



# The Impact of COVID-19 on the University Student Experience

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Higher education has undergone a dramatic transformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the onset of COVID-19 during the Spring 2020 semester sent students home to engage with new or revamped online learning platforms, the Fall 2020 semester brought a range of responses. Some universities returned fully in-person, some remained fully online, and others practiced varying degrees of both.

In December 2020, WeWork, in partnership with [brightspot strategy](#), a research and strategy firm, conducted a blind, representative survey to holistically assess the student experience during the Fall 2020 semester. Data from this survey was compared to data gathered in Fall 2019 (during a normal semester) and Spring 2020 (at the onset of COVID-19) to understand the change in students' experiences.

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## KEY FINDINGS

**Overall student satisfaction declined 27 percent in Fall 2020, compared to Spring 2020 (the onset of COVID-19).**

**Fully online students are half as satisfied as compared to fully in-person students** (35 percent satisfied versus 69 percent satisfied), hybrid students, with a mixture of in-person and online classes, are 67 percent satisfied. Students attending classes fully in person are 15 percent more likely to rate their academics “far above average” this semester compared to fully online students.

**The two most important reasons students value campus—“in-person classes” and “being together with friends”—are areas of the student experience that have seen the greatest decline from Spring 2020 to Fall 2020.**

**Students' assessments of their academic growth, personal growth, and community experiences have dropped between 14 and 21 percent on average from Spring 2020 to Fall 2020.** Specifically, students reported a 23 percent drop in “feeling engaged in my coursework,” and a 20 percent drop in “working on long-term projects.”

**On average, students would choose to allocate the majority of tuition (59 percent) toward non-class expenditures** (including access to technology and campus facilities), and the minority (41 percent) toward classes.



Photo courtesy of Her Campus Media LLC



In Fall 2020, approximately 44 percent of institutions planned to open primarily or fully online, 21 percent anticipated a hybrid model, and 27 percent planned to be primarily or fully in person, according to the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#). The move toward virtual classes was a continuation of policies in Spring 2020, when most institutions closed their campuses and completed the semester online.

Whether or not a student had in-person classes had the greatest impact on their satisfaction. Online learning has impacted so much of student life and hence the overall university experience. It's difficult for students to socialize and connect with like-minded individuals through virtual courses. Students surveyed ask that universities find places where they can safely interact and socialize. Students also hope professors would foster more of a social environment in virtual classes.

The few students who had access to a "third place," a location outside their home and campus that could serve as a learning environment, rated their academic performance above average. These students had the highest likelihood of recommending their university to a friend; none of them were detractors of their university. They rated their campuses' ability to make them feel a part of a community the highest, among all students surveyed.

Those surveyed who rely on their universities for physical, mental, and economic safety are pushing their schools to be better support systems for all students. They implore universities to lower tuition and lift campus fees for students who are fully online. They ask for more financial aid, and that food be made available all day.

Looking ahead, many students are adjusting their Spring 2021 plans. Higher education leaders must recognize the importance of a fully robust student experience that covers all facets of a student's life, on or off campus. This study examines how university responses to COVID-19 impacts students' self-reported satisfaction, and highlights where institutions should focus their efforts during the pandemic and beyond.

## Methodology

In December 2020, brightspot's [Student Experience Snapshot](#), a nationally benchmarked, holistic student experience assessment tool, was administered to over 400 students. This survey was also administered during the Spring 2020 semester at the onset of COVID-19 as well as during the 2018–2019 academic year, providing baseline data. The results from the December 2020 survey are the lowest self-reported assessment of the student experience since the survey was first administered in 2018.

The survey is representative of undergraduate students enrolled in bachelor's degree programs across the United States. These students attended primarily public and private four-year institutions, with a strong representation from research institutions. Additionally, the survey collected information on how these institutions have adjusted to COVID-19, their policies and procedures, as well as information regarding student home and study environments.

For the Fall 2020 semester:

- 85 percent of students surveyed had at least half of their coursework conducted online
- Half of students studied either primarily or fully online, one-third studied in a hybrid model, and 16 percent studied primarily or fully in person
- 45 percent of students lived at home, with the other 55 percent living in either on- or off-campus housing. (See a full breakdown of students' living and studying situations in the Appendix.)

