

High-Achieving, Low-Income Graduates in a Pandemic

Results of a National Survey



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Research Center

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The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation supports Education Week's coverage of the experiences of low-income, high-achieving students. The foundation provides generous scholarships to exceptionally high-achieving students throughout the country who have financial need as well as grants that support high-achieving, low-income students with innovative programming.

<https://www.jkcf.org/>



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A message from this study's grant underwriter:

About the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation:

The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation is dedicated to advancing the education of exceptionally promising students who have financial need.

Since 2000, the Foundation has awarded over \$230 million in scholarships to more than 2,930 students from 8th grade through graduate school, along with comprehensive educational advising and other support services. The Foundation has also provided \$119.5 million in grants to organizations that ensure financial need is not a limiting factor to educational access and achievement, as a way to extend the Foundation's impact beyond scholarships.

The Foundation's scholarship programs serve groups of students from middle school all the way through graduate school. The Young Scholars Program for rising 8th graders offers an individualized learning plan, support in identifying an appropriately rigorous high school, summer programming, and valuable networking opportunities. The College Scholarship Program and Undergraduate Transfer Scholarship, for rising freshman and community college students respectively, offer up to \$55,000 per year to pursue any field of study at a four-year university, as well as personalized advising, access to a thriving Cooke Scholar community, and possible Cooke Graduate Scholarship funding of up to \$150,000.

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Executive Summary

In August and September of 2021, the EdWeek Research Center surveyed nearly 1,500 high-achieving high school graduates from the Class of 2021 to assess the pandemic's impact on their high school experiences and post-high school plans. The nationally representative survey found that 2021 graduates saw heightened stress along with financial hardship as they enrolled in college, started full-time work, or took on caregiving roles.

The 2021 survey followed the research center's previous study examining the pandemic's effects on high-achieving students in the 2020 graduating class. Since the 2020 and 2021 surveys included many of the same questions, the research provides an opportunity to gauge how this year's high-achieving graduates were faring compared to their peers a year earlier.

The effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the Class of 2020's high school experiences were sudden and intense, but took place starting in the final months of students' senior year. By contrast, the Class of 2021 faced over a year of pandemic-impacted education. The findings reveal two main trends that highlight the instability and uncertainty high schoolers continue to face upon graduation.

First, disruption to students' postsecondary plans intensified in 2021, with fewer graduates reporting that they had been able to stick to their pre-pandemic plans to attend two- or four-year colleges. The proportion of respondents who reported changing their post-high school plans in order to care for a family member who had COVID-19 or was at risk of suffering severe consequences from the virus increased from 2020 to 2021, as did the share of graduates who said they experienced "some" to "a lot" of health-related and economic stress.

Second, disparities between low-income graduates and their higher-income peers persisted and in some cases widened. Low-income, high-achieving graduates were more likely to say they use money from their own jobs to support their family rather than to pay for college-related expenses as planned. Low-income students also more often reported that they will need financial aid to attend college but haven't yet taken steps to apply for it. The magnitude of both discrepancies grew from the 2020 to the 2021 survey.

These results arise even as 2021 graduates received more support from their high schools for college and postsecondary planning than their 2020 counterparts, according to survey responses.

The survey's key findings include:

- Just 62 percent of 2021 graduates who planned to attend a four-year college and 44 percent of those who planned to attend a two-year college had been able to follow through on those plans by September of 2021, both down more than 10 percentage-points since 2020.
- More than 1 in 5 low-income 2021 graduates (22 percent) said they changed their college or job plans to care for a family member infected with or at high risk for COVID-19. Less than half that percentage (8 percent) of higher-income graduates said the same.
- Twenty-one percent of low-income graduates said that money from their own jobs now has to go toward supporting their family, rather than paying for college-related expenses.
- The share of graduates who "never" received support from their high school on questions related to financial aid declined from 23 to 14 percent, and the percent whose schools never provided information on work and apprenticeship opportunities declined from 26 to 15 percent from the 2020 to the 2021 survey.

