

# UC Berkeley

## SERU Consortium Reports

### Title

Undergraduates' Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Disparities by Race and Ethnicity

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1rf4p547>

### Authors

M. Soria, Krista M.  
Roberts, Brayden J.  
Horgos, Bonnie  
et al.

### Publication Date

2020-11-30



# SERU COVID-19 SURVEY

## Undergraduates' Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Disparities by Race and Ethnicity

Krista M. Soria, Brayden J. Roberts, Bonnie Horgos, & Katie Hallahan

**The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted students who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC students).** The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium survey was administered from May to July 2020 to 31,687 undergraduate students enrolled at nine large public research universities. Among the respondents, 0.1% were American Indian or Alaska Native ( $n = 36$ ), 19.9% were Asian ( $n = 6,301$ ), 4.2% were Black ( $n = 1,336$ ), 3.7% were Latinx ( $n = 1,171$ ), 0.1% were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander ( $n = 42$ ), 53.4% were White ( $n = 16,917$ ), 13.1% were multiracial ( $n = 4,152$ ), and 5.5% had an unknown or unreported race or ethnicity ( $n = 1,732$ ).

According to the results, **BIPOC students were more likely to experience academic obstacles in the transition to remote instruction**, including lacking access to technology, not being able to attend online class sessions, and lacking access to appropriate study spaces.

**BIPOC students were also more likely than White students to experience financial hardships**, including the loss or reduction of wages from on-campus employment, unexpected increases for living expenses and technology, and loss or reduction of income of family. **BIPOC students also experienced higher rates of food and housing insecurity, and were more likely to experience symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder.**

Finally, **BIPOC students were less likely than White students to live in places free from emotional or physical abuse, where they felt their identities were respected, and where they felt safe and respected.**

## Academic Obstacles

In the SERU COVID-19 survey, we asked undergraduate students “Which of the following academic factors, if any, were an obstacle to your successful transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?” Students could respond either “yes” or “no” regarding whether they experienced the obstacles. Below, we report the results for some of the items in which we observed the greatest differences between students.

We asked students whether they experienced the lack of access to technology necessary for online learning. Overall, BIPOC students were more likely than White students (14%) to lack access to technology necessary for online learning; however, the rates are much higher for American Indian or Alaska Native students (38%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students (30%), and Latinx students (23%) (Figure 1).

Furthermore, we asked students whether they were unable to attend scheduled online class meetings. All BIPOC students were more likely than White students to report being unable to attend scheduled online class sessions; however, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students (37%) and American Indian or Alaska Native (32%) students were much more likely than others to indicate that they were unable to attend scheduled online class sessions (Figure 2).

**Figure 1**

**Percent of Students Who Lacked Access to Technology Necessary for Online Learning, by Race/Ethnicity**

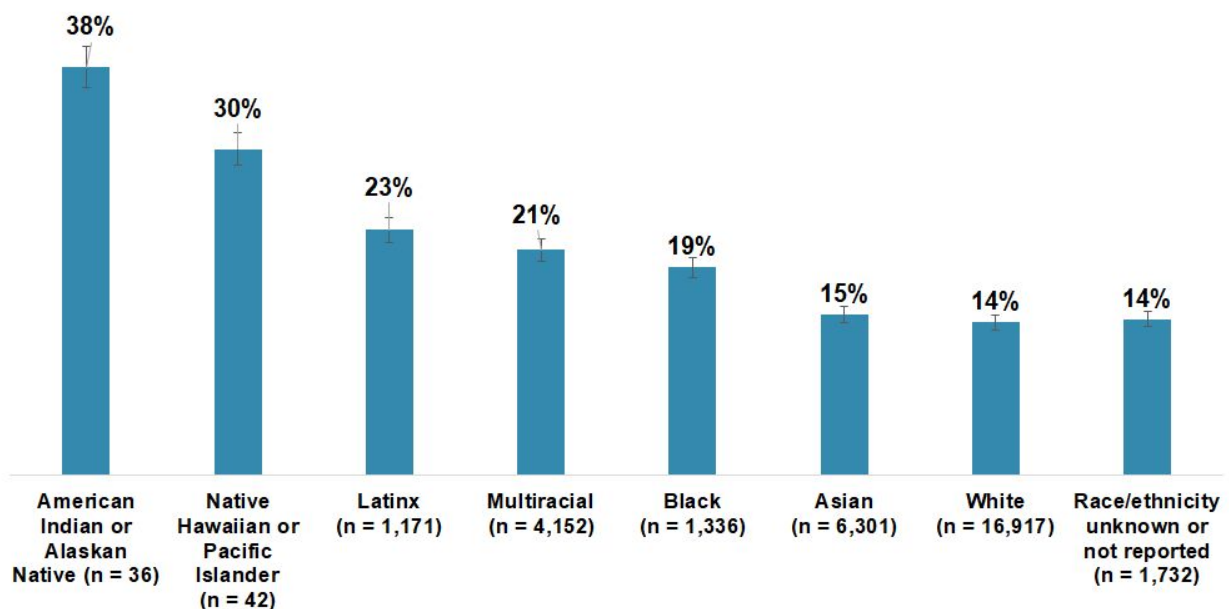
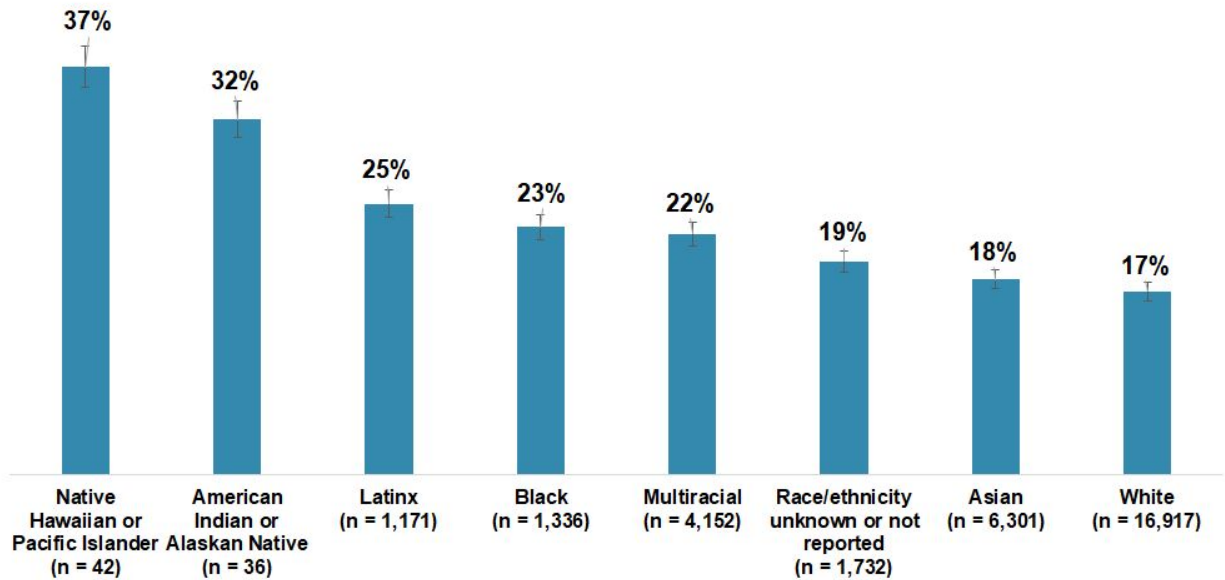


