

Housatonic Community College

Fall 2020 Enrollment Survey Report

Introduction

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on community colleges is coming into focus, with institutions across the nation reporting sharp declines in enrollment for the Fall 2020 semester. At Housatonic Community College, fall-to-fall enrollment fell by **21%** as of the census date (Sept. 17, 2020).

National surveys conducted before the start of the fall semester identified the rapid transition to online instruction as a key factor driving students' uncertainty about enrollment. In addition to the personal and social impacts of the coronavirus crisis, Housatonic students are facing the challenge of learning almost exclusively online, for the first time.

Anticipating the challenges ahead for students, Board of Regents President Mark Ojakian noted in a March 23, 2020 update:

**Though our students are resilient, they will need a great deal of support,
both personally and academically, during this time.**

The efforts of faculty and staff at Housatonic Community College are now focused on supporting students through the transition to online learning, while maintaining the quality of instruction and other student services, in the unfamiliar context of remote instruction and service delivery.

To learn more about the factors driving the decline in enrollment at Housatonic Community College, the Office of Institutional Research surveyed currently enrolled students to learn about: (1) their concerns before and after enrolling for the Fall semester; (2) how well the College is supporting them; (3) their attitudes toward and experiences with online learning; and (4) their enrollment plans for the Spring 2021 semester. The survey consisted of 13 questions and took most respondents less than five minutes to complete.

The survey was administered online over six weeks at the beginning of the semester, from Sept 21 – Nov 6, 2020. Based on the overall student population, we chose a random sample of 519 students, for a 95% confidence level and a $\pm 4\%$ margin of error. An invitation was sent to the students via e-mail, and personalized reminder e-mails were sent each week to non-respondents.

A total of 207 students completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 39.9% and margin of error of $\pm 6.6\%$. Given the general decline in survey response rates, with many online surveys reaching only single-digit rates,¹ the response to the survey was high.

Respondent demographics were compared with those of the entire student population, and the respondent pool was found to generally representative of the student population across a range of demographic and academic characteristics, but men and full-time students were under-represented.

¹ Dillman, D.A., Smyth, J.D., & Christian L.M. (2014) *Internet, phone, mail and mixed mode surveys: The tailored design method* (4th ed.). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Given the high response rate, the overall representativeness of the respondent pool and persistent trends in the data over the collection period, we believe the data is valid and have chosen to report the results of the survey. Except where noted, the percentages in this report are calculated based on the total number of students who completed the survey, as respondents were allowed to skip questions. The report also incorporates analysis and samples of open-ended survey responses to supplement the quantitative data.

Acknowledgements

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Student Concerns

What were students' concerns as they began the fall semester?

