

Comparison of Findings for Community College Students: Results from Trellis' Fall 2020 and 2021 Student Financial Wellness Surveys

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 June 2022

Recommended Citation: Fletcher, C. (2022). *Comparison of findings for community college students: Results from Trellis' Fall 2020 and 2021 Student Financial Wellness Surveys*. Trellis Company.

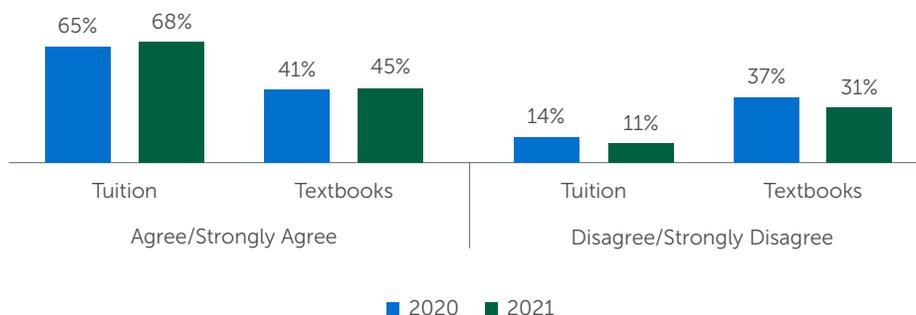
Key Findings

- A higher percentage of community college students felt their school made tuition and textbooks more affordable in 2021, compared to 2020.
- In 2021, fewer community college students agreed or strongly agreed they were worried about having enough money to pay for school compared to 2020.
- A larger percentage of respondents in the fall 2021 survey indicated they would recommend their school to a friend or family member compared to 2020.
- Fewer community college respondents reported experiencing low or very low food security in 2021, compared to 2020.



While enrollments across all higher education sectors decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic, this decline has been particularly steep for community colleges.¹ Many colleges and universities across the country instituted tuition freezes during the pandemic as a way to try to retain enrolled students and attract potential students, and relief funds provided by the federal government during the pandemic helped colleges maintain funding and provide students with emergency aid and support services.^{2,3} These measures provided relief to some students who may have been under financial strain during part of the pandemic.

SFWS: Percentage of community college respondents that agree or disagree that their school makes the following items more affordable.*



*Responses indicating 'Neutral' are not shown



This analysis uses data from 27,739 respondents at 46 community colleges that participated in Trellis’ Fall 2020 Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS) and 44,254 respondents at 71 community colleges from the Fall 2021 SFWS. The brief focuses on comparisons between the two annual surveys among community college students. The Fall 2020 survey was implemented during the first fall semester of the pandemic, about seven months after the United States locked down when cases began to rise in March 2020. Many colleges across the country moved a large portion of their classes to an online format. This was particularly true in the community college sector.⁴ Although new variants continued to disrupt plans, colleges were more comfortable opening their campuses to in-person learning by Fall 2021 amid widespread vaccines and the development of more effective treatments for COVID-19.

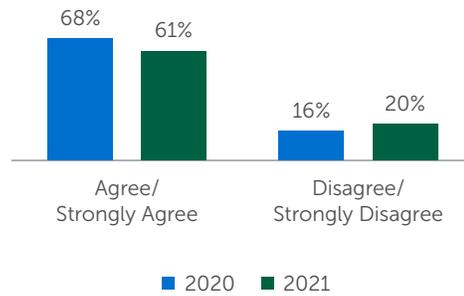
There are limitations to comparing multiple implementations of the SFWS. Different colleges choose to participate each year, and changes between years may reflect a different student body composition. Additionally, students experiencing the most severe financial challenges may not have been enrolled during the Fall 2021 semester, meaning the more positive scores may reflect the absence of students with the biggest hurdles.

Perceptions of Tuition and Textbook Affordability of Survey Respondents

Between 2020 and 2021, the percentage of community college students who believed their school made tuition and textbooks more affordable increased. Those who agreed or strongly agreed that their school made tuition more affordable increased from 65 percent to 68 percent, while those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement decreased from 14 percent to 11 percent. Similarly, those who believed their school made textbooks more affordable increased from 41 percent to 45 percent, while those who disagreed with this statement decreased from 37 percent to 31 percent.

A smaller percentage of community college respondents in Fall 2021 reported worrying about having enough money to pay for school (61 percent), compared to community college respondents in Fall 2020 (68 percent). Twenty percent of community college respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they worry about having enough money to pay for school in Fall 2021, compared to 16 percent in Fall 2020.

