

OCTOBER 2020

Issue Brief

8

Educational Equity
and Opportunity Gaps:
**The COVID-19 Pandemic
Has Increased the Need
To Strengthen Supports
for Arizona Students**

College 
Success
Arizona

Access · Opportunity · Success

Board of Directors

Vince Roig, Chairman

Paul Koehler, Vice Chairman

Tracy Bame

Gonzalo de la Melena, Jr.

John Fees

Kate Hickman

Chevy Humphrey

Rich Nickel

Steve Seleznow

Patricia Welborn

About College Success Arizona

College Success Arizona is working to significantly increase the postsecondary attainment rate of students in Arizona, particularly for those who otherwise would not be able to attend or graduate. By doing so, we believe that we will improve the quality of life not just for those individuals and their families but also for the state as a whole.

Acknowledgments

Dr. Richard Daniel directs College Success Arizona's research and policy activities. He is the lead author of this brief and College Success Arizona's ongoing series of publications on issues that affect college access and attainment.

Collaborative Communications Group contributed to the research and development of this brief.





Educational Equity Will Have a Powerful Influence on Arizona's Future

In the education community, serious concerns about how the COVID-19 pandemic will negatively affect educational opportunity and equity have not been diminished by the start of the new academic year. If anything, those concerns, which arose during the initial shock of the disruption in the spring, have intensified. More and more evidence shows that students and families who were already marginalized by our K-12 and higher education systems are being disproportionately harmed by the pandemic. By nearly every measure—be it with respect to health outcomes, employment and financial stability, or education—people of color and those from low-income families are among the most likely to experience negative outcomes.

An April 2020 survey found that ASU students from lower-income families were 55 percent more likely to delay graduation than their more affluent peers.

That it comes as little surprise that these outcomes track along predictable racial, ethnic, geographic, and socioeconomic lines is a further indictment of our collective failure to redress the inequalities that define our society. And, specifically where our education systems are concerned, it is an indictment of the long-term inaction to address equity and opportunity gaps before the pandemic, gaps that now threaten to grow wider—undoing what progress we have made—as the current crisis persists.

About This Brief

This issue brief highlights key systemic issues and barriers—many of which predate, and have been exacerbated by, the pandemic—that students and families face when it comes to accessing higher education opportunities and succeeding in college. Importantly, it does not provide a comprehensive account of the educational equities or barriers, nor does it make recommendations or propose prescriptive policy solutions. Instead, it focuses on select indicators and presents information and insights, from national and state-specific perspectives, that can help advance efforts in Arizona to understand how the pandemic affects educational equity as it pertains to college access and college success.



Arizona is at a crucial juncture. What we do in the coming months to ensure that students have the opportunities and supports required to succeed in school (whether in-person or online), go to college, and earn a certificate or degree has the potential to shape the future of our state.

We cannot simply hope or demand that secondary schools and higher education institutions find ways, on their own, to shrink equity and opportunity gaps. Already many have demonstrated exceptional ingenuity and genuine care for their students, even as they themselves continue to face enormous challenges to provide quality learning experiences while their budgetary constraints grow increasingly severe.

“The COVID-19 shock is likely to exacerbate socioeconomic disparities in higher education.”

Rather, this moment requires a collective response from us all—education advocates, student serving organizations, the business and philanthropic communities, policy makers, and educational institutions alike. We must ensure that high school students are prepared for college and have the information they need to navigate the college admissions processes amid prevailing uncertainty. We must also ensure that current college students receive the academic and non-academic supports they need to be successful and graduate.

Students Have Seen Their Lives and Academic Plans Upended

It almost goes without saying that college students have experienced major disruptions to their educational experience, and for many, their sense of stability. During the initial shock of campus closures and the transition to remote learning, it was readily apparent that some students would experience significant hardships—due to factors like the loss of stable housing, loss of jobs, loss of access to reliable internet and technology, and the loss of access to many on-campus services—in addition to the academic challenges inherent to remote learning.

