

Gateway Community College

Fall 2020 Enrollment Survey Report

Introduction

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on community colleges is coming into focus, with institutions across the nation reporting sharp declines in enrollment for the Fall 2020 semester. At Gateway Community College, fall-to-fall enrollment fell by **12%** as of the census date (Sept. 17, 2020).

National surveys conducted before the start of the fall semester identified the rapid transition to online instruction as a key factor driving students' uncertainty about enrollment. In addition to the personal and social impacts of the coronavirus crisis, Gateway students are facing the challenge of learning almost exclusively online, for the first time.

Anticipating the challenges ahead for students, Board of Regents President Mark Ojakian noted in a March 23, 2020 update:

**Though our students are resilient, they will need a great deal of support,
both personally and academically, during this time.**

The efforts of faculty and staff at Gateway Community College are now focused on supporting students through the transition to online learning, while maintaining the quality of instruction and other student services, in the unfamiliar context of remote instruction and service delivery.

To learn more about the factors driving the decline in enrollment at Gateway Community College, the Office of Institutional Research surveyed currently enrolled students to learn about: (1) their concerns before and after enrolling for the Fall semester; (2) how well the College is supporting them; (3) their attitudes toward and experiences with online learning; and (4) their enrollment plans for the Spring 2021 semester. The survey consisted of 13 questions and took most respondents less than five minutes to complete.

The survey was administered online over six weeks at the beginning of the semester, from Sept 21 – Nov 6, 2020. Based on the overall student population, we chose a random sample of 546 students, for a 95% confidence level and a $\pm 4\%$ margin of error. An invitation was sent to the students via e-mail, and personalized reminder e-mails were sent each week to non-respondents.

A total of 206 students completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 37.7% and margin of error of $\pm 6.7\%$. Given the general decline in survey response rates, with many online surveys reaching only single-digit rates,¹ the response to the survey was high.

Respondent demographics were compared with those of the entire student population, and the respondent pool was found to generally representative of the student population across a range of demographic and academic characteristics, but men and students with GPAs under 2.5 were under-represented.

¹ Dillman, D.A., Smyth, J.D., & Christian L.M. (2014) *Internet, phone, mail and mixed mode surveys: The tailored design method* (4th ed.). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Given the high response rate, the overall representativeness of the respondent pool and persistent trends in the data over the collection period, we believe the data is valid and have chosen to report the results of the survey. Except where noted, the percentages in this report are calculated based on the total number of students who completed the survey, as respondents were allowed to skip questions. The report also incorporates analysis and samples of open-ended survey responses to supplement the quantitative data.

Acknowledgements

The Office of Institutional Research is grateful to the following people for the assistance they provided with the research and design of the survey and the interpretation of the data:

[Kat Ahern](#), Gateway Community College

[Rose Luglio](#), Gateway Community College

[Andrew Pelletier](#), Housatonic Community College

[Roberta Prior](#), Gateway Community College

[Sheri Valentin](#), Gateway Community College

[Kim Wood](#), Housatonic Community College

The Office of Institutional Research
Gateway Community College

[Jamicia Lackey](#)

Research Specialist

[Vincent Tong, Ph.D.](#)

Regional Institutional Research Director, Shoreline-West

Student Concerns

What were students' concerns as the semester began?

