



The Pandemic Ripple Effect

Four Potential Long-Term Impacts on
College Enrollment and Student Success



The Pandemic Ripple Effect

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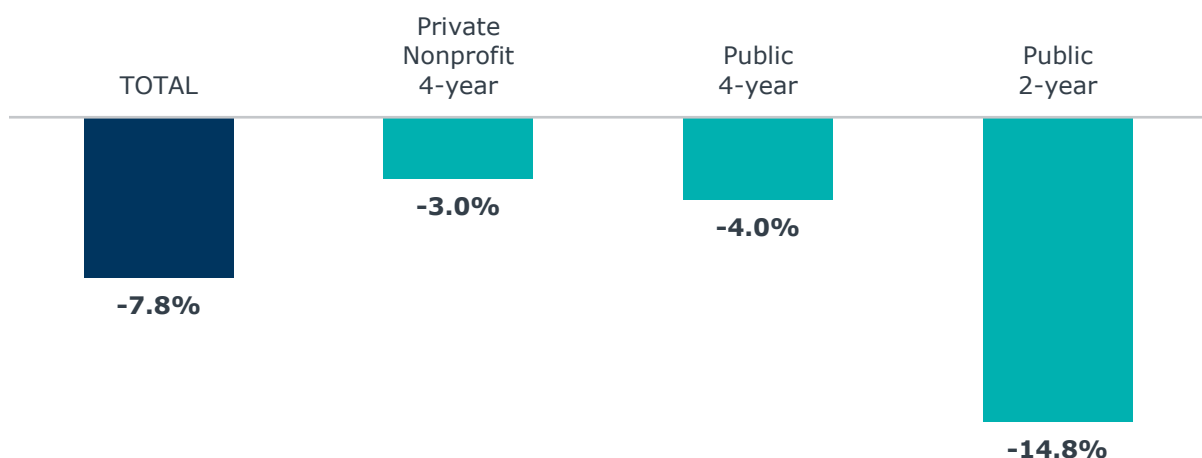
The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted every part of our society in profound ways that we may not fully understand for years to come. Some disruptions will be relatively short-lived and dissipate as we adjust to our new normal. Other disruptions could have long-term impact that result in permanent changes to our way of life.

Higher education has been heavily disrupted by the pandemic in ways that we may be dealing with long after other parts of our economy rebound. These pandemic “ripples” could define the next decade or more as we grapple with metabolizing an unprecedented amount of change in such a short period of time.

One of the biggest disruptions has been to enrollment. Overall college enrollment in Fall 2021 was nearly 8% lower than where it was in Fall 2019 as students paused their educations and waited for more favorable conditions.¹ Two-year schools have experienced the sharpest declines, although this contraction has been felt to some degree by nearly every segment of higher education.

The obvious response has been to redouble recruitment efforts, yet this might not be enough. All schools are now fighting harder to attract a smaller pool of students, one that will only shrink further as we reach the demographic contraction forecasted for the second half of this decade. Expanding recruitment is necessary but not fully sufficient to address the challenge.

Change in Enrollment from Fall 2019 to Fall 2021 National Student Clearinghouse²





As colleges and universities ramp up recruitment efforts, they must simultaneously put more effort into *keeping* students they are able to enroll. Retaining students is harder than ever before as students battle the economic and psychological fallout of the pandemic. After a decade of hard-fought gains, national persistence rates fell by an unprecedented 2% in Fall 2020, contributing to the overall pandemic enrollment decline.³ The time is now to broadly implement practices and technologies proven to retain and ultimately graduate more students.

This elevated urgency around retention and student success could be felt for years. There is a prevailing assumption that our enrollment challenges will abate and return to normal once public health conditions improve and students can resume their college journeys without fear of changing modalities, limited social activities, and illness. Unfortunately, we are seeing several concerning indicators that suggest this assumption may be premature, and we could be feeling the ripple effects of the pandemic on enrollment and student success throughout the remainder of the decade.

In this white paper, we will explore four such ripple effects and offer suggestions for how forward-looking institutions can prepare now for the future. What follows are the observations and recommendations of EAB experts who have been studying the medium-term and long-term impact of the pandemic on postsecondary education. Their work calls attention to four special areas of elevated concern: Social Disengagement, Mental Health, Availability of Transfers, and Unfinished Learning in K-12. In each section you'll find data about the ripple effect, recommended action steps, and links to relevant resources from EAB.

These ripple effects will present new threats to student success by exacerbating old challenges we have grappled with for years. Rather than panicking, we should see this as an opportunity to clear long-standing barriers to college completion while strengthening our value proposition for tomorrow's students.



