



COLLEGE STUDENT ALLIANCE

RETURN-TO-CAMPUS STUDENT SURVEY

WINTER 2022 REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

College students across Ontario are facing unprecedented challenges heading into Winter 2022. For the past 21 months, students have faced disruptions in their personal, academic, and career outcomes. With the sudden November 2021 announcements made by many colleges to return to campus in January 2022, students were again presented with another disruption to student learning and health outcomes.

To access a better understanding of student challenges, concerns, and feedback regarding college return-to-campus plans, CSA launched the Return-to-Campus Student Survey. Circulated from December 23rd to December 30th 2021, the survey collected results from over 500 students across 23 Ontario colleges.

This subsequent report contains a detailed breakdown of the survey findings, including a thorough examination into student demographics, as well as the academic, financial, mental health, and other challenges that students are reporting heading into Winter 2022.

The report aims to be a useful tool for CSA membership in understanding the challenges, concerns, and feedback of its students, and in appreciating how they can best be supported in the year ahead.

KEY INSIGHTS

Return-to-Campus Plans

- 47 percent of respondents indicated their college is mandating fully in-person learning for Winter 2022.
- The average satisfaction rating for Winter 2022 return-to-campus plans was 6.5 out of 10.
- Three-quarters of respondents plan to live off-campus in 2022.
- Students reported that email (64 percent), college websites (50 percent) and social media (30 percent) were their top sources of information for return-to-campus plans.
- 87 percent of respondents indicated their preferred method of communication is email.

Support Services & Student Concerns

- Over half of respondents indicated that their finances have been significantly impacted by COVID-19.
- Personal finances, personal health & well-being, and family/friends' health & well-being were rated the top 3 student concerns for Winter 2022.
- Financial aid, career development services, and fitness/recreational sports & activities were ranked the top 3 support services needed for Winter 2022.

Indigenous & International Students

- Over half of Indigenous student respondents indicated that accessible counselling services was the number one support service needed for Winter 2022.
- International students displayed evidence of greater financial challenges than the entire respondent pool, with 71 percent indicating personal finances was their top concern, and 65 percent indicating that they are in need of financial support through scholarships, bursaries, or reduced tuition.

OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this survey was to collect updated student opinions regarding their college's return-to-campus plans, and determine how students could be better supported now and into the future. This survey focused on six main subject areas: academics, finances, virtual learning, mental health, communication, and the concerns of international and indigenous students. This report presents findings of 501 respondents from 23 publicly-funded colleges across Ontario, including 266 responses exclusively from CSA members, and provides an overview of how students regard their colleges' return-to-campus plans heading into 2022.

METHOD

Using a mixed-methods approach, this survey gathered both statistical information and anecdotal accounts on the experiences of college students returning to campus. The survey consisted of 22 questions that included multiple choice, Likert scale, rating scale, and open-ended type questions. From November 23rd to November 30th, 2021, a total of 501 anonymous college students responded to our online survey, 266 of whom were from member schools of the College Student Alliance (CSA). The confidence interval for the data collected from CSA's membership is 95 percent with a 4% margin of error.

LIMITATIONS

While our findings are representative of CSA's membership with an acceptable confidence interval (95 percent) and margin of error (4 percent), it is worthwhile to note the high proportion of students responding from Humber College (45.5 percent). This is likely due to the increased capacity of Humber college's student association, Ignite, to actively promote this survey with their student body, which happens to be one of the largest in Ontario¹. We can therefore expect this phenomenon to impact the results of the survey more generally in favour of Humber student needs and opinions. A

¹ Humber College, 2022.

METHOD



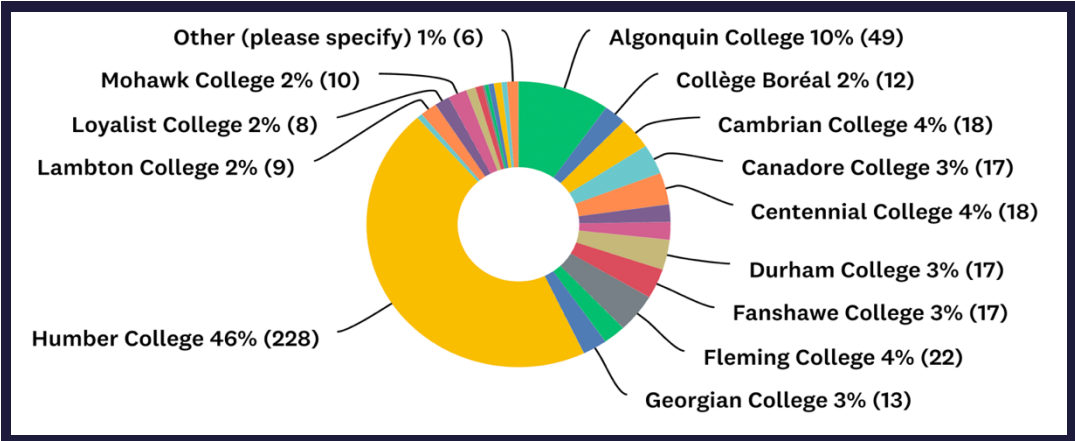
monetary incentive (\$25 Amazon gift card) and a coordinated effort made by membership to engage students did increase the number and diversity of respondents from past surveys.

Another limitation to our research was the inability to verify that all respondents were college students, due to the anonymity of the survey. We attempted to prevent invalid entries by expressing that only students from CSA member schools would be eligible for the monetary incentive.