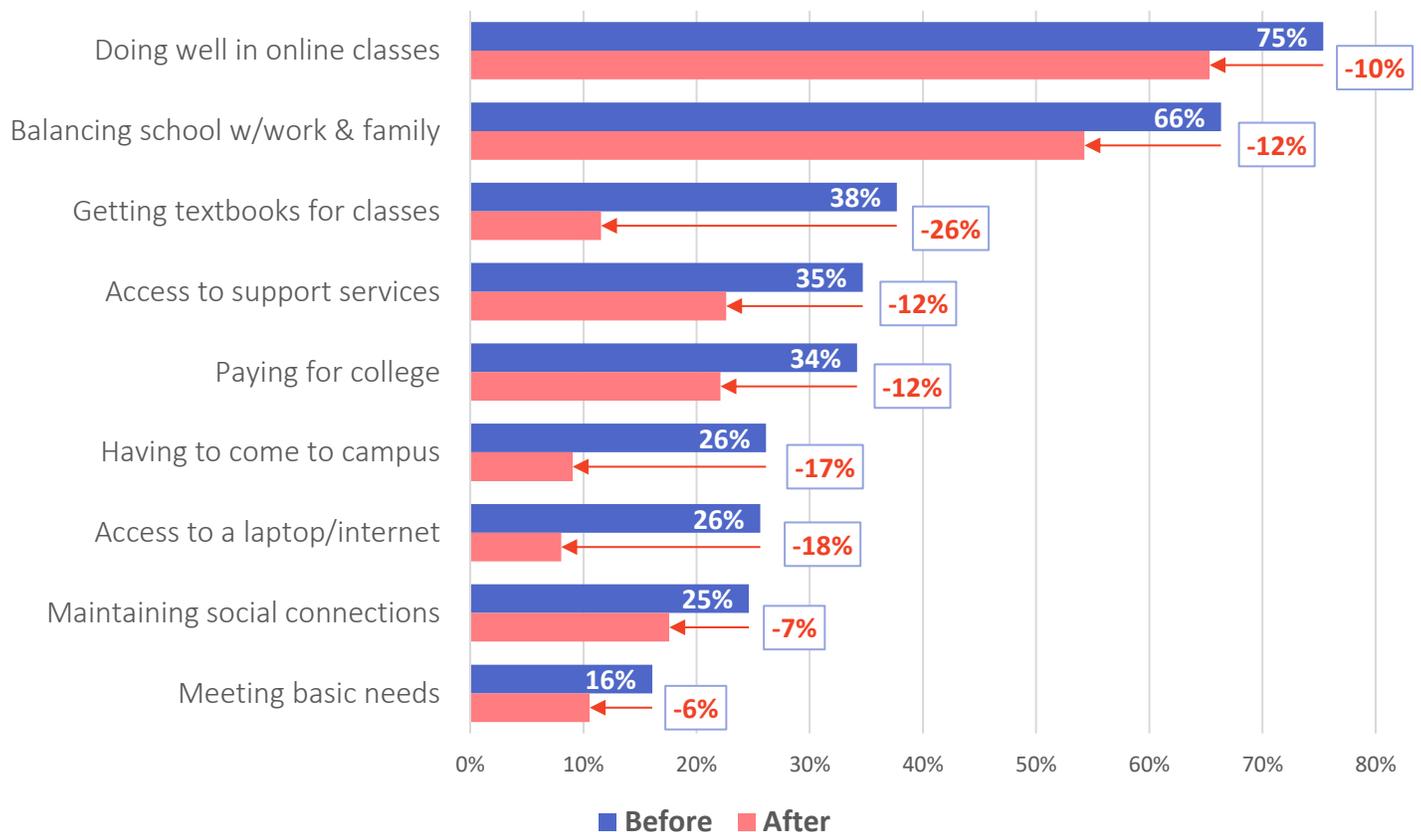
Before the semester started, students were most concerned about doing well in online classes and balancing school with other responsibilities. Students also reported significant concern around access to support services and textbooks, and paying for college.

Top Concerns before Fall 2020 Semester

75%	66%	38%	35%	34%
doing well in online classes	balancing school with work & family	getting textbooks for classes	access to support services	paying for college

The overwhelming percentage of students who reported concern about succeeding in online classes suggests that attitudes towards and experiences with online learning may play an over-sized role in students' enrollment decisions going forward. This dynamic is exacerbated by the fact that concerns about academic performance have not decreased substantially since the start of the semester and remain high.

Students' Concerns Before & After the Start of the Fall 2020 Semester



Access to Support

How are students accessing support?

Concerns about accessing support services have decreased, but not significantly, since the beginning of the semester. Approximately **1 in 5** students remains concerned about access to services such as tutoring, advising and financial aid.

The majority of students (**80%**) used e-mail to connect to support at the college, making it the predominate method students are using to access services. Only **5%** of students reported having an in-person meeting with staff. Notable percentages of the respondents have used less traditional methods of contact, such as online forms, online chat, and video conference. The response rate for this question (**99.5%**) suggests high rates of interaction between staff and students needing assistance during the first weeks of the semester.

23%
of students remain
concerned about
access to support
services.

