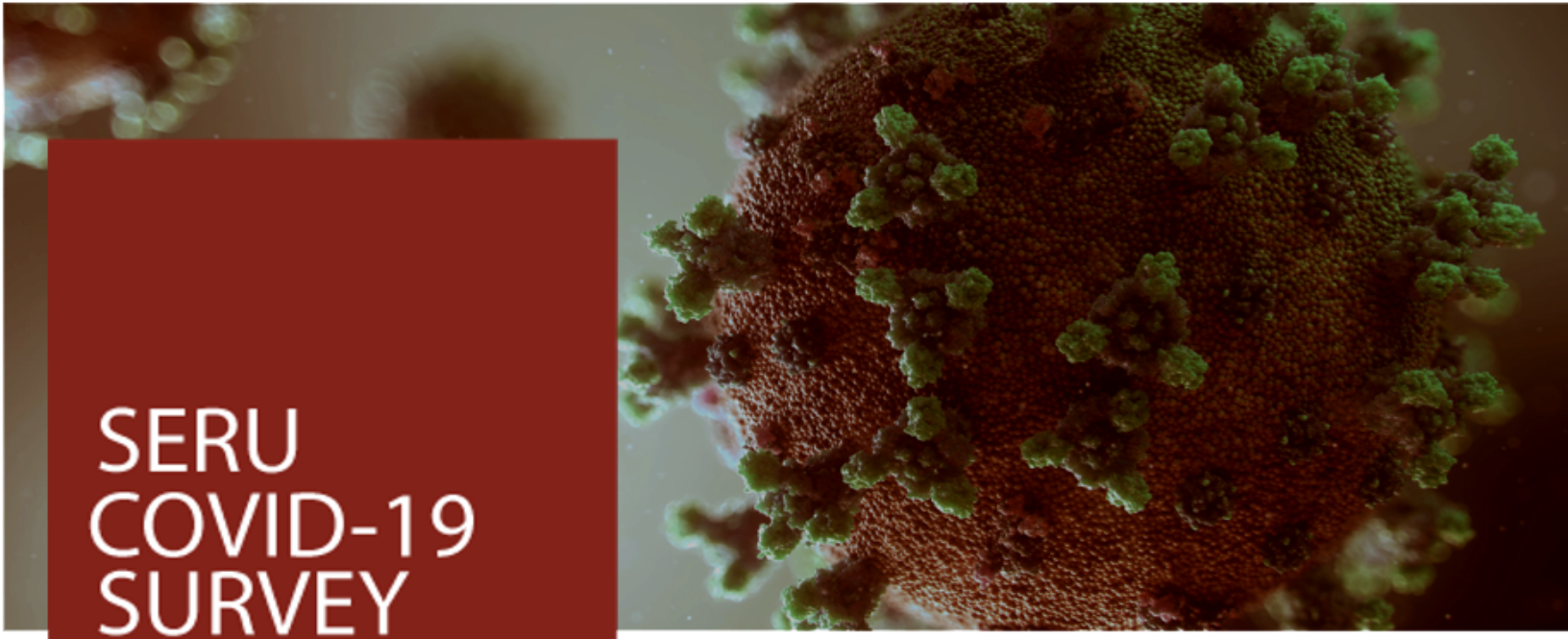


SERU COVID-19 SURVEY

# Social Class Differences in Students' Experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Krista M. Soria & Bonnie Horgos

**The COVID-19 pandemic has created significant hardships for students from low-income, poor, and working-class backgrounds enrolled at large, public research universities**, according to the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium survey of 30,697 undergraduate students conducted May through July 2020 at nine universities. In the survey, 7% of respondents (*n* = 2,112) identified as low-income or poor, 16% identified as working-class (*n* = 4,970), 42% identified as middle-class (*n* = 12,815), 32% identified as upper-middle or professional-middle class (*n* = 9,924), and 3% identified as wealthy (*n* = 876).

The results of our study suggest that **students from low-income/poor and working-class backgrounds were significantly more likely than their peers to experience financial hardships**, including the loss or reduction of income from other family members, unexpected increases in living experiences and technology, the loss/cancellation of expected jobs or internships, and the loss of wages from off-campus employment.

Furthermore, students from low-income/poor and working-class backgrounds were significantly **more likely than their peers to experience food insecurity and housing insecurity.**

Additionally, students from low-income/poor and working-class backgrounds had **significantly higher rates of generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder** and **academic obstacles during the transition to remote learning**, such as lack of access to appropriate study spaces, technology, academic advising, and learning support services.