As analysts at Inside Higher Ed note, the switch to online learning this past spring revealed the degree to which resource advantages can contribute to learning advantages. Simply put, “students with private places to study, reliable Wi-Fi and less economically stressed home environments enjoy tangible benefits in their efforts to navigate online courses” compared to their peers who do not have access to similar resources.¹



This insight extends beyond disparities related to online learning. Students with resource advantages are also better positioned to succeed in the absence of the fundamental support services institutions provide, and, perhaps above all, they have more substantial safety nets. Their less advantaged peers, by contrast, are more vulnerable to the disruption and more affected by limited access to the support services that normally come with a fully operational campus. The leaders of the Aspen Institute's American Talent Initiative sum up these barriers to success thusly:

Our most vulnerable students will lack access to stable broadband, quiet study spaces, and other critical support services that campuses reliably provide. With the loss of on-campus jobs and the onset of new family hardships, they are now at risk of losing ground in their academic journeys, incurring additional costs to make up credits, and potentially dropping out of college altogether.²

A Snapshot of Student Success At Risk

While the full picture of the impact of the pandemic on college students is still emerging, and, in fact, constantly changing as the new academic term progresses, an array of survey data collected throughout the summer shows significant effects on academic progress, student well-being, financial stability, and numerous other factors that influence student persistence and success.

The severity of the disruptions students have faced bears reemphasizing, as do the measurable consequences for student success that go along with them. In an April 2020 survey of more than 1,500 undergraduate students at Arizona State University, for example, researchers found that 13 percent of students surveyed had delayed graduation, 11 percent had withdrawn from classes, and 50 percent reported a decrease in academic performance and in time spent studying.³ These are concrete academic setbacks, accompanied in many cases by other challenges that directly threaten students' chances of successfully completing their degree programs.

In a national survey, almost 25% of Latino, and 7% of Black students said they expected to take a lighter course load when the new school year starts, as did 18% of the lowest-income students.



Moreover, these setbacks were not equally distributed. The ASU researchers note that their findings “underscore the fact that the COVID-19 shock is likely to exacerbate socioeconomic disparities in higher education.”⁴ Their data revealed that students from lower-income families were 55 percent more likely to delay graduation than their more affluent peers; similarly, that compared to their peers whose parents have a college-education, first-generation students were 50 percent more likely to delay graduation.⁵

These findings are buttressed by those from other, nationally representative studies. A May 2020 survey by Global Strategy Group and The Education Trust found that more than 75 percent of students overall—and 84 percent of Black students and 81 percent of Latino students—are concerned about staying on track to complete their programs of study.⁶ In the same study, “85 percent of students of color [said] they are very concerned about not being able to get the skills or work experience needed to get a job after they graduate.”⁷

Arizona Postsecondary Student Resiliency Fund

College Success Arizona understood in the early days of the pandemic that college students in Arizona would face extraordinary academic, personal, and financial challenges as a result of the disruption. Together with Helios Education Foundation, we launched the Arizona Postsecondary Student Resiliency Fund to provide direct relief to students. Distributed through partner organizations throughout the state, Resiliency Fund grants have enabled students to meet basic needs and have provided a measure of financial stability so that they can continue their college education. In total, the Resiliency Fund distributed \$500,000 in student grants to 1,156 low-income and first-generation college students, as well as \$25,000 in capacity-building funds to help partner organizations provide virtual support to students.

Survey data shows that Arizona high school students want to go to college, despite the many challenges that the pandemic has presented.

In a survey conducted between April 29 and July 21, 2020, researchers at the Center for Economic and Social Research, at the University of Southern California, found that “nearly 30 [percent] of Asian American, almost 25 [percent] of Latino, and 7 [percent] of Black students said they expect to take a lighter course load when the new school year starts, as do 18 [percent] of the lowest-income students.”⁸ This is particularly worrisome because course load reductions increase the likelihood that students will not complete their program of study, that they will take longer to graduate, and take on greater debt to finance their education.⁹



Indicators Reveal Worrying Trends and Widening Access and Equity Gaps

When it comes to college access, there are numerous signals that disparities and inequities—along racial, socioeconomic, and geographic lines—are increasing. One such troubling indicator is the decline Arizona has seen in FAFSA applications and renewal rates. FAFSA completion is strongly correlated with college-going, especially among students in the quintile with the highest poverty. Students in this quintile who complete the FAFSA enroll in college at a rate of 85 percent, compared to 37 percent for students who do not complete the FAFSA.¹⁰ A decline in first time applications and renewals suggests low-income students—who likely require federal financial assistance in order to afford college—will likely enroll or persist in college at lower rates compared to before the pandemic.

Among Arizona students eligible for Pell Grants, FAFSA renewal rates decreased by 2.1 percent as of August 14, 2020 compared to the same time last year.¹¹ This rate of decline is greater than that of FAFSA renewals for all students in the state, which amounted to a 0.5 percent decrease.¹² Overall, FAFSA applications in Arizona were down 2.1 percent; nationally the decline was 2.4 percent as of August 14, 2020. At the national level, education observers cite numerous reasons for the decline in FAFSA completions, among them lack of internet access at home, lack of access to school counselors in the transition to remote learning, and, in some cases, students must abandon higher education plans in order to work and contribute to the household income.^{13,14}

“America’s future depends on our ability to nurture the talents and capabilities of our young people.”

