

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

Exhausted but Optimistic: a Portrait of This Year's Incoming Freshmen

By *Audrey Williams June*

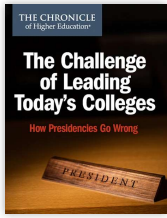
AUGUST 23, 2021

Members of the high school class of 2021 — whose entire senior year was marred by a global pandemic — are mentally exhausted but optimistic about their first year of college, according to [new data on students entering college this fall](#).

That's just one of the insights in the data from the annual Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement, conducted by the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University at Bloomington. Between May and August 20, the survey had more than 40,000 respondents who recently completed high school and were entering bachelor's degree-granting colleges in fall 2021.

The survey, which closes in mid-September, includes pandemic-related questions to capture how Covid altered students' lives and fueled concerns about their future, health and safety, and ability to socialize. As classes get underway at colleges across the nation, the data provide insight about students' hopes for their first year of college and the impact Covid has had on their mental health.

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More than half of the students reported a substantial increase in mental/emotional exhaustion as a result of the pandemic. But at the same time, 47 percent were “very optimistic” that their first-year of college would be a success.

Here’s more on what the survey says about how the pandemic has affected first-year students:

Some Key Concerns Caused By Covid

As the pandemic drags on, one out of four students is "very much" or "quite a bit" more worried about the likelihood of being able to socialize, a key part of college life. A similar share is worried about future opportunities.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, to what extent, if any, has your concern about the following increased?

Ability to socialize

Very much	9%
Quite a bit	16%
Some	26%
Very little	22%
Not at all	26%
Don't know	1%

Your health and safety

Very much	7%
Quite a bit	12%
Some	25%
Very little	22%
Not at all	33%
Don't know	1%

Future opportunities

Very much	8%
Quite a bit	15%
Some	29%
Very little	22%
Not at all	22%
Don't know	3%

Note: Data are through August 20. Some responses might not total 100 percent because of rounding.

Chart: Audrey Williams June • Source: [Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement/Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University at Bloomington, 2021](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

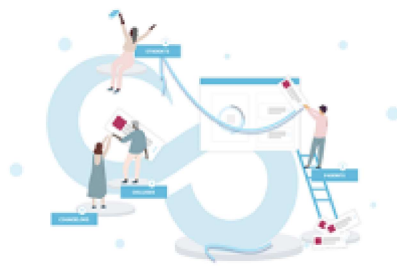
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Mental and Emotional Exhaustion

Mental and emotional exhaustion seem to be linked to students' expectations of how difficult it will be to keep up with their coursework and navigate interactions with faculty.

Expected academic difficulty	Percent indicating substantial increases in mental/emotional exhaustion
Low	43%
Moderate	54%
High	70%

Note: Data are through August 20. Substantial increases are "very much" or "quite a bit."

Table: Audrey Williams June • Source: [Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement/Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University at Bloomington, 2021](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Eager to Learn In-Person

After experiencing a substantial amount of online or hybrid instruction in their later years of high school, more than half of incoming students "strongly prefer" attending classes in person in college.

With regard to online and in-person courses, which of the following statements is most true for you?

Strongly prefer in-person	51%
Somewhat prefer in-person	23%
No preference	13%
Somewhat prefer online	9%
Strongly prefer online	3%

Note: Data are through August 20. Responses might not equal 100 percent because of rounding.

Chart: Audrey Williams June • Source: [Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement/Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University at Bloomington, 2021](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Confident About College

More than 80 percent of students are "very optimistic" or "moderately optimistic" that their freshman year of college will go well.

How optimistic are you about having a successful first year of college or university?

Very optimistic	47%
Moderately optimistic	38%
Somewhat optimistic	14%
Not at all optimistic	1%

Note: Data are through August 20.