As campuses roll out their programs and services for the fall 2020 semester, we encourage them to consider the unique needs and experiences of students from low-income/poor and working-class backgrounds and reconfigure their programs to address those students' financial hardships, food/housing insecurity, mental health disorders, and academic obstacles.

# Financial Hardships

We asked students which financial hardships, if any, they have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. In nearly all instances, low-income, poor, and working-class students were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to experience some financial hardships during the pandemic (Table 1). It is clear the pandemic has disproportionately affected students' financial hardships based upon students' social class background: while 40% of wealthy students experienced no financial hardships, only 6% of low-income or poor students and 10% of working-class students reported experiencing no financial hardships during the pandemic.

We presented students' top five financial hardships in Figure 1. Notably, close to two-thirds (63%) of low-income or poor students and over half of working-class students (54%) experienced the loss or reduction of income from other family members compared to slightly over one-third of middle-class students (36%) and one-fifth of upper-middle or wealthy students (24% and 18%, respectively). Low-income, poor, and working-class students were also much more likely to have experienced unexpected increases in living or technology expenses compared to middle-class, upper-middle class, and wealthy students. Additionally, low-income, poor, and working-class students were much more likely than middle/upper-class students to have experienced lost wages or the loss/cancellation of expected jobs or internships.

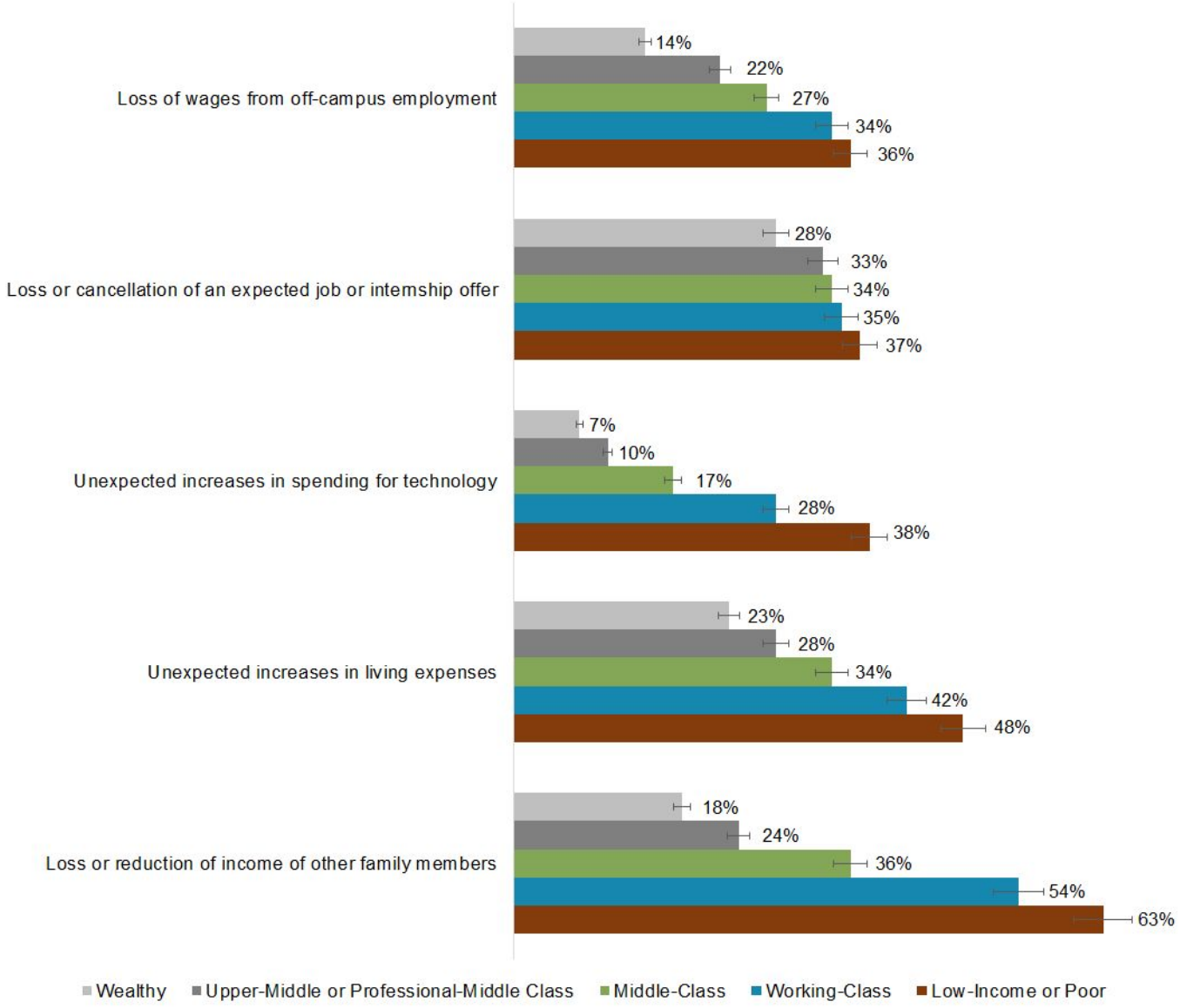
**Table 1**

*Students' Financial Hardships During the Pandemic by Social Class*

| | Low-income or Poor | | Working-Class | | Middle-Class | | Upper-Middle or Professional-Middle Class | | Wealthy | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % |
| Loss or reduction of income of other family members | 1312 | 63 | 2666 | 54 | 4519 | 36 | 2344 | 24 | 147 | 18 |
| Unexpected increases in living expenses | 1006 | 48 | 2071 | 42 | 4286 | 34 | 2717 | 28 | 194 | 23 |
| Unexpected increases in spending for technology | 800 | 38 | 1360 | 28 | 2192 | 17 | 970 | 10 | 58 | 7 |
| Loss or cancellation of an expected job or internship offer | 776 | 37 | 1728 | 35 | 4258 | 34 | 3143 | 33 | 230 | 28 |
| Loss of wages from off-campus employment | 742 | 36 | 1663 | 34 | 3348 | 27 | 2070 | 22 | 120 | 14 |
| Loss of wages from on-campus employment | 600 | 29 | 1200 | 24 | 2221 | 18 | 1329 | 14 | 62 | 7 |
| Loss or reduction of grant aid | 138 | 7 | 242 | 5 | 284 | 2 | 76 | 1 | 5 | 1 |
| No financial hardships | 117 | 6 | 479 | 10 | 2544 | 20 | 2776 | 29 | 335 | 40 |
| Loss or reduction of a scholarship | 104 | 5 | 196 | 4 | 321 | 3 | 170 | 2 | 12 | 1 |
| Loss or reduction of insurance coverage | 102 | 5 | 173 | 4 | 248 | 2 | 96 | 1 | 6 | 1 |
| Loss or reduction of student loan aid | 98 | 5 | 214 | 4 | 441 | 4 | 303 | 3 | 27 | 3 |