Urgency Around Equity

Institutions cannot successfully navigate the pandemic ripple effects if they do not immediately prioritize closing their equity gaps. Higher education has struggled with equity gaps for decades, especially for students of color, first-generation students, and students from lower-income backgrounds. While we have made progress on these gaps in recent years, much more work remains to be done.

If we do nothing, our equity gaps will further expand. The effect of the pandemic on transfer pathways and K-12 learning will threaten college access for students from under-resourced communities. Unless action is taken, we could retrace much of the progress we have made on equitable access and completion in recent years.

Our long-term strength as a nation is at risk. Education is foundational to our growth as a nation. College graduates power the knowledge economy, generate more tax revenue, grow GDP, and cost the public less in assistance. Wider equity gaps and lower completion rates threaten our national competitiveness and hurt our long-term economic well-being.

Bold action is needed to mitigate the worst long-term impacts. Many of the recommendations in this paper could serve as the basis for transformative change on equity, but only if they are pushed to their fullest expressions. To do so requires strong leadership willing to make investments in human and financial capital and work across institutions to address the systemic equity challenges facing our entire industry.

Learning from EAB's National Initiative

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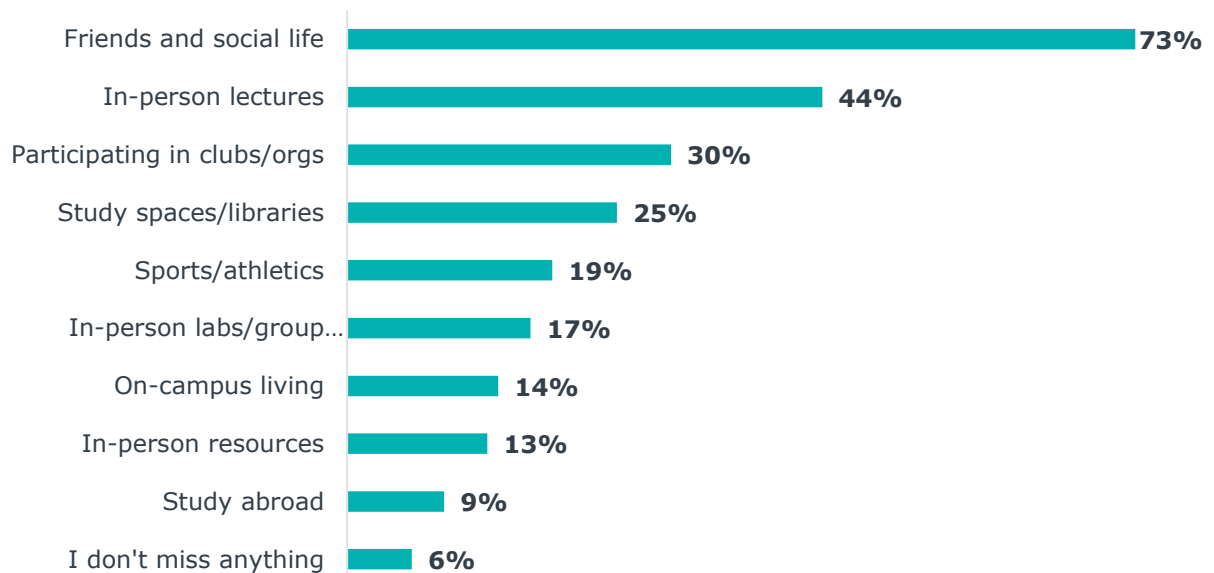
Social Disengagement

Students who engage with their campus communities graduate at higher rates and are more likely to value their college experience. Our understanding of the relationship between engagement and retention can be traced all the way back to the 1970s when researchers first started investigating student success in earnest. Now, half a century later, student engagement still plays a foundational role in many student success strategies.

Student social engagement suffered mightily during the pandemic. Classrooms and support services were able to move online in a way that the cocurricular college experience could not, leaving students feeling like they were missing out on a huge part of what they expected to be their college experience.

Indeed, a March 2021 survey found that 73% of students said “friends and social life” was the thing they missed most about campus life, by far the top response.⁴ While this loss was felt to a degree by all college communities, the loss of interpersonal interactions was especially difficult for residential colleges that rely on campus life as a huge part of their value proposition—and justification for higher tuition and fees.