DEMOGRAPHICS

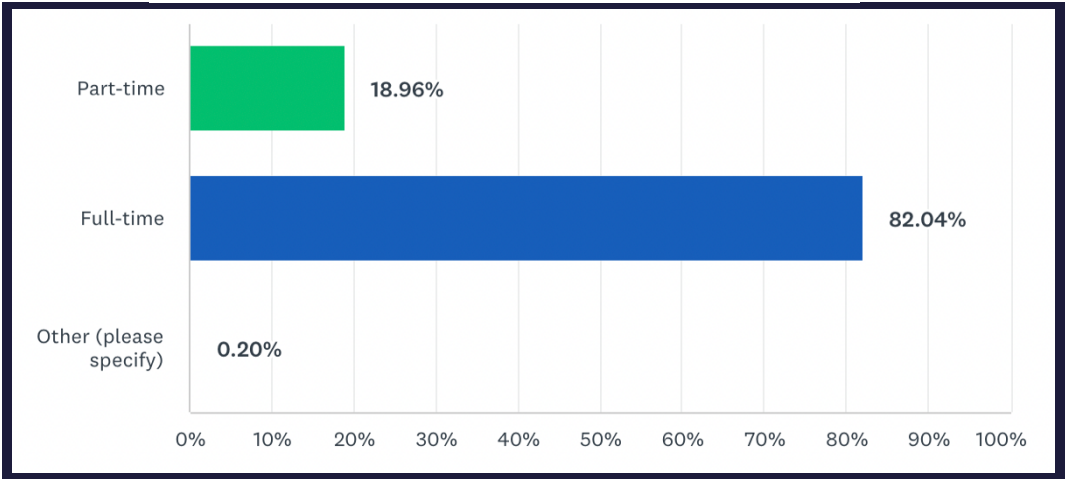
As mentioned, the student survey was implemented over a one week period from November 23rd to November 30th, 2021. A total of 501 participants from across 23 colleges participated in the survey, including 266 respondents from CSA member colleges, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Student Survey Participation by College



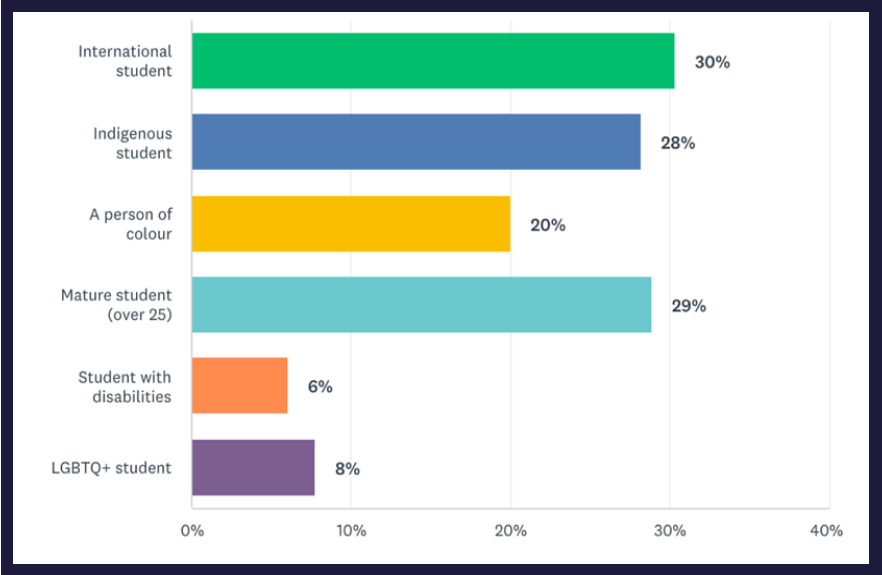
Of these student respondents, the majority reported being enrolled on a full-time basis (82%), as demonstrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 – College Student Academic Status



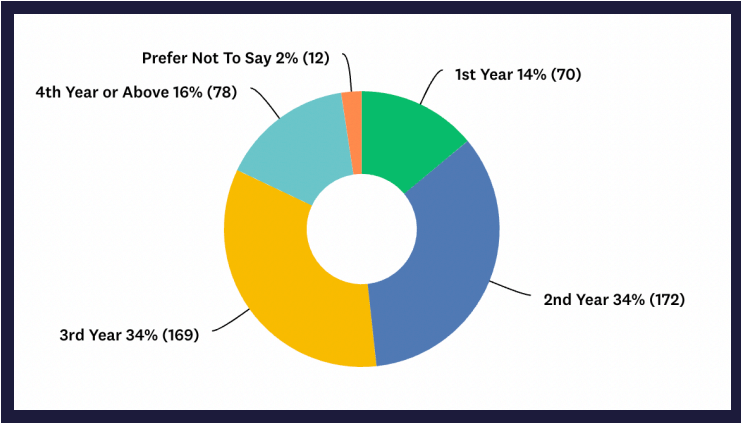
It is essential to highlight the demographic breakdown of self-identity groups within the study body. The highest proportion of respondents identified as international students (30 percent), followed by mature students (29 percent), and indigenous students (28 percent). All self-identity categories are outlined in Figure 3.

Figure 3 – College Student Self-Identification Status by Category



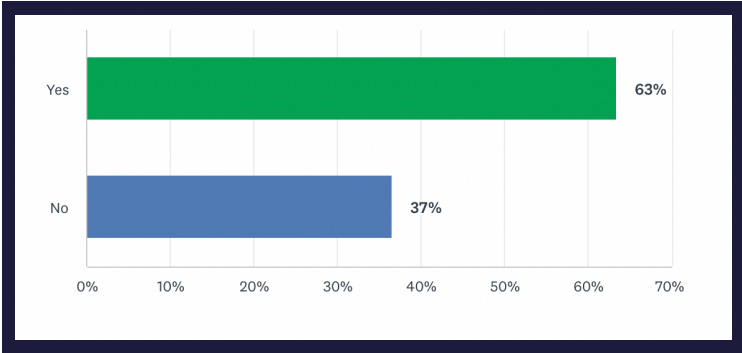
The spread of students across levels of study closely followed a normal distribution bell-curve, where student respondents predominantly identified their level of study as second year (34 percent) or third year (34 percent), as illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4 – College Student Population by Level of Study