It is not just declining FAFSA completions that signals a troubling trend when it comes to educational equity and college access. In addition to noting the decline in FAFSA completion among first time filers and continuing students, a nationwide analysis of more than 500,000 admitted students, conducted by Education Advisory Board, found a “6 [percent] year-over-year decline in deposits [to secure enrollment] among students from households with Expected Family Contributions (EFC) below \$10K. For Black students in that income bracket, deposits are down 12 [percent]. Only when EFC rises above \$40K do we stop seeing a decline in deposits.”

This analysis underlines what surveys and polling have been indicating since the beginning of the summer: that low-income students and families, and students and families of color are more likely than their white and more affluent peers to change their college plans, including deferring and foregoing enrollment, in response to the persistent uncertainty.¹⁵



Findings from A Survey of Arizona Parents

This summer, College Success Arizona surveyed 400 parents of 10-12 grade students throughout Arizona to better understand how the pandemic has impacted students and families in our state. We asked parents about their perceptions of the supports related to college-going that students received from schools, particularly with respect to how schools were helping their students prepare for college, what information parents need to help students prepare for college, and how the pandemic has impacted students' decisions about college and their families' financial circumstances.

Their responses indicate that Arizona high school students want to go to college, despite the many challenges that the pandemic has presented when it comes to navigating the college admissions process, as well as the additional barriers—in terms of academic readiness, financial stability, or otherwise—they face.

At the same time, the survey responses also indicate that many students and families are not receiving from their schools the information and other supports needed to overcome the additional barriers the pandemic has presented.

College Access is Hindered by Lack of Information and Guidance

Most parents indicated that they do not have enough information about college. Nearly 60 percent of parents surveyed—and, notably, 66 percent of rural parents—said they do not have the information they need about how the pandemic will impact their students' future college enrollment.

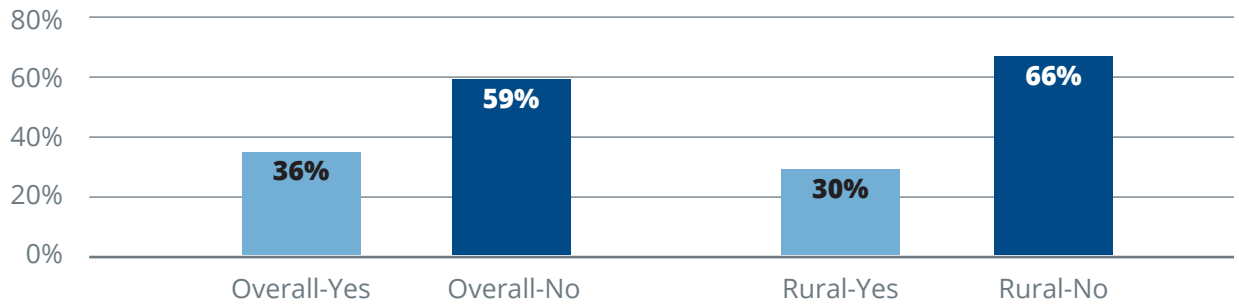
A significant proportion of those surveyed are reliant on external resources for information about college. Nearly 25 percent of parents said they do not have a family member who knows the college preparation process. Approximately one-third of these families have a household income lower than \$49,000 or do not have a college education. Upwards of 90 percent of the families who said they don't have someone familiar with the college-preparation process indicated that they would benefit from receiving scholarship and application date information.

Parents identified counselors as the most helpful resource for college information. Thirty-nine percent of parents say that counselors or advisors at their students' schools are their sources for guidance on navigating the college-preparation process, from learning about different colleges and exploring options all the way to applying for colleges and learning about financial aid.

At the same time, parents also identified access to counselor support as the resource they most lacked. This lack of access is not surprising, given Arizona's long-term inability to reduce its student-to-counselor ratio, which, at 905:1, is the worst in the country. The national recommended ratio is 250:1.