The survey analyzes how student and university environments impact the following success metrics:

- **Net Promoter Score:** How likely students are to recommend their college or university to a friend or colleague.
- **Self-Assessed Academic Performance:** How students rate their Fall 2020 semester performance as compared to their Spring 2020 (onset of COVID-19) performance.
- **Overall Satisfaction:** How satisfied students are, overall, with their college or university experience during the Fall 2020 semester during COVID-19.

The survey asked students to assess their experience during the Fall 2020 semester across a holistic set of touchpoints\*. Respondents were asked to rate their experience across a series of activity statements within each of the nine touchpoint categories, on a scale of 1 to 5. Data was used from prior administrations of the Student Experience Snapshot, both in 2018–2019 during a normal academic year, and in Spring 2020 at the onset of COVID-19, to calculate the difference in self-assessed experience.

An average of all survey respondents shows that the experience across all nine touchpoints has declined since Spring 2020 at the onset of COVID-19, with certain touchpoints experiencing greater impact than others. Assessing these changes against institutional and individual student conditions provides a more nuanced picture of what universities should address to improve the student experience for both in-person and online students going forward.

*\*These touchpoints, built on established student assessment categories found in similar national surveys, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU), and supplemented with brightspot's experience working with more than 90 institutions of higher education, include personal growth, academic experience, academic services, administrative services, facilities, technology platforms and hardware, campus culture, and community.*

**OVERALL STUDENT EXPERIENCE HAS DECLINED**

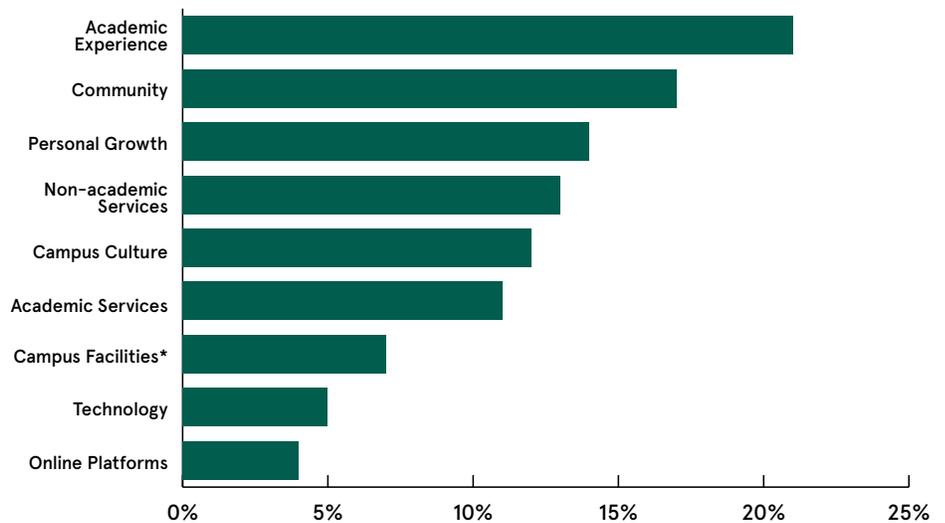
**Results**

**Overall student satisfaction has declined 27 percent** between Spring 2020 (onset of COVID-19) and Fall 2020. During Spring 2020, 75 percent of students were at least somewhat satisfied overall, in contrast with 55 percent of students at least somewhat satisfied in Fall 2020.

Students reported this impact most acutely in their personal growth, academic experience, and community. They felt less of an impact in regard to technology, online platforms, and facilities.