Figure 2

**Percent of Students Who Were Unable to Attend Scheduled Online Meeting Times, by Race/Ethnicity**

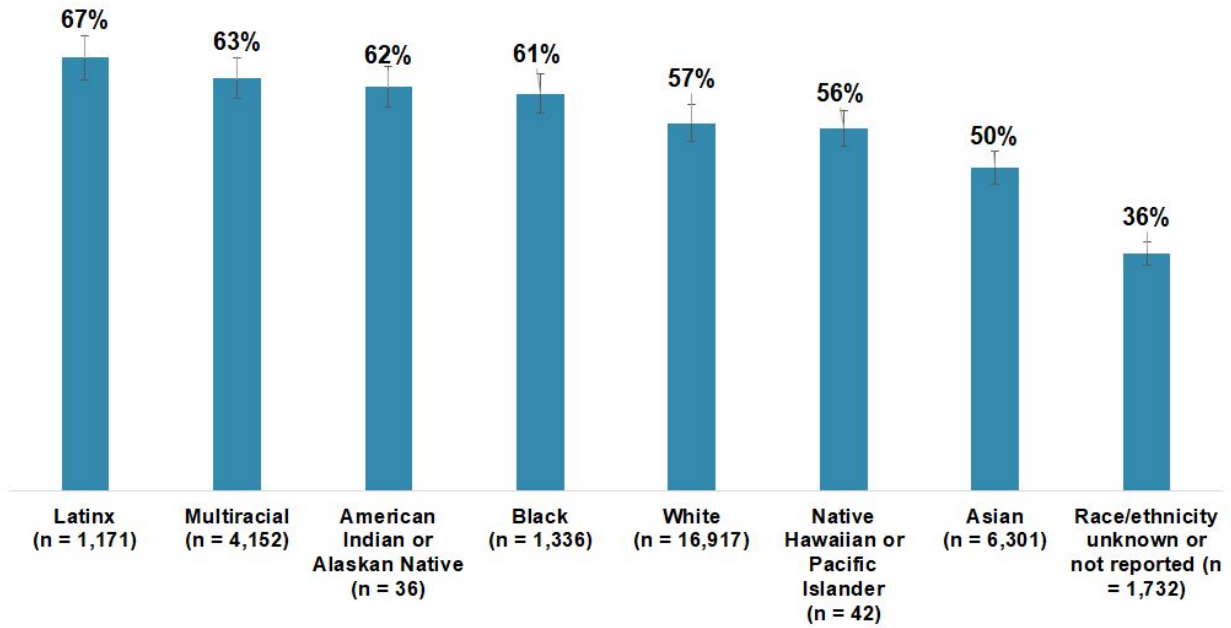


Furthermore, the results suggest that Latinx (67%), multiracial (63%), American Indian or Alaska Native (62%), and Black (61%) students were more likely to lack access to appropriate study spaces compared to White (57%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (56%), Asian (50%) and students whose race/ethnicity was unknown or not reported (36%) (Figure 3).

Additionally, the results suggest that some students did not adapt as well to online instruction compared to their peers. Specifically, only 36% of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students and 39% of Latinx students said that they adapted “well” or “very well” to the shift to remote instruction. Furthermore, only 41% of Black students and 45% of multiracial students indicated that they adapted “well” or “very well” to remote instruction compared to White students, Asian students, American Indian or Alaskan Native students, and students who did not have a race/ethnicity identified (Figure 4).

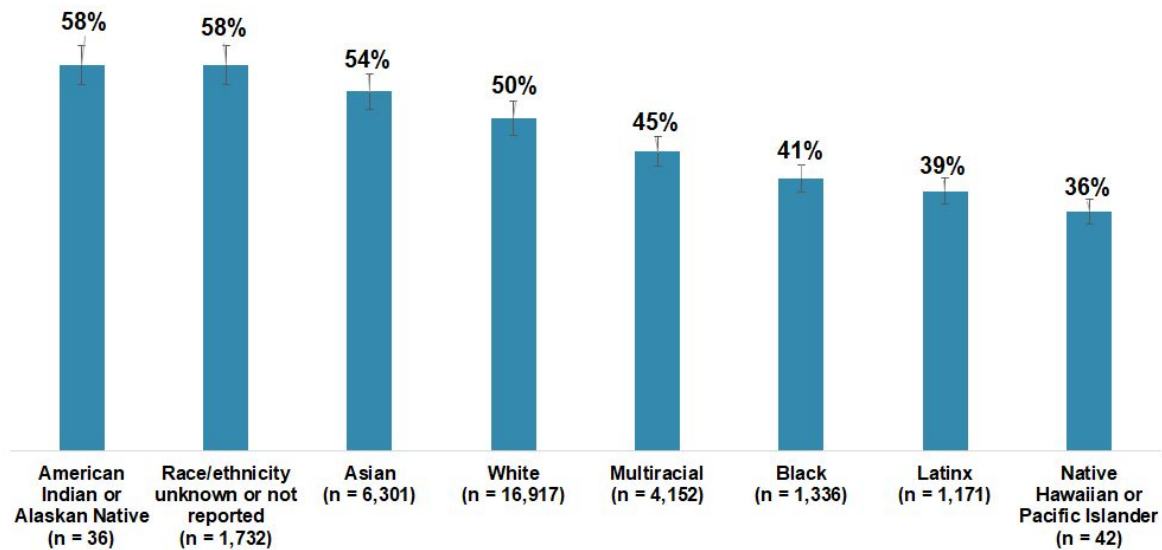
**Figure 3**

**Percent of Students Who Lacked Access to an Appropriate Study Space, by Race/Ethnicity**



**Figure 4**

**Percent of Students Who Adapted “Well” or “Very Well” to Shift to Remote Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic, by Race/Ethnicity**