What Do You Miss Most? (choose up to three) Inside Higher Ed / College Pulse survey⁵



1

Social interactions improved with the widespread return of in-person learning in Fall 2021 but not to the degree that we might have hoped. A November 2021 survey found that just 28% of students reported socializing more than ever before, while a combined 52% said they are socializing less than ever before (20%) or less than before the pandemic but more than in Spring 2021 (32%).⁶ This concerning data suggests that student social life is not simply snapping back into place with the return to campus. While this could partly be explained by students still fearful of infection, it may also mean that colleges need to do more to foster and facilitate social interactions for students who missed out on the typical orientation and first-year social experiences and who may still be recovering from an extended period of social isolation.

How Much Did Students Socialize in Fall 2021? Inside Higher Ed / College Pulse survey⁷



Why is this so important for student success? Just prior to the pandemic, a surprising 23% of first-year students said they did not feel like they were part of the community at their institution.⁸ These students were more than four times as likely to say they did not intend to return for a second year when compared to students who did feel like they were part of their college community. We can't say for certain that these trends hold true for pandemic students, but if they do, the currently tepid levels of social engagement could be a harbinger of increased pressure on retention rates in the semesters to come.

1

So, what can you do about it?

Ironically, online platforms might be an answer. Already born digital natives, students moved their interpersonal interactions even further online during the pandemic. It seems likely that even students who deeply value in-person college experiences will continue to have more virtual social interactions than any prior cohort. Connections made online often become the basis for meeting in real life.

Colleges and universities can take advantage of this trend by building and curating online communities that help students connect with other students, find peers with shared experiences, and engage more deeply in academic and cocurricular groups. Admissions offices already use these sorts of platforms to recruit prospective students by building engagement with one another and their future peers who are already on campus. Expanding the use of these platforms beyond matriculation could help improve in-person student connections and foster community.

These communities could prove especially valuable for nonresidential institutions seeking to build student social engagement absent the assets and social programming traditionally available on residential campuses.

1

EAB Recommendations:

- 1 Investigate what platforms your students use to make virtual connections that translate to face-to-face interactions.** If you find that students rely largely on external platforms such as social media, consider establishing your own institution-specific community that promotes aspects of your campus life. By controlling and curating the content, you can stay on message while avoiding the toxicity associated with other online communities.
- 2 Look to expand platforms that you already control.** During your internal audit, you may find that you already are providing students with opportunities to engage virtually. Of note, many admissions offices use online communities to recruit admitted students for matriculation. Expanding existing platforms can give you a head start by building on a preexisting user base.
- 3 Leverage these communities to drive participation in high-impact practices.** Students who join extracurriculars, do internships, and complete long-term projects are more likely to say that college prepared them for life after graduation,⁹ yet colleges often struggle to get students to take advantage of these opportunities. Orienting your virtual communities around these practices can simultaneously drive social engagement and a more valuable college experience.

Further Reading

- [Designing a Modern Student Experience](#)
- [5 Components of Student Belonging](#)
- [Build Connections Online with Virtual Communities](#)
- [3 Ways to Prevent Summer Melt](#)
- [Wiser Enrollment Yield Report](#)
- [120+ Virtual Engagement Strategies for Incoming Students](#)

