Back to the "New Normal"

Workers and Learners Navigate Campus and Workplace Reopening

UCLA Labor Studies

UCLA Labor Center

UCLA College | Social Sciences
Institute for Research
on Labor & Employment

A new report by the
Labor Summer Research
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About Us

The Workers and Learners Project

Workers and Learners is a multiyear project to document the experiences of college students who are also employed. It is a collaboration between the University of California, Los Angeles, Labor Center, Labor Studies, and Institute for Research on Labor and Employment; the Los Angeles Community College District Dolores Huerta Labor Institute, and the California State University, Long Beach, American Studies Program. This report builds off three previous studies: Unseen Costs: The Experiences of Workers and Learners in Los Angeles County, A Survey of Workers and Learners during COVID-19, and Workers and Learners during a Global Pandemic and Social Uprising.

The UCLA Labor Summer Research Program

The UCLA Labor Summer Research Project immerses students in real-world research on work and working-class communities in Los Angeles County. Over a period of six weeks each summer, students learn how to conduct surveys and interviews, analyze data, and present their findings to public stakeholders. Participants have studied car wash workers, ride-hailing drivers, and the challenges facing young workers. Students' research findings contribute to a growing body of knowledge about contemporary work that informs the community, educational leaders, and other public policy stakeholders.

Labor Studies at UCLA

Labor Studies at UCLA is an interdisciplinary degree program that prepares the next generation of social-movement and civil-society leaders to lift up the prospects for California's diverse working people and their communities. In collaboration with the UCLA Labor Center and Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, Labor Studies develops students' research and leadership skills and creates opportunities to test academic knowledge in real-world settings.

UCLA Labor Center

For more than 50 years, the UCLA Labor Center has created innovative programs that offer a range of educational, research, and public service activities within the university and in the broader community, especially among low-wage and immigrant workers. The Labor Center is a vital resource for research, education, and policy development to create jobs that are good for workers and their communities, to improve the quality of existing jobs in the low-wage economy, and to strengthen the process of immigrant integration, especially among students and youth.

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and disparate impact on the lives of millions of people. In Los Angeles County, college campuses remained closed for more than a full academic year. Workers and learners juggled academic demands with the need to work for an income. As the pandemic persisted and colleges across the country continued to modify their reopening plans, the leaders of this study recognized the urgency of investigating the possible long-term effects the crisis may have on workers' and learners' career paths and future earnings.

This study builds on existing knowledge concerning the experiences of workers and learners by documenting how their academic, employment, and life experiences inform their concerns and expectations for the return to campus and work. Developed by the 2021 Labor Summer Research Program student research teams, the research is based on 128 surveys and 29 interviews collected from Los Angeles public colleges and universities students in August 2021.

The following are key findings from the report.

1. The rapid transition to remote learning presented opportunities and challenges for workers and learners.

- Transitioning to remote learning required adopting various new resources and tactics in the learning environment. Students (63%) reported that most or all of their professors provided class recordings, and 52% said most or all of them held flexible office hours. Professors also offered deadline flexibility and attendance though to a lesser rate.
- Nearly all students agreed that flexibility in deadlines (91%), office hours (96%), and attendance (75%) should remain as they return to campus. They also wanted to see the practice of recorded class lectures (95%) continue.
- Remote learning opened up flexibility for work time: 58% of workers reported that remote learning allowed more flexibility to set their work schedules all of the time, and 36% reported that it allowed scheduling flexibility some of the time. Further, 65% reported that remote learning decreased scheduling conflicts with work.
- While schedule flexibility helped some students balance school and work, many were still forced to prioritize either school or work. Half of students surveyed said that COVID-19 reduced their ability to balance these two obligations.
- Overall, 53% said they valued remote learning more than they had prior to the pandemic. When surveyed about what class format would be most accommodating for student workers, many students chose online and asynchronous (47%) or hybrid learning (45%).
- The majority of surveyed workers were employed in education or service jobs that are onsite and customer-facing (i.e., retail and restaurants). For students who are essential workers, remote work was not an option. While over half (54%) worked onsite, 63% reported a preference to work in either a remote or a hybrid environment.
- The pandemic opened up new practices but also limited opportunities for workers and learners, including the ways that students could interact with others. Students reported limited engagement with their peers (96%) and professors (68%) and reduced networking opportunities for jobs and internships (89%).
- Remote learning also put student continuity at risk, with many considering leaving their program; 37% reported that they had considered dropping out of school during remote learning.