## Financial Hardships

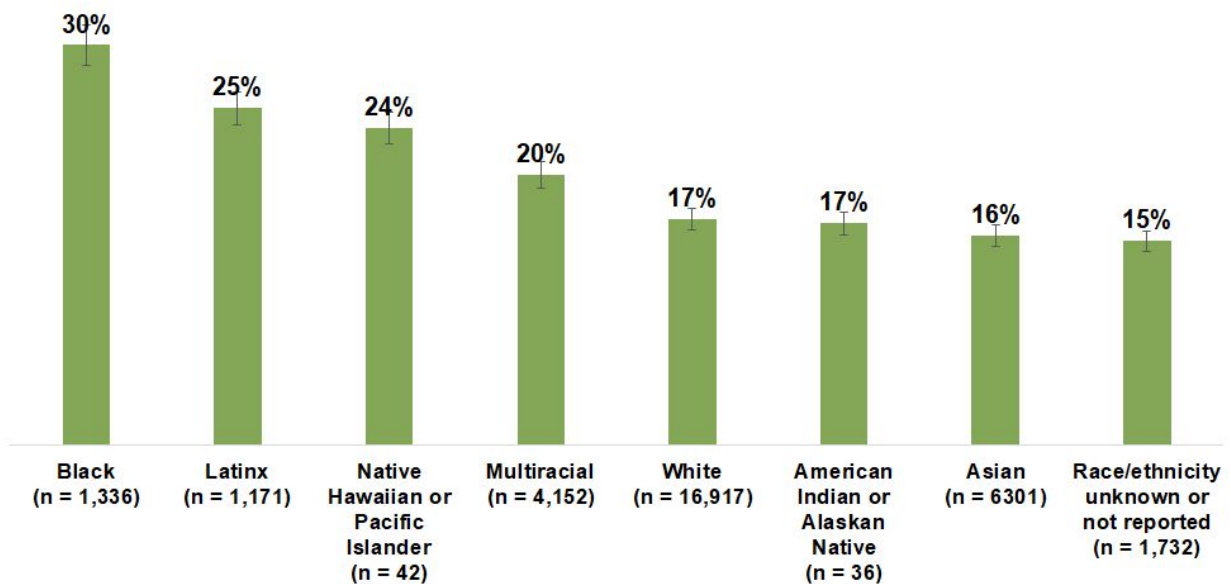
In the SERU COVID-19 survey, we asked undergraduate students “Which of the following financial hardships, if any, have you experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic?” Students could respond either “yes” or “no” regarding whether they experienced the financial hardship. Below, we report the results for some of the items in which we observed the greatest differences between students.

We asked students whether they experienced the loss or reduction in wages from on-campus employment during the pandemic (Figure 5). Overall, BIPOC students were more likely than White students (17%) to experience the loss of wages from on-campus employment. The rates are much higher for Black students (30%), Latinx students (25%) and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students (24%) (Figure 5).

We also asked students whether they experienced unexpected increases in spending for technology (Figure 6) and unexpected increases in living expenses (Figure 7). Overall, BIPOC students were more likely than White students to experience both unexpected increases in spending for technology and unexpected increases in living expenses, although the differences between students by race/ethnicity are greater for the unexpected increases in spending for technology than for unexpected living expenses.