2

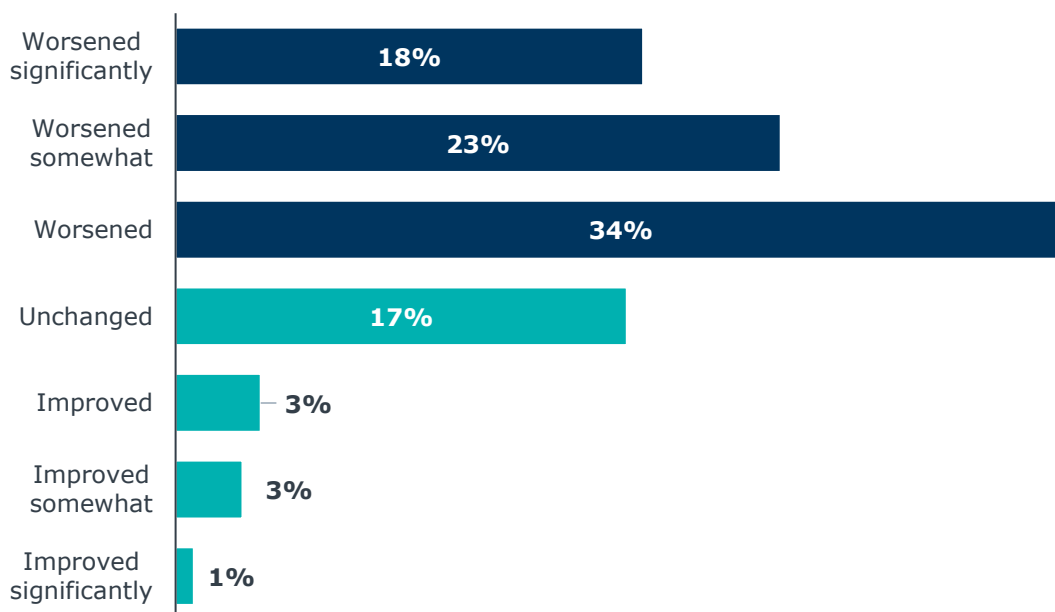
Student Mental Health

Mental health concerns among adolescents have been on the rise for the last decade. In 2018, 14% of adolescents reported a major depressive episode in the last year, compared to just 8% in 2010.¹⁰ Nearly one-third of pre-pandemic adolescents will meet the criteria for anxiety disorders.¹¹

The isolation and stress of the pandemic turned a growing challenge into a full-blown mental health crisis, compounded by a host of associated economic, political, and social stressors, many of which have had profound impact on students and their home communities. Accordingly, three-quarters of students reported that their mental health worsened during the pandemic, with 18% saying that it “worsened significantly.”¹² This crisis became so severe that college presidents surveyed in February 2021 ranked student, faculty, and staff mental health as their top pandemic concern, ahead of even enrollment declines and institutional financial health.¹³

How Has Students' Mental Health Changed During the Pandemic?

Active Minds survey¹⁴



2

The push to improve mental health delivery is even more vital for students of color, who historically have been less likely to engage with mental health services due to difficulties with access and finding providers who understand their identities and struggles.¹⁵ Many of these students hail from families and communities disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Their mental health needs to be a priority.

Colleges and universities often serve as a key provider of mental health services for students, a trend that has been building for years. Counseling center utilization increased 38% from 2009 to 2015, nearly seven times the rate of enrollment growth over that same period.¹⁶ The elevated need for mental health services during the pandemic has put even more pressure on institutions and stretched counseling centers to the breaking point.

A reduction of pandemic stressors may alleviate some of this elevated demand, but not all of it. The mental health consequences of traumatic experiences can be felt for years. Our current students will need time to recover, and future students may arrive on campus still bearing the trauma of their own pandemic experiences. Given that demand was already increasing prior to the pandemic, we should anticipate that on-campus counseling services will continue to grow in importance as a part of your larger student success strategy.

32%

of adolescents will meet the criteria for an anxiety disorder by age 18 ¹⁷

14%

of adolescents reported a major depressive episode in 2018 (up from 8% in 2010)¹⁸

38%

Increase in counseling center demand from 2009 to 2015¹⁹

2

So, what can you do about it?

We should see this as an opportunity to make big strides in addressing a challenge that was already critical. To do this, we need to expand mental health support by building awareness and extending capacity for care outside of the counseling office.

Many such programs already exist, but college leaders should not assume that their students know about them, even those programs that were specifically added in response to the pandemic. For example, 49% of community college students surveyed in Fall 2021 said that they did not know if their college offered support for coping with COVID-19 stress, despite being three semesters into the pandemic.¹⁹

You can expand awareness and extend capacity through peer support groups and mental health touchpoints embedded intentionally into the curriculum and residential life. Put a premium on connecting students with support tailored to their needs, especially minoritized students who may feel uncomfortable engaging with traditional mental health counseling or stigmatized if they seek care. When hiring mental health support staff, emphasize hiring individuals who reflect the demographics of your student body to ensure students can connect with providers who they feel understand their backgrounds and challenges.

Finally, colleges making mental health investments can and should be doing more to analyze data on the effectiveness of these investments. This means going beyond traditional effectiveness measures, such as utilization and student satisfaction, to understand and quantify the contributions that mental health services make to factors such as academic success, persistence, and belongingness. This data can in turn help inform and secure additional investments in the future.

Taking these steps will help you meet growing demand for holistic mental health support on campus, maximize existing resources, and ultimately create a better experience for your students.