It's not yet clear whether the postsecondary disruptions brought on by COVID-19 represent short- or longer-term changes in plans for 2021 graduates. Regardless, strengthening non-traditional pathways to college will likely be critical in helping students who graduated during the pandemic find their way back to postsecondary education.

Introduction

The transition from high school to college or the workforce is often considered a critical juncture for young people, with meaningful impact on their career and educational pathways. It's also a time where students may struggle to access support for college planning, caught between the advising systems of high schools and postsecondary institutions.

From August to September of 2021, the EdWeek Research Center conducted a nationally representative survey of 1,452 high-achieving graduates in the high school class of 2021. The survey asked a range of questions to assess the pandemic's impact on their plans to attend college, obtain financial aid, and/or join the workforce.

In order to qualify for the sample, students needed to earn at least a "B" grade-point average or finish in the top half of their graduating class. More than 65 percent took at least two advanced courses in high school, such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes. And the majority (68 percent) were low-income, meaning that they qualified for free or reduced-price lunch at some point during their education.

The findings included in this report extend the results of a similar EdWeek Research Center study of high-achieving students in the Class of 2020. They suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has compounded inequities in the college planning process, leading to abrupt changes in plans—particularly for low-income graduates. They also show that the effects of the pandemic on students' postsecondary transition deepened from 2020 to 2021.

SURVEY DETAILS

Surveys Administered: August 2020 and August-September 2021

Respondents: 2,135 high-achieving graduates in the Class of 2020 and 1,452 in the Class of 2021

- 62% of the 2020 respondents qualified for free or reduced-price lunch
- 68% of the 2021 respondents qualified for free or reduced-price lunch
- All respondents included in the sample maintained at least a "B" grade-point average or finished in the top half of their graduating class

Sample: Nationally representative

Pandemic Disruption to Students' Post-High School Plans

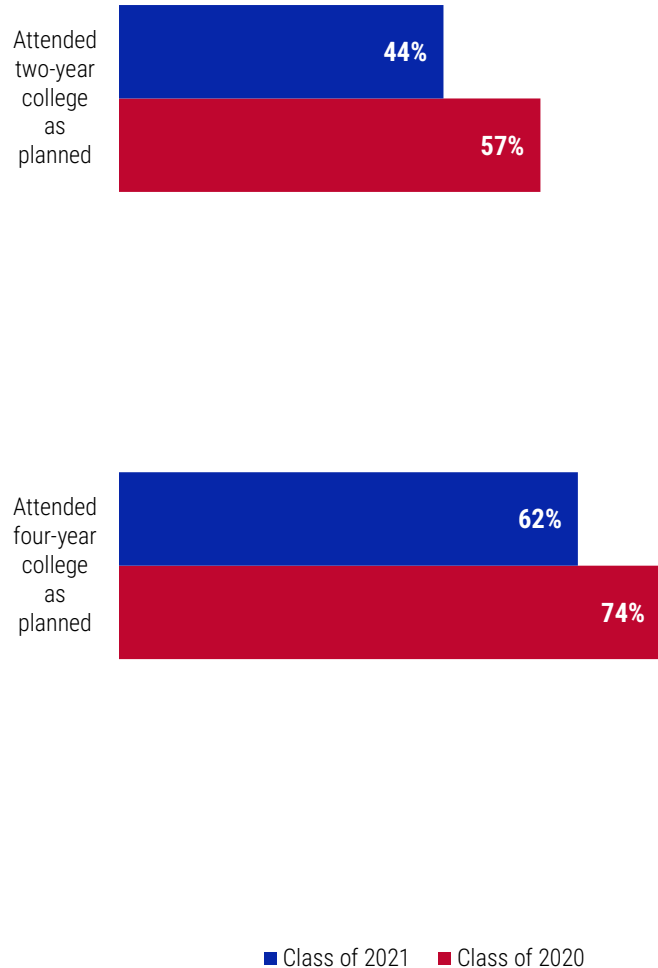
Plans to Attend College

Graduates who responded to the survey answered a series of questions that gauged whether they had been able to follow through on their original postsecondary plans since graduation. The results show that students' pre-pandemic plans to attend college changed substantially over the course of the pandemic, especially for those graduating in the Class of 2021.