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STUDENT LIFE

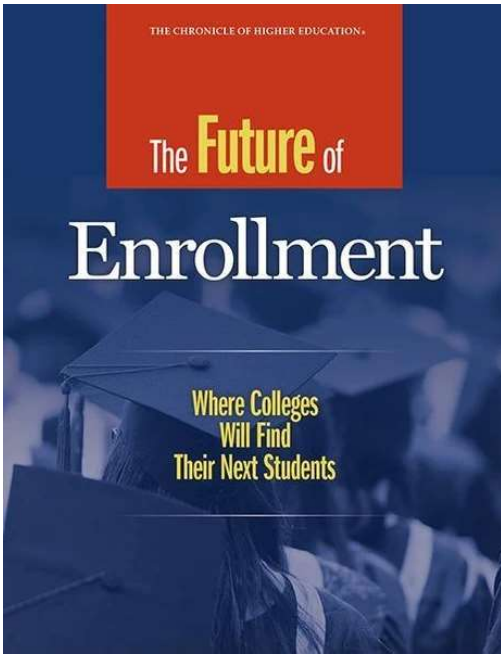
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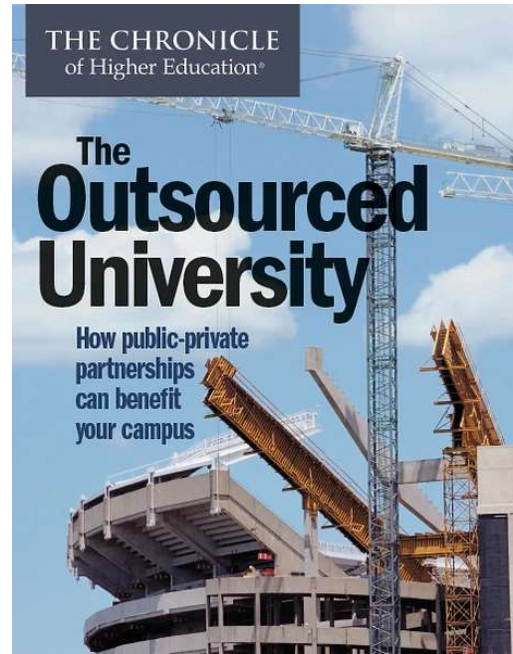
Audrey Williams June

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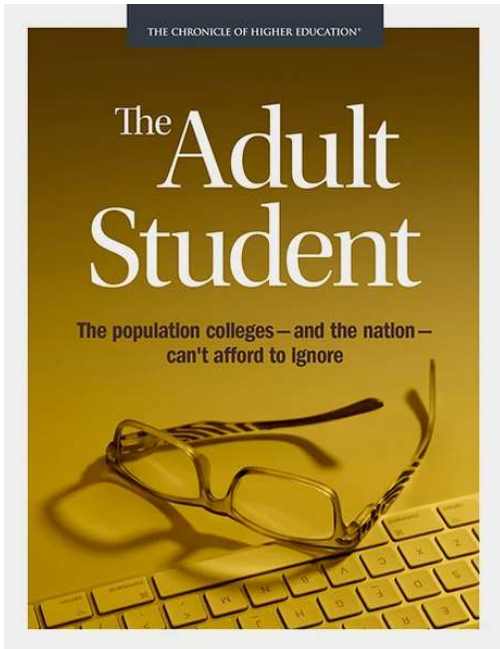
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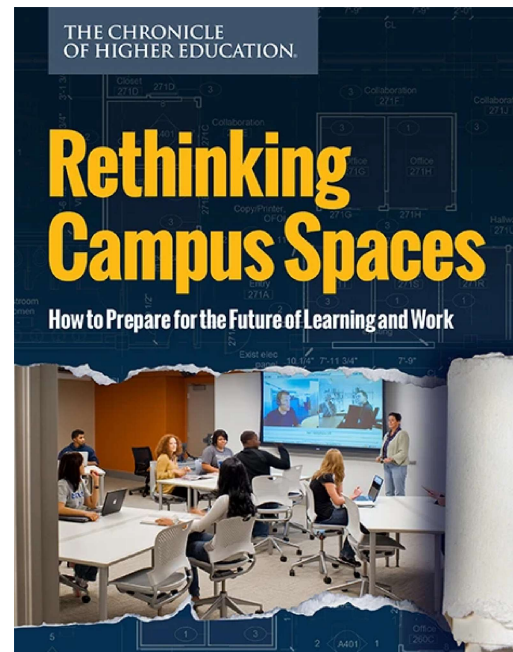
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