SFWS: Percentage of community college respondents that agree or disagree that they worry about having enough money to pay for school.*

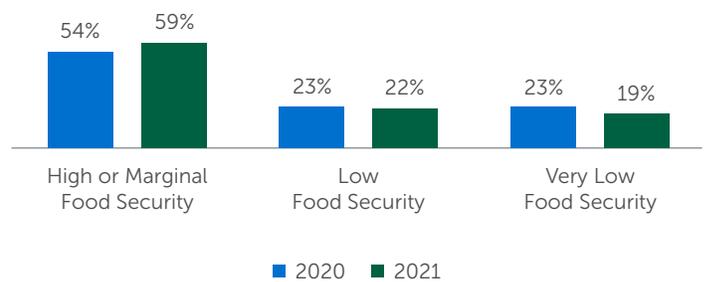


*Responses indicating 'Neutral' are not shown

Food Security

Food security among community college students also saw some improvement between the Fall 2020 and Fall 2021 surveys. Food security is measured in the SFWS using a six-item scale developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture that assigns levels of food security to respondents based on how many affirmative responses they give to the questions in the scale. More information about this scale can be found on page 3 of this brief. The percentage of community college respondents reporting high or marginal food security increased from the Fall 2020 and Fall 2021 survey results, from 54 percent to 59 percent.

SFWS: Food security of community college respondents



Student Loyalty

Community college students generally feel very loyal towards their school. This loyalty is measured in the SFWS using a scale called the Net Promoter Score (NPS). More information about the NPS scale and calculation can be found on page 3 of this brief. In the Fall 2020 administration, half of community college respondents indicated

¹ National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2021). Fall 2021 enrollment (As of October 21). <https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/>.

² Inside Higher Ed. (2021). Summer brings another wave of tuition freezes. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/06/28/colleges-freezing-tuition-next-academic-year>.

³ U.S. Department of Education. (2021). U.S. Department of Education announces \$3.2 billion in additional higher education emergency relief funds to support students at historic and under-resourced institutions. <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-announces-32-billion-additional-higher-education-emergency-relief-funds-support-students-historic-and-under-resourced-institutions>.

⁴ Chronicle of Higher Education. (2020). Here's our list of colleges' reopening models, Last updated October 1, 2020. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/heres-a-list-of-colleges-plans-for-reopening-in-the-fall/>.



they would recommend their school to a friend or family member. This increased to 56 percent in 2021, along with a decrease in the percentage of students giving low ratings (detractors) from 18 percent to 14 percent. The four-year sector has a lower average loyalty score compared to the community college sector, and saw a small decrease in loyalty between 2020 and 2021 with the NPS falling from 8.81 to 4.59.

| Net Promoter Score | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Q22: How likely is it that you would recommend your school to a friend or family member? | | |
| | Public 2-year 2020 | Public 2-year 2021 |
| Promoters (Score 9-10) | 50% | 56% |
| Passives (Score 7-8) | 32% | 30% |
| Detractors (Score 0-6) | 18% | 14% |
| Net Promoter Score (NPS) | 32.74 | 41.16 |
| | n=26,566 | n=42,199 |

Conclusion

Results from the Fall 2021 survey of community college students showed some positive signs compared to the Fall 2020 survey on the topics of perceptions of affordability of tuition and textbooks, worrying about paying for school, food insecurity, and overall loyalty. However, while there was improvement in these areas, there were still many students who were worried about their finances and had faced food insecurity. To better assist these students, resources like on-campus food pantries should be widely advertised, highly accessible, and stigma free. Emergency aid funds can also provide quick, direct assistance to students who find themselves in a financial bind that may negatively impact their enrollment. Providing students with needed support will help them continue to stay enrolled and graduate.

Measures

To better understand the experiences of survey takers, scales measuring school loyalty and food security were included in the instrument in Fall 2020 and Fall 2021.

Student Loyalty

To measure how loyal students feel toward their school, Trellis collected the information with a scale that allows

a Net Promoter Score (NPS) to be calculated for Project Success Schools. NPS is a method, grounded in extensive research, to benchmark customer satisfaction ratings across different services, businesses, and products. NPS uses a 0-10 scale. Those respondents who score 9-10 are promoters, 7-8 are passives, and 0-6 are detractors. %Promoters - %Detractors = NPS. A positive NPS (>0) is generally considered good, with highest performers usually between 50 and 80.

