



# Quick Facts: Community Colleges and the Covid-19 Pandemic

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## Background

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated longstanding challenges to academic success at community colleges. While all higher education institutions were impacted by the pandemic, community colleges, which serve the nation's largest portion of first-generation college students, low-income students, students of color, English language learners, adult students, and part-time students experienced some of the most severe impacts.

## Enrollment

According to the [most recent data](#) from the National Student Clearinghouse, total postsecondary enrollment declined **2.7%**, or roughly **500,000 students**, in fall 2021, contributing to a total two-year decline in postsecondary enrollment since the pandemic began of **5.1%**. Of this, the vast majority of the decline came from undergraduate enrollment (graduate enrollment was not severely affected). Public 2-year institutions have been hit harder than any other sector with a total enrollment decline of **13.2%**, or roughly **700,000 students**, since the start of the pandemic (a decline of **10.1%** in fall 2020 over 2019 enrollment, and an additional decline of **3.4%** in fall 2021 over 2020 enrollment).

**New England Community College Enrollment Declines, 2019-2021**

State	% Change in Community College Enrollment Over the Previous Year, Fall 2021	% Change in Community College Enrollment Over the Previous Year, Fall 2020	% Change in Community College Enrollment Over the Previous Year, Fall 2019
Connecticut	-4.7	-15.3	-4.7
Massachusetts	-6.2	-13.4	-0.7
Maine	-16.4	-7.2	+3.2
New Hampshire	-4.7	-8.5	-5.5
Rhode Island*	-	-7.4	+1.6
Vermont*	-	-0.04	-5.1
New England Average	-8% (excludes RI and VT)	-8.64%	-1.9%

\*Rhode Island and Vermont figures only take one community college's enrollment data into account per state (Community College of Rhode Island and Community College of Vermont).

**Sources:** National Student Clearinghouse [Fall 2021 Estimates](#) report for CT, MA, ME, and NH data and NEBHE analysis of IPEDS data for RI and VT enrollment figures.

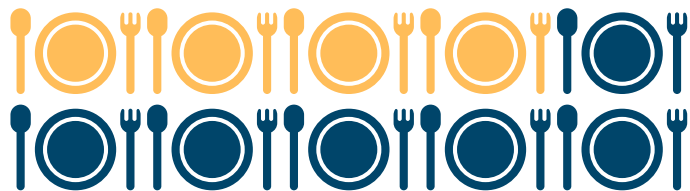
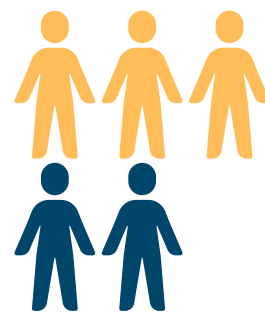
Maine saw the biggest decline in community college enrollment during the second year of the pandemic of all the New England states, while Connecticut community colleges experienced the sharpest declines in enrollment during the first year of the pandemic, closely followed by Massachusetts. Overall, the pandemic disproportionately and negatively impacted enrollment at New England community colleges compared to pre-pandemic years.

### Basic Needs Insecurity

A [study](#) by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice published in 2021, using fall 2020 data, assessed college students' basic needs insecurity during the ongoing pandemic. "Basic needs insecurity" is defined as food insecurity, housing insecurity, and/or homelessness. According to the report, which surveyed 202 postsecondary institutions and 195,000 students in 42 states:

- **61%** of community college students experienced at least one form of basic needs insecurity within the last year, compared to 53% of students at four-year colleges.
- **75%** of Indigenous students, **70%** of Black students, **64%** of Hispanic students, **54%** of white students, and **53%** of Asian/Asian-American students experienced basic needs insecurity within the past year.
- Women were **seven percentage points** more likely than men to have experienced basic needs insecurity.
- LGBT students were **nine percentage points** more likely than non-LGBT students to have experienced basic needs insecurity.
- **64%** of first-generation college students experienced basic needs insecurity, compared to 55% of non-first-generation college students.
- **67%** of Pell Grant recipients experienced basic needs insecurity compared to 50% of non-Pell Grant recipients.
- **70%** of students who are parents experienced basic needs insecurity, compared to 55% of students who are not parenting.