Just 62 percent of high-achieving 2021 graduates who originally planned to attend a four-year college were enrolled in a four-year school at the time of the survey. That's compared to nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of Class of 2020 graduates who planned to attend a four-year college and had done so by the fall of 2020.

In both years, students who planned to attend a two-year college experienced heightened disruption. Fifty-seven percent of 2020 graduates were able to follow through on their plans to attend a two-year college. In 2021, that number dropped below half, with just 44 percent of graduates able to stick to their plans.

Percent of high-achieving graduates who planned to attend a two- or four-year college in January 2020 and were enrolled in the fall after high school graduation

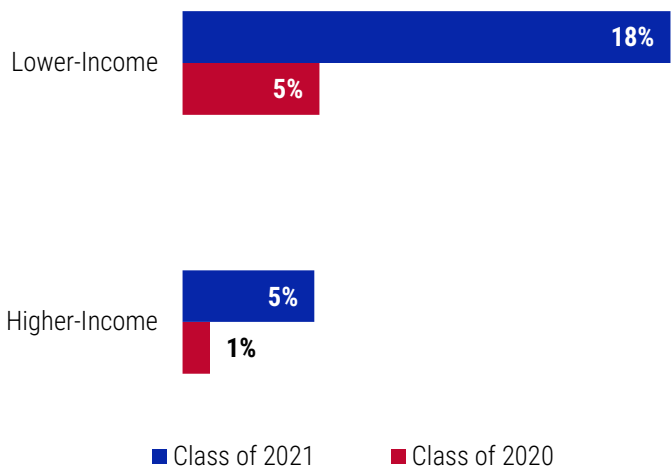


Changes in Plans Due to COVID-19 Infection or Health Risks

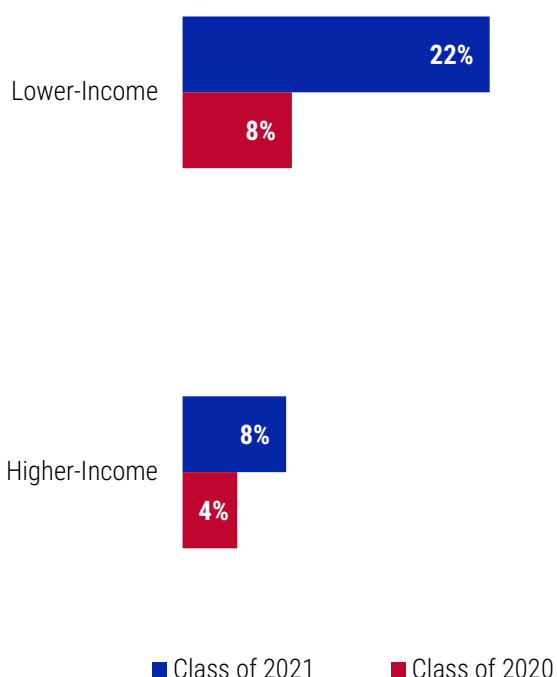
For many students, changes in college plans reflect concerns over their own or family members' exposure to COVID-19. Low-income graduates cited these risks more often than higher-income graduates did. More than 1 in 5 low-income 2021 graduates (22 percent) said they changed their college or job plans to care for a family member who had or was at risk of suffering severe consequences from the virus, as opposed to just 8 percent of higher-income graduates. Eighteen percent changed their plans because they contracted COVID-19, more than three times the percentage of higher-income grads who changed plans due to their own infection (5 percent).

In 2020, fewer graduates reported changing their plans for these reasons across the income spectrum. Still, the percentage of low-income graduates who changed their plans to care for a family member was double the percentage of higher-income grads who did so (8 percent versus 4 percent). And just 1 percent of higher-income graduates changed plans due to their own bout with COVID-19, while 5 percent of low-income grads said that was the case.

