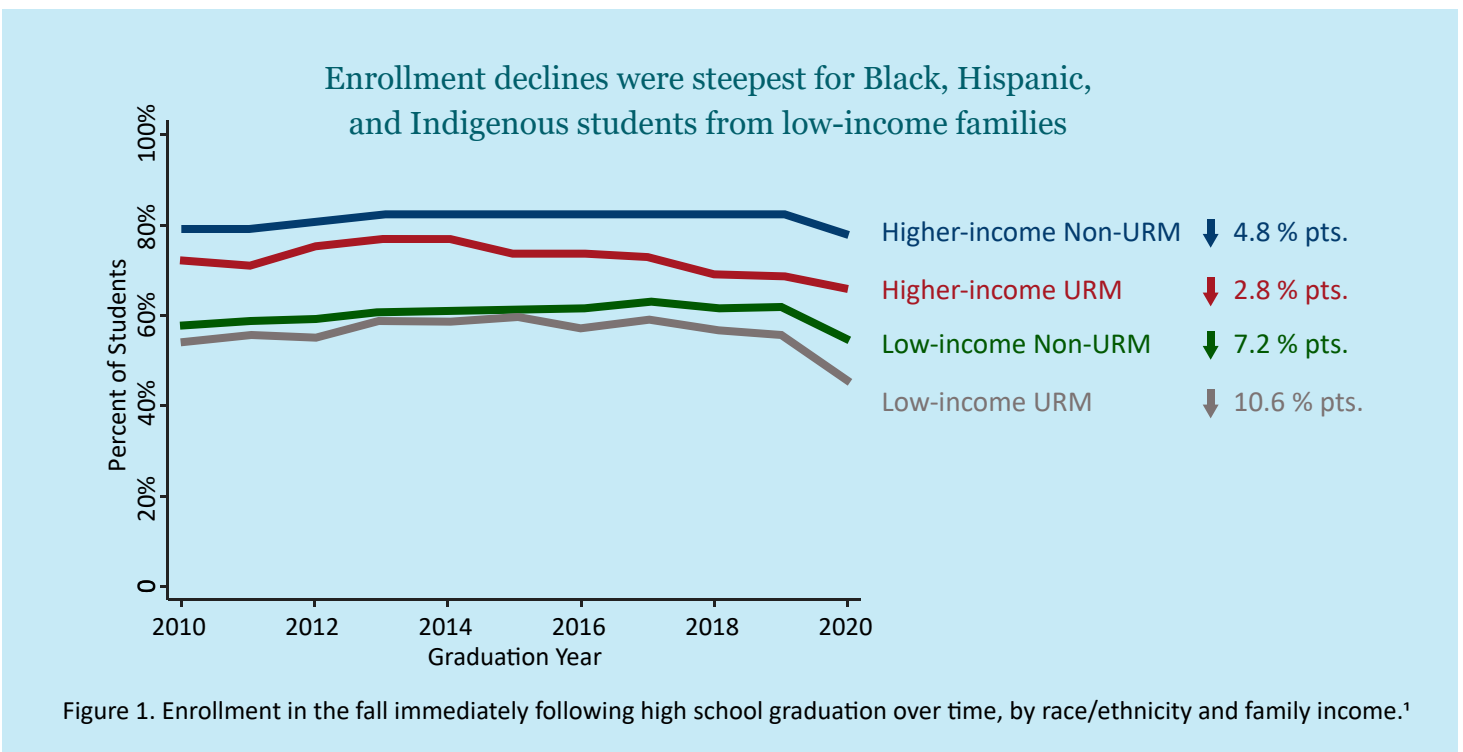
Enrollment declines were steepest in community colleges.

The class of 2021 also seems at risk for college enrollment declines. Nearly 3,000 fewer seniors have completed the FAFSA by mid-February, compared to the class of 2020 at the same point in time.

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Every year, most Massachusetts students enroll in college in the fall immediately after they graduate from high school. Seventy percent of students in the class of 2019 did so. Enrollments among the class of 2020 fell about 7 percentage points (or 10%). This represents a sizable drop, one not seen in the previous decade, and translates to more than 5,000 students who would have been expected to enroll in college in the fall but did not.

Critically, these declines were concentrated among low-income Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students. Nearly 1,500 fewer low-income URM students enrolled, representing a decline of 11 percentage points (or 19%), compared to just five percentage points (6%) for higher-income students from other racial/ethnic groups.



Enrollment declines were steepest in community colleges

More than a third of Massachusetts high-school graduates in the class of 2019 first enrolled in a private or out-of-state college. In-state public colleges and universities enrolled another third of students (21% in state four-year universities, and 13% in community colleges), while the final 30% of students did not enroll in college at all.