2

EAB Recommendations:

- 1 Help students connect with mental health resources that fit their specific needs.** Students don't take full advantage of the wide range of mental health programs and services that already exist. An online matchmaking portal can increase utilization by aggregating programs and connecting students to the resources that make most sense based on their specific needs and concerns.
- 2 Integrate well-being touchpoints throughout the student experience to proactively ensure each student receives well-being support.** For example, faculty can integrate mental health topics into their curricula to encourage discussion and destigmatize help-seeking behavior. Schools with large residential populations can embed mental health programming and services into the housing experience.
- 3 Apply a DEIJ lens to mental health services to ensure all students have access to support and care that is responsive to their identities.** Minoritized students do not engage with mental health services at the same rate as White students. Hiring diverse, culturally aware staff can help more students find someone they feel comfortable connecting with for care.
- 4 Collect and use data to assess the ROI of new mental health initiatives.** Assess impact in terms beyond utilization and student satisfaction surveys. Cross-walk mental health initiatives to institutional goals, such as retention or academic success, then assess the contribution that these initiatives make to these goals. Use this data to promote successful initiatives and encourage additional investment.

Further Reading

- [Meeting the Escalating Demand for Mental Health and Well-Being Support](#)
- [Expanding Well-Being Initiatives Through Faculty Partnerships](#)
- [Bolster Mental Health Support for Graduate Students This Fall](#)
- [3 Things the COVID-19 Pandemic Revealed About Campus Mental Health](#)

3

Transfer Student Availability

No segment of higher education has been hit harder by the pandemic than our two-year schools. As of Fall 2021, two-year enrollments are down 14% from where they were in Fall 2019.²¹ This dramatic decline has left community colleges struggling to fill classes and meet budgets.

This is troubling, as community colleges form the foundation of postsecondary education and provide a critical on-ramp for students who lack other points of access, especially those limited by cost. The enrollment decline in the two-year space is a warning sign that postsecondary education overall became less equitable and less diverse during the pandemic.

The two-year enrollment contraction is also a warning sign that the availability of upward transfer students could be reduced for the next several years. Over one-third (35%) of students transfer between institutions, and thus nearly every kind of institution could feel this ripple effect to some degree.²² Nearly half of all bachelor's degree graduates earn credits from a two-year college at some point during their education.²³ Even selective four-year schools with relatively small transfer populations may be indirectly impacted via a reduction in dual enrollment classes taken by top high school students at community colleges.

"Upward transfer" from a two-year school to a four-year has already declined by 4% since Fall 2019.²⁴ Worryingly, this trend worsened from Fall 2020 to Fall 2021, even as "lateral transfer" between four-year schools recovered slightly.

Two-year enrollments are also impacted by the transfer contraction. Roughly two-fifths of transfers from a two-year school go to another two-year school.²⁵ Lateral transfers between two-year schools fell by 21% across the pandemic, although it should be noted that almost all this decline happened in Fall 2020 before stabilizing in Fall 2021.²⁶

35%

of students transfer from one institution to another²⁷

41%

of transfers go from a two-year school to another two-year school²⁸

49%

of BA graduates have community college credits²⁹

34%

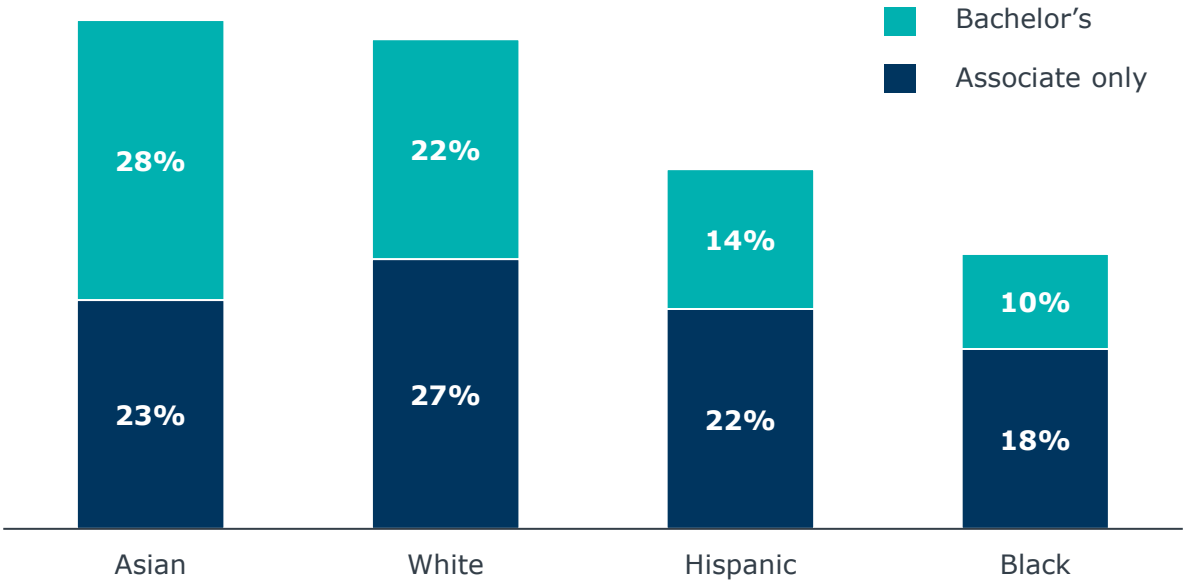
of students take college credit in high school³⁰