Parents Who Say They Have Access to the Necessary Information About How the Pandemic Will Impact Their Student's Future College Enrollment

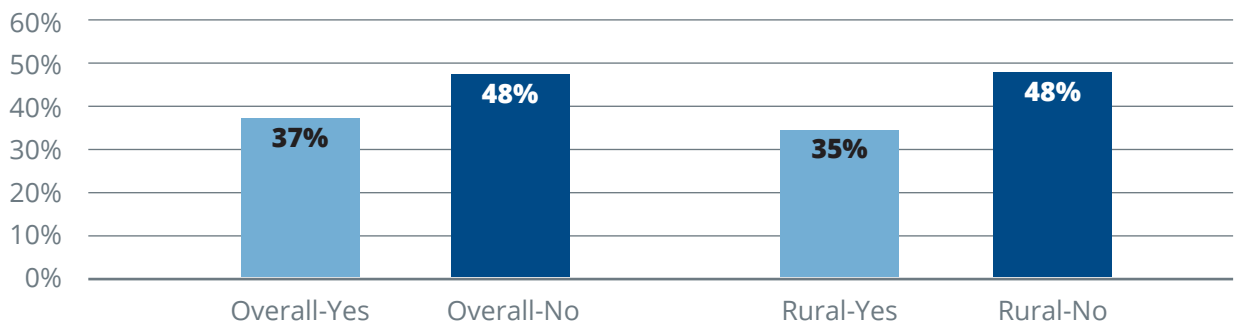


Parents Doubt the Quality of the Academic Preparation Their Students Will Receive

Parents question quality of instruction students will receive this fall. A majority of those surveyed—including 48 percent of rural parents—believe that the instruction students receive this fall will be insufficient to prepare them for college.

Their responses also point to a major equity issue, one that has the potential to exacerbate information, opportunity, and achievement gaps: disparities when it comes to access to the broadband internet and technology required to participate in online classes. More than 33 percent of surveyed families who live in low-income communities indicated that they do not have access to devices needed for remote learning.

Parents Who Believe Instruction Received in Fall 2020 Will Prepare Their Students For College



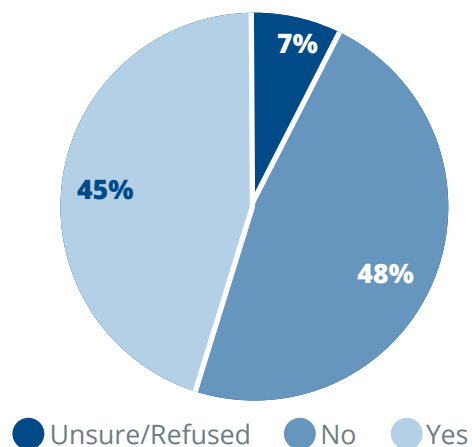


Parent Perceptions of Lack of Support for Students Highlights Disparities

Many students have not been receiving non-academic supports during the pandemic, according to their parents. Non-academic supports play a major role in college readiness and access, as College Success Arizona has written about previously, but 38 percent of parents said their students are not receiving them during the pandemic. Among these parents, 45 percent were of Hispanic origin, 44 percent were from rural communities, and 44 percent did not have a college education.

Additionally, 48 percent of parents said their family had not received enough information, resources, or support related to their student's emotional well-being during the pandemic.

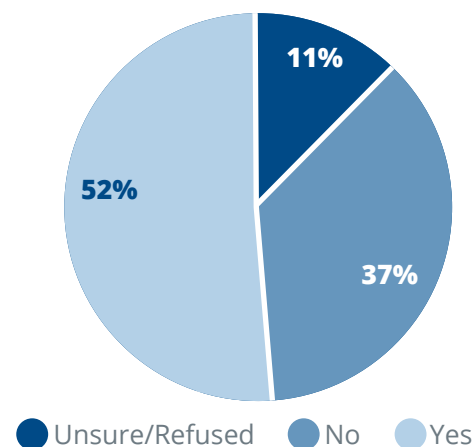
Parents Who Say They and Their Student Received Information, Resources, and Support Related to Emotional Well-Being



The Pandemic Is Impacting College Affordability

More than 50 percent of parents said the pandemic will impact their family's ability to pay for college, while 11 percent indicated that they were uncertain (or refused to answer) whether or not their ability to afford college would be affected. Among parents who believe their ability to pay for college will be affected, 28 percent have students who have changed their college decisions, compared to only 11 percent of students who have changed their college plans and whose parents say the pandemic will not have a financial impact.

Parents Who Say the Pandemic Will Impact on Their Family's Ability To Pay for College





Implications for The Future of Arizona

College Success Arizona has long championed the importance of ensuring that Arizona's young people have the opportunities, resources, and supports that enable them to pursue a college education successfully. Now, when educational opportunity and equity are in greater jeopardy than at any time in recent memory, it is all the more essential that we commit, as a community and as a state, to expanding opportunity and increasing equity.