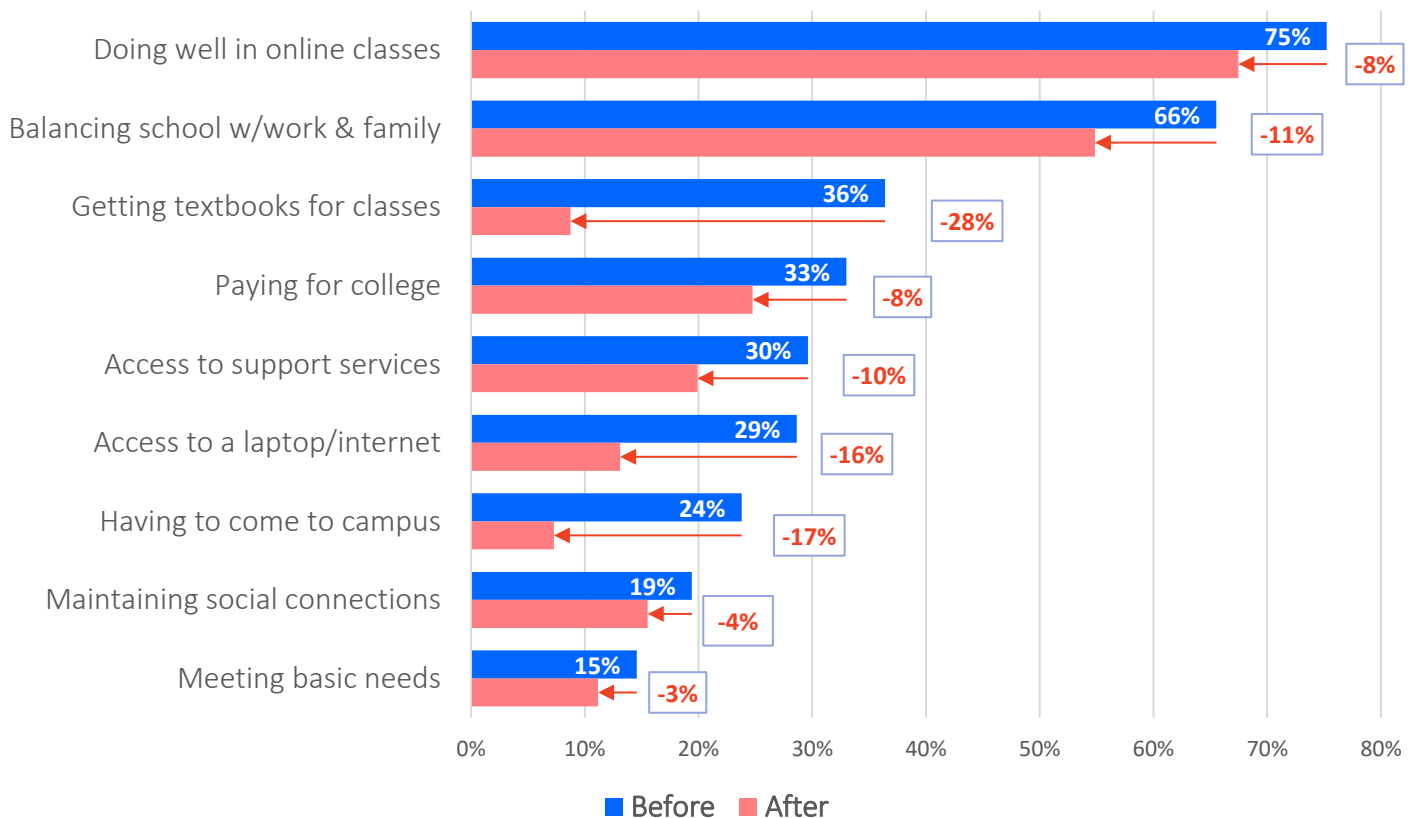
Before the semester started, students were most concerned about doing well in online classes and balancing school with other responsibilities. Students also reported significant concern around access to support services and paying for college.

Top Concerns before Fall 2020 Semester

75%	66%	36%	33%	30%
doing well in online classes	balancing school with work & family	having to come to campus	paying for college	access to support services

The overwhelming percentage of students who reported concern about succeeding in online classes suggests that attitudes towards and experiences with online learning may play an over-sized role in students' enrollment decisions going forward. This dynamic is exacerbated by the fact that concerns about academic performance have not decreased substantially since the start of the semester and remain high.

Students' Concerns Before & After the Start of the Fall 2020 Semester



Access to Support

How are students accessing support?





Concerns about accessing support services have decreased, but not significantly, since the beginning of the semester. Approximately **1 in 5** students remains concerned about access to services such as tutoring, advising and financial aid.

The majority of students (**77%**) used e-mail to connect to support at the college, making it the predominate method students are using to access services. Only **7%** of students reported having an in-person meeting with staff. Notable percentages of students have used less traditional methods of contact, such as video conference and online chat. The response rate for this question (**99%**) suggests high rates of interaction between staff and students needing assistance during the first weeks of the semester.

20%
of students remain
concerned about
access to support
services.