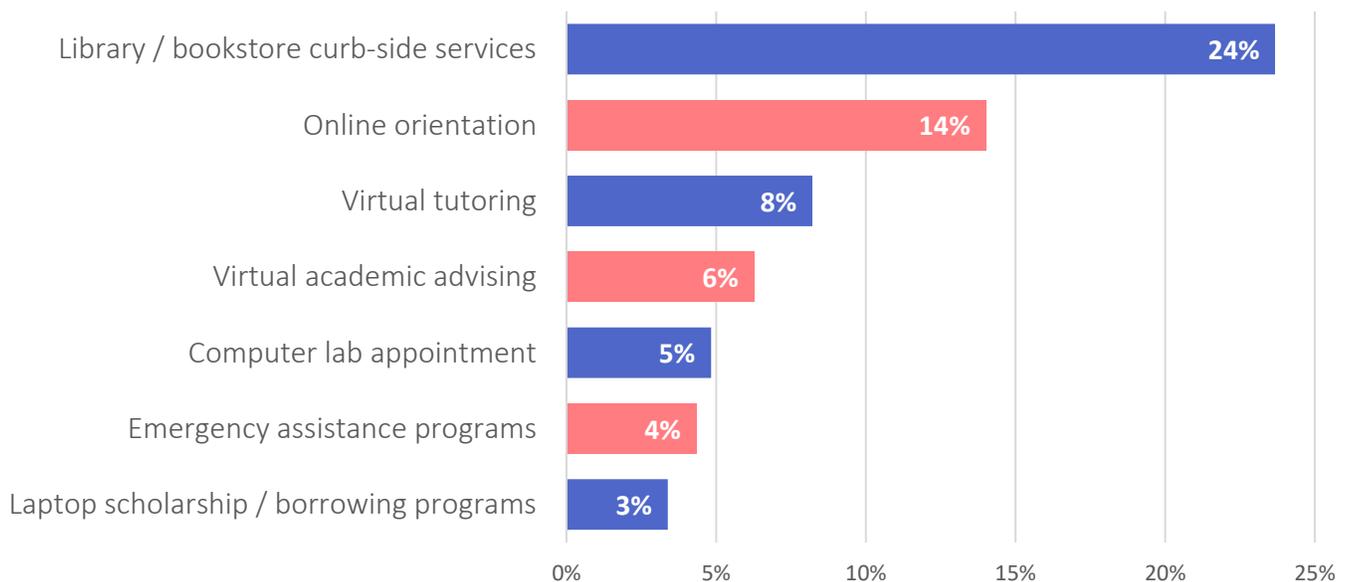
12%
decrease since
the start
of the semester

Top Methods of Accessing Support

			
E-mail (80%)	Phone (41%)	Online chat (13%) Online forms (12%)	Video conference (11%)

Less than half of students (**49%**) had accessed one or more of the following resources:

Q5: Have you taken advantage of any of these resources at your college? (Check all that apply.)

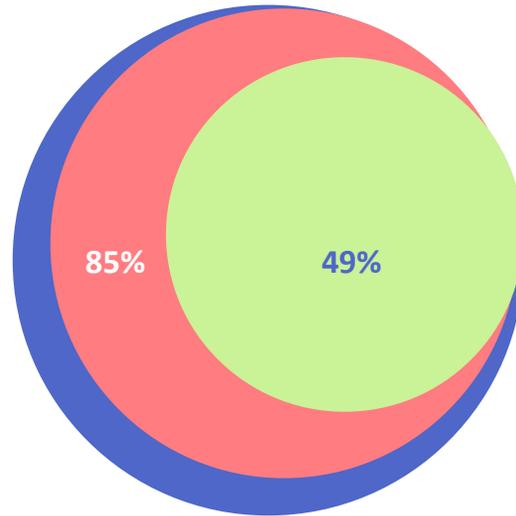
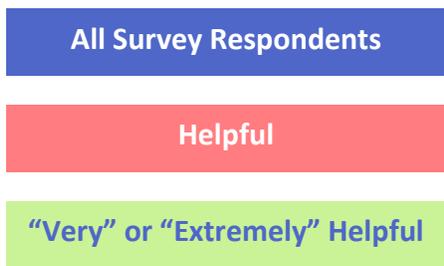


Are students getting the help they need?

Although a majority of students (85%) reported that college staff have been helpful in addressing their concerns, there is a significant drop-off in the number of students who found staff “very” or “extremely” helpful (49%). Only 5% of students reported that staff were “not at all helpful.”