Food Security

To measure food security within the prior 30 days, a short-form, six-question scale designed by the United

| Table 1. Net Promoter Question | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| How likely is it that you would recommend your school to a friend or family member? | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 0 | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <input type="checkbox"/> 7 <input type="checkbox"/> 8 <input type="checkbox"/> 9 <input type="checkbox"/> 10 |
| Not at all Likely Extremely Likely | |

States Department of Agriculture (USDA) was utilized. This short-form scale has been shown to identify food-insecure individuals and households with high sensitivity and specificity, and minimal bias.⁵ USDA methodology assigns levels of food security to individuals based on how many affirmative responses they give to certain questions. Under the short-form survey, individuals who give 2-4 affirmative responses have “low food security” and individuals who give 5-6 affirmative responses have “very low food security”; both are considered “food insecure.” Respondents with 0-1 affirmative responses are characterized as having “high or marginal food security” or food secure.

| Table 1. USDA 30-Day (Short-Form) Food Security Scale |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The food that I bought just didn't last and I didn't have money to get more (Often, Sometimes, Never True) |
| I couldn't afford to eat balanced meals (Often, Sometimes, Never True) |
| In the last 30 days, did you ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food? (Yes, No) |
| [If answered Yes to previous question] How many days did this happen? |
| In the last 30 days, did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food? (Yes, No) |
| In the last 30 days, were you ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough food? (Yes, No) |

⁵ United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). (2021). What is food security? <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/measurement.aspx>.



About the Data/Methodology

The Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS) is a self-reported, online survey that seeks to document the well-being and student success indicators of post-secondary students across the nation. While not nationally representative, responses were weighted to reflect the total student composition at participating institutions.

The Fall 2020 survey opened on October 19, 2020 and closed on November 19, 2020. Sixty-two colleges and universities participated in the survey – 46 two-year institutions, 12 public four-year institutions, and 4 not-for-profit private four-year institutions. A total of 391,740 undergraduate students were invited to take the survey, of whom 37,936 responded, yielding a 9.7 percent response rate.

The Fall 2021 survey opened on October 25, 2021 and closed on November 15, 2021. One hundred four (104) institutions participated in the survey—71 two-year colleges, 20 public four-years, and 13 private not-for-profit four-years. A total of 715,545 undergraduate students were invited to take the survey, of whom 63,751 responded, yielding a 9.0 percent response rate.

Recent Trellis Research publications

No food for thought: Insights on basic needs insecurities and mental health challenges from Trellis' Fall 2020 Student Financial Wellness Survey.

Cornett, A., & Fletcher, C. (2022). No food for thought: Insights on basic needs insecurities and mental health challenges from Trellis' Fall 2020 Student Financial Wellness Survey. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: <https://www.trelliscompany.org/portfolio-items/no-food-for-thought-insights-on-basic-needs-insecurities-and-mental-health-challenges/>

Student Financial Wellness Survey Report: Fall 2020

Webster, J., Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., & Knaff, C. (2021). Student financial wellness survey report: Fall 2020. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: <https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/SFWS-Report-Fall-2020.pdf>

State of student aid and higher education in Texas.

Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., & Webster, J. (2021). State of student aid and higher education in Texas. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: <https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/SOSA-2021.pdf>

Studying on empty: A qualitative study of low food security among college students

Fernandez, C., Webster, J., & Cornett, A. (2019). Studying on empty: A qualitative study of low food security among college students. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: <https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Studying-on-Empty.pdf>

Longitudinal fluidity in collegiate food security: Disruptions, restorations, and its drivers

Cornett, A., & Webster, J. (2020). Longitudinal fluidity in collegiate food security: Disruptions, restorations, and its drivers. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Research-Brief_FSS_Longitudinal-Fluidity.pdf

About Trellis Company and Trellis Research Services

Trellis Company ([trelliscompany.org](https://www.trelliscompany.org)) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation focused on helping people leverage the power of post-secondary education and learning to improve their quality of life and the communities where they live.

Trellis Research ([trelliscompany.org/research](https://www.trelliscompany.org/research)) provides colleges and policymakers insight into student success through the lens of higher education affordability. With more than three decades of experience studying key issues such as student debt, student loan counseling, and the financial barriers to attainment, our research team explores the roles of personal finance, financial literacy, and financial aid in higher education.

Interested in collaborations or need research expertise? Trellis Research welcomes opportunities to inform policymakers and help organizations address their analytical needs. For more information, please contact Trellis Research at Trellisresearch@trelliscompany.org or visit us on Twitter ([@TrellisResearch](https://twitter.com/TrellisResearch)).

The Student Financial Wellness Survey is a free national survey offered by Trellis Company that explores the connections between student finances, academic success, and more. Interested in participating in the Fall 2022 implementation of SFWS? Learn more here: www.trelliscompany.org/SFWS-get-started

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