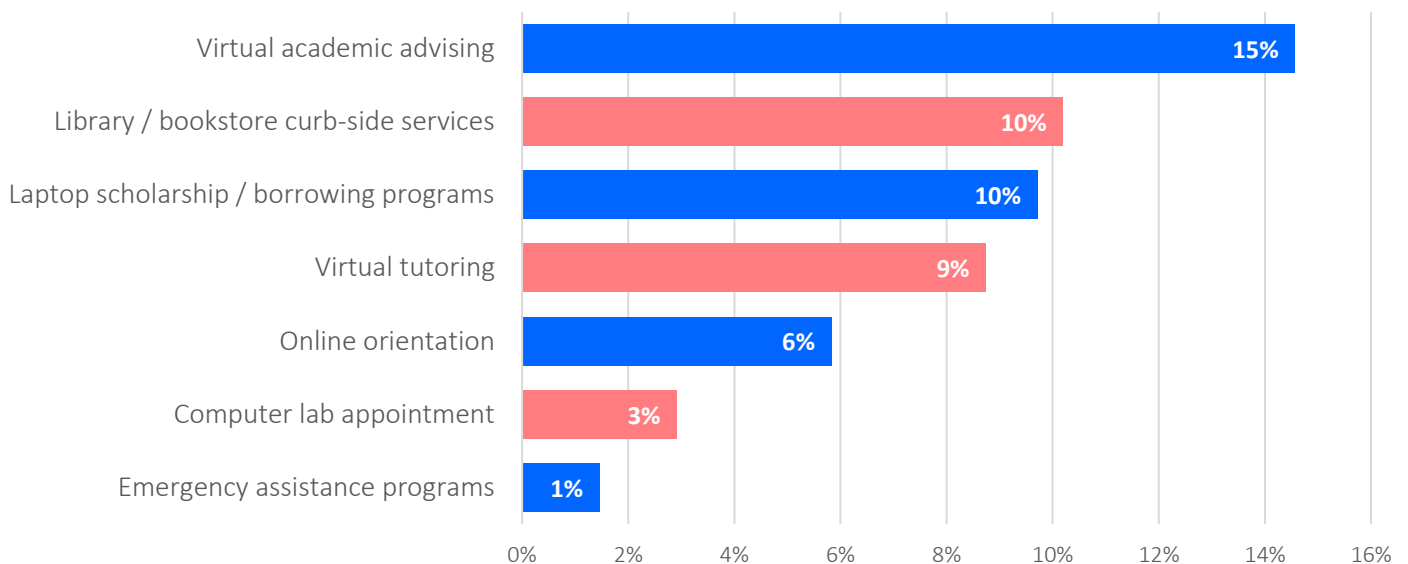
10%
decrease since
the start
of the semester

Top Methods of Accessing Support

			
e-mail (77%)	phone (36%)	video conference (19%)	online chat (15%)

A majority of students (**63%**) had accessed one or more of the following resources:

Q5: Have you taken advantage of any of these resources at your college? (Check all that apply.)

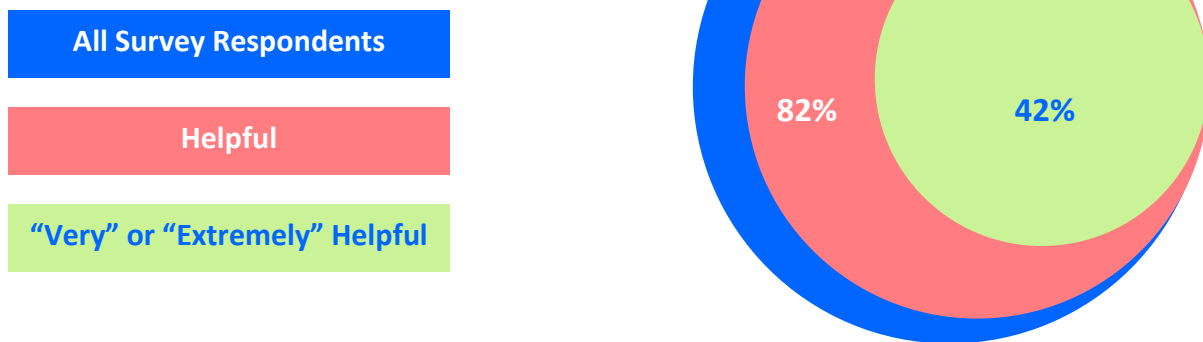


Are students getting the help they need?

Although a majority of students (82%) reported that college staff have been helpful in addressing their concerns, there is a significant drop-off in the number of students who found staff “very” or “extremely” helpful (42%). Only 5% of students reported that staff were not at all helpful.

The question also had a high response rate of 98.5%, again pointing to high rates of interaction between staff and students needing assistance during the first weeks of the semester.