Addressing the prevailing equity issues and barriers to college access and success highlighted in this brief is about more than responding to the pandemic crisis. Committing to eliminate educational inequities and expand access to educational opportunities now, in the midst of the pandemic, will also help to build stronger education systems in the long term and a more prosperous Arizona for all once the pandemic ends and the long process of recovery begins.

In fact, these efforts will, in large part, help to define the success of that recovery. Again, the leaders of the American Talent Initiative succinctly capture the imperative to prioritize educational equity amid the uncertainty that defines the ongoing pandemic and the experimental response strategies that schools and institutions of higher education have implemented. They note that

America's future depends on our ability to nurture the talents and capabilities of our young people. Stepping back now—when the need is greatest—would be shortsighted. At a moment like this, there is a sense of moral urgency involved in the task of providing our young people with education and hope. Coming together and taking a collective leap for equity will be instrumental to that future.¹⁶

In this case, what is true for America's future is true for Arizona's as well. If, as a state, we aspire to a more just and equal society, in which all Arizonans have the opportunity to thrive and prosper, then we must proactively build toward that aspiration—not just hope for it. Education, from early childhood through ensuring that more young people are prepared and able to complete a postsecondary credential and that Arizona meets its 60 percent statewide attainment goal, will shape that future. How we come together as a state to collectively and collaboratively support students, families, and the institutions that serve them will determine what educational, social, and economic opportunity looks like in Arizona over the coming months and after the pandemic has ended.



Endnotes

1. Maloney, E. and Kim, J. "The Challenge of Equity in Higher Education Under COVID-19." Inside Higher Ed. May 12, 2020. <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/learning-innovation/challenge-equity-higher-education-under-covid-19>
2. Drake, M.V. and Portfield, D.R. (2020). "Universities Should Support Their Most Vulnerable Students To Champion Education Equity." Fortune, June 27, 2020. <https://fortune.com/2020/06/27/higher-education-equity-access-poverty/>
3. Aucejo, E.M., French, J.F., Araya, M.P.U., and Zafar, B. (2020). The Impact of COVID-19 on Student Experience and Expectations: Evidence from a Survey. NBER Working Paper No. 27392. National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w27392.pdf>
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Global Strategy Group. (2020). Higher Ed Survey Highlights the Academic, Financial, and Emotional Toll of Coronavirus on Students. <https://s3-us-east-2.amazonaws.com/edtrustmain/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2017/11/27120859/Higher-Ed-Nationwide-CA-Memo-F05.27.20.pdf>
7. Ibid.
8. Key, Jim. (2020). "Pandemic May Delay College Graduation for Students of Color." University of Southern California. <https://dornsife.usc.edu/news/stories/3279/coronavirus-covid-19-may-delay-graduation-students-of-color/>
9. Ibid.
10. DeBaun, Bill. (2019). FAFSA Completion by District Poverty Level Across the United States. National College Attainment Network. <https://public.tableau.com/profile/bill.debaun.national.college.access.network#!/vizhome/FAFSACompletionbyDistrictPovertyLevelAcrossTheUnitedStates/Story1>
11. DeBaun, Bill. (2020). "Percent Change in Year-Over-Year FAFSA Completions August 14, by State and Application Type." National College Attainment Network. <https://public.tableau.com/profile/bill.debaun.national.college.access.network#!/vizhome/FAFSARenewals20-21/StateRenewals>
12. Ibid.
13. West, Charlotte. "'I Am Beyond Worried': More HS Students Are Applying for Financial Aid — and Enrolling in College as a Result. Coronavirus May Put an End to Both." The 74. May 19, 2020. <https://www.the74million.org/article/i-am-beyond-worried-more-hs-students-are-applying-for-financial-aid-and-enrolling-in-college-as-a-result-coronavirus-may-put-an-end-to-both/>
14. O'Connor, M., Schraeder, B., and Donaldson, B. (2020). "Drop in College Enrollment Deposits and FAFSA Filing Raises Equity Concerns." Education Advisory Board. <https://eab.com/insights/expert-insight/enrollment/drop-college-enrollment-fafsa-filing-raises-equity-concerns/>
15. Fairfax, M. and Venit, E. (2020). "What Do Early Indicators Tell Us About Equity Gaps in Fall 2020?" Education Advisory Board. <https://eab.com/insights/blogs/student-success/equity-gaps-fall-2020-covid19/>
16. Drake, M.V. and Portfield, D.R. (2020). Op cit.

College 
Success
Arizona

Access · Opportunity · Success

www.collegesuccessarizona.org