These enrollment patterns for the class of 2019 varied widely by academic preparation, race/ethnicity, and family income. More than twice as many low-income Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students enrolled in a Massachusetts public college or university than in a private or out-of-state college. And, for these students, community college was the most popular pathway. About 56% of low-income URM students in the class of 2019 enrolled in college in the fall following graduation, while 44% enrolled later or did not enroll. Among those who enrolled, 41% first enrolled in a Massachusetts community college, another 31% in an in-state four-year college, and just 28% in a private or out-of-state college.

¹ We define underrepresented minorities (URM) as those in the Black, Indigenous or Hispanic racial/ethnic groups.

Given these demographic patterns, it is not surprising that the COVID pandemic had a disproportionate impact on the Massachusetts public higher education sector, and particularly in community colleges. The share of the class of 2020 enrolling in out-of-state or private universities fell by 1.5 percentage points (representing nearly 1,300 students, or about a 4% decline), while enrollment in Massachusetts community colleges fell by nearly 3 percentage points (representing more than 2,000 students, or a 22% drop). The patterns are even more striking for low-income Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students – for these students, enrollments in community colleges fell 8 percentage points (1,200 students, or a 36% decline), while enrollments in private and out-of-state colleges were rather stable despite the pandemic.

Enrollment declines were concentrated in MA public colleges, especially community colleges