Q4: Overall, how helpful has the staff been in addressing your concerns?



Less than a third (29%) of students responded to an open-ended question [Q9] on what the college could do to provide more support. Of these respondents, 27% of these respondents expressed negative sentiments about the support they are receiving from the college, while 5% wrote positive comments. Textual categorization of the responses revealed a few important themes.

Top Categories & Samples of Textual Responses about Support

(Percentages of all respondents to Q9: What can we do to provide more support?)

Communication / Responsiveness – 14%

Some students expressed frustration with a lack of responsiveness from staff when they reach out for help, while others wanted more communication around access to resources.

I wasn't aware of all the different modes of support that are offered. More advertising for those would be extremely helpful.

Experience w/ student support services in trying to enroll for the first time was not good. Long delay in communication.

More detailed information on tutoring.

Tech Support & Laptops – 8%

Some students continue to struggle with access to laptops, including new students who reported they were ineligible for laptop scholarships due to GPA requirements. Others have unresolved tech support issues that are impacting their ability to access their online classes.

I have been having trouble using Webex for class and I have been calling class through the phone. I called and emailed [for] help and no response at all. The staff at Gateway is not helpful when it comes to things like this and always find myself figuring out problems on my own.

Provide freshman students with a way to borrow laptops if they do not have reliable access to one.

Advising – 5%

A few students reported general concern about advising for the spring semester, potentially pointing to scheduling issues for the Spring semester.

Do more things to facilitate... communicat[ion] with advisers.

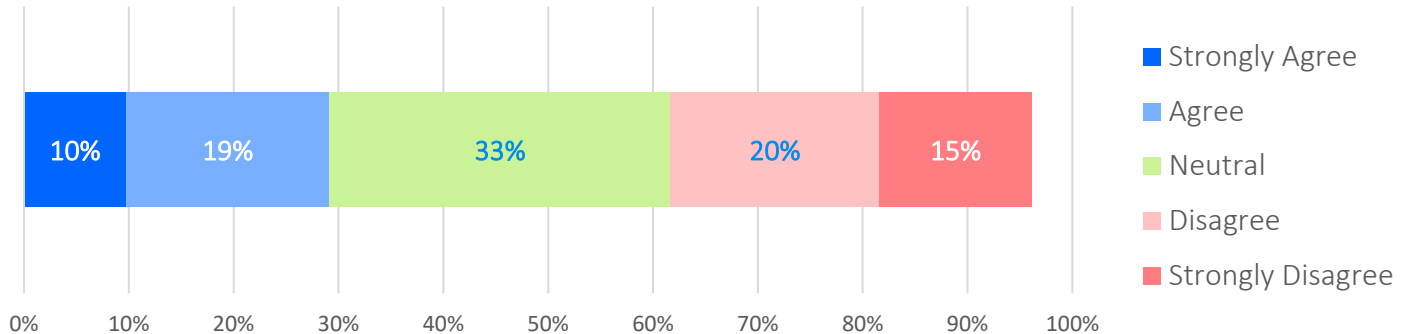
I am concerned about advising needs when it comes around to signing up for the next semester.

Online Learning

How are students faring with online learning?

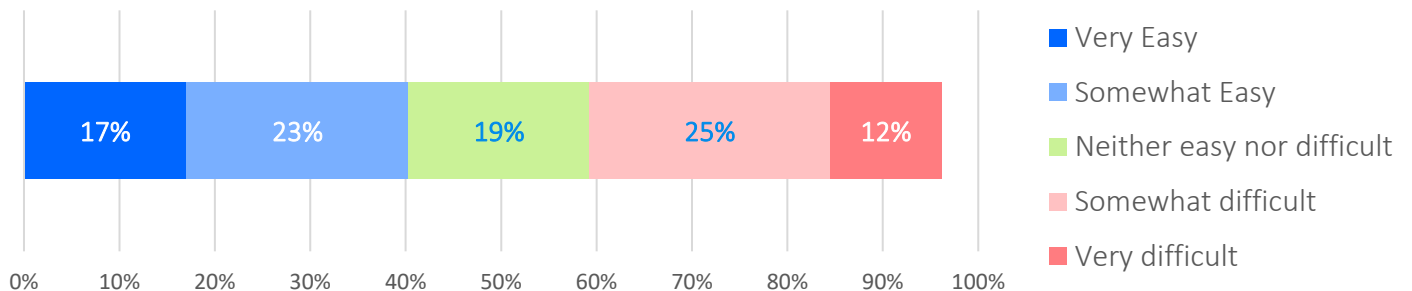
Given the shift to remote instruction in Spring 2020, we asked students about their perceptions of and experiences with online learning. Opinions about for online learning were evenly split, with about **1/3** of students reporting enthusiasm, a lack of excitement and ambivalence about taking classes online.