The question also had a high response rate of 99.5%, again pointing to high rates of interaction between staff and students needing assistance during the first weeks of the semester.

Q4: Overall, how helpful has the staff been in addressing your concerns?



Nearly a third (32%) of students responded to an open-ended question [Q9] on what the college could do to provide more support. Of these respondents, 24% expressed negative sentiments about the support they are receiving from the college, while 10% wrote positive comments. Textual categorization of the responses revealed a few important themes.

Top Categories & Samples of Textual Responses about Support

(Percentages of all respondents to Q9: What can we do to provide more support?)

Communication / Responsiveness – 13%

Some students expressed frustration with a lack of responsiveness from staff when they reach out for help, while others wanted more communication around access to resources.

It would be helpful if [someone] sent out an email stating which computer labs are open and when... tutoring/library is open.

I emailed someone about mental health help and have not received anything back whatsoever.

It is like fortnight getting someone to answer "SERIOUS" questions in a timely manner.

Generally Positive / Feel Supported – 13%

A number of students reported satisfaction with the level of support they have received from the college.

I think I'm provided the perfect amount of support.

Spring 2020 semester was very hard... Not an easy transition. But luckily staff...were more prepared this semester.

You guys are doing an excellent job.



Access to Campus Resources – 10%

Some students reported issues with the availability of on-campus resources such as tutoring, the library, the bookstore and computer labs.

One thing is the bookstore hours. It was hard for me to get to the store due to my work hours.

Because of home I need to be able to be at the library or the computer lab in order get work done. More hours early and later like before would be greatly appreciated.

I wish i could be back on campus...and...come to tutoring in person anytime.

Lack of Support & Dire Stakes – 4%

While this was not a top category in the textual responses, it is worth noting that the stakes are dire for those students that are not receiving the support they need. Technological issues were mentioned in only a few responses (7%), but due to lack of support in this area, some students are suffering negative academic consequences or are considering withdrawing.

Well it took me 2 months to get the help I need. At this time I am overwhelmed. I'm not sure if I'll be returning for next semester!

I have not [gotten] the right help I need to login to class. I want to take a leave of absence from school.

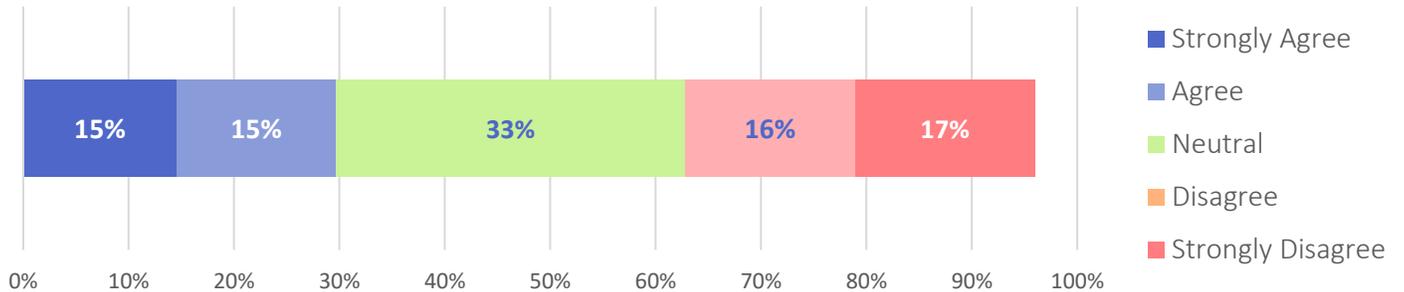
It would be nice to be notified if the system will be down for...testing, updating. I needed to submit a paper and take a test and couldn't do either.

Online Learning

How are students faring with online learning?