**Overall student experience**

Percent drop in students' Fall 2020 experience as compared to Spring 2020



\*Campus facilities compare Fall 2020 to the 2018-2019 academic year (since most universities transitioned off-campus in Spring 2020 at the onset of COVID-19)

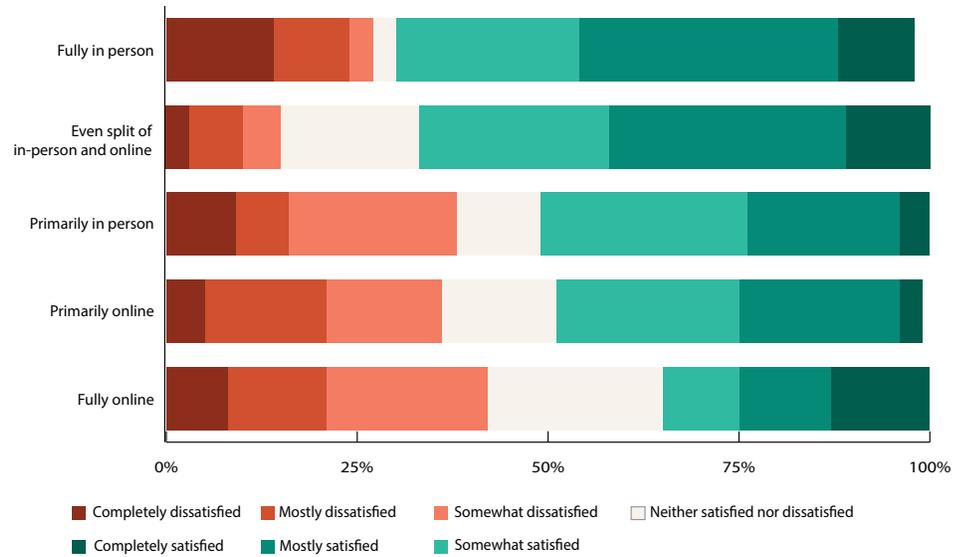
**CAMPUS LIFE AND IN-PERSON CLASSES LEAD TO HIGHER SATISFACTION**

Online students are less satisfied and feel less like they belong to a community. Fully online students are half as satisfied as fully in-person students (35 percent satisfied versus 69 percent satisfied).

On the other hand, **students attending classes fully in person are struggling less, and are 15 percent more likely to rate their academics “far above average”** this semester compared to fully online students. Hybrid students, with an even split of in-person and online classes, are also having a better experience than fully online students, and are 33 percent more likely to recommend their university to a friend.

### Overall experience satisfaction by course format

Percent of students in each course format satisfied or dissatisfied with their overall Fall 2020 experience



A student’s living situation also impacts satisfaction. One student described her challenges working from home: “It has not been working well. My household doesn’t have good internet and there are four of us using it. My mom is also teaching, so it’s difficult to have space and good internet.”

- 65 percent of students living on campus are at least somewhat satisfied, as compared to 53 percent of students living at home.
- Students that live on campus are more likely to feel that their university is “understanding their needs” and “providing financial support” during this time.

Whether students live on or off campus, and the degree to which their campus is open, impacts their overall experience. One student suggested that for the upcoming Spring semester their institution should “try to communicate as well as possible about what the university is planning so that my family [and I] can plan.”

- When the entire campus was open, students were 13 percent more satisfied and were more likely to recommend their university to a friend than were peers with less access to campus spaces.
- Students with full access to the campus feel more positively about their universities’ “communication of updates and changes” during COVID-19.

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**ACADEMICS AND  
INTERPERSONAL  
GROWTH ARE MOST  
NEGATIVELY  
IMPACTED**

Overall, **89 percent of students surveyed had access to some of, if not the entire campus**. However, most students surveyed utilized a dedicated office or desk space in their own home environments, not the campus, as their primary study space. Twenty percent of students use a non-work area, such as a kitchen table or couch as their primary workspace, and 12 percent utilized a shared space on campus, like a library.

Since Fall 2020, students felt the biggest decline in their academic experience among all metrics evaluated. [High-impact practices](#) that correlate to increased student persistence, satisfaction, and retention have been hard hit. This includes

- “working on long-term projects” (20 percent decrease)
- “feeling engaged in coursework” (23 percent decrease)
- “interacting with peers in the classroom” (28 percent decrease)

One student spoke to this disconnect: “I have a paper due in a week that I haven’t even started on because I don’t feel emotionally connected to the course like I would if it was in person.”