Q8: I am excited about taking classes online.



Students' experiences of the transition to online classes also varied widely, with more students (**37%**) finding the transition "somewhat" or "very" difficult.

Q6: How would you rate your experience transitioning to online classes?

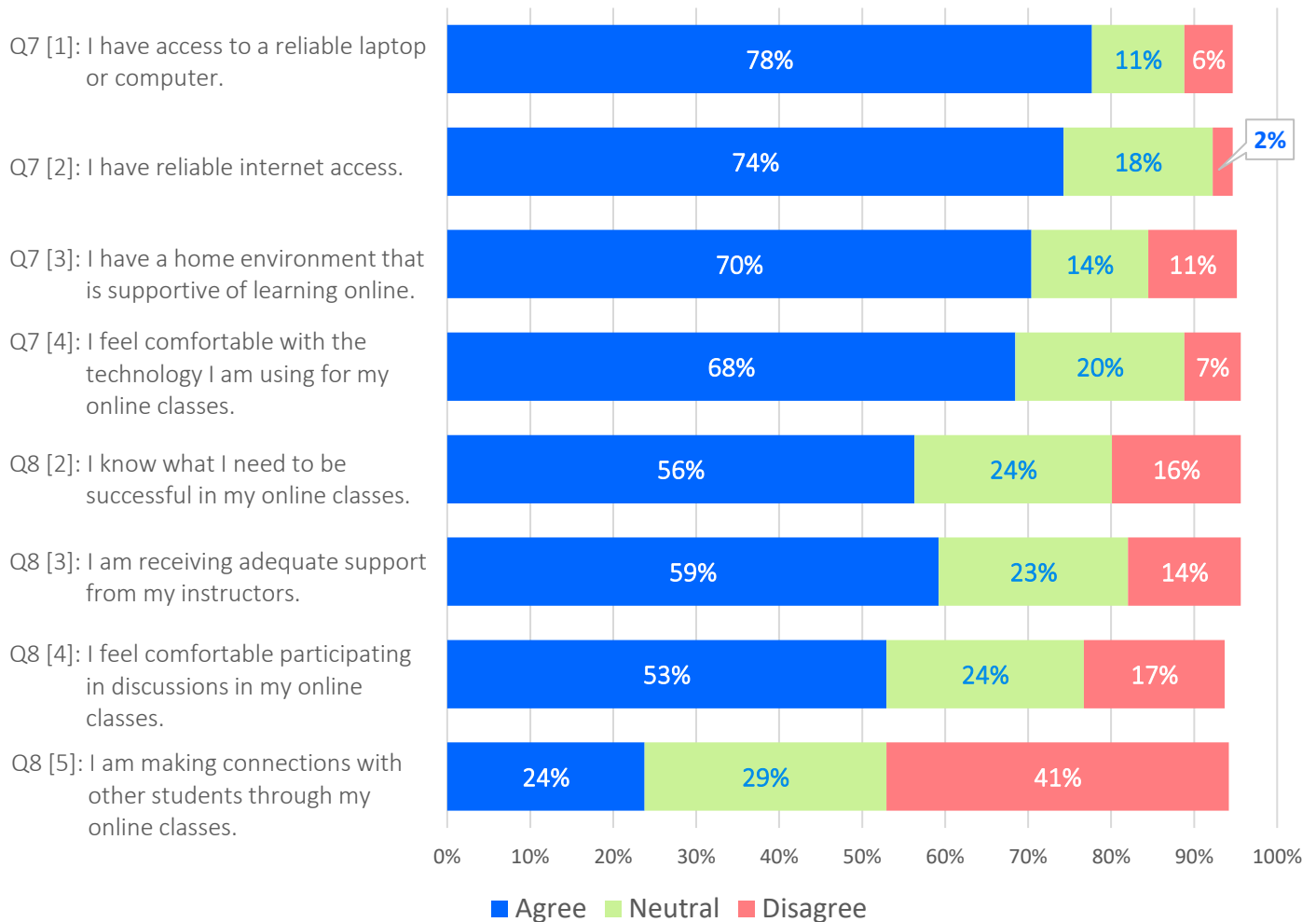


To gauge students' preparation for and attitudes toward online learning, we asked them to indicate their agreement or disagreement, along a Likert scale, with statements about remote learning technology and their learning environment [Q7] and their experiences taking classes online [Q8].