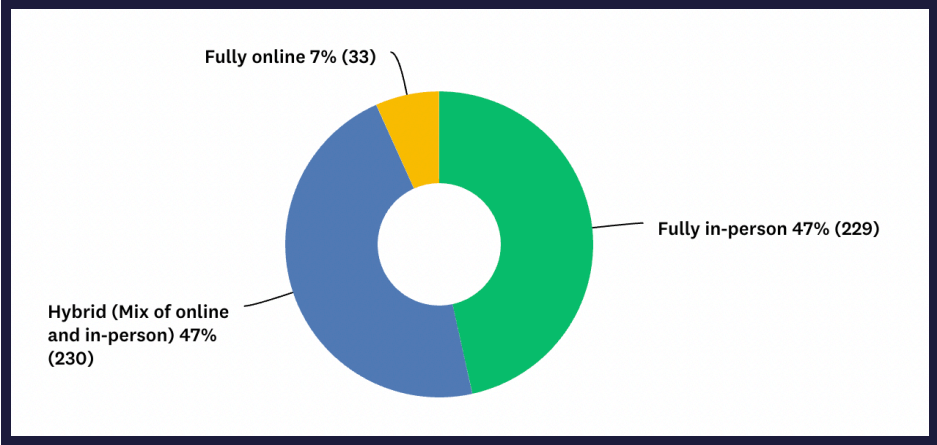
Regarding work status, 63 percent of respondents indicated that they will be completing a practicum or co-op work placement in Winter 2022, as demonstrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5 – Practicum or Co-Op Status for Winter 2022



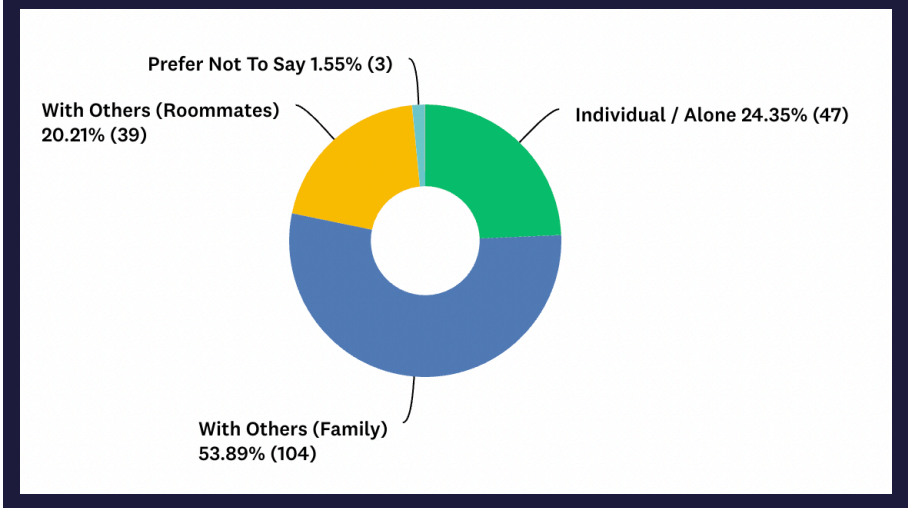
Nearly half of respondents indicated that they will be returning to fully in-person learning (47 percent) this Winter 2022 term, while a large number will continue with hybrid learning (47 percent), and a small minority with fully online learning (7 percent), as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6 – Mode of Learning for Winter 2022



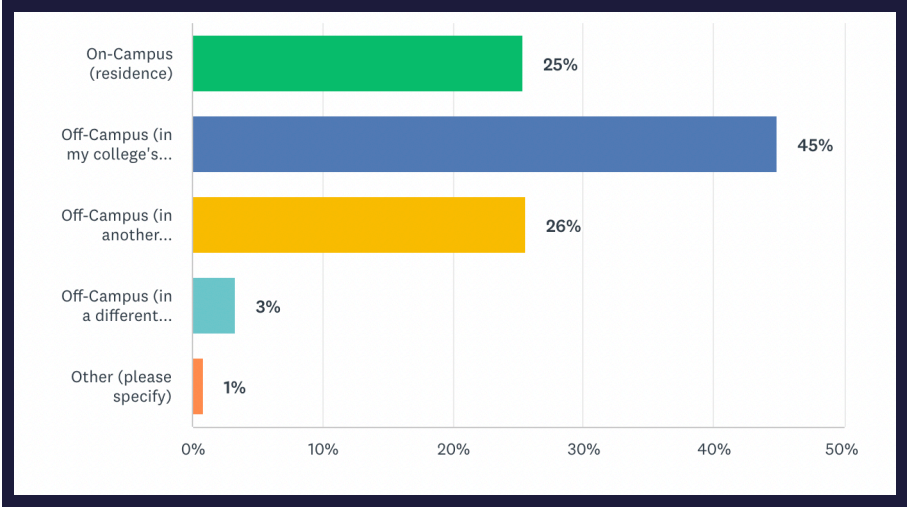
Regarding living situations, the majority of respondents indicated they are currently living with family (54 percent), while a portion identified as living individually/alone (24 percent), or with roommates (20 percent), during the Fall 2021 semester, as indicated in Figure 7.

Figure 7 – College Student Living Situations for Fall 2021



When reporting geographic location, the largest proportion of respondents indicated that they will be living off campus in their college’s hometown/city (45 percent), while a further 26 percent will be living off-campus in another town/city, and 25 percent will be on-campus in residence, as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8 – College Living Situations by Location for Winter 2022