Students are struggling to prepare for their future since Spring 2020, reporting a roughly **14 percent drop in obtaining life skills** like “preparing for my future career,” “working well on a team,” and “expanding my comfort zone.”

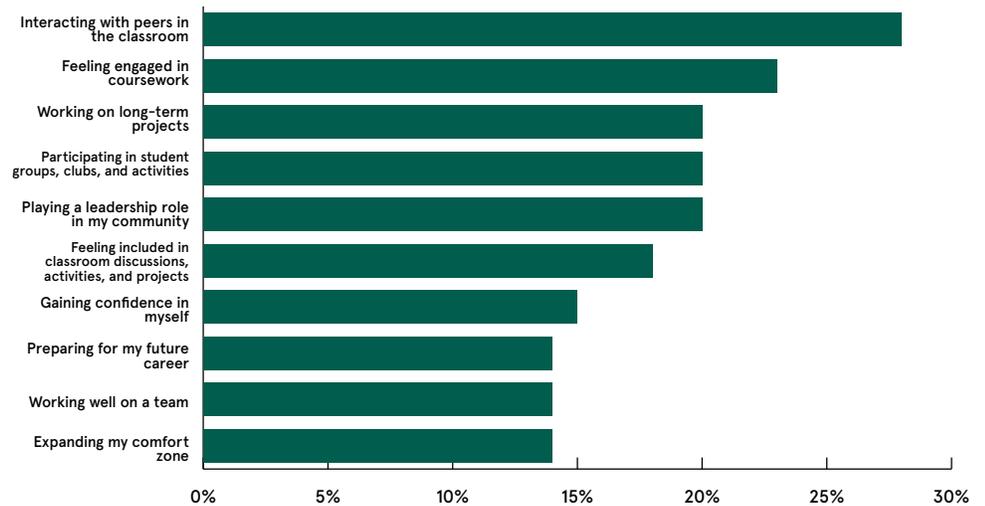
This is compounded by the fact that **self-confidence has dropped 15 percent**. As one student put it, “I think it was most difficult to try to figure out what potential career path I may want to take because of the fact that everything being online limited my abilities to gain in-the-field experience and talk to people about what they do, to figure out what may interest me.”

Online learning has also affected the way students socialize with one another, and has made it difficult for students to organically connect through classwork and shared interests. Students yearn for ways to safely socialize on campus, and ask that universities help identify places where these interactions can occur, or develop better events and activities virtually. Peer-to-peer communication in online classes is difficult, and students hope professors could play a more significant role in fostering a social environment in virtual classroom environments.

Beyond the classroom, students are having a hard time engaging in extracurricular activities and assuming leadership roles, two important facets of growth and obtaining a career post-graduation. Even students who lived on campus experienced difficulty engaging. According to one student: “There were so many classes fully online, but I was living on campus in a dorm, so I would often have to be sitting at my desk all day from morning until afternoon, only leaving for meals.”