**Figure 1**

*Students' Financial Hardships During the Pandemic by Social Class*



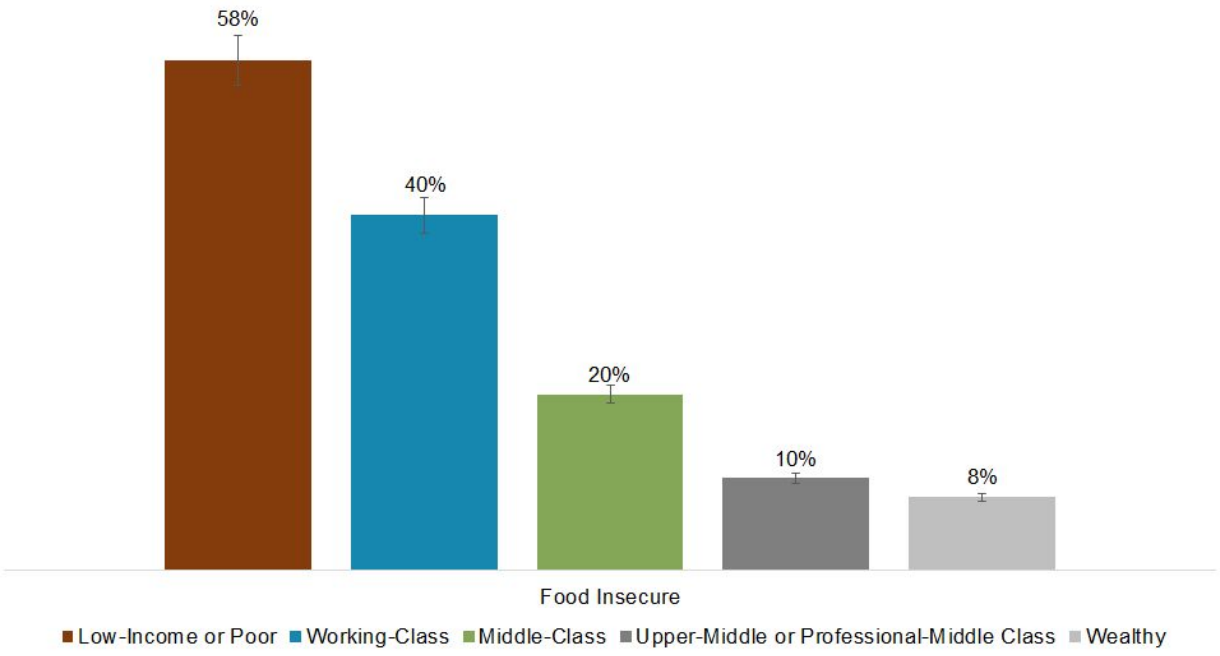
# Food Insecurity

We used a two-item food insecurity screen to identify students' food insecurity (Hager et al., 2010). We asked students 1) how often they worried whether their food would run out before they got money to buy more and 2) how often the food that they bought did not last and they did not have money to get more food. A response of "often true" or "sometimes true" to either statement indicates a positive screen for food insecurity.

The results suggest that low-income, poor, and working class students were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely than middle-class, upper-middle or professional-middle class, and wealthy students to experience food insecurity during the pandemic. Notably, low-income students were over seven times more likely to experience food insecurity than wealthy students (58% compared to 8%) while working-class students are five times more likely to experience food insecurity than wealthy students (40% compared to 8%).

**Figure 2**

*Students' Food Insecurity During the Pandemic by Social Class*



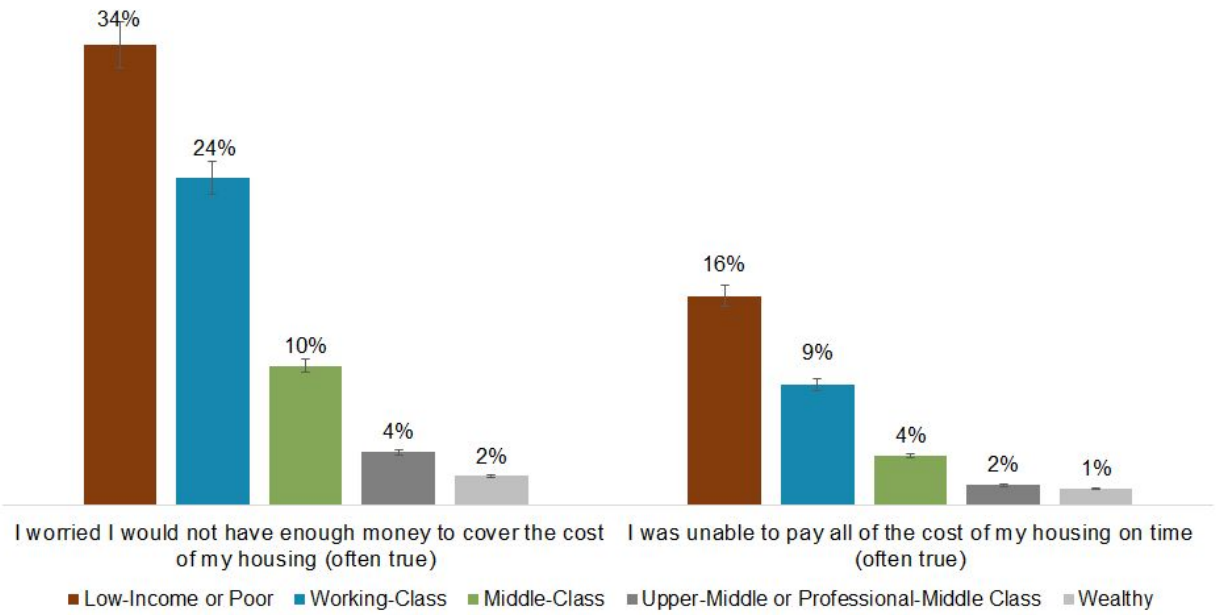
# Housing Insecurity

We asked students two items to measure their housing insecurity during the pandemic ("I worried I would not have enough money to cover the cost of my housing" and "I was unable to pay all of the cost of my housing on time"). Students responded whether those items were "often true," "sometimes true," or "never true" for them during the pandemic.