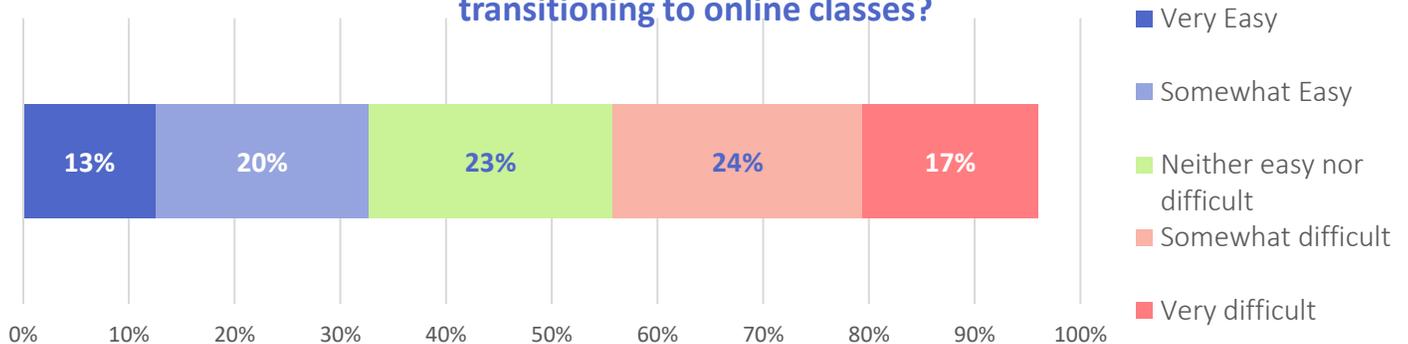
Given the shift to remote instruction in Spring 2020, we asked students about their perceptions of and experiences with online learning. Opinions about for online learning were evenly split, with about **1/3** of students reporting enthusiasm, a lack of excitement and ambivalence about taking classes online.

Q8: I am excited about taking classes online.



Students' experiences of the transition to online classes also varied widely, with most students (**41%**) finding the transition "somewhat" or "very" difficult.

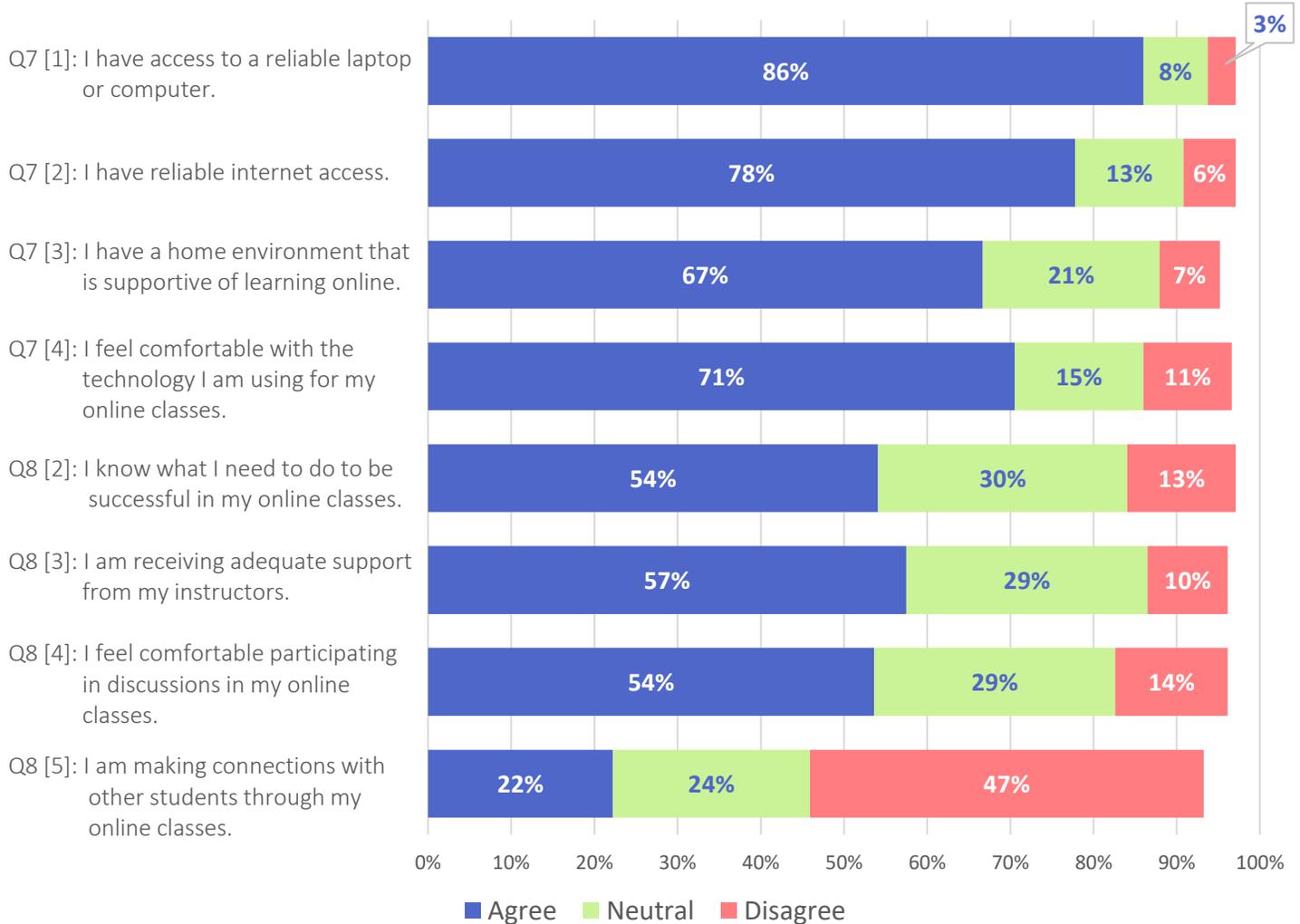
Q6: How would you rate your experience transitioning to online classes?



