

**For Immediate Release**

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**Optimism and Weariness: Students Entering College in Fall 2021 are Mentally Exhausted, but Eager for a Campus Experience**

*Bloomington, IN* — Most students entering college in fall 2021 had a disrupted high school experience. COVID-induced distance learning challenged students academically, technologically and psychologically, and the pandemic required some to take on new responsibilities at home while managing unfamiliar expectations to finish high school. Following a distressing senior year, these students will soon enter college.

Results from the [Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE),](https://nsse.indiana.edu/bcsse/index.html) administered by Indiana University’s Center for Postsecondary Research, offer insight into entering students’ high school experiences and their expectations for the coming year. Current findings, including dynamic visual displays, and more information about BCSSE are available [bcsse.indiana.edu](https://nsse.indiana.edu/bcsse/index.html).

Entering students experienced a variety of learning environments during their senior year of high school. About 60% had a combination of in-person and online instruction (hybrid), while 26% took classes entirely online and 14% entirely in person. However, results varied by racial/ethnic identity, with about half of Black or African American, Hispanic or Latina/o, and Asian students experiencing entirely online instruction (47%, 51%, and 49% respectively). The substantial difference between the overall result and among racial identity groups suggests the need to provide resources to diverse groups of students.

Carina Beck, Vice Provost, Allen Yarnell Center for Student Success at Montana State University said, “Our Success Advisors used BCSSE data to personally contact new students who commented about their high school learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Advisors offered support and scheduled services for students prior to their campus arrival. BCSSE results about student expectations for college life also informed our strategies to better support student learning, development, and engagement.”

The majority of entering students across racial/ethnic identity groups were optimistic (ranging from 80% to 89%) about their first year of college, and most (76%) did not believe that COVID-19 interfered much with their college plans. However, very recent data show a drop in student optimism; the percentage of those who were “very optimistic” dropped from 58% in May to just 45% in August. Regardless of whether this decline is influenced by the spread of the Delta variant or reflects normal worries near the start of the school year, it shows that students may need assurance about their institutions’ plans for ensuring health and safety and they need to have realistic expectations for the quality of their college experience.

The toll of the pandemic on students’ mental health is of great concern. More than half (53%) had substantial (“very much” or “quite a bit”) increases in levels of depression, hopelessness, and loneliness due to COVID.

Open-ended student comments reflect the emotional toll: “I can hardly bear to think back to lockdown- it ruined my mental and emotional health and I have a hard time focusing now... it just hurts” said one entering student. Another student reported, “About eight family members of mine died due to COVID-19, and I have struggled to see an upside. Yet attending college would be a great way to honor their wishes.”

Mental and emotional exhaustion appears to be linked to expectations of academic difficulty. Nearly 70% of entering students who experienced a substantial increase in mental and emotional exhaustion indicated high expectations of academic difficulty, compared to 42% of their peers who did not experience substantially increased exhaustion. The combination of exhaustion and expected academic difficulty makes it imperative for colleges and universities to implement widespread, early, and frequent check-ins by faculty, academic advisors, and student life staff to offer the support and—if necessary—intervention to help students be successful in their first year of college.

As of August 10, 2021, more than 35,000 students had completed the BCSSE survey. These students recently completed high school and are about to begin college at one of 57 bachelor’s degree-granting colleges and universities in the United States. The survey is still open, but scheduled to close mid-September.

These results and implications for colleges and universities will be discussed in a free webinar – “[Students Entering College in Fall 2021: What Colleges and Universities Should Know](https://iu.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_gJvDxKtiSrC-4pBpGg15wQ),” on **Thursday, August 26, at 1 p.m. Eastern time**.

Students entering college in fall 2021 bring experiences unlike any others. Colleges and universities need to respond adeptly to such circumstances and consider ways to realign student services and academic experiences.

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