I changed my plans because I contracted COVID-19



I changed my plans so I could care for family members who have COVID-19 or are at risk of suffering severe consequences of the virus



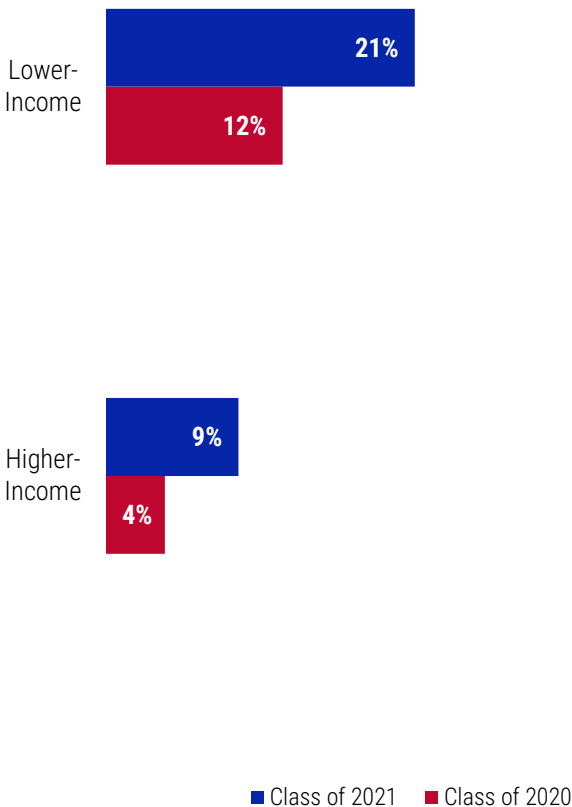
Paying for College

Shifting Plans for Student Income

High-achieving, low-income graduates increasingly report that as a result of the pandemic, money from their own jobs goes toward supporting their families rather than paying for college-related expenses as planned.

Twelve percent of low-income 2020 graduates said that was true for them, as opposed to 4 percent (one-third that proportion) of higher-income graduates. In the Class of 2021, 21 percent of low-income graduates said that income from their jobs had to go toward supporting their family—nearly double the previous year’s rate. The rate also increased among higher-income graduates, to 9 percent in 2021.

Money from my own job now has to go toward supporting my family, not paying for college-related expenses as expected



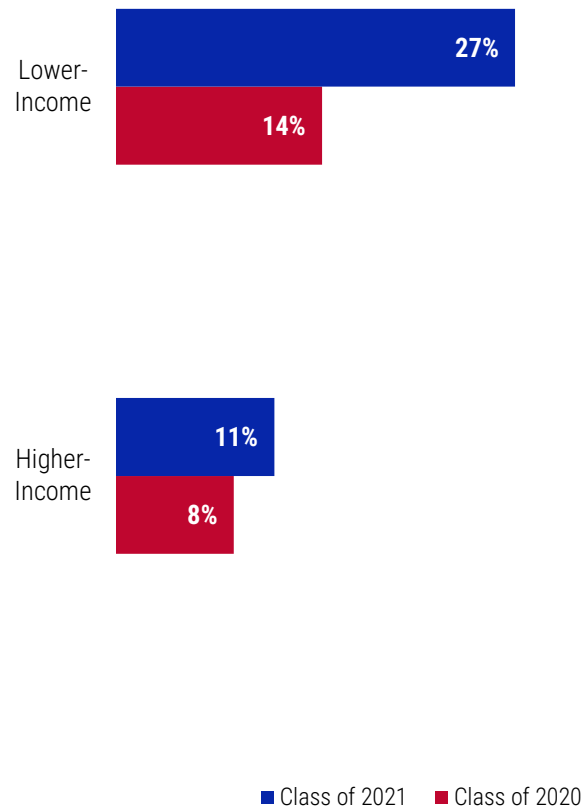
Financial Aid

Amid continuing financial strain due to the pandemic, an increasing share of high-achieving graduates (who planned to attend college) reported that they had not taken steps to obtain financial aid—even though they expected to need it.

More than one-quarter (27 percent) of high-achieving, low-income graduates in the Class of 2021 had not moved forward on financial assistance to pay for college. That percentage represents a nearly two-fold increase over the August 2020 survey, where 14 percent of low-income graduates said they would need financial aid but hadn't taken steps to apply.