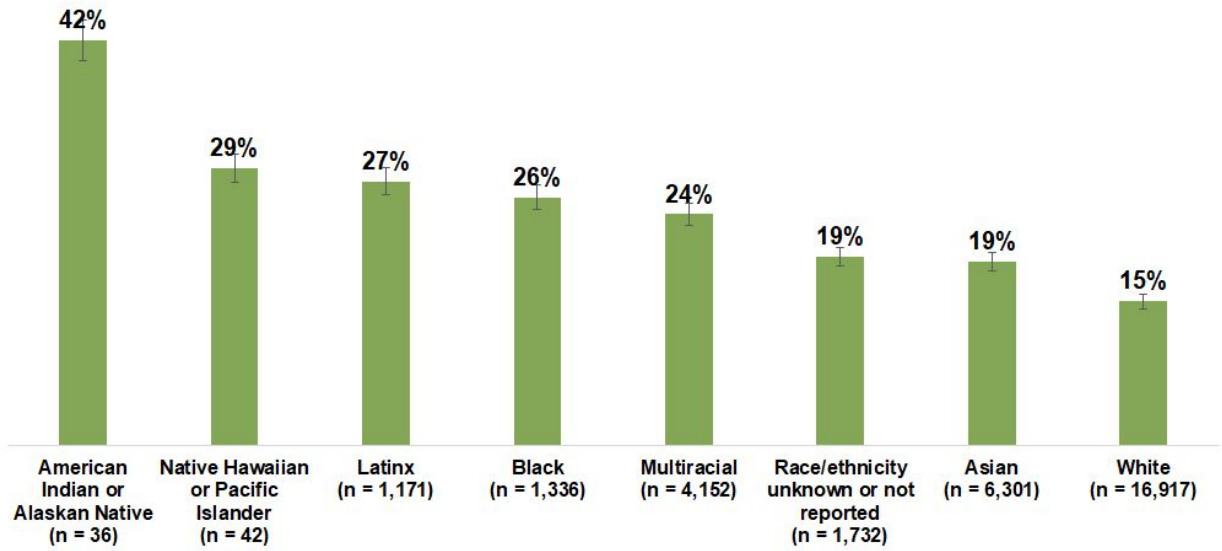
**Figure 5**

***Percent of Students Who Experienced the Loss or Reduction in Wages from On-Campus Employment, by Race/Ethnicity***



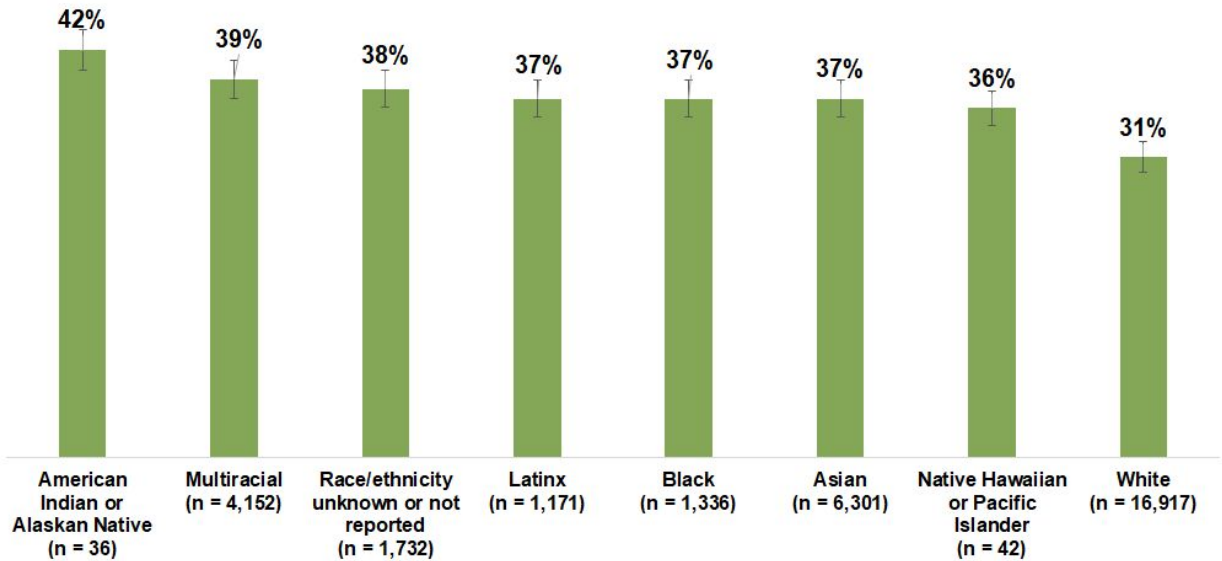
**Figure 6**

**Percent of Students Who Experienced Unexpected Spending for Technology, by Race/Ethnicity**



**Figure 7**

**Percent of Students Who Experienced Unexpected Increases in Living Expenses, by Race/Ethnicity**

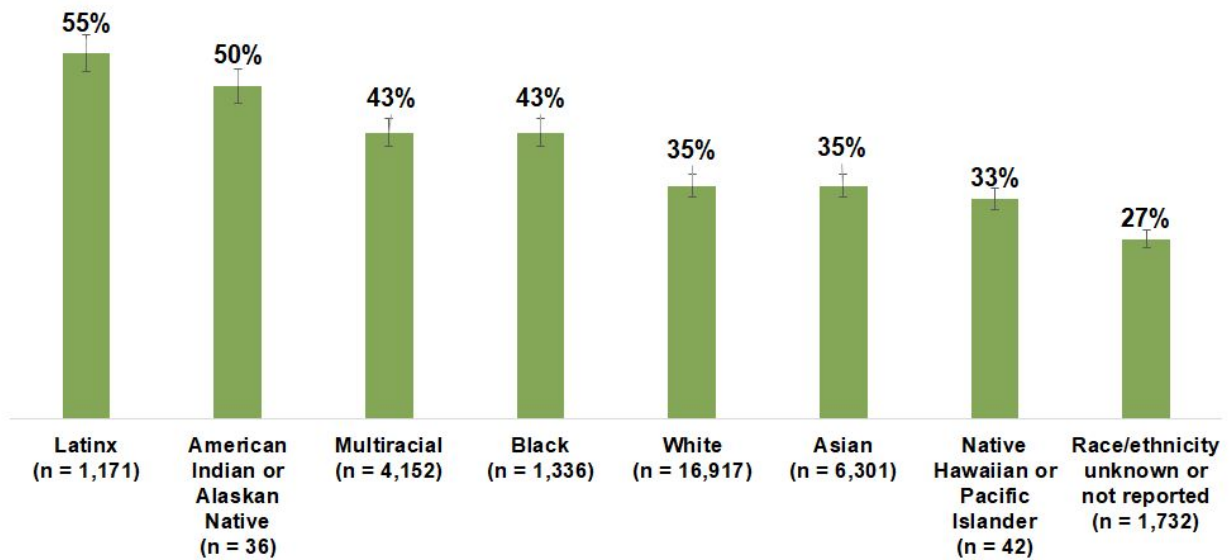


We also asked students to indicate whether they experienced the loss or reduction of income of family members during the pandemic (Figure 8). Latinx students, American Indian or Alaskan Native students, multiracial students, and Black students had significantly higher rates of experiencing the loss or reduction of income of family members compared to their peers.

**Figure 8**

***Percent of Students Who Experienced the Loss or Reduction of Income of Family Members***

***During the Pandemic, by Race/Ethnicity***



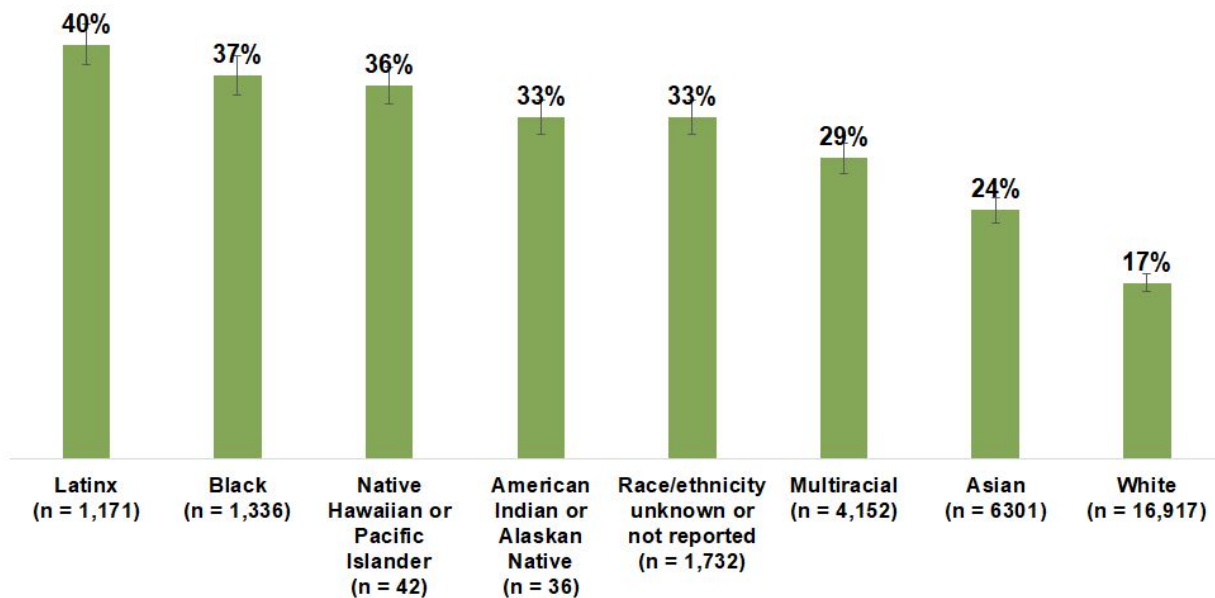


We used a two-item food insecurity screen to identify students' food insecurity (Hager et al., 2010). We asked students how often they were worried whether their food would run out before they got money to buy more and how often the food that they bought didn't last, and they didn't have money to get more. A response of "often true" or "sometimes true" to either statement indicates a positive screen for food insecurity.

The results suggest that BIPOC students were more likely to experience food insecurity, with Latinx, Black, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and American Indian or Alaska Native students experiencing close to (or more than) two times the rate of food insecurity as White students (Figure 9).