To gauge students' preparation for and attitudes toward online learning, we asked them to indicate their agreement or disagreement, along a Likert scale, with statements about remote learning technology and their learning environment [Q7] and their experiences taking classes online [Q8].

The overwhelming majority of students reported that they have access to a reliable laptop or computer (**86%**) and internet access (**78%**) for online learning, which helps to explain the relatively low numbers of students who reported concerns about access to these resources after classes started [in Q2]. Most students also reported that they feel comfortable with the technology needed for remote learning, and that they also have a home environment conducive to taking classes online, although at lesser percentages.

Preparation for & Experiences with Online Learning



Students were less affirmative in response to statements in Q8 about their experiences with online classes. For Q8 statements 2, 3 and 4, agreement decreased an average of **20 percentage points**, while students that gave a neutral response grew by an average of **15%**. Still, the percentages of students who reported feeling comfortable and supported in their online classes are remarkably high, given that nearly 2 out of 3 of students were still concerned about doing well in online classes at the time they completed the survey [Q2].

Agreement dropped sharply for the final statement about peer-to-peer connections, with nearly half of students (**47%**) expressing disagreement. Maintaining social connections did not emerge as a top concern for students; only **18%** reported that they were concerned about this after the semester began.

Overall, the differences in agreement between Q7 statements about remote learning technology and environment and Q8 statements about experiences with online learning point to the need for more support in relation to the social aspects of online learning.

For Q9, students were asked to share thoughts on what the college could do to provide more support, and over half (60%) of the open-ended responses focused on online learning and instruction, with the vast majority (90%) expressing negative sentiments. A deeper dive into students' textual responses reveals that, while experiences with online learning are mixed, the stakes are high for those who are struggling with remote instruction.

Top Categories & Samples of Textual Responses about Online Learning

(Percentages of all respondents to [Q9]: What can we do to provide more support?)

Generally challenging – 23%

A significant percentage of students who mentioned some aspect of online learning considered it generally challenging, but some students are having a positive experience. For some students, the stakes are dire, even if they feel supported in other ways.

Learning online has been very stressful and has set me back. Next semester is up in the air...

I think HCC is doing great with [the] virtual classes.

Online classes...can be extremely challenging, especially for older students.

Communication with Faculty – 15%

Most students who raised communication with faculty as an area for increased support expressed sentiments of frustration, and more than half (55%) of the mentions of the word “e-mail” for Q9 refer to communication with professors. But one student reported that the online experience improved communication.