3

Compounding the challenge, transfer students are already expected to navigate an inequitable and inefficient system. Roughly 80% of entering community college students intend to transfer to a four-year institution, yet just 31% do so within six years.³¹ Those that make the leap lose 43% of their credits as they move between institutions due to curricular misalignment and inefficient or confusing articulation processes, driving up costs for students.³²

The inequity in the system becomes even more stark when disaggregated along racial lines. Just 10% of Black students and 13% of Hispanic students who start at a two-year school eventually complete bachelor's degrees, compared to 21% for White students and 26% for Asian students.³³ Allowing this broken transfer system to persist in the current environment will only serve to exacerbate education inequities during the recovery.

Transfer: An Underreported Equity Issue
Six-Year Outcome for Students Starting at Two-Year Colleges³⁴



3

So, what can you do about it?

Use this crisis as an opportunity to finally fix the broken transfer system. With fewer students available, transfer-dependent institutions will need to work harder to attract matriculants. Schools that expand credit articulation and automate the process will become more appealing destinations than those that allow the status quo to persist.

Four-year schools can further secure transfer enrollment by partnering with feeder two-year schools to strengthen shared degree pathways and develop new ones. Two-year schools will also benefit if they can use the new pathways as a marketing level to attract prospective students, backfilling their pandemic enrollment declines.

EAB Recommendations:

- 1 Reduce the number of credits lost in transfer.** Ask faculty to collaborate with their counterparts at partner institutions to review and align course syllabi, paving the way for more credits to transfer. Regularly revisit these conversations to keep curricula aligned over time through regular cross-institutional review.
- 2 Automate the credit articulation process.** Improve transparency by providing prospective transfer students a portal for uploading their previously earned credits to get an instant assessment of what will and won't transfer to your school.
- 3 Create and strengthen formal degree pathways between transfer partner institutions.** Intentionally design cross-institutional pathways that feel seamless for students as they move between institutions. Ensure that all credits will articulate between schools and that advising efforts are aligned and coordinated on both ends.

Further Reading

- [Paving the Path to Transfer](#)
- [Increase Your Transfer Student Population](#)
- [3 Ways Community Colleges Should Be Communicating Credit Articulation](#)
- [Transfer Portal Resource Hub](#)
- [Transfer Maturity Curve](#)

4

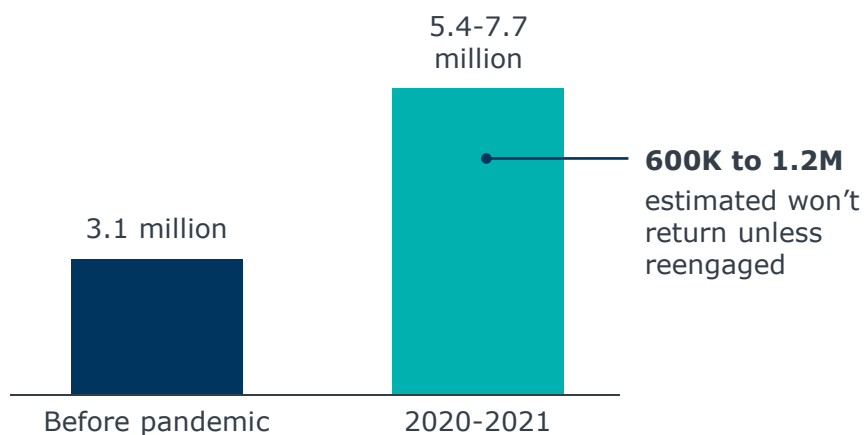
Unfinished K-12 Learning

The pandemic has been exceptionally challenging for K-12 educators. Primary and secondary schools struggled with providing adequate access to devices, converting to online teaching methods, and enforcing attendance. Parents were often called upon to fill the gap while also trying to adapt their professional lives to the pandemic. As a result, the 2020-21 school year was unlike any we have experienced before.