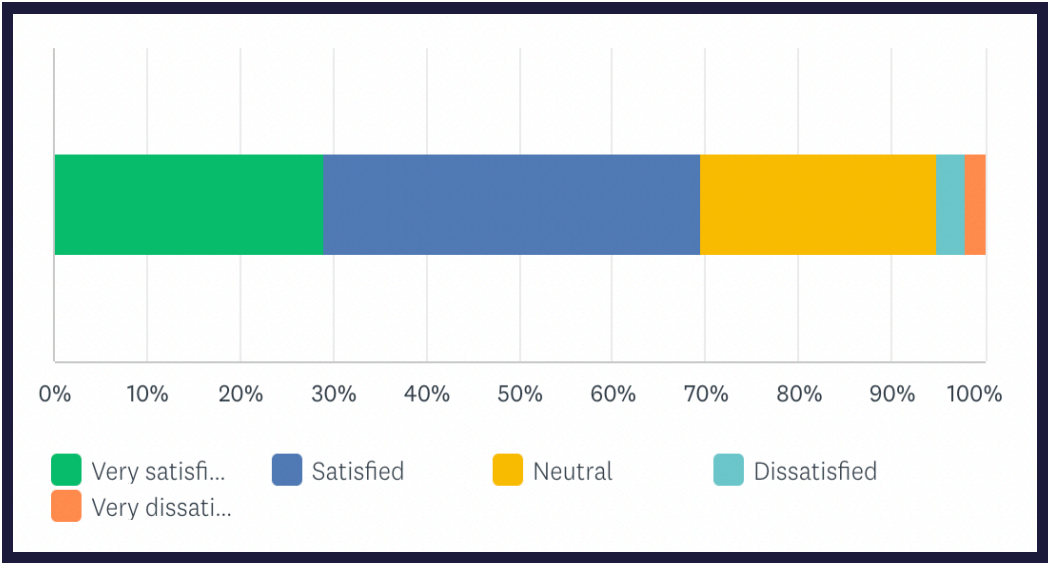


ACADEMICS

Despite the virtual learning format used by colleges in Fall 2021, most students reported taking a full course load, with the majority of respondents indicating that they are enrolled in full time studies (82 percent). Student respondents were well represented across all years of study, featuring students in first year (14 percent), second year (34 percent), third year (34 percent), and fourth year or above (16 percent). Nearly half of respondents cited that they will be having fully in-person classes for the Winter 2022 semester (47 percent), while many students will continue with hybrid learning (47 percent), and only 7 percent will have fully online learning. The majority of students (71 percent) confirmed that they will be returning to campus in Winter 2022.

In addition to these findings, the majority of students also expressed positive opinions regarding the quality of education they received, indicating that they were either satisfied (40 percent) or very satisfied (29 percent), as shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9 - Student Satisfaction Levels of Perceived Quality of Education in Fall 2021



On the whole, students rated their college’s handling of the Fall 2021 semester positively, with an average rating of 7.5 out of 10. Conversely, their satisfaction with Winter 2022 plans was less favourable, with an average rating of 6.5 out of 10. Overall, our findings suggest that Ontario colleges’ return-to-campus plans and communication levels were positively received by students.

While delivery of hybrid learning in Fall 2021 was well received, surveyed students indicated that balancing academic responsibilities with other priorities remained difficult, as discussed by this respondent:

“ My biggest concern is being able to pay rent and my bills while going to campus full time. My work situation has changed due to COVID and I need to work full time to support myself. ”

– current third year Business student

Respondents expressed concerns over managing competing priorities, and highlighted the need for increased student supports in the coming year. Given the diversity of our sample, the needs of each student sub-population were shown to vary widely, wherein respondents cited competing family duties, work responsibilities, health stressors, and travel requirements. When asked to describe their current situation and concerns for Winter 2022, one respondent expressed the following:

“ Full-time student, 2 part-time jobs, mortgage and household expenses are manageable now. Moving from online to full in-person programming means commuting 3 hours to and from campus daily! It is highly stressful, expensive and time consuming. Very concerned for social distancing, academic success, and mental health impacts.² ”

– current fourth year Business student

While college return-to-campus plans were positively received by students, respondents indicated how other competing challenges, particularly financial concerns, negatively impact their academic performance, as indicated by this respondent:

“ I work full time overnights to pay for school and the struggle has been real to keep up good grades. I have slept through a test or two and

² Edited for clarity

DISCUSSION



missed a few lectures because I hit snooze a few too many times.

Just being a little more financially secure would be great. My biggest concern is just trying to keep my head above water while trying to keep up in school.³ ”

— current first year Natural Environment student

³ Edited for clarity

FINANCES

The pandemic has negatively impacted the financial stability of many college students, not only impacting their ability to fund their studies, but in many cases, limiting their ability to afford housing, support their families, access public transportation, and maintain their own health. In this survey, the majority of respondents indicated that personal finances are their number one concern for the upcoming Winter 2022 semester (64 percent), with 61 percent of respondents indicating that that financial aid resources would be the most preferred support for the coming year.

However, significant barriers exist to accessing financial aid resources, and students are often required to seek out additional employment to fund their studies, as cited by one respondent:

“ I am extremely concerned in regards to my finances. Due to my parents income, I qualify for \$0 of OSAP, but, they do not help me in anyway shape or form financially.

I am doing my best to work as much as possible while taking 6 courses but it gets hard to balance things. Now, I will be working even less due to in person classes, and I have the added expense of commuting. ”

— current first year Business student

In addition, the sudden announcement from many colleges to mandate fully in-person learning for Winter 2022 has increased the financial strain on many students. With 47 percent of respondents indicating they are required to attend fully in-person classes for Winter 2022, many students are now facing disruptions in their work and housing situations, as discussed by this respondent:

“ Because we are going back to class, I am most concerned with the financial aid the school can offer as now I would have to cut back my hours at work which leaves me short for my living expenses including the roof over my head. This

becomes a huge burden for me when going back to class winter 2022.



– current second year Business student

For the Winter 2022 semester, the majority of respondents indicated they will return to either fully in-person learning (46.5 percent) or hybrid learning with some practical components (47 percent). Correspondingly, 71 percent of respondents indicated they would be returning to campus, with 45 percent of respondents indicating that they would be living in their college campus' hometown/city. The sudden moving costs and changes in employment and practicum prospects have added new financial pressures for many students, as reported by this respondent:



I moved out of province during the pandemic, found worthwhile employment, increased my savings. All of that will be gone if I need to return to campus for the winter semester. I had arranged to do my co-op at this employer for the summer of 2022.