**Figure 9**

***Percent of Students Who Experienced Food Insecurity, by Race/Ethnicity***

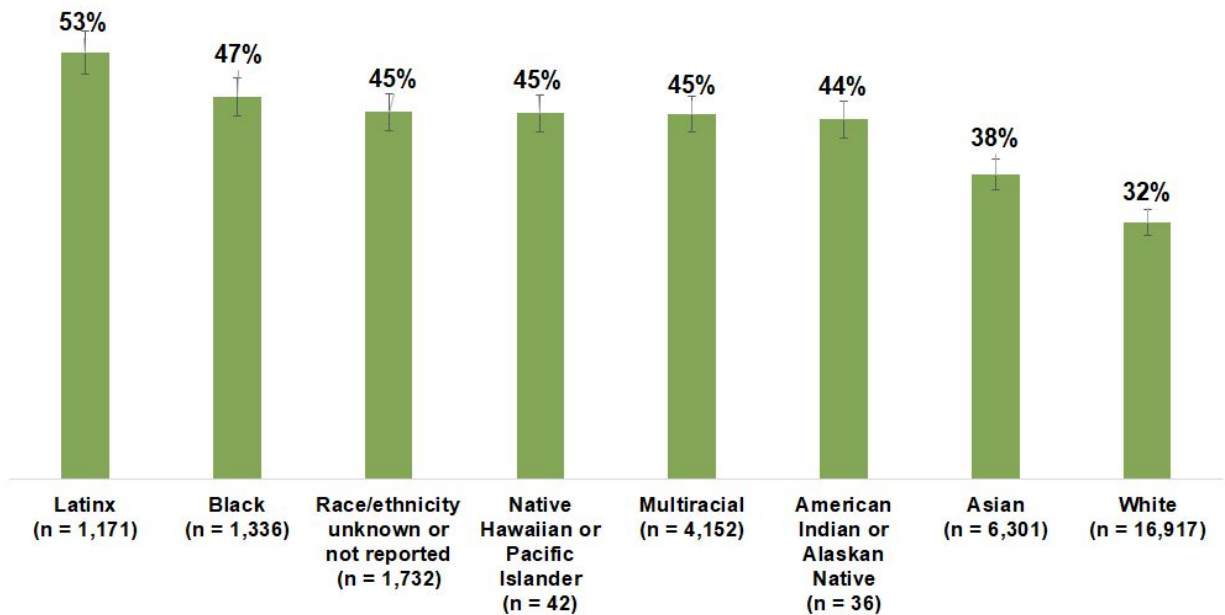


We used similar items to measure students' rate of housing insecurity. We asked students how often they were worried whether they would not have enough money to cover the cost of their housing and how often they were unable to pay for housing on time. A response of "often true" or "sometimes true" to either statement indicates a positive screen for housing insecurity.

The results suggest that BIPOC students were more likely than White students to experience housing insecurity; specifically, Latinx students, Black students, students who do not have a reported race/ethnicity, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students, multiracial students, and American Indian or Alaskan Native students were between 1.25 to 1.5 times more likely than White students to experience housing insecurity (Figure 10).

**Figure 10**

***Percent of Students Who Experienced Housing Insecurity, by Race/Ethnicity***



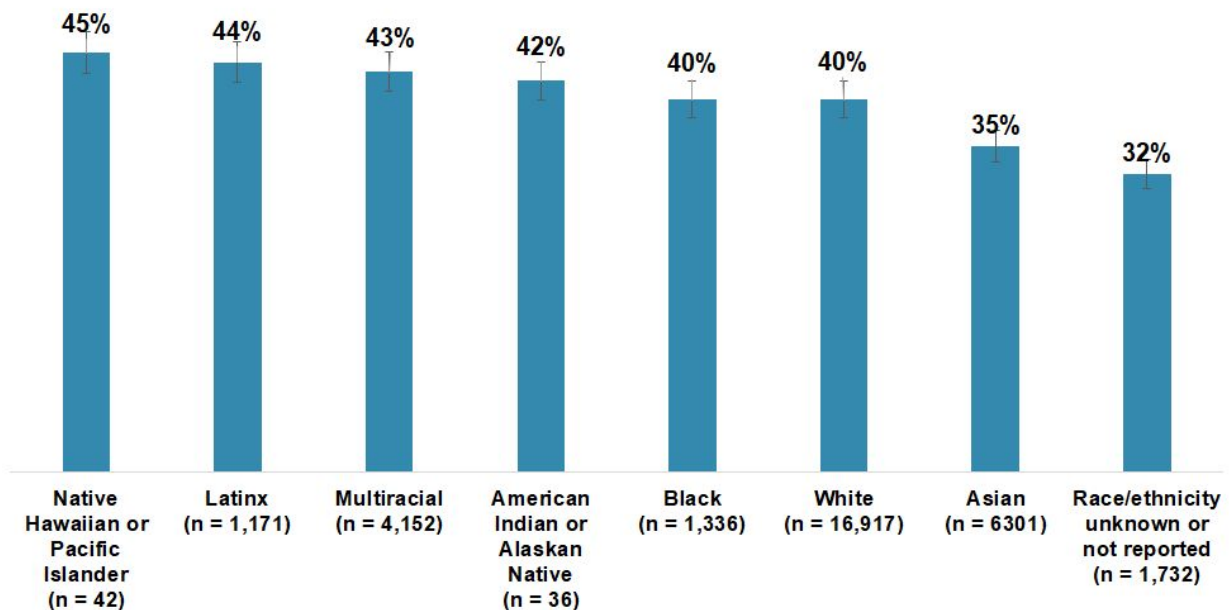
## Mental Health

We used the Patient Health Questionnaire-2 ([PHQ-2](#)) two-item scale to screen for major depressive disorder symptoms (Kroenke et al., 2003) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder-2 ([GAD-2](#)) two-item scale to screen students for generalized anxiety disorder symptoms (Kroenke et al., 2007). The PHQ-2 asks two questions about the frequency of depressed mood and anhedonia over the past two weeks while the GAD-2 asks two questions about the frequency of anxiety over the past two weeks. Each question is scaled from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day). The responses to two questions in each scale are summed and, if the score for PHQ-2  $\geq 3$  (out of 6), major depressive disorder is likely. If the score for GAD-2 is  $\geq 3$  (out of 6), generalized anxiety disorder is likely.

The results suggest that some BIPOC students were more likely to experience clinically significant symptoms for generalized anxiety disorder compared to White students and students with an unknown or unreported race/ethnicity (Figure 11). Specifically, 45% of Native Hawaiian or Alaska Native students, 44% of Latinx students, 43% of multiracial students, 42% of American Indian or Alaskan Native students met clinically significant criteria for generalized anxiety disorder compared to 40% of Black and White students, 35% of Asian students, and 32% of students with an unknown or unreported race/ethnicity.

Figure 11

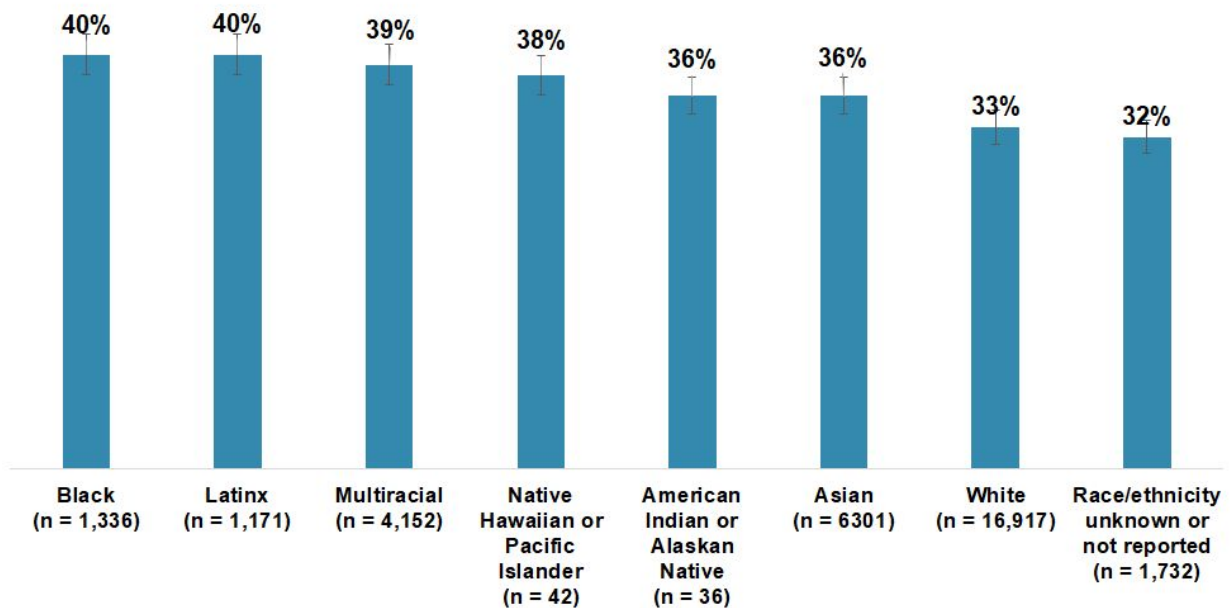
*Percent of Students Who Have Clinically Significant Generalized Anxiety Disorder Symptoms, by Race/Ethnicity*