The overwhelming majority of currently enrolled students have access to a reliable laptop or computer (**78%**) and internet access (**74%**) for online learning, which helps to explain the relatively low numbers of students who reported concerns about access to these resources after classes started [in Q2]. Most students also reported

that they feel comfortable with the technology needed for remote learning, and that they also have a home environment conducive to taking classes online, although at lesser percentages.

Preparation for & Experiences with Online Learning



Students were less affirmative in response to statements in Q8 about their experiences with online classes. For Q8 statements 2, 3 and 4, agreement decreased an average of **17 percentage points**, while the students that gave a neutral response grew by an average of **6%**. Still, the percentages of students who reported feeling comfortable and supported in their online classes are remarkably high, given that nearly 2 out of 3 of students were still concerned about doing well in online classes at the time they completed the survey [Q2].

Agreement dropped sharply for the final statement about peer-to-peer connections, with **41%** of respondents expressing disagreement. Maintaining social connections did not emerge as a top concern for students; only **16%** reported that they were concerned about this after the semester began.

Overall, the differences in agreement between Q7 statements about remote learning technology and environment and Q8 statements about experiences with online learning point to the need for more support in relation to the social aspects of online learning.

For Q9, students were asked to share thoughts on what the college could do to provide more support, and nearly two-thirds (64%) of the open-ended responses focused on online learning and instruction, with the vast majority (92%) expressing negative sentiments. Three intersecting concerns emerged from a textual analysis of the responses:

Top Categories & Samples of Textual Responses about Online Learning

(Percentages of all respondents to [Q9]: What can we do to provide more support?)

Technology – 20%

Concerns about online learning technology focused mainly on its impact on instruction, and on access and performance issues.

Technology & Instruction

Some students discussed the difficulty of completing their programs through online courses, while others focused on how the platforms they use for online learning are negatively impacting instruction.

I think Zoom classes would help better...where I can ask my teachers questions and get an immediate response.

It is difficult to do it [science classes] online... because it is difficult to see slides on the computer.

Maybe teach the teachers how to use Blackboard Collab. Using Webex is not as easy, and it doesn't have...the same hand raising and polls which make some online classes more engaging imo.

Access and Performance Issues

Although a majority of students reported in Q7 that they feel comfortable with the technology used in their online classes, a few students are still having technological issues that are impacting their ability to access or fully participate in their classes.

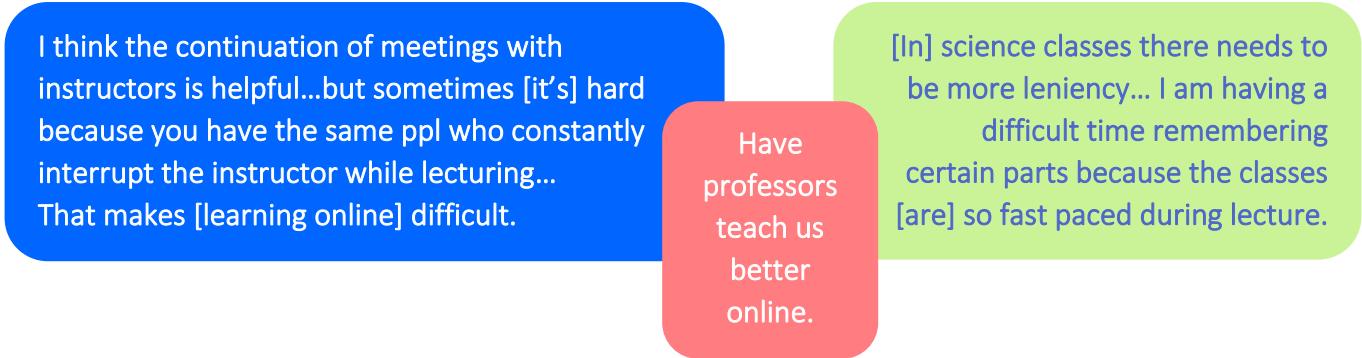
The online learning platform Blackboard Collaborate Ultra is very choppy in most lectures and it's very hard to hear the professor talk.