The results suggest that students from low-income/poor and working-class backgrounds were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to experience housing insecurity compared to middle-class, upper-middle or professional-middle class, or wealthy students (Figure 3). Notably, low-income students were 17x more likely than wealthy students to indicate that it was often true that they worried they would not have enough money to cover the cost of their housing, and 16x more likely than wealthy students to indicate that it was often true that they were unable to pay all of the costs of their housing on time. Working-class students were 12x more likely than wealthy students to indicate that it was often true that they worried they would not have enough money to cover the cost of their housing, and 9x more likely than wealthy students to indicate that it was often true that they were unable to pay all of the costs of their housing on time.

**Figure 3**

*Students' Housing Insecurity During the Pandemic by Social Class*



# Mental Health

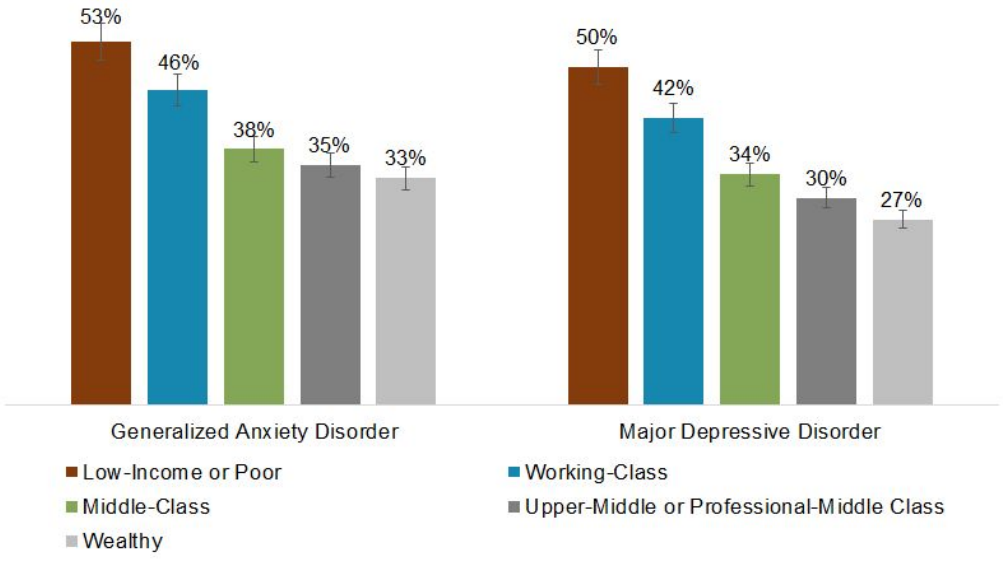
In addition to the financial hardships experienced by students from lower social class backgrounds, our results also suggest mental health disparities by students' social class. We used the Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2) two-item scale to screen for major depressive disorder symptoms (Kroenke et al., 2003) and the 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 (lost interest in activities or lack of pleasure) 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 >= 3 (out of 6), major depressive disorder is likely. If the score for GAD-2 is >= 3 (out of 6), generalized anxiety disorder is likely.

Based on these screening tools, we found that 53% of low-income/poor students, 46% of working-class students, 38% of middle-class students, 35% of upper-middle or professional-middle class students, and 33% of wealthy students screened positive for generalized anxiety disorder (Figure 4). Students from lower social class backgrounds were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to screen positive for generalized anxiety disorder compared to students from middle and upper-class backgrounds.

Similarly, students from lower social class backgrounds were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to screen positive for major depressive disorder compared to students from middle and upper-class backgrounds. We found that 50% of low-income/poor students, 42% of working-class students, 34% of middle-class students, 30% of upper-middle or professional-middle class students, and 27% of wealthy students screened positive for major depressive disorder.

**Figure 4**

*Students' Mental Health During the Pandemic by Social Class*



## Academic Obstacles

We also asked students to indicate whether they had experienced obstacles to their transition to remote learning. Students from low-income/poor and working-class backgrounds were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to indicate that they lacked access to an appropriate study space amid a distracting home environment, that they lacked access to technology necessary for online learning, and that they were unable to attend classes at their scheduled online meeting times (Table 2).