K-12 students are the future of higher education, so it is critically important that higher education leaders understand the impact that the pandemic has had on primary and secondary education. Two questions are most prominent: First, how will the pandemic affect the number of college-going students coming out of high school? After years of increases, high school graduation rates stalled in 2021 and even declined in some states.³⁵ Second, will these students come to college with the same base of knowledge as pre-pandemic students? We won't know the full answers to these question for several years, but there is reason for concern.

High school absenteeism spiked in 2020-21. In normal times, just over 3 million students are chronically absent from high school each year. This number rose to between 5.4 to 7.7 million in 2020-21. It is estimated that 600,000 to 1.2 million of these students won't return to high school unless they are actively reengaged. Many of those who do return will have to repeat courses or grades, delaying their graduation from high school.³⁶

Chronically Absent Students, Grades 8–12 McKinsey & Company survey³⁷



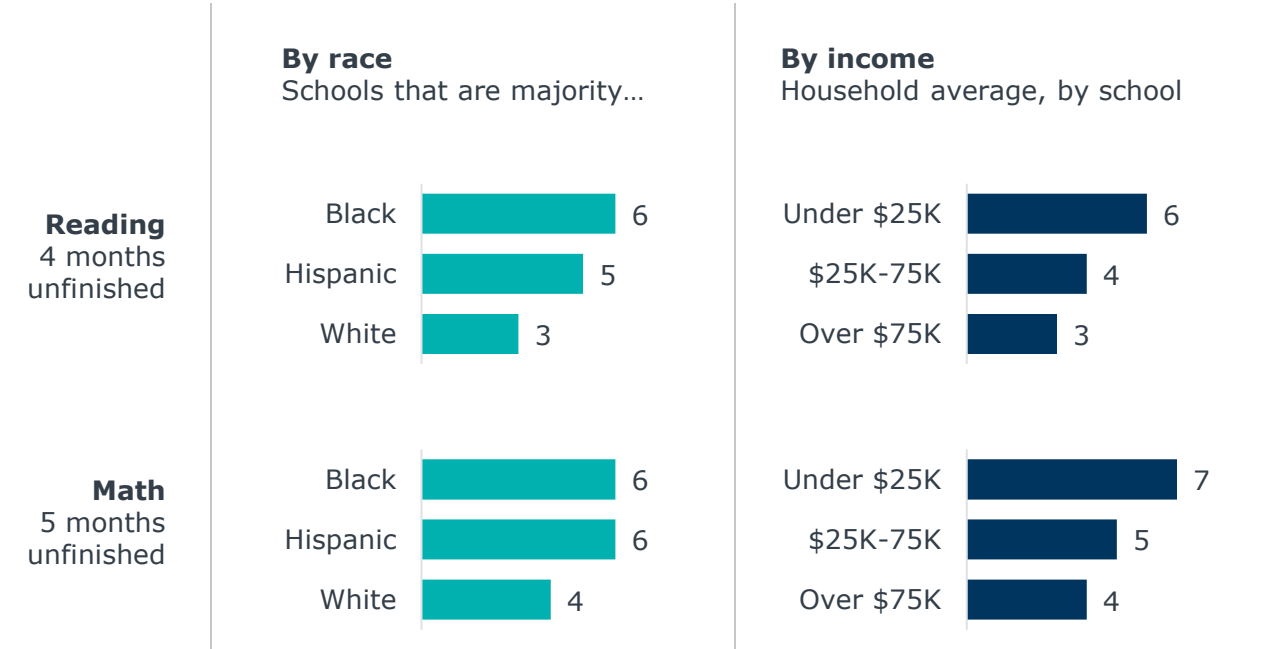
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This disruption could potentially reach into the next decade. We know from pre-pandemic studies that what happens early in a student’s academic development can have long-term implications for their education outcomes. For example, we know that a student’s likelihood to go to college is strongly correlated with their reading proficiency as early as third grade. We also know that students who are not reading-proficient by third grade rarely catch up by the time they graduate from high school.³⁸

Test scores show that the first year of the pandemic left elementary school students with roughly four months of unfinished learning in reading and five months of unfinished learning in math.³⁹ This impact was felt even more strongly in schools serving lower-income communities and communities of color, foretelling a future challenge to education equity. If third-graders from 2020-21 don’t catch up, we could still be feeling the effect when they are high school seniors in 2030-31.

While this data is alarming, we should remember that the full impact on postsecondary education is still several years away. Response from the education community and the nation could help students adjust and minimize disruption to college pathways. Nevertheless, diligent institutions should closely monitor trends in K-12 education and prepare for long-term challenges that we hope never fully manifest.

Cumulative Months of Unfinished Learning, Grades 1–6 McKinsey & Company / Curriculum Associates i-Ready assessment data⁴⁰



4

So, what can you do about it?