I don't have a laptop. I use my phone for my classes.

I have been having trouble using Webex for class and I have been calling class through the phone.

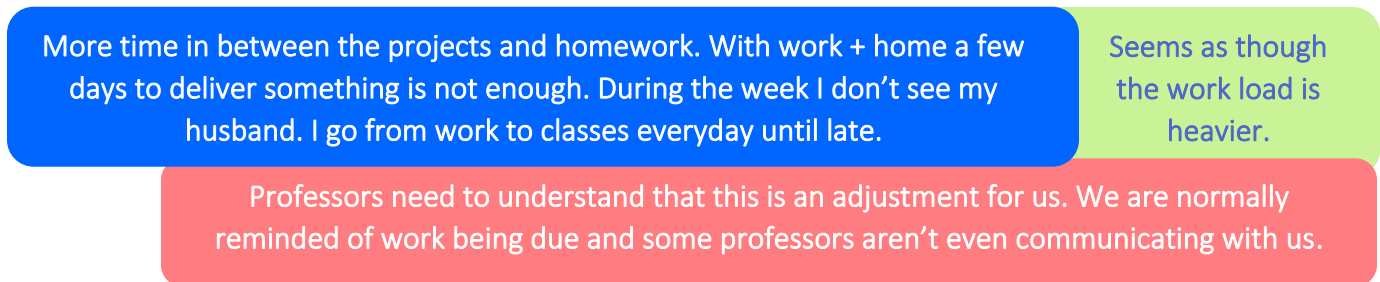
Quality of Instruction – 15%

Although this category of responses intersects with those that reference technology, some students expressed concern about the quality of instruction they are receiving from professors simply because classes are online.



Assignments & Workload – 10%

Some students are having difficulty with the workload in their online courses. Given that concerns about balancing school with other responsibilities remain high, students who are struggling to keep up with assignments in online courses may be at risk for withdrawing.



Spring Enrollment

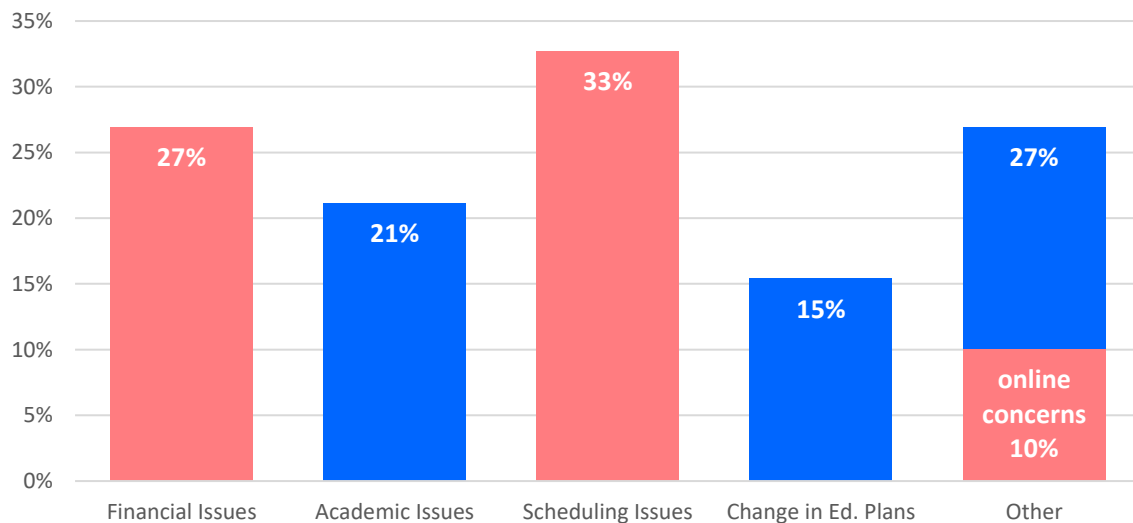
Are current students returning in the Spring? What's holding them back?

While a majority of respondents indicated that they plan to return next semester, about **1 in 5** students are unsure about their plans.



When asked about the barriers holding them back from enrolling, students who indicated “no” or “unsure” about enrolling pointed to a variety of reasons. Notably, **33%** of these students pointed to scheduling issues, such as a conflict with a job, as the top barrier to returning in the Spring. Another **27%** of respondents pointed to financial issues as top concern, possibly pointing to an effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on students’ confidence in their ability to afford college.