**Impact on academics and interpersonal growth**

Percent drop in students’ Fall 2020 experience as compared to Spring 2020



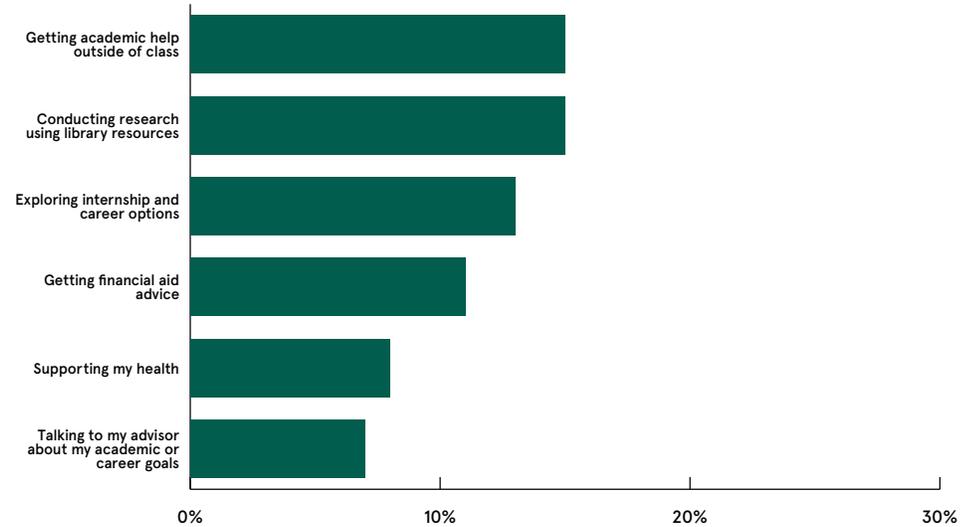
**SERVICE INTERACTIONS MODERATELY IMPACTED**

Online learning—whether fully online or through a hybrid model—has created challenges for students in their ability to focus, seek extra help, and stay motivated. One student indicated that their “biggest challenge is having to write a six- to seven-page paper without being able to go to the campus library or getting help from an instructor face-to-face for assignments.”

Online learning and extended isolation have also impacted students’ mental health, and they ask that their universities provide reliable, virtual counseling services to help support them through this time. One student said, “I deal with a lot of mental health issues such as depression when I do not have a regular and rigorous schedule to adhere by. The issue with being isolated at home without classes to attend in person is that I feel no reason to adhere to specific hours a day to study or attend online classes. It kind of feels too flexible when left to your own discretion.”

### Impact on service interactions

Percent drop in students' Fall 2020 experience as compared to Spring 2020



### TECHNOLOGIES ARE THE LEAST IMPACTED

Universities were able to maintain the effectiveness of their digital and physical assets in a time of increased strain and scrutiny. With only slight drops in performance, this may be judged as a success during a global pandemic.

Students felt relatively little impact on their access to hardware, software, and WiFi, which is positive considering the increased importance placed upon these assets. Students had merely a 7 percent decrease in “exploring emerging technologies” likely due to the fact that many emerging technologies exist on campus only, due to size, power requirements, or high cost.

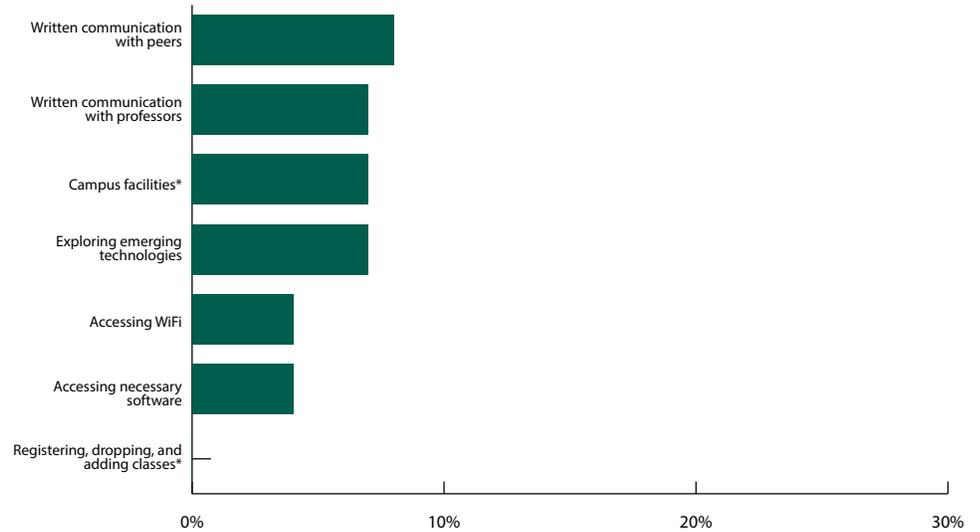
Students are seeking higher quality communication with their professors, and extended patience as they work to navigate and achieve academic success. “I feel like professors should be more understanding and understand that technology sucks and to be patient. I think colleges should be lenient with grades and allow for a credit no credit option.”

One student outlined their struggle with communication: “I would normally understand material from lectures pretty quickly and always be organized. Unfortunately for this semester, some class lecturers were hard to communicate with online, and it was hard to get a check-in with the professor, so I ended up taking longer to complete simple tasks like homework. This has decreased motivation and performance.”