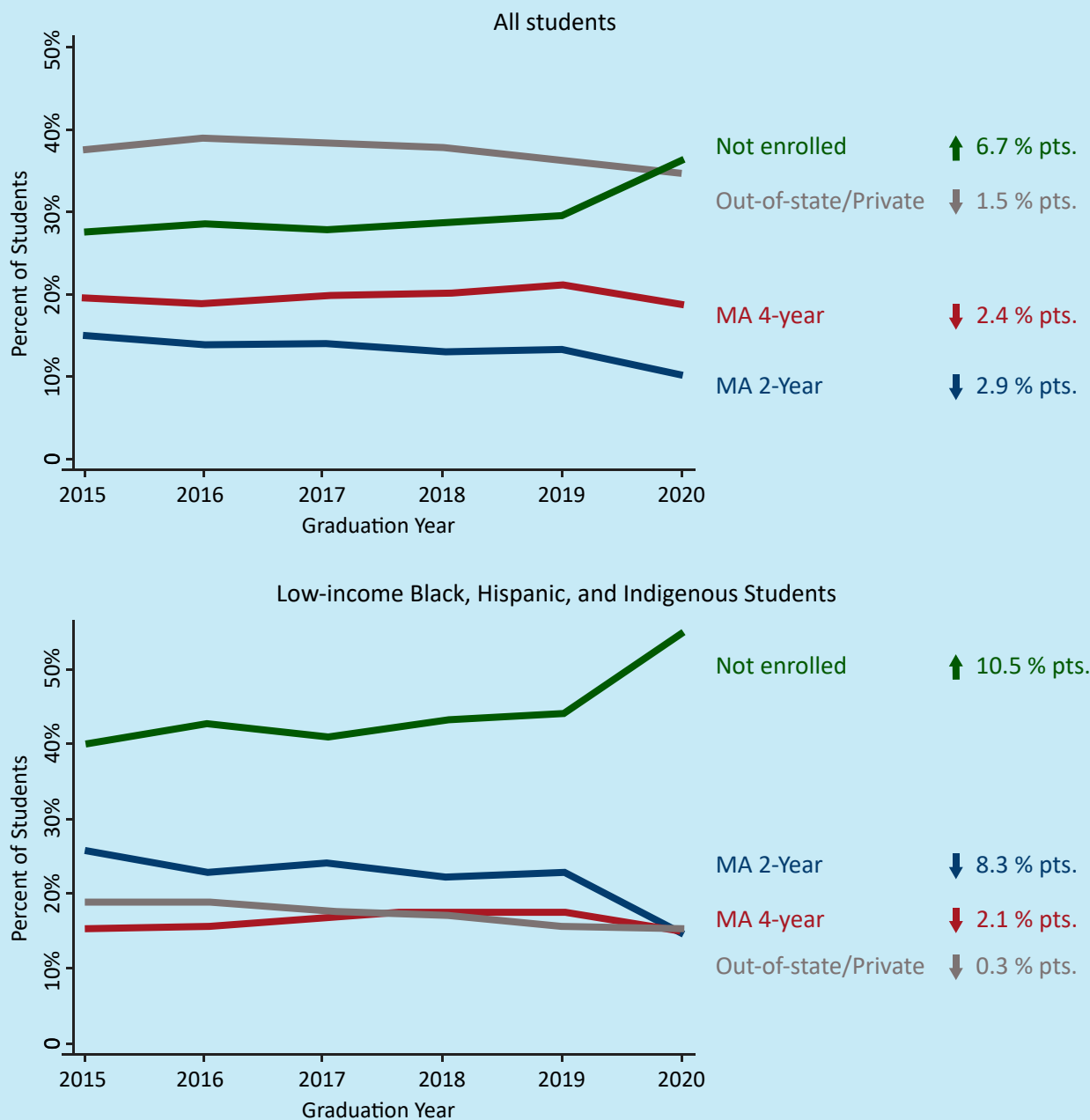


Figure 2. Enrollment in the fall immediately following high school graduation over time, sector, for all students (top) and low-income Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students (bottom).

Data and Analysis

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education maintains a comprehensive database that tracks students longitudinally beginning in the early 2000s. We link this information to data about students' college enrollments from the National Student Clearinghouse and FAFSA completion. For college enrollment analyses, we focus on students who graduate from high school in the spring of each given year. Thus, we do not explore the impact of the pandemic on students who do not graduate from high school or who graduate in the fall or summer. For FAFSA completion analyses, we focus on students enrolled in their senior year of high school.

FAFSA completion is a strong early indicator of college enrollment

A substantial body of research documents that completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a key gateway to post-secondary education. The FAFSA, a complicated and detailed form, is required for students to receive federal and state financial aid, as well as most sources of need-based aid from local colleges and universities. Thus, its completion is a critical step on the path to college enrollment for students from low-income families.

FAFSA completion is a useful early indicator of college enrollment in Massachusetts. In the class of 2019, 88% of students who completed the FAFSA enrolled in college, compared to just 37% who did not. We see similar patterns for the class of 2020, and similar patterns regardless of race/ethnicity and family income. Early completion is a stronger predictor of enrollment.

Students who complete FAFSA, particular before March 1, are much more likely to enroll in college