Barriers to Enrollment



Students were not given an answer choice to relating to online courses for Q12: What barriers are holding you back from registering for the Spring semester? Yet, out of 14 students who chose “Other” and provided a written response, over a third identified concerns about online learning as a barrier to enrollment, or about **10%** of all students who are not yet committed to enrolling in the Spring.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The survey results indicate that the most pressing concerns for currently enrolled students are around **doing well in online classes** and **balancing school with other responsibilities**, and that these concerns are affecting students' enrollment decisions for the Spring 2021 semester. **19%** of the students who responded to the survey are **unsure about returning** in the Spring, and 2% indicated that they would not re-enroll. The top **barriers to enrollment** for these students are **scheduling issues, such as a job conflict** (33%) and **financial concerns** (27%). Although they were not given an answer choice related to "online learning," 10% of the respondents who are not committed to enrolling for the Spring semester identified **challenges with learning online** as a barrier to enrollment.

Students are split in their attitudes toward and experiences with online learning. While most students reported that they are technologically prepared for taking classes online, they feel **less prepared for the social aspects of online learning**, including engaging with faculty and peers and time management. When students were asked to share thoughts on what the college could do to provide more support, nearly two-thirds (64%) of the open-ended responses focused on online learning and instruction. Concerns about the **quality of instruction** and the **technology** used for course delivery emerged as top issues for students who expressed the need for more support around online learning. Some students also expressed frustration with the **workload** in their courses.

There are encouraging signs that many currently enrolled students feel supported and prepared for online learning. **Overall, concerns around access to support and resources have declined** since the start of the semester, and most students feel the staff has been helpful in addressing their concerns. However, there is **room for improvement**, with 20% of students still concerned about access to support services, and over a third (40%) of students reporting that staff was only "slightly" or "moderately" helpful in addressing their concerns.

Communication with staff and **access to tech support and laptops** emerged as the top support issues raised in open-ended responses. Some students expressed the desire for **more communication with advisors**, possibly pointing to scheduling concerns for the Spring semester.

Based on these findings, we offer the following recommendations for encouraging enrollment:

1/ Focus on academic and financial aid advising to address top barriers to enrollment. While it is not surprising that students would be concerned about schedule conflicts and financial aid as they consider re-enrolling for the Spring semester, the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has likely exacerbated these issues. Increased support around advising and financial aid may help currently enrolled students persist.

2/ Improve access to laptops and technology support. With the transition to remote instruction, more students than ever need to access to laptops and support using online learning platforms. Increasing the availability of laptops, especially to new students, and finding ways to identify and assist students who are struggling to access online courses is critical for retention.

3/ Increase support around the social aspects of online learning, including instruction. While some students have adapted well to online learning, those who are struggling may be unsure about returning. Finding ways to enhance student engagement in online courses and assist busy students with managing course workload may help students feel more comfortable with online learning and continue to pursue their educational goals.

Demographic Comparison²

	Survey Respondents	Student Population
Student Type		
New	16%	20%
Continuing	64%	62%
Transfer	15%	11%
Readmitted	4%	4%
HS Partnership	2%	3%
FT/PT		
Full Time	27%	31%
Part Time	73%	68%
Degree		
Associates	89%	87%
Certificate	4%	5%
Non-Degree	7%	9%
Semester Credits		
Avg. Sem. Credits	9	8
GPA Distribution		
No GPA*	25%	29%
2.0 or lower	6%	10%
2.1 - 2.5	6%	9%
2.6 - 3.0	19%	16%
3.1 - 3.5	18%	18%
3.6 and higher	26%	15%

* Students with 0 overall earned credits.

	Survey Respondents	Student Population
Gender		
Female	75%	63%
Male	25%	37%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	40%	37%
Hispanic/Latino	27%	28%
Black/African American	25%	23%
Asian	3%	4%
Amer. Ind./Alaska Native	0%	<1%
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	0%	<1%
Two or more races	2%	3%
Nonresident alien	1%	1%
Unknown	2%	2%
Age		
Average Age	28	26
Course Modalities this Semester		
LRON	65%	63%
ONLN	29%	29%
HYBR	4%	4%
TRAD	2%	3%
CLIN	5%	4%
INTN	1%	<1%
OLCR	1%	<1%

² All demographics taken at census date (Sept 17, 2020).