Now I will need to move back to Toronto, find suitable housing, new employment and a new co-op that is in line with my career goals and financially rewarding. All in all, the potential to go back to campus for this one semester is going to cost me over \$10,000 outside of tuition.



– current third year Business student

While 54 percent of respondents did indicate that their college offers financial aid resources to students to offset these challenges, many cited increased concerns over not being able to afford their education. These intensified financial pressures have resulted in some respondents expressing that they would not be able to continue their studies, including this respondent:

“ In Winter 2022, I will no longer be able to attend school due to financial and health reasons. I cannot afford to commute four hours to classes, keep my part-time job and manage my health problem. ”

— current second year Media & Creative Arts student

The sudden announcements regarding college return-to-campus plans and quick transitions to in-person learning have intensified the financial strains college students are facing across the province. Respondents indicated increased financial challenges associated with relocating costs, work/placement disruptions, and commuting expenses. These impacts have negatively impacted student health and well-being, and have even resulted in a number of respondents indicating that they will end their studies due to overwhelming financial costs.

Students should not have to postpone or stop their education due to financial costs. To prevent these disruptions in the new year, Ontario colleges need to put supports in place, including accessible financial resources and virtual learning options, that enable students to continue their studies according to their pre-existing schedules and health needs.



MENTAL HEALTH

Ontario’s college students are continuing to experience negative mental health outcomes already exacerbated by over 21 months of COVID-19 pandemic disruptions. Our previous study findings indicated that before the pandemic, 60 percent of students had experienced negative mental health outcomes, however due to the pandemic this has increased to 67 percent⁴. These negative mental health trends are also consistent with existing research^{5 6}.

We asked respondents to describe their current situation and major concerns for the upcoming Winter 2022 semester. An open coding analysis of their responses revealed the most prevalent key words used by respondents, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Respondent Concerns Expressed by Frequency of Key Words

Key Word	Percentage of Students Who Reported Using This Key Word
1. School	21%
2. Concerned	17%
3. Work	16%
4. Time	15%
5. Campus	13%

Our analysis of these key words and subsequent answers indicates that the main issues for respondents are academic/school demands, time management, work responsibilities, in-person campus requirements, and struggling with negative feelings and mental health challenges.

Negative mental health is a significant issue impacting Ontario’s college students, which is further compounded by major concerns expressed by respondents about the upcoming Winter 2022 semester, including personal finances (64 percent), personal health & well-being concerns (59 percent), academic workload (44 percent), family/friends’ health & well-being concerns (50 percent), and social/physical isolation (40 percent). According to these increased pressures, 48 percent of

⁴ College Student Alliance, 2020.
⁵ Patterson et al, 2021
⁶ Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance et al, 2020.

respondents indicated that accessible mental health services, including counselling services, were a priority support that they wanted for Winter 2022.

College return-to-campus announcements for Winter 2022 have further intensified negative mental health incomes, including concerns over personal health & well-being outcomes. In particular, many respondents cited fear and anxiety over being told to return to campus, out of concern for their own health outcomes, as explained by this respondent:

“ I am anxious and stressed out with the decision ... of returning to school for Winter 2022. I experienced severe migraines most of the time and my travel time is four hours each day. I am not sure how I will be able to concentrate on my studies knowing I have severe migraines and high chance of being exposed to COVID.⁷ ”

— current fourth year Business student

Additionally, respondents reported concerns for the safety of their family members should they be exposed to COVID-19 as a result of returning to in-person learning. In fact, 50 percent of respondents indicated that their family/friends' health & wellbeing was one of their top concerns when considering returning to campus in Winter 2022. One respondent indicated:

“ I have a sister who is immunocompromised, if I am at all exposed I will not be allowed to see her. I also have a grandfather who we see very often who is 88 years old. I am also worried about my own health and well-being. I am currently also working from home. I am worried about being able to balance workloads between school and work, especially as someone who does need to work. ”

— current second year Business student

⁷ Edited for clarity

DISCUSSION



Loneliness and social exclusion were frequently reported by students, with 39 percent of respondents indicating both were a top concern for Winter 2022. Rapid announcements by colleges to return to in-person learning have led to increased disruptions to students' existing social connections, as mentioned by this respondent:

“ I have a 5 year old who goes to school 5 minutes walk away from my home...If I am to return on campus my husband will have to leave his job to take and pick up my daughter from school as well as take care of her when she is home which will put us in a financial strain. Travelling on the bus to and from campus will put me and my family at risk in contracting the virus. ”

— current second year Business student

The impact that College return-to-campus plans have had on student personal health outcomes, family health concerns, and social connections has certainly contributed to negative student mental health. To address the upcoming challenges for Winter 2022, it is essential that Ontario's colleges implement effective mental health supports for its students, particularly given the ongoing need to shift in-person and virtual learning formats.

VIRTUAL LEARNING

While the past 21 months have forced students to adapt to virtual learning programming, the rapid announcement by colleges to return to in-person learning has disrupted well established student routines, schedules, and living situations. For Winter 2022, 47 percent of respondents reported that their college will be offering in-person learning exclusively, and in many cases, will be removing the option for flexible virtual learning entirely. As reported by this respondent:

“ I am currently living in a different city from the college I attend. As a result of the pandemic, I no longer needed to be in Toronto for work or school and thus moved back to my home city. Seeing as online learning is very feasible, my main challenge is wasting money on accommodations just [to] be close to campus when I can realistically do classes from anywhere if a hybrid delivery was in place. ”

— current third year Business student

With the majority of students set to live off-campus (74 percent) in Winter 2022, including those living in a different city (26 percent) and those living in a different time zone (3%), it remains essential that these students have the option to access flexible virtual learning methods. Given the diversity of the study sample, including large proportions of mature students (29 percent) and international students (30 percent), differences in social and economic needs may demand more flexible virtual learning options that can accommodate family and work obligations. Accordingly, 54 percent of all respondents indicated that they live with family members. Despite these factors, students reported increased frustration with their college’s perceived inflexible in-person demands, as expressed by this respondent:

“ I’m currently living with immunocompromised family members who can’t take the vaccine and I fear I can still spread it the Covid-19 virus to them. I also feel that we should have had a bigger notice because now I have less than two months for my

family to rearrange our schedules and jobs and find daycares. I believe that until the numbers go down and variants stop fully we should not fully go back in person. I would like flexibility and choice. ”

– current second year Business student

Lastly, respondents reported that inconveniences caused by the sudden switch to in-person learning have not been acknowledged by their college. The abrupt disruption in March 2020 resulted in new barriers for students in accessing social events, health & wellness services, and other important resources, and colleges learned to introduce new supports, such as accessible virtual counselling services, to help students adjust to the new normal. Similarly, this new disruption to student routines and modes of learning, caused by college return-to-campus plans, requires that colleges provide effective supports to help students adapt to changes in virtual learning, which should include hybrid options, as expressed by this respondent:

“ The college could provide more hybrid options. They offer minimal class sections forcing students to travel to campus daily and no online opportunity to offset the inconvenience. ”

– current third year Humber student

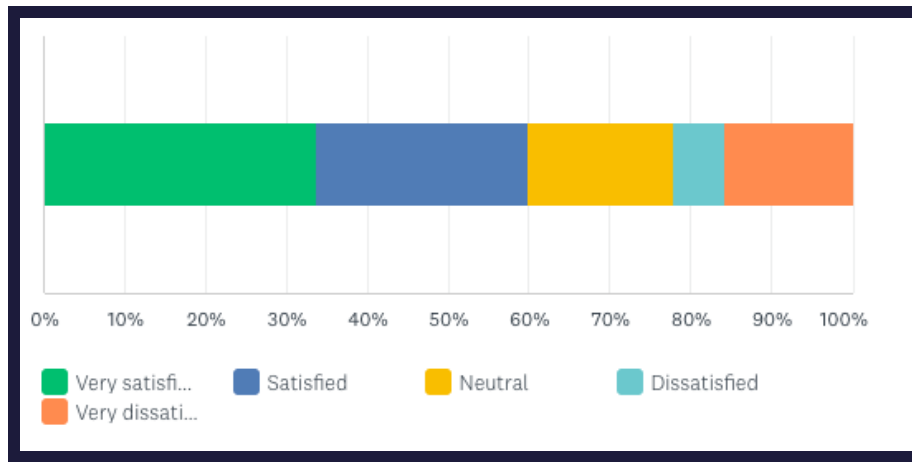
COMMUNICATION

Communication presented an important challenge for college institutions in connecting with their students and in conveying their return-to-campus plans for Winter 2022.

While the majority of respondents identified email as their preferred method of communication (87 percent), respondents reported that they accessed return-to-campus updates and information predominantly from email (64%), their college’s website (50 percent) and social media (30 percent).

In general, the majority of respondents expressed positive opinions of their college’s level of communication during Fall 2021, expressing that they were either satisfied (26 percent) or very satisfied (33 percent), as shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10 – Student Satisfaction of College’s Communication Methods regarding its Return-to-Campus Plans



Despite the generally favourable approval of Fall 2021 communication levels, respondents ranked their college’s return-to-campus plan for Winter 2022 at an average rating of 6.5 out of 10. This is largely in part due to the decision by many colleges to make partial or full return-to-campus announcements mid-November 2021, leaving many students struggling to relocate, find affordable housing, and new work options within only a few months, as mentioned by this respondent:

“ I have no time given such the short notice, to change my living situation to go back to campus. I wish I was told this in the fall or that in person was for summer 2022 / fall 2022. It’s disorganized and too fast for my comfort. ”

— current second year Business student

Respondents indicated that they require adequate notice in advance, especially given that many students (29 percent) live off-campus in a town/city outside their campus’ hometown/city. In addition, some students studying abroad face significant obstacles to entering Canada in time for January 2022 classes, as cited by this respondent:

“ Keep in-person classes on the same day. Especially in the winter semester when we were only notified we'd have in person classes halfway through the fall semester, it's very very hard to find housing last second in the winter. As well, very hard because of return to Canada restrictions at the border for students abroad right now to return home last minute/over the busy holiday season where testing times increase. Having a transition to in person classes would have been better for the fall semester. ”

— current third year Technology student

To address these concerns, respondents suggested that college return-to-campus plans need to be communicated well in advance of implementation, in order for students to smoothly and effectively adjust to policy changes.

INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

Our survey yielded results from 131 Indigenous students from 23 Ontario colleges, with the highest proportion from Algonquin College (23 percent), Centennial College (8 percent), and Georgian College (8 percent). While a significant portion of respondents indicated that they would be returning to fully in-person classes (42 percent), the majority of Indigenous students reported they will continue to have online learning as an important component of their program with hybrid learning (51 percent) and fully online (7 percent).

Our previous survey results have indicated that access to high speed 50/10 Mbps internet, required for virtual learning, remains a continual barrier for Indigenous students, with only 16% of First Nations households having access to this level of internet⁸. Lacking internet connection is a significant barrier to a student's full participation and success in their post-secondary education, as previous data has shown^{9 10}.

The majority of respondents indicated that they would be participating in a practicum or co-op placement this year (86 percent), well above the sample average (63 percent). Given this finding, it is essential that colleges recognize the need for career services and resources for Indigenous students, and provide effective career development services to ensure students secure practical placements in their career fields.

In terms of living accommodations, a high proportion of respondents (41 percent) indicated that they would be living on-campus in residence, followed by those living close to their college off-campus (37 percent). This may account for a pronounced shift in desired support services with large in-person components, including fitness/recreational sports or activities (44 percent) and in-person social events (31 percent).

⁸ Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2020.

⁹ Hansen & Reich, 2015.