At community colleges in the Northeast, **three in five students** experienced basic needs insecurity, but **only a third of these students** used supports on their college campuses to help address their needs, a gap of **28%**. Campus supports include programs that help students obtain Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, find affordable housing, or locate emergency housing. Students failed to utilize these supports for a variety of reasons, including administrative burden, lack of knowledge about the supports, stigma and shame.



**39%** of community college students experienced food insecurity within the past year. **38%** of community college students experienced food insecurity within the past 30 days.

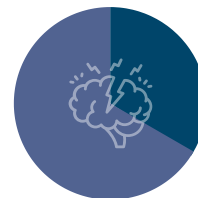
**52%** of community college students experienced housing insecurity (difficulty maintaining a safe and affordable place to live) in the past year, compared to 43% of students at four-year colleges.



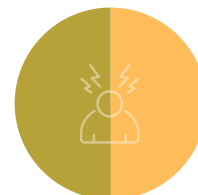
**14%** of students experienced homelessness in the past year at both community colleges and four-year colleges.

## Stress

According to the [same study](#) by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, just over **one third of students** experienced moderate to severe anxiety and/or depression in the last two weeks, which was slightly higher than the rates reported in 2019. Stress came from many sources, including basic needs insecurity, employment, parenting, and other financial and academic stressors. For instance, **42%** of students with a part-time job and **31%** of students with a full time job lost their jobs during the pandemic. Additionally, **73%** of students who are parents spent **40+ hours in the last week** caring for their child, on top of school and, in many cases, work.



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**Half of community college students reported not knowing if their campus had support services to cope with the stress of the pandemic.**

A [2021 report](#) by the Center for Community College Student Engagement, which surveyed roughly 120,000 students across 273 community colleges, also found that **just over one third** of community college students reported their personal financial situation being worse in spring 2021 than before the pandemic, and **almost one quarter** reported that they were struggling to pay for college as a result of the pandemic. The report also found that **49%** of community college students surveyed did not know if their campus had support services to cope with the stress of the pandemic.

## Access to Technology

As the pandemic forced many higher education institutions to shift to remote learning, community colleges were more likely to shift to online classes and less likely to return to in-person classes, despite the fact that many community college students do not have access to reliable Internet at home.

- As of fall 2020, **65%** of four-year students reported in the [survey](#) by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice that their campus was open for in-person classes, compared to **just 28% of two-year students**. Thus, campus facilities like cafeterias and libraries were less accessible to community college students. Similarly, **84%** of community college students moved to online-only classes, while 66% of four-year college students did so—a **difference of 18%**.
- A [fall 2020](#) Center for Community College Student Engagement report found that **25%** of community college students surveyed did not have access to reliable Internet at home, and **4%** did not have access to the Internet at home at all. Additionally, **5%** of community college students completed all online coursework using their cell phones.

*In May 2020, community colleges had received just 21 percent of all federal CARES funding, despite educating roughly 40 percent of all undergraduate students in the U.S. and the largest proportion of nontraditional and high-needs learners.*

## Emergency Aid Was Often Insufficient

Federal CARES funding helped many postsecondary institutions and students stay afloat during the pandemic. Yet, its design and implementation led to severe challenges, especially for community colleges. An October 2021 [report](#) from the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice surveyed 195,000 students at 202 institutions, as well as staff and administrators from those institutions. It found:

- Just **21%** of community colleges in spring 2020 felt they had sufficient financial resources.
- **60%** of colleges used Pell Grant eligibility as a criteria for distributing aid. Additionally, Title IV requirements within CARES funding meant that undocumented and DACA students were excluded from receiving emergency aid.
- Only **15%** of students experiencing basic needs insecurity in spring 2020 applied for emergency aid.

Additionally, an [analysis](#) by the Center for American Progress from May 2020 found that because the CARES act used “full-time enrollment” as a criterion in its formula for fund allocation, community colleges’ needs were greatly underestimated (**65%** of community college students nationwide are enrolled part-time). Community colleges received just 21% of all federal CARES funding, despite educating roughly 40 percent of all undergraduate students in the U.S. and the largest proportion of nontraditional and high-needs learners.