The gap between low- and higher-income graduates also grew between 2020 and 2021. In the Class of 2020, 8 percent of higher-income respondents indicated that they had not yet taken steps to apply for financial aid even though they would need it, 6 percentage-points lower than the rate for low-income students. Eleven percent of higher-income graduates said the same in 2021—a 16-point gap from their lower-income peers.

I plan to attend college but have not yet taken steps to obtain financial aid—even though I will need it



Support for College Planning

Assistance Provided by High Schools

Survey results suggest that high-achieving graduates in 2021 received more support for college planning from their high schools than their peers graduating a year earlier.

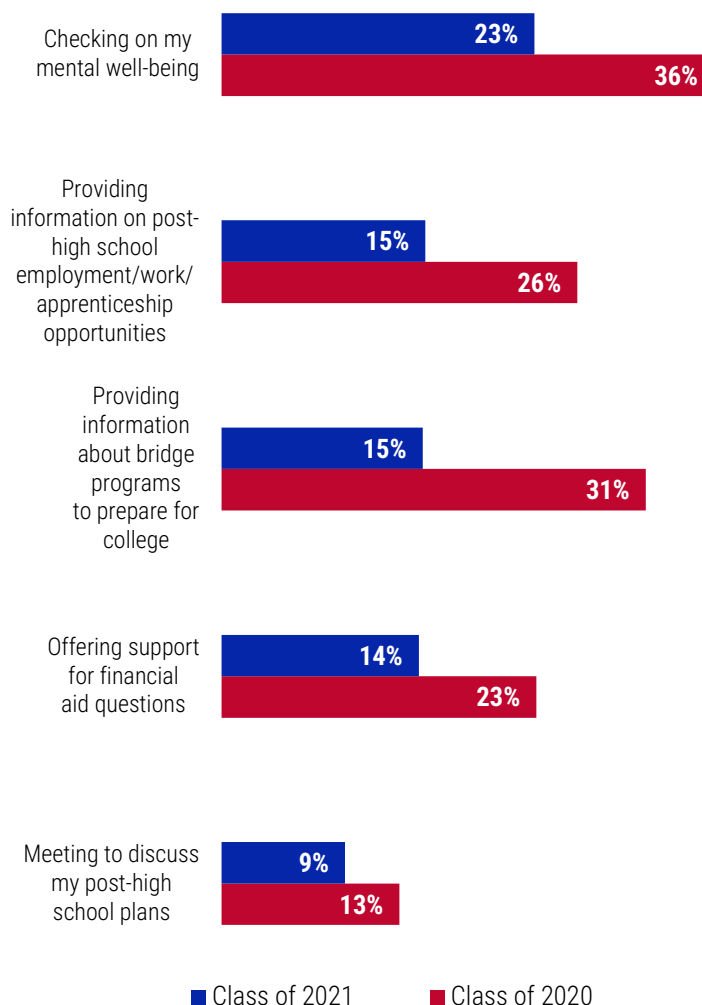
The percentage of graduates who said they “never” received support from their high school on questions related to financial aid dropped from 23 to 14 percent from 2020 to 2021. The percentage who reported that their school never provided information on post-high school employment or apprenticeship opportunities fell from 26 to 15 percent. Fifteen percent of Class of 2021 graduates said their high school never provided information about bridge programs to prepare for college, compared to 31 percent for the Class of 2020.

It’s possible that high schools reinstated normal opportunities for college and career support in 2021, as time passed and some schools returned to in-person or hybrid learning. High schools may also have bolstered support for postsecondary planning to address the ongoing tumult of the pandemic or found new ways to adjust their student support efforts to pandemic realities.

In both years, most students reported that they had at least some opportunity to meet and discuss their post-high school plans: just 13 percent in the Class of 2020 and 9 percent in the Class of 2021 reported never receiving this type of support.

Yet, a substantial proportion of graduates in both the Class of 2020 and Class of 2021 indicated that their high school never checked in on their mental well-being. More than a third (36 percent) of 2020 graduates said their high school never checked in on their mental well-being at any point during the postsecondary planning and college application process. Twenty-three percent of Class of 2021 respondents said the same.