Additionally, students from low-income/poor and working-class backgrounds were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to indicate that they lacked access to critical support services, including academic advising and learning support services, and that they were unfamiliar with the technical tools necessary to engage in online learning (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Students' Academic Obstacles Transitioning to Remote Instruction During the Pandemic by Social Class*

| | Low-income or Poor | | Working-Class | | Middle-Class | | Upper-Middle or Professional-Middle Class | | Wealthy | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % |
| Lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment | 1436 | 70 | 3156 | 65 | 6952 | 55 | 4955 | 51 | 408 | 48 |
| Lack of access to technology necessary for online learning | 621 | 30 | 1142 | 23 | 1894 | 15 | 1030 | 11 | 87 | 10 |
| Inability to attend classes at their scheduled online meeting time | 583 | 28 | 1129 | 23 | 2197 | 18 | 1413 | 15 | 126 | 15 |
| Lack of access to academic advising | 470 | 23 | 1026 | 21 | 2413 | 19 | 1878 | 19 | 165 | 19 |
| Inability to access learning support services | 452 | 22 | 930 | 19 | 1914 | 15 | 1324 | 14 | 104 | 12 |
| Lack of familiarity with technical tools necessary for online learning | 390 | 19 | 819 | 17 | 1722 | 14 | 1075 | 11 | 100 | 12 |

# Conclusions

Students from lower social class backgrounds already encounter significant challenges in higher education (Soria, 2015). Unfortunately, the pandemic appears to have further widened the gaps between students from low-income/poor or working-class backgrounds and students from middle-class, upper-middle and professional-middle class, and wealthy backgrounds.

While many students are experiencing financial hardships as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Soria et al., 2020), students from lower social class backgrounds represent a particularly vulnerable population. Not only did students from lower social class backgrounds report significant increases in living and technology expenses caused by the pandemic, but many also indicated a reduction in personal or family income. Furthermore, the results of our analyses suggest that students from lower social class backgrounds experience significantly elevated rates of food and housing insecurity, which may be due to some of the indirect economic consequences of the pandemic, increases in living/technology expenses, and reduced family/personal income as well.

The economic pressures experienced by students from lower social class backgrounds may further exacerbate increases in mental health disorders such as major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder. Finally, the results of our study suggest that students from lower social class backgrounds were much more likely to experience distracting home environments and were unable to attend classes during their scheduled online times.

# Recommendations

Higher education leaders should actively work to reduce the financial barriers for students from low-income, poor, and working-class backgrounds. We encourage financial aid officers to share information on existing scholarships or grants available to students and discuss what, if any, additional funding options exist to relieve their financial burdens.

Additionally, to assist students from low-income/poor or working-class backgrounds who are experiencing the lost income or wages associated with employment positions, university career centers should help students to locate alternative positions, such as on-campus or off-campus employment opportunities, to offset increased living expenses for these students. We also recommend that career development centers open access to provide job-seeking resources to students' family members who have also lost employment positions.

It is also important to expand students' access to highly nutritious, low-cost, or free food. We recommend that campuses expand the hours and availability of food pantries to help students combat food insecurity and have more regular access to free food. During the pandemic, we also encourage colleges and universities to offer free no-touch pick-up options (e.g., "grab and go" or pick-up windows) and free food delivery to students who live on campus or near campus. To help students who may be away from campus during the fall 2020 semester, we encourage campuses to partner with national grocery store chains or restaurants to offer discounted items or meals to students. We also encourage institutions to continue offering emergency grant funding or lobbying the federal government to offer additional federal funding packages to support students in critical need.

Furthermore, we recommend that campuses work to 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). Similarly, to address students' housing insecurity, we recommend that colleges increase the availability of low-cost family housing near campuses or on campuses and work more actively to connect students with governmental economic assistance programs (e.g., local government assistance to pay rent or housing costs during the pandemic).

Colleges and universities should also plan to allocate more resources for a potential increase in students' requests for mental health services, including counseling or therapeutic services, this upcoming fall 2020 semester. In order to accommodate the needs of students from lower-income, poor, and working-class backgrounds, counseling centers may need to create more appointment times, increase their counseling staff, or network with third-party vendors to expand available mental health services to students at a variety of different hours during the day.

Students need enhanced flexibility from their professors and institutions in this time of great uncertainty. We encourage learning support services offices and academic advisors to offer expanded hours for their services to better meet the needs of students from low-income, poor, and working-class backgrounds during the pandemic.

## 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 nine 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 20, 2020 to undergraduate students at large, public research universities. The report uses data from 30,697 undergraduate students. The response rate was 14-41% 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

## Suggested APA Citation

Soria, K. M., & Horgos, B. (2020). *Social class differences in students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.* SERU Consortium, University of California - Berkeley and University of Minnesota. https://cshe.berkeley.edu/seru-covid-survey-reports

## 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.

Soria, K. M. (2015). *Welcoming blue collar scholars into the ivory tower: Developing class-conscious strategies for students' success.* Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.