As almost all students were remote during the Spring 2020 semester, the student experience of campus facilities was compared to experiences from the 2018–2019 “normal” academic year, with a reported 7 percent drop on average for facilities (buildings, classrooms, residence halls, dining, etc.).

### Impact on technologies and spaces

Percent drop in students’ Fall 2020 experience as compared to Spring 2020



\*1% increase in student experience for registering, dropping, and adding classes

## THE VALUE OF CAMPUS IS MORE THAN JUST CLASS

Students value the academic classes and social relationships available on a physical campus, which can be difficult to replicate and facilitate in a remote environment. **A majority—57 percent—of students indicated that “in-person classes” is the top reason they valued a campus.** Social factors are also highly valued aspects of campus life: 54 percent of students selected “being together with friends,” and 51 percent of students selected “being a part of campus life and culture.” Without a campus, one student said they “haven’t been able to meet as many people due to classes being online” and they’re “not getting a real college experience.”

Rank	Top reasons students value being on campus	Percent
1	In-person classes	57%
2	Be together with friends	54%
3	Be part of campus life and culture	51%
4	Space to study and join meetings	30%
5	Reliable internet connectivity	20%
6	Help like tutoring and advising	20%
7	Campus housing	19%
8	Technology and software	18%
9	In-person research	14%
10	Campus meal plan	14%

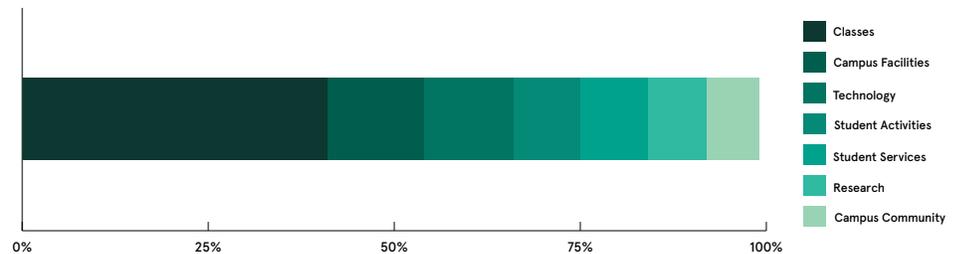
*Students were asked to select the top three reasons*

Students also recognize the importance of classes when considering their financial investment in a college education. While classes are the primary investment, with an average allocation of 41 percent of their tuition, **students prefer a majority (59 percent) of the monies go toward non-class factors** such as access to technology and campus facilities.

One student emphasized disappointment that their university was “charging the same tuition when certain facilities and services were not available.” Students felt that social experiences such as “student activities and clubs” and “engaging in the campus community” accounted for 9 percent and 7 percent of their tuition respectively.

**Percent of tuition allocated**

Mean percent of tuition that students would allocate to the following



## What universities can do

Moving forward it is important for universities to recognize that even a little in-person engagement can go a long way for students. The degree of campus openness and whether a student has access to an alternative third place greatly impact students' ability to have in-person experiences. Universities should anticipate students adjusting their enrollment and residential plans in Spring 2021 based on access to these essential spaces.



Depending on each institution's campus openness in Spring 2021, each will see a corresponding impact on their student enrollment in the coming months and years. Five percent of students plan to take a semester off ([and enrollment looks even more grim for two-year community college students](#)). Overall, 2 in 3 students surveyed plan to continue their studies as before, while around 1 in 3 students plan to transition online.

Beyond enrollment, universities' decisions regarding the degree of openness of the campus and availability of online vs. in-person courses are among the biggest factors for students in making their residential plans for Spring 2021.

- 20 percent of students who lived at home during Fall 2020 are planning to live on or near campus this spring.
- 89 percent of students who previously lived on campus are planning to stay.

When looking toward this spring, students are trying to find different ways to achieve a satisfactory in-person experience. If they're not getting it through their coursework, they report, they may look for it in their residential life or a "third place," such as a café or coworking space.

Universities might consider providing students with a "third space"—outside the home and campus—that is conducive to learning.