Percent of high-achieving graduates who “never” received the following types of support from their high school



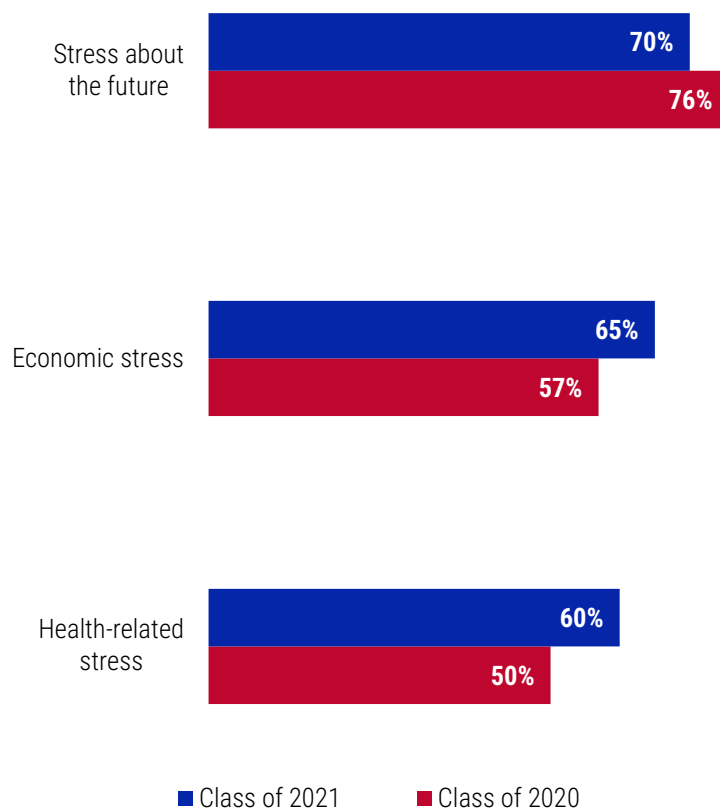
Stress about the Future

Health and Economic Concerns

Given continuing challenges due to the health risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic instability resulting from them, it's not surprising that Class of 2021 graduates report higher levels of health-related and economic stress than their 2020 peers. Sixty percent of 2021 graduates indicated that they had "some" or "a lot" of health-related stress, up 10 percentage-points from the previous year. Sixty-five percent experienced at least some economic stress, compared to 57 percent for the Class of 2020.

And yet, the share of graduates who had "some" or "a lot" of stress about the future fell slightly, from 76 percent in the Class of 2020 to 70 percent in the Class of 2021.

Percent of high-achieving graduates who had "some" or "a lot" of the following types of stress from the COVID-19 pandemic



Conclusion

The transition from high school to college or the workforce is challenging even in the best of times. Particularly for low-income and first-generation students, or those who receive little support for postsecondary planning in high school, the process of applying for college and financial aid—or finding work and apprenticeship opportunities—can be confusing and opaque.

In addition to the typical stressors, graduates in 2020 and 2021 had to factor COVID-19 risk and exposure into their post-high school decision-making, reformulating plans to attend college in light of a public health crisis and global recession. Less than half of high-achieving 2021 graduates who originally planned to attend a two-year college had enrolled by the following September. Given such disruptions, it's particularly concerning that Class of 2021 graduates reported more COVID-related health and economic stress than 2020 graduates.

EdWeek Research Center survey results show these added burdens were especially acute for low-income graduates, who were more likely than their higher-income peers to report that their postsecondary plans changed due to their own or a family member's COVID-19 infection and that they now contribute income from their own jobs to support family rather than paying for college.

High-achieving, low-income graduates experienced disproportionate effects from the pandemic. Across a range of measures, the difference in the percentages of high- and low-income graduates reporting disruption to their postsecondary plans grew between the 2020 and 2021 surveys.

The onset of the pandemic compounded inequities and complicated the transition to postsecondary life. The coronavirus appears to have further entrenched barriers to higher education for academically promising, low-income high schoolers. Together, the findings discussed in this report emphasize the need for targeted and ongoing support for recent graduates, whose postsecondary plans may continue to evolve along with the pandemic.