The results suggest that all BIPOC students were more likely to experience clinically significant symptoms for major depressive disorder compared to White students and students with an unknown or unreported race/ethnicity (Figure 12). Specifically, 40% of Black and Latinx students, 39% of multiracial students, 38% of Native Hawaiian or Alaska Native students, and 36% of American Indian, Alaskan Native, or Asian students met clinically significant criteria for major depressive disorder compared to 33% of White students and 32% of students with an unknown or unreported race/ethnicity.

**Figure 12**

***Percent of Students Who Have Clinically Significant Major Depressive Disorder Symptoms, by Race/Ethnicity***

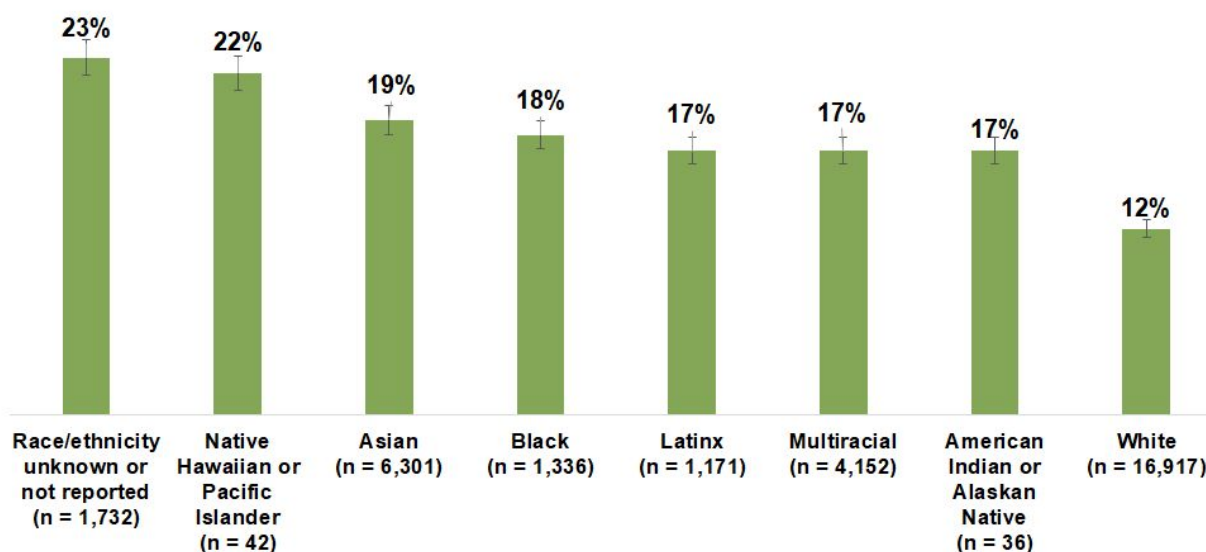


## Safety

We asked students to indicate whether it was “never true,” “sometimes true,” or “often true” that they experienced safety or respect in their living situation. Our survey results suggest that BIPOC students were more likely than White students to live in places during the pandemic that were not free from physical or emotional violence or abuse (Figure 13).

**Figure 13**

***Percent of Students Who Indicated It Was “Never True” or “Sometimes True” That They Had a Place to Live That Was Free from Physical or Emotional Abuse, by Race/Ethnicity***



We also asked students to indicate whether it was “never true,” “sometimes true,” or “often true” that they had a place to live where they felt their identity was respected. Our survey results suggest that many students (Asian, Black, Latinx, multiracial, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students) were more likely than White students to live in places during the pandemic where their identity was not respected (Figure 14). Students without a race/ethnicity identified or reported had the highest rates of living in a place where their identity was not respected.

Finally, we asked students whether it was “never true,” “sometimes true,” or “often true” that they had a place to live where they felt safe and respected. Our survey results suggest that BIPOC students and students without an identified or reported race/ethnicity were more likely than White students to live in places during the pandemic where they felt safe and respected (Figure 15).

Figure 14

*Percent of Students Who Indicated It Was “Never True” or “Sometimes True” That They Had a Place to Live Where Their Identity Was Respected, by Race/Ethnicity*

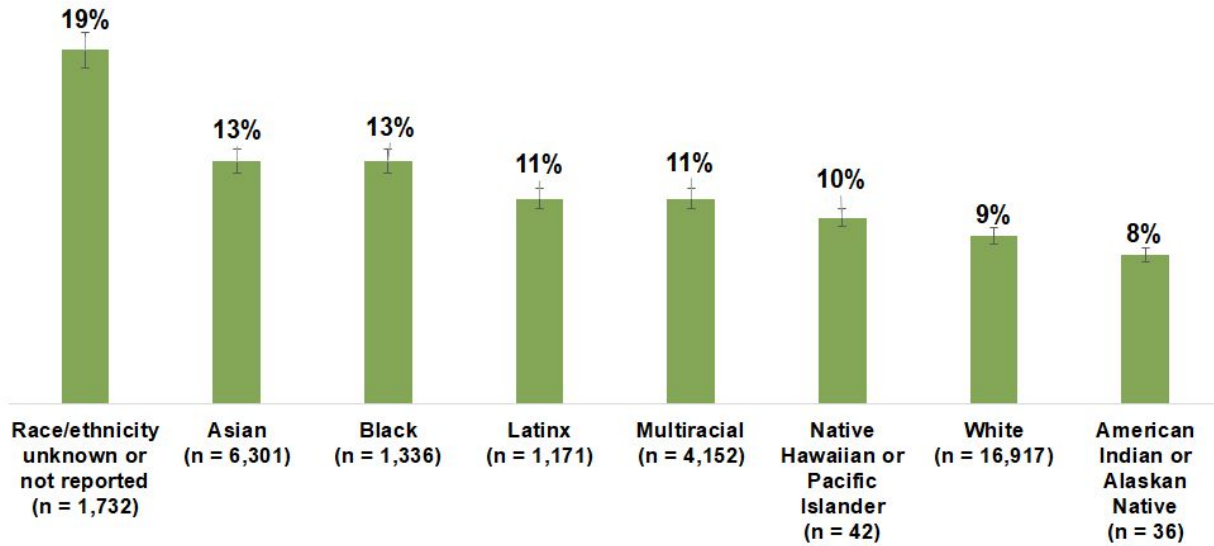
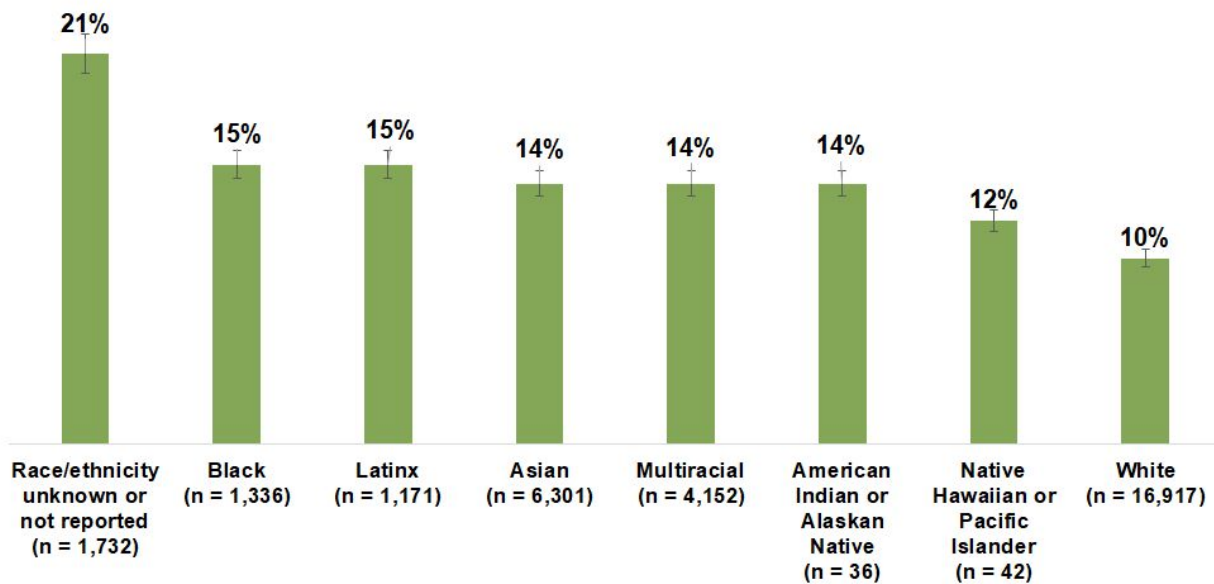