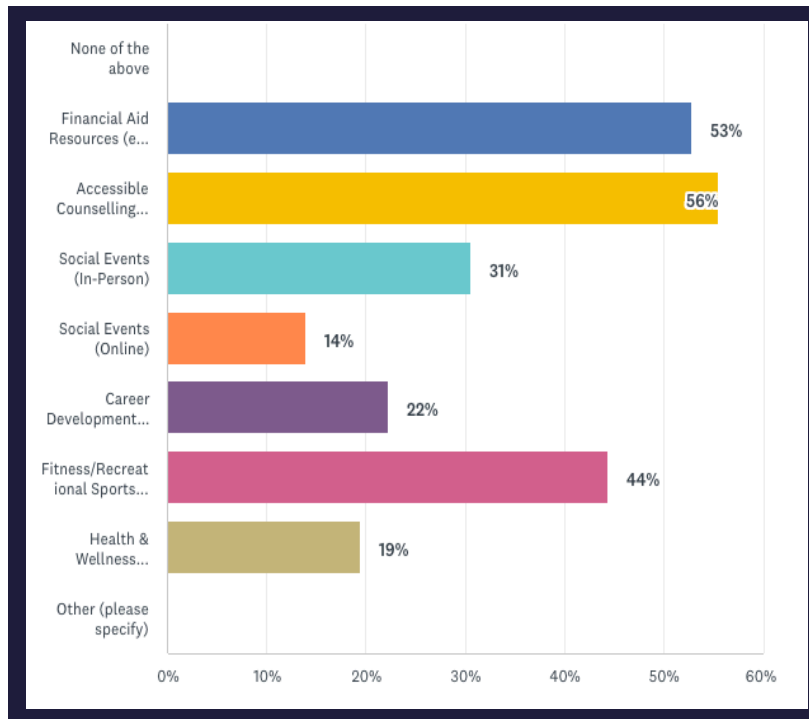
¹⁰ Colleges Ontario, 2020

RESULTS



Accordingly, respondents indicated that the most helpful support services for Winter 2022 would be accessible counselling services (56 percent), financial aid resources (53 percent), and fitness/recreational sports or activities (44 percent), as shown by Figure 11. Regarding concerns for the upcoming Winter 2022 semester, respondents indicated their top concerns were personal finances (44 percent), personal health and wellbeing (36 percent), family/friends' health & wellbeing (26 percent) and social/physical isolation (36 percent).

Figure 11 – Desired Support Services for Winter 2022

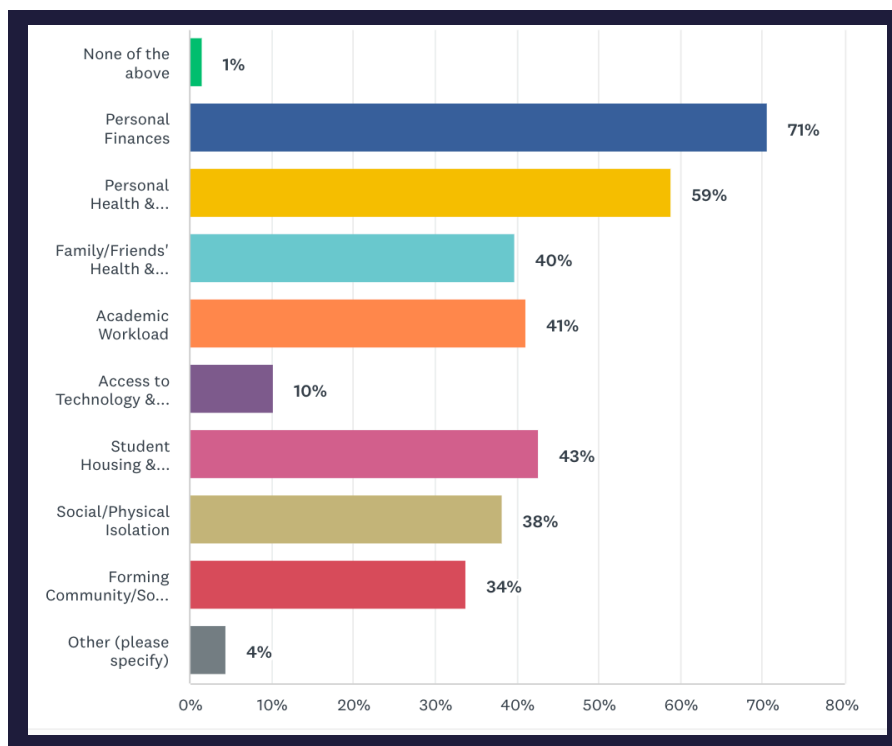


It is essential that colleges provide effective support services, particularly in-person services, to meet the needs of the 78 percent of Indigenous students living on, or nearby, campus. Having these support services will help ensure that these students succeed in their postsecondary studies.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Our survey included 141 respondents who indicated they are international students from 18 Ontario colleges, with the highest proportion from Humber College (62 percent), and Algonquin College (8 percent). 71 percent of respondents indicated that their top concern for the upcoming year was personal finances, as indicated in Figure 12, and this finding accurately reflects the increasing financial burdens international students are facing across Ontario’s colleges^{11 12}, as well as the significantly higher tuition fees they must pay in comparison to domestic fees^{13 14}.

Figure 12 – International Student Priority Concerns for Winter 2022



Our previous study findings suggest that international students are five times more likely to report difficulty affording rent, three times more likely to indicate their job does not cover their costs, and three times more likely to report difficulty affording their tuition than others¹⁵. To pay for these

¹¹ College Student Alliance, 2021.

¹² Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario, 2017.

¹³ Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario, 2017.

¹⁴ College Student Alliance, 2021.

¹⁵ College Student Alliance, 2020.