One good aspect about completing online assignments [is] the response back from instructors stating they have received the assignments. This is good for first time online...students.

Have instructors respond to emails as soon as possible...since that is the only way for students to reach out to them.

Communication with my professors sometimes is very difficult... So if I'm struggling with a question, I have to wait till two days or so to get a response.

Assignment/Workload Concerns – 10%

Out of four responses that mention “overwhelm,” three relate to workload and assignment concerns. Given that concerns about balancing school with other responsibilities remain high, students who are struggling to keep up with assignments in online courses may be at risk for withdrawing.

The amount of assignments due each week is overwhelming.

Instead of having professors give us work, I feel we need more interactions with professors and classmates. [It's] overwhelming with the amount of work [given].

Extra time in completing assignments. Can be somewhat overwhelming for the ones that work.

Tech Issues – 10%

Only **10%** of respondents to Q9 reported some issue with the technology used for remote learning, but for those students who are still having tech issues, the stakes are high.

I have not [gotten] the right help I need to login to class. I want to take a leave of absence.

It would be nice to be notified if the system will be down for a period testing, updating. I needed to submit a paper and take a test and couldn't do either.

Course Modalities – 8%

Asynchronous (ONLN) courses make up **69%** of Housatonic's offerings for the fall semester. While the survey did not distinguish between different modalities of online instruction, textual responses suggest that some students are feeling distress over the lack of contact with faculty in asynchronous classes.

I do wish there was a live person online to talk to if I have any questions about my work or need something explained.

Some of the professors do not give lectures which I highly dislike... Only one of my professors [does] – something I'm very grateful for.

I think each class needs [their] meeting each week. I hate this type of learning.

Spring Enrollment

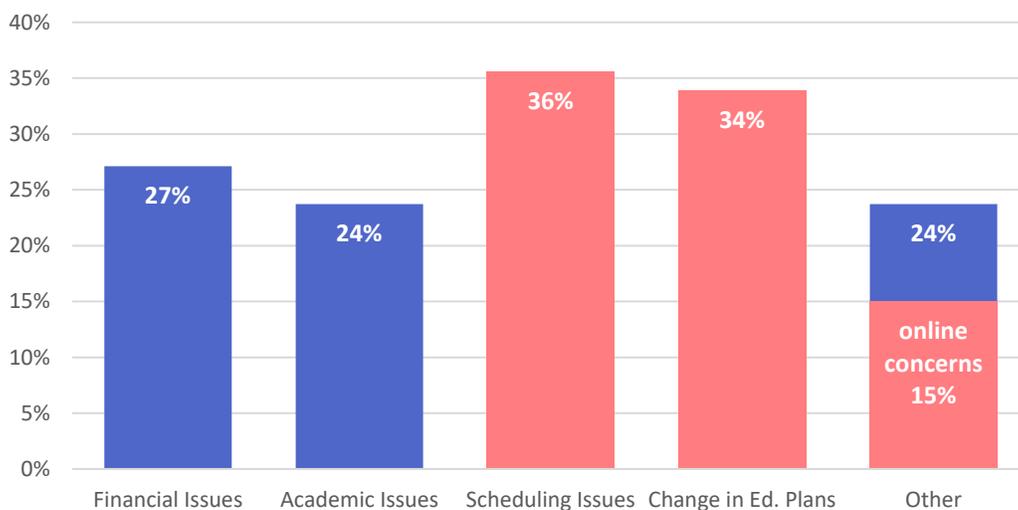
Are current students returning in the Spring? What's holding them back?

While a majority of respondents indicated that they plan to return next semester, **1 in 5** students are unsure about their plans.



When asked about the barriers holding them back from enrolling, students who indicated “no” or “unsure” about enrolling pointed to a variety of reasons. Notably, **36%** of respondents pointed to scheduling issues, such as a conflict with a job, as a barrier to returning in the Spring, and **34%** of these students reported that their educational goals have changed.