Figure 15

*Percent of Students Who Indicated It Was “Never True” or “Sometimes True” That They Had a Place to Live Where They Felt Safe and Respected, by Race/Ethnicity*



## Belonging & Support

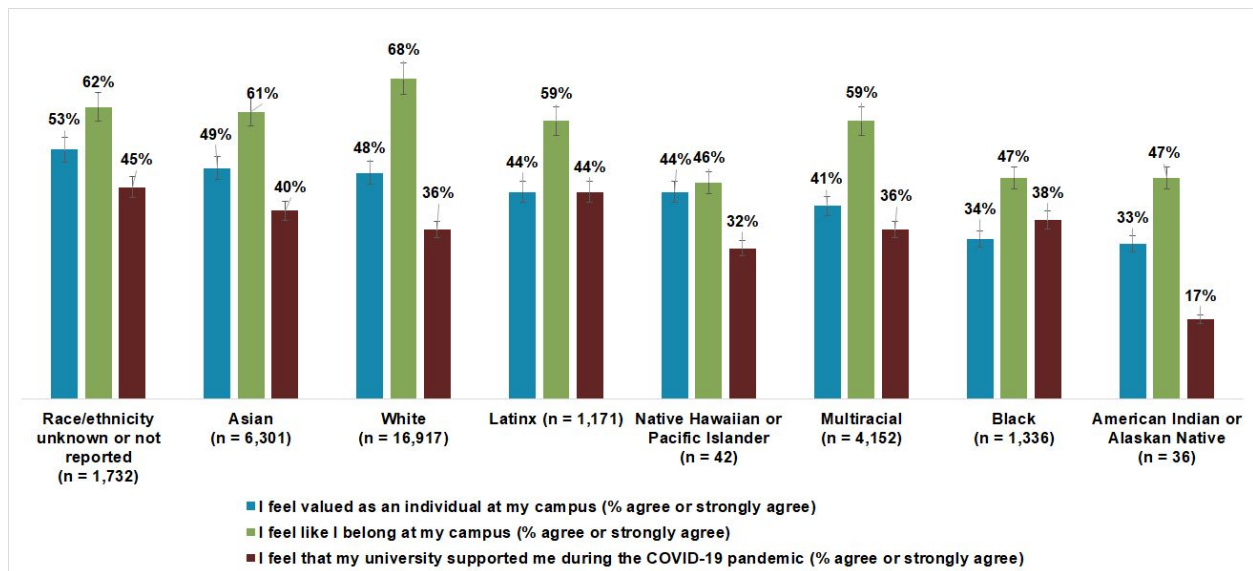
Students responded to three items: “I feel valued as an individual at my campus,” “I feel like I belong at my campus,” and “I feel my university supported me during the pandemic” on a scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree. Below, we share the percentages of students who selected “agree” or “strongly agree” to the items.

Latinx, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, multiracial, Black, and American Indian or Alaska Native students were less likely to agree that they felt valued on campus compared to White students, Asian students, and students with an unknown or unreported race/ethnicity (Figure 16). Furthermore, all BIPOC students were less likely to feel like they belong on campus compared to White students. Notably, Black and American Indian or Alaska Native students were much less likely to feel valued or that they belonged on campus compared to their peers.

Furthermore, some BIPOC students (American Indian or Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and multiracial students) were less likely to agree that their university supported them during the pandemic compared to their peers.

**Figure 16**

***Students’ Perception of Feeling Valued, Like They Belong on Campus, and That Their Universities Supported Them During the COVID-19 Pandemic by Race/Ethnicity***



## Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of our study suggest that BIPOC students experienced more academic obstacles and financial hardships (including food and housing insecurity) during the COVID-19 pandemic than White students. Additionally, in many instances, BIPOC students experienced higher rates of clinically significant symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder compared to White students and students with an unknown or unreported race or ethnicity. Finally, BIPOC students were less likely than White students to live in environments free from physical or emotional abuse, where their identity was respected, and where they felt safe and protected.

Below, we offer some policy recommendations for colleges and universities to support BIPOC students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Inquire about the needs of specific racial/ethnic groups: Do not use “one-size-fits-all” approaches to supporting students***

Students are not only a part of their school cultures; they also belong to unique cultures associated with their identity. Approaches to support students should therefore take students' cultural backgrounds into consideration. We suggest that institutions collaborate with students to develop solutions to the most pressing issues concerning BIPOC students during the pandemic.

To aid stakeholders with identifying the best approaches to support students, we encourage campus staff, administrators, and faculty to identify students' needs and experiences and disaggregate the results by race/ethnicity. We also encourage stakeholders to examine students' experiences through an intersectional perspective by incorporating other aspects of students' identities, such as [disability status](#), gender, sexual orientation, [parental education](#), [social class](#), [caregiving status](#), or [nationality](#).