Photo courtesy of Her Campus Media LLC



During the Fall 2020 semester, some hybrid and fully online students who had limited access to campus spaces found success in a “third place,” a location outside their home and campus that served as a conducive learning environment. Students who worked in an alternative third place rate their academic performance exclusively above average. As a group, they have the highest likelihood of recommending their university to a friend, with none of them being detractors of their university. Students who work in a third place rate their campuses’ ability to make them feel a part of a community the highest, compared to students who work at home or on campus. Universities would do well to keep this in mind when looking for opportunities to simulate the on-campus experience for students.



For many years, the cumulative experiences of a physical campus community have made traditional higher education unique and impactful. Without these formative physical engagements, students find themselves searching for this simulation elsewhere. When it comes to remote learning and the future of online education, there is an explicit need for somewhere beyond the campus where students can meaningfully engage and connect.

Photo courtesy of Her Campus Media LLC

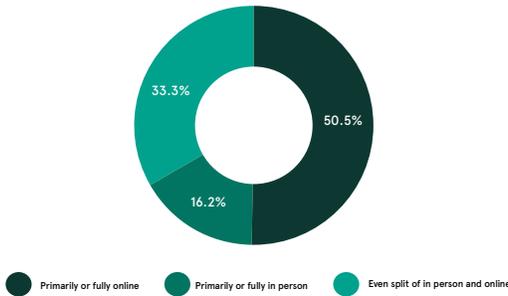
## Appendix

### FALL 2020 STUDENT PROFILE

During Fall 2020, students shifted toward a more remote, virtual learning environment than in semesters prior to COVID-19. This shift impacted student residence, study habits, household atmosphere, and ultimately quality of education.

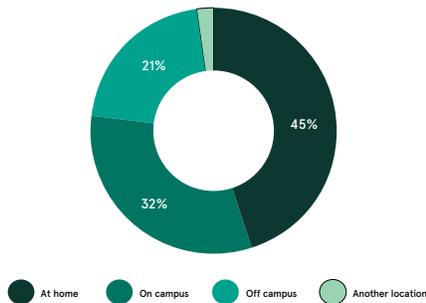
### UNIVERSITY APPROACH TO COURSES DURING FALL 2020

Over half of students surveyed studied primarily or fully online, and one-third studied in hybrid formats.



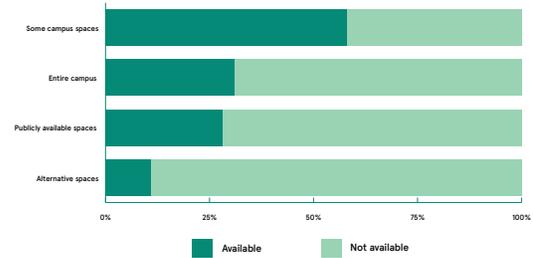
### WHERE STUDENTS LIVED DURING FALL 2020

In Fall 2020, more bachelor degree students at four-year institutions lived at home than at any other location, on or off campus.



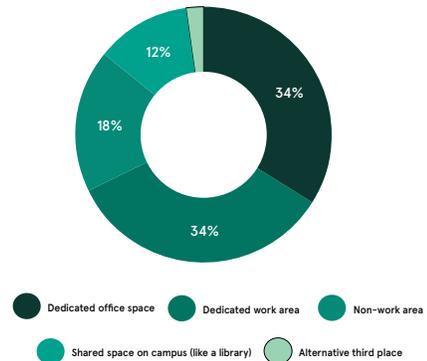
### AVAILABLE STUDY SPACES DURING FALL 2020

In Fall 2020, more bachelor degree students at four-year institutions lived at home than at any other location, on or off campus.



### PRIMARY STUDY ENVIRONMENTS DURING FALL 2020

2 in 3 students studied in a dedicated office space or area within their residence, while the remaining 1 in 3 students primarily studied in flexible, shared, or public spaces.



### SIZE OF STUDENT HOUSEHOLDS DURING FALL 2020

Students lived in a wide variety of household capacities, with 80 percent of students living with three or more people.