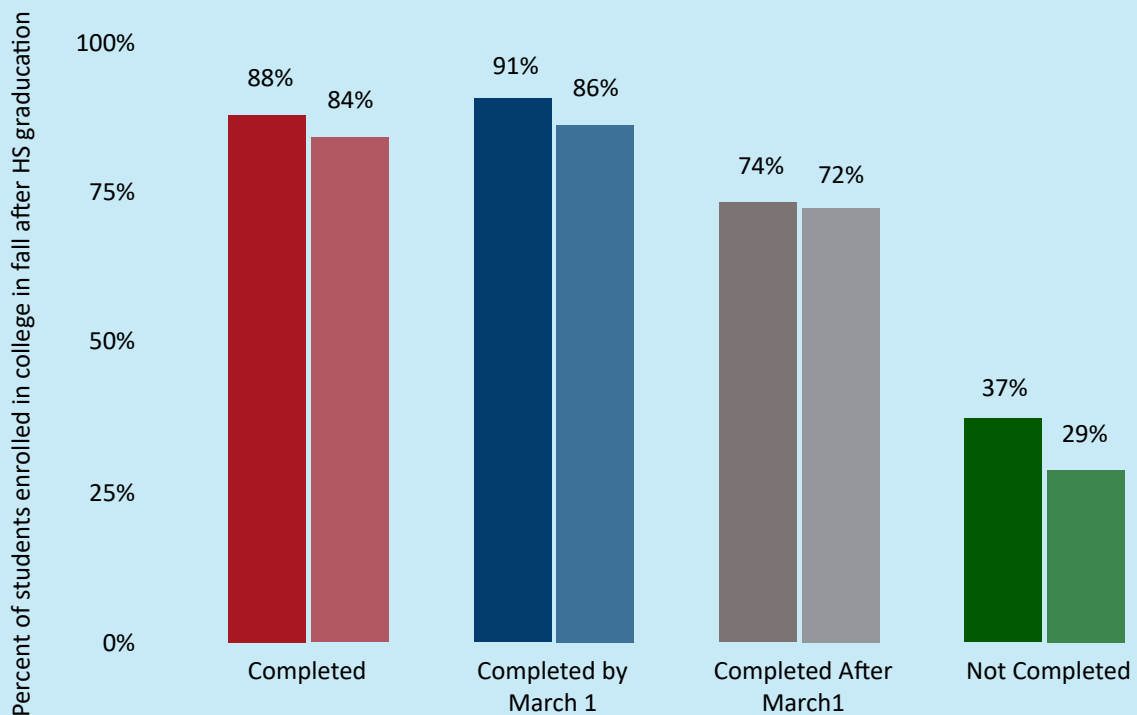
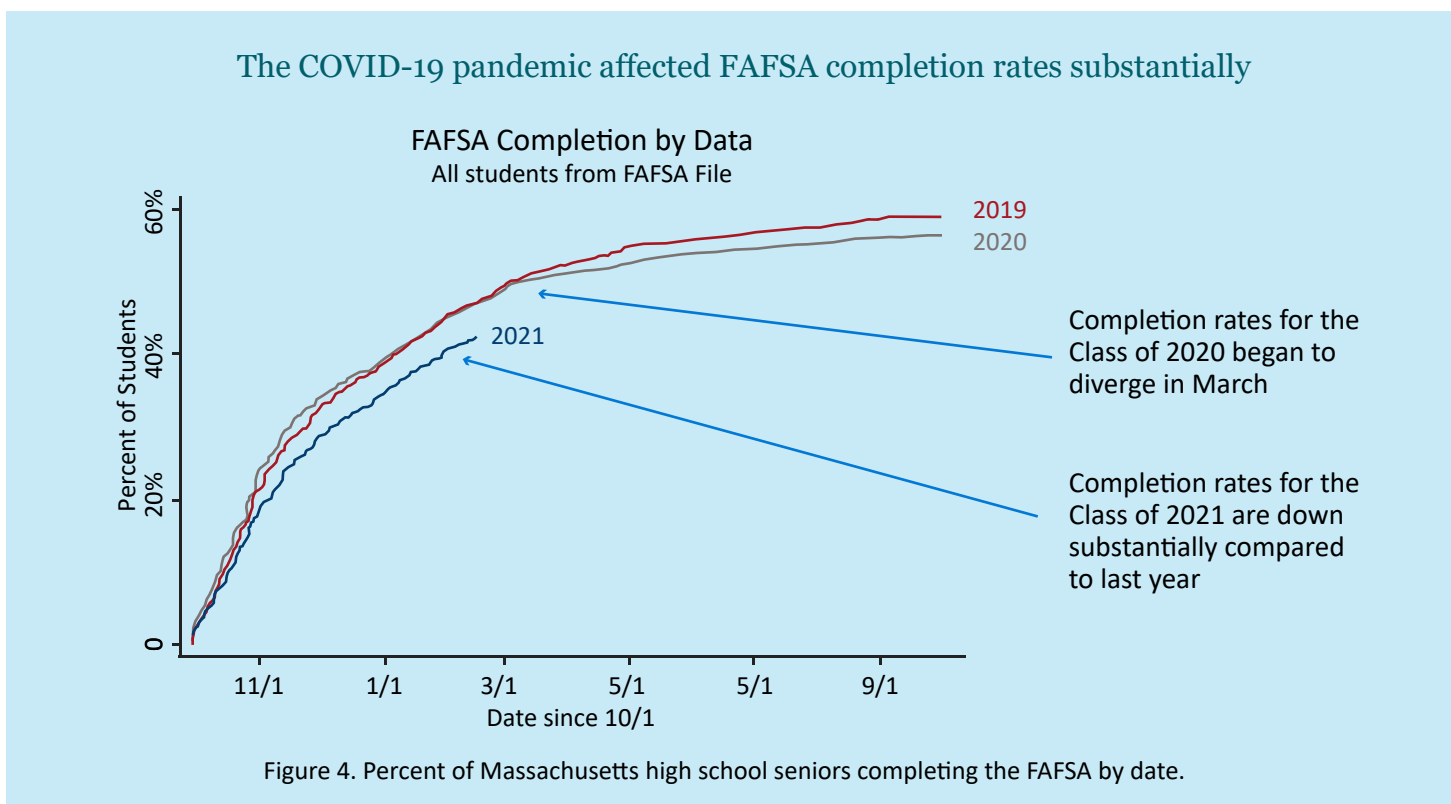


Figure 3. Probability of enrolling in college in the fall after high school graduation by FAFSA completion, 2019 and 2020.

FAFSA completion rates fell in the spring of 2020 and are substantially below last year's level for the class of 2021.

The pandemic had a substantial impact on FAFSA completion rates. Completion rates for high school seniors in 2020 began to lag behind those in the Class of 2019 in March, during the onset of the pandemic in the U.S. By the end of the summer, 60% of seniors in the Class of 2020 had completed the FAFSA, a 4 percentage point decline from the Class of 2019. The trend for the Class of 2021 has continued as of mid-February, with FAFSA completion rates lagging by approximately 5 percentage points.