### ***Promote Engagement in Online Learning***

Some BIPOC students struggled with adapting to online instruction and were more likely to report that they were unable to attend virtual classes at their scheduled meeting times, experienced more increases in spending for technology and in living expenses, and lacked access to appropriate technology for online learning. We recommend that faculty work to better understand the experiences of BIPOC students, schedule their classes to better meet the needs of students, or record their courses and lectures so that students can access them if they are unable to attend classes during their scheduled virtual times. Furthermore, we recommend that institutions work to increase students' access to the types of technology needed for online learning, including renting laptops, expanding access to campus computer labs (with social distancing), and offering discounts to students who need to purchase technology.

### ***Reduce Financial Barriers***

It is important for higher education administrators to attend to the financial hardships experienced by BIPOC students. We recommend that institutional leaders be proactive in reaching out to BIPOC students to share student employment opportunities available at colleges and universities, especially virtual work-from-home positions. Wages from such employment opportunities can help students to defray some of the additional living expenses



incurred during the pandemic, assist students who need to provide financial support to their families, enable students to purchase much-needed technology, and, overall, provide students with financial resources to pay for their education. When those student employment opportunities are aligned with students' academic interests or future career fields, students stand to benefit more from those experiences (Soria, 2015); therefore, we recommend that human resources officers on campus work to connect students with meaningful employment opportunities.

Furthermore, given that many BIPOC students also experienced the loss of income of family members, we recommend that colleges and universities broaden access to career development resources to students' family members during the pandemic. For instance, career development counselors can offer free access to job board websites (such as Handshake), registration to virtual job fairs, and career resource guides (e.g., resume writing advice) to students' family members. We expect that some of these resources could be made more broadly available to students' family members without incurring significant expenses for institutions.

### ***Reduce Food and Housing Insecurity and Improve Safety***

While many colleges and universities have existing food pantries on campus, we recommend that they expand the hours and availability of those services to help students combat food insecurity and have more regular access to free nutritious food. During the pandemic, we also encourage colleges and universities to offer free no-touch pick-up options and free food delivery to students who live on campus or near campus. Campuses can connect qualifying students to resources in their local communities or provide assistance with completing state or federal applications for assistance (such as the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program).

To combat challenges associated with housing insecurity, we recommend that campuses more readily communicate additional housing-related resources to assist students. For instance, some counties have offered residents rental assistance funding during the pandemic or have worked with landlords to prevent sudden evictions. Many colleges and universities have off-campus student liaison services or student legal services offices that can help students to negotiate with difficult landlords or learn more about their rights as tenants.

We also encourage campuses to consider reducing their rates for on-campus housing during the pandemic to make it easier for first-generation students to afford to live on campus. Additionally, we encourage campuses to alter their lease contracts and offer more flexible opportunities for students to stay on campus just a few days a week (like a hotel) so that they have a retreat from their distracting home environments to focus on their schoolwork (but are not obligated to pay full room and board rates).

It is alarming how many BIPOC students reported that they do not live in safe environments that are free from physical or emotional violence or where they felt respected and safe. The pandemic has exacerbated many of the challenges experienced by BIPOC college students. We recommend that housing administrators on college campuses set aside emergency housing locations to assist students who may be living in unsafe environments and provide pathways to help students transition to safe, stable housing when needed.

### ***Expand Mental Health Services, Validate Students, and Support Students***

Colleges and universities should work to provide accessible mental health resources to BIPOC students. As our results suggest, in some cases, BIPOC students were more likely to experience mental health disorders during the pandemic than White students. Our research suggests that colleges and universities should actively work to eliminate some of the barriers to students' ability to seek mental health resources. For instance, administrators could invest in developing more targeted outreach efforts, partnering with programs such as multicultural support services or other programs directed toward BIPOC students, and working with key faculty members to promote existing resources.

Furthermore, faculty and staff should aim to create equitable grading practices for BIPOC students. Coupled with additional disparities such as housing insecurity and lack of access to technology, BIPOC students likely face more academic obstacles than White students. Professors and advisors should work to proactively support BIPOC students by offering options such as extended deadlines, additional time to take exams, and access to free PDFs of textbooks. By creating more equitable access, faculty and staff can undoubtedly ease a significant burden that can potentially exacerbate mental health symptoms.

It is incredibly powerful to validate students' experiences and to acknowledge the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has on BIPOC students. Staff, administrators, and faculty should take time to be educated on the experiences and hardships plaguing the students they serve. Bearing witness to someone else's struggle is a reminder and recognition of one another's humanity. Reminding students—often, in a variety of ways, through multiple channels of communication—that they matter and that they belong on campus can help to support them in an age of increased isolation and distancing.

## About the SERU COVID-19 Survey

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium administered a special survey on the impact of COVID-19 on student experience at U.S. public research universities. The SERU COVID-19 Survey assesses five areas to better understand undergraduates, graduates, and professional students' experiences during the global pandemic: 1) students' transition to remote instruction, 2) the financial impact of COVID-19 on students, 3) students' health and wellbeing during the pandemic, 4) students' belonging and engagement, and 5) students' future plans. You can access the full survey instrument [here](#).

## Sample

The survey was a census survey administered from May 18 to July 2020 to undergraduate students at nine large, public research universities. The report uses data from 31,687 undergraduate students. The response rate was 14-31% at the respective institutions. More information about the demographic composition of the samples is available [here](#).

## Methodology

All of the items we report in this research brief are categorical; therefore, we utilized Pearson's chi-square test to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the expected and observed frequencies of students' responses. We utilized the common

probability level of  $p < .05$ , which serves as an a priori statement of the probability of an event occurring as extreme or more extreme than the one observed if the null hypothesis is true.

## About the SERU Consortium

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium is an academic and policy research collaboration based at Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California – Berkeley (CSHE) working in partnership with the University of Minnesota and partner institutions. More information is available at <https://cshe.berkeley.edu/seru>.

## Contact Information

Krista M. Soria, PhD, Assistant Director for Research and Strategic Partnerships, SERU Consortium, and Director for Student Affairs Assessment, University of Minnesota.  
[ksoria@umn.edu](mailto:ksoria@umn.edu)

## References

Hager, E. R., Quigg, A. M., Black, M. M., Coleman, S. M., Heeren, R., Rose-Jacobs, R., Cook, J. T., Ettinger de Cuba, S. A., Casey, P. H., Chilton, M., Cutts, D. B., Meyers, A. F., & Frank, D. A. (2010). Development and validity of a 2-item screen to identify families at risk for food insecurity. *Pediatrics*, *126*, e26-e32.

Kroenke, K., Spitzer, R. L., & Williams, J. B. (2003). The Patient Health Questionnaire-2: Validity of a two-item depression screener. *Medical Care*, *41*, 1284-1292.

Kroenke, K., Spitzer, R. L., Williams, J. B., Monahan, P. O., & Löwe, B. (2007). Anxiety disorders in primary care: Prevalence, impairment, comorbidity, and detection. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, *146*, 317-325.

## Suggested APA Citation

Soria, K. M., Roberts, B.J., Horgos, B., & Hallahan, K. (2020). *The experiences of undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic: Disparities by race and ethnicity*. SERU Consortium, University of California - Berkeley and University of Minnesota.