RESULTS



increasing financial costs, many international students have traditionally turned to part-time, on-campus work throughout the school year^{16 17}, which unfortunately has been severely disrupted by COVID-19. International students cited continued challenges with financing their education off-campus, given that their study permit only allows 20 hours per week of off-campus work.¹⁸

When asked what kind of support international students needed most for Winter 2022, the majority (65 percent) selected financial aid resources, either in the form of scholarships, bursaries, or reduced tuition. To manage these intense financial challenges, many international students over the past year have turned to part-time employment, particularly options close to where they live. The sudden shift back to in-person learning can compromise these stable sources of income, as cited by this respondent:

“ I currently work 2 part time jobs (one on campus and the other off campus). I’m concerned that with the shift to more in person classes, I’ll have to quit one and that will cause further financial stress as an international student. ”

- current first year Business student

Additionally, respondents identified the need for additional supports to fit their needs, including career development services (49 percent), and ensure that they can effectively secure practicum placements that match their career goals and enable them to integrate into Ontario’s workforce. Given that the majority of international student respondents (58 percent) indicated that they have a practicum/co-op as part of their program, colleges need to ensure the appropriate career development services are in place for these students.

Other respondents indicated that the option of virtual learning has given them the flexibility to handle multiple responsibilities, with family and jobs. With 48 percent of all international students reporting that they will have mandatory, fully in-person classes next January 2022, this presents further difficulties that international studies must face, as indicated by one respondent:

“ I am an international student who lives in Ontario with two kids. Winter 2022 in-person update made it a very difficult situation for me. ”

¹⁶ College Federation of Students-Ontario, 2017.

¹⁷ Government of Canada, 2021.

¹⁸ Government of Canada, 2021.

When I check my program, I only have in-person options. I have two kids who don't have covid vaccine. How am I going to isolate myself with in-person classes, in-person presentation or test/exams?

Today I have lots of friends who want to take classes online. Students should still be able to attend classes remotely if they are able to engage completely. We should be able to make our own decisions. ”

- current second year Business student

International student respondents indicated that they were significantly less satisfied with their college's return-to-campus plan for Winter 2022, citing a 5.9 out of 10 average rating. Respondents indicated that colleges could improve their plans by including more options for online classes, giving students more time to prepare to return to campus, and providing clearer communication for students. As suggested by one respondent:

“ Make decisions and announce earlier to give students ample time to prepare. Be completely honest about their plans and also be considerate. They know the current circumstances and the renting market.

They initially said we will have hybrid model so I waited to see if my program was online or not. This impacted where I would rent, online = out of town/cheap or in-person = in Etobicoke area/pricey.

My college announced 2 months before classes start that we will return fully in person. And I can't find a place to rent as yet, despite one month of contacting landlords and even offering 5 months of rent deposit.¹⁹ ”

- current second year Business student

¹⁹ Edited for clarity

RESULTS



The past 21 months of virtual learning has allowed international students to continue their studies from virtually any location, and due to the pandemic, some have returned to their home countries to continue their studies. With nearly half of respondents indicating that their college is mandating in-person learning, this presents another barrier to international students accessing their education. As expressed by this fourth year international student:

“ I feel uncomfortable if I have to return to school. Because I’m living in my country and the pandemic is blooming seriously. There are no flights overseas or even entering [Canada]. My country is in lockdown.

Also, I feel insecure when coming back to school because the pandemic has not gone yet. What if I’m back to school and someone else gets the virus but they don’t know and spread it to others? My life will be in danger!

I don’t want to go back to school at this time.²⁰

– current fourth year Humber student



To address their top concern for personal finances (71 percent), the majority of international students (65 percent) reported that they need financial aid resources in the form of scholarships, bursaries or reduced tuition. Furthermore to offset the heavy cost of international tuition, colleges must also look for ways to increase part-time employment options on-campus for international students, to help them combat the 20 hour off-campus limitations dictated by their study permit.

International students also need additional supports, including career development services, to ensure that the majority with practicum components (58 percent) find secure placements that match their career goals and help them integrate smoothly into Ontario’s workforce. Finally, respondents indicated that more flexible hybrid learning options would help them balance distance challenges, family obligations, and academic workloads.

²⁰ Edited for clarity

CONCLUSION

We surveyed Ontario college students from November 23 to November 30 2021 to obtain updated information on the concerns they have regarding college return-to-campus plans, and how they can be further supported throughout the school year.

These findings confirm existing knowledge obtained from our previous May 2020 COVID-19 survey and consultations throughout the year with college students. Our results indicate that among the 266 respondents reporting from CSA membership schools are continuing to face challenges associated with COVID-19. The concerns of students surrounding academics, finances, communication, mental health, and virtual learning are at similar levels with those surveyed in May 2020.

Student perspectives on virtual learning continue to be mixed. While the majority of students are in favour of returning to campus, respondents reported that the rapid shift to in-person learning added further pressures to their own academic, financial, and social challenges. In terms of finances, the majority of respondents (64 percent) indicated that personal finances were their top concern for Winter 2022, and reported difficulty affording basic necessities and education costs, given that they are experiencing employment challenges in addition to financial instability.

Indigenous students reported the need for support services with in-person components, including social events, and recreational sports or activities, as well as effective career development services and accessible counselling services. With greater financial instability than the overall respondent pool, international students need financial aid resources (scholarships, bursaries, reduced tuition), as well as increased on-campus employment options, career development services, and flexible hybrid learning options to combat financial, career, and health challenges.

Students continue to experience difficulties managing workloads and stress leading to increased anxiety and negative mental health. In terms of how students could be better supported, our findings revealed academic, financial, and mental health supports that would benefit college students best.

Respondents reported that flexible learning options, better communication of campus policy, and increased in-person events and activities would alleviate their academic concerns. Additionally, increased financial support in the form of OSAP grants, emergency relief, or scholarships and bursaries would help improve the financial concerns of students, especially international students. Finally, increased financial aid, increased time off, and continued promotion of and access to virtual

CONCLUSION



mental health support would benefit the mental health of college students.

The findings of this Return-to-Campus Student Survey Report demonstrate the clear financial, academic, health, and social needs that college students have heading into the Winter 2022 term. It is up to colleges, student associations, student advocacy organizations, and provincial policy-makers to use the proposed recommendations contained herein, and develop the necessary supports that college students need in order to thrive in the new year.

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For more information, please contact:

TREVOR POTTS

RESEARCH & POLICY ANALYST

(647) 787-4991

research@collegestudentalliance.ca