These impacts varied substantially by family income. For the class of 2020, the pandemic's impact on FAFSA completion was concentrated among low-income students; there was no impact for higher-income students. However, the reduction in FAFSA completion for the class of 2021 spans all groups. While completion rates for low-income students are substantially lower than at a similar point in time in 2020, we now also see impacts for higher-income students. Overall, about 2,870 fewer students completed the FAFSA by this time last year, more than two-thirds of whom were low-income students.

About Educational Opportunity in Massachusetts

Educational Opportunity in Massachusetts is a research-practice partnership between researchers at Brown and Harvard Universities and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. We study the broad effects of educational reform in the Commonwealth and the ways that the public K–12 and higher education systems promote and constrain opportunity for students from all backgrounds. Using integrated data from several state agencies, we follow students' progress through the educational pipeline and entry into the labor force. Our work focuses on educational inequality and the consequences of standards-based reform.

Impacts in the Class of 2020 were concentrated among low-income students, but all students have lower FAFSA completion rates in 2021

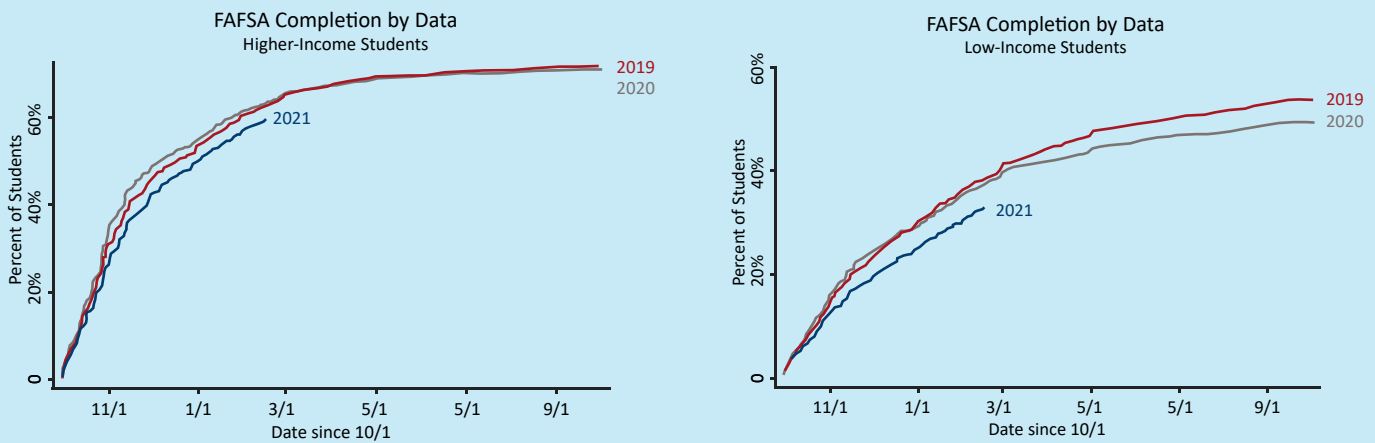


Figure 5. Percent of Massachusetts high school seniors completing the FAFSA by date, for low-income and higher-income students.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has obviously disrupted nearly all aspects of life, not just post-secondary education. Impacts on health, economic prosperity, and other aspects of well-being were disproportionately felt by families living in poverty and communities of color. However, given how important post-secondary credentials are in the labor market and as a driver of economic mobility, the patterns documented here raise serious concerns about long-term inequality for the Commonwealth. They highlight three key implications.

First, while many economic, health, and social factors clearly influenced students' post-secondary enrollment decisions, the choice to delay enrollment rather than engage in on-line higher education may have made sense for students who thought they would learn more in an in-person environment. We may see enrollments climb in the fall of 2021 for these students. However, we know that, prior to the pandemic, relatively few students who did not enroll in college immediately subsequently enrolled in future years. Ensuring that students in the class of 2020 who did not enroll become re-engaged with the system should be a key priority for the Commonwealth. And, although we focus primarily on students enrolling in college immediately after high school, there are likely impacts that stretch well beyond this group – altering students' plans for continuing or pursuing post-secondary education.

Second, addressing these challenges will require a coordinated response to support the Class of 2021, of the type begun through a partnership between the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Department of Higher Education, under the auspices of the Executive Office of Education and in partnership with high schools, college access and community organizations. It also requires attention to students who traditionally fall outside the auspices of either agency – recent high school graduates who have not yet enrolled in college.

Third, we focus on the immediate equity impacts of the pandemic. Longer-term impacts are likely to emerge as we gather more evidence on the widening gap in K-12 academic preparation that the pandemic has produced and as we learn more about how differences across individuals and post-secondary institutions in the resources available for virtual learning affect students' experiences.