Forward-looking institutions should prepare for an unprecedented level of academic support needs among students coming out of high school. To meet the challenge, your institution may need to adopt more sophisticated methods to identify and prioritize the needs of those who struggle. Faculty may need extra help supporting students in their courses, and students themselves may not be accustomed to seeking academic help if they haven't needed to do so in the past.

Professional academic advisors will play a critical role in this response. Schools that have previously put off hiring more advisors or implementing new advising technologies should strongly consider making these investments now. Big changes like these can take several semesters to fully implement; thus, work needs to begin right away.

Schools that place large numbers of students into math and writing developmental education pathways should expect to accommodate more in the future. To prepare, schools must move away from the traditional zero-credit models that fail unacceptably high numbers of students. Recent research demonstrates better outcomes when developmental students are placed into college-level courses with required corequisite instruction. Many schools have already made this transition, and those that have not must do so immediately.

4

EAB Recommendations:

- 1 Increase investment in advising and student support.** Add staff and technology in anticipation of increased need and demand from future students. Move to a proactive, caseload-based advising model with clearly defined KPIs linked to advisors' professional goals. Use a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to align expectations across disparate advising offices and establish a more seamless experience for students.
- 2 Formalize pandemic innovations in virtual advising and support.** The pandemic showed us that virtual environments expand student access to support offices. Commit to offering virtual options on an ongoing basis, and challenge staff to continue innovating on ways to reach students within this medium.
- 3 Audit and reform your developmental education coursework.** If you have not done so already, implement cocurricular support models for students who need additional help with college-level math and English.

Further Reading

- [The Student Success Strategy Playbook](#)
- [What Can Health Care Teach Us About Student Success?](#)
- [Hardwiring Student Success](#)
- [Narrowing the Third-Grade Reading Gap](#)
- [15 Best Practices to Erase Equity Gaps](#)
- [Is Virtual Advising Here to Stay?](#)
- [Traditional Developmental Education Will Fail Students](#)



Conclusion

The impacts of the pandemic on enrollment and student success could ripple through higher education for years to come. It is too soon to say how severe these impacts will be or how long they will last, but it is likely that they will require ongoing attention beyond what many college leaders anticipate right now.

While the situation may seem dire, we should take heart. The pandemic has generated many problems, but it has also created an environment where we can do more for student success than ever before. Our forced virtualization now allows us to reach out with support to students who previously would have fallen through the cracks. Our ongoing racial reckoning has put student equity front and center while building broad momentum for mitigating the impact of the pandemic on students from our minoritized communities. Finally, the tremendous injection of federal pandemic relief funds into higher education has kept our industry moving forward while allowing many schools to get a head start on making student success investments necessary for the coming decade.

With this momentum at their backs, college leaders can and should view their current circumstances as an opportunity to address and eliminate barriers to student success that existed long prior to the pandemic. Issues such as student engagement, mental health, transfer pathways, and college preparation have negatively impacted college completion rates for years, but until now have not risen to the top of most institutions' student success agendas. We now have the urgency to finally give these issues the attention they need and deserve.

We cannot foresee the full extent of disruption from the pandemic or how long it might last. That said, the investments we make to mitigate the worst consequences have been needed for years and will have a payoff even if the ripple effects are less severe than we anticipate. Schools that embrace these changes will emerge from the pandemic stronger and more student-centric than ever before.



How EAB Can Help

Solutions to Prepare for the Pandemic Ripple Effects

NAVIGATE

Comprehensive Student Success Management

Access all the tools you need to build a student-centric campus



3 to 15%

Typical graduation rate improvement for Navigate partners

WISR

Virtual Student Communities

Accelerate student connections and build institutional affinity at scale



90%

of first-year and transfer students joined one campus's community

RESEARCH

Student Mental Health Best Practices

Elevate mental health services, reach, and impact



30

Founding partners in EAB's Mental Health Collaborative

TRANSFER PORTAL

Custom Credit Articulation Solutions

Attract prospective transfer students with transparent credit evaluations



30%

Increase in application completion percentage among Portal users

EDIFY

Higher Ed's First Data Platform

Aggregate and access data to understand how ripple effects are impacting your school



75%

Reduction in time required to update data across systems

Want to participate in an expert consultation?

Click on the solution, email us at eabcommunications@eab.com, or visit eab.com.



Endnotes

Executive Summary

1. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/> (November 18, 2021 update)
2. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/> (November 18, 2021 update)
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Social Disengagement

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