Barriers to Enrollment



Students were not given an answer choice relating to online courses for Q12: What barriers are holding you back from registering for the Spring semester? Yet, out of 17 students who chose “Other” and provided a written response, over half identified concerns about online learning as a barrier to enrollment, or about **15%** of all students who are not yet committed to enrolling in the Spring.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The survey results indicate that the most pressing concerns for currently enrolled students are around **doing well in online classes** and **balancing school with other responsibilities**, and that these concerns are affecting students' enrollment decisions for the Spring 2021 semester. **21%** of the students who responded to the survey are **unsure about returning** in the Spring, and 4% indicated that they would not re-enroll. The top **barriers to enrollment** for these students are **scheduling issues, such as a job conflict** (36%) and a **change in educational plans** (34%). Although they were not given an answer choice related to "online learning," 15% of the respondents who are not committed to enrolling for the Spring semester identified **challenges with learning online** as a barrier to enrollment.

Students are split in their attitudes toward and experiences with online learning. While most students reported that they are technologically prepared for taking classes online, they feel **less prepared for the social aspects of online learning**, including engaging with faculty and peers and time management. When students were asked to share thoughts on what the college could do to provide more support, over half (60%) of the open-ended responses focused on online learning and instruction. **Communication with faculty, course workload** and **tech issues** emerged as top issues for students who expressed the need for more support around online learning. Some students also expressed distress over lack of contact with professors in **asynchronous courses**.

There are encouraging signs that many currently enrolled students feel supported and prepared for online learning. **Overall, concerns around access to support and resources have declined** since the start of the semester, and most students feel the staff has been helpful in addressing their concerns. However, there is **room for improvement**, with 23% of students still concerned about access to support services, and over a third (36%) of students reporting that staff was only "slightly" or "moderately" helpful in addressing their concerns.

Communication with staff and **access to campus resources** emerged as the top support issues raised in open-ended responses, and some students expressed the desire for **better communication about the availability of resources**. But **for those students who do not feel they are getting the support they need, the stakes are dire**, particularly when compounded with the challenges of online learning. These students reported issues with academic performance and fears of having to withdraw.

Based on these findings, we offer the following recommendations for encouraging enrollment:

1/ Help students reconnect to their educational goals. Despite the disruption and uncertainty created by the COVID-19 pandemic, current students enrolled this semester because getting an education is important to them. Reminding them of those goals may encourage them to persist despite current challenges.

2/ Increase support around the social aspects of online learning. While some students have adapted well to online learning, those who are struggling may be unsure about returning. Finding ways to increase interaction with faculty and assist students with managing school and other responsibilities, especially in asynchronous courses, may help with retention.

3/ Improve communication about access to support and resources, including tech help for online courses. With the transition to remote instruction, more students than ever may need to access support services and resources. Increasing awareness of the availability of support is critical to ensuring students' continued success.

Demographic Comparison²

	Survey Respondents	Student Population
Student Type		
New	28%	21%
Continuing	59%	60%
Transfer	6%	9%
Readmitted	5%	6%
HS Partnership	2%	4%
FT/PT		
Full Time	41%	34%
Part Time	58%	65%
Degree		
Associates	88%	86%
Certificate	5%	4%
Non-Degree	7%	9%
Semester Credits		
Avg. Sem. Credits	9	9
GPA Distribution		
No GPA*	31%	32%
2.0 or lower	10%	10%
2.1 - 2.5	6%	9%
2.6 - 3.0	15%	16%
3.1 - 3.5	23%	18%
3.6 and higher	15%	15%

* Students with 0 overall earned credits.

	Survey Respondents	Student Population
Gender		
Female	76%	65%
Male	24%	35%
Race/Ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino	39%	36%
Black/African American	32%	30%
White	21%	26%
Asian	2%	3%
Amer. Ind./Alaska Native	0%	0%
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	0%	0%
Two or more races	4%	3%
Nonresident alien	1%	<1%
Unknown	<1%	<1%
Age		
Average Age	27	27
Course Modalities this Semester		
ONLN	74%	72%
OLCR	7%	9%
LRON	6%	8%
HYBR	6%	6%
TRAD	5%	4%
CLIN	1%	<1%
INTN	1%	<1%

² All demographics taken at census date (Sept 17, 2020).