2. Students face new challenges as they return to campus and jobs.

- Students shared that in-person instruction in an academic environment fosters better relationships, promotes learning, and increases motivation. But 55% of workers and learners expressed concern about the loss of scheduling flexibility that remote learning afforded.
- Nearly two-thirds (63%) of workers and learners expected to reduce their work hours when they returned to campus. Despite less time working, 52% of workers felt that the workload itself would increase as their worksites pandemic orders were lifted.
- Colleges and universities have devised safety plans to alleviate the residual effects of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic. Most students reported that their campus had a vaccine requirement (95%) and mask mandate (95%)—preventive measures that they were overall in favor of. Just over half (57%) said their school conducted weekly testing. Even with these measures, a majority (81%) of students reported wanting to return to smaller class sizes with only 35 students or fewer per classroom.
- Workers and learners report that their workplaces have fewer requirements for safety in contrast

to university policies. Most workers reported that their workplace required masks (90%) but only half of the worksites had vaccine mandates (46%). About half of workers (53%) had to submit a daily symptom survey, and a quarter (28%) had weekly testing. The majority of workers expressed a preference for strict health protocols including daily symptom checks and weekly testing.

- Even with safety measures, another COVID wave is a looming possibility. Over half of workers and learners (56%) were somewhat concerned and almost a third (31%) were very concerned about exposure to COVID-19. at their college or university.

- Although respondents were excited to have in-person interaction again, there was a general consensus (67%) that if COVID-19 worsened, online learning is likely the best way for universities to respond. At the same time, students worried that another round of remote learning would have an impact on student well-being (29%) and force them to renegotiate learning spaces at home (27%).

- Half (52%) of workers were concerned about the safety at work if there were to be a substantial new COVID-19 wave, while another segment (33%) expressed misgivings about the detriment of such an event on their mental, social, and physical health.

3. Workers and learners face barriers to financial stability and well-being.

- Whether concerned about health and safety or about scheduling issues, 27% were very stressed and 58% were somewhat stressed around returning to campuses.

- Half (52%) of survey respondents said they felt that their university made mental health services and counseling accessible to students during the pandemic.

- Students were concerned about the impact of their commute. Students largely drove (54%) or used public transportation (22%). Most respondents (61%) expected their commute time to increase with the return to campus, with 62% reporting experiencing stress due to the commute.

- About half (48%) of students were somewhat concerned and 20% were extremely concerned about paying for their education in the upcoming year. Three-quarters (76%) of students had received some form of financial aid for the upcoming school year.

- Workers and learners also faced challenges around housing and food access. Students were extremely or somewhat concerned about paying for household expenses (84%) and food (53%). Of those supporting other people, 76% were worried about providing for a dependent this upcoming school year.

- A majority of students felt that their college major would benefit their future career (91%), while 38% were not confident that their current job would benefit their future career. About a third (33%) of students were considering changing their jobs.

Recommendations

Returning to normal after a global pandemic will be a process filled with challenges. Public colleges and universities, employers, and policymakers have the power to respond to the diverse needs of workers and learners so that they can thrive academically and professionally. The following are specific recommendations for improving conditions.

1. **Ensure that campuses and workplaces are safe for workers and learners.** Colleges and workplaces should implement weekly contact tracing, free COVID-19 testing and vaccinations, mandated mask orders and social distancing, including policy enforcement.

2. **Continue to provide workers and learners with flexible academic practices.** University administrations and staff should promote a flexible student learning environment in which students can prioritize their well-being.

3. **Expand campus resources and practices beyond the pandemic.** Colleges should ensure that students have access to resources, address food insecurity and offer low-cost food and affordable housing and transportation options.

4. **Create stronger pipelines between jobs, academics, and careers.** Students should have access to channels that link majors to employment opportunities and thereby support students' careers.

5. **Support efforts to make college affordable and create policies that allow students to work less.** Policymakers and administrations need to push policies that make college affordable, increase wages to allow workers and learners to reduce their work hours, and help alleviate financial concerns.

Introduction

Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and disparate impact on the lives of millions of people. In Los Angeles County, college campuses remained closed for more than a full academic year. The COVID-19 pandemic revolutionized higher education as schools quickly transitioned their courses entirely to virtual platforms. Workers and learners juggled academic demands with the need to work for an income. Their access to quality employment and educational opportunities was severely affected,[1] a development even more apparent for people in vulnerable communities. The pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities,[2] much like during the 2008 Great Recession.[3] These trends are especially concerning in a community like Los Angeles County where, prior to COVID-19, half of undergraduate students in the county were working, mostly in frontline, low-wage jobs, many of whom quickly became essential workers facing a higher risk of exposure to COVID.[4] During the pandemic, young adults who were already struggling in jobs with stagnant wages saw significant disruptions to their lives. As the pandemic continues and colleges across the country frequently modify their reopening plans,[5] we believe that investigating the possible long-term effects this current crisis may have on workers and learners' career paths and future earnings is imperative.

This brief supplements the report [Unseen Costs: The Experiences of Workers and Learners in Los Angeles County](#) and research briefs [A Survey of Workers and Learners in Los Angeles County during COVID-19](#) and [Workers and Learners during a Global Pandemic and Social Uprising](#) with new data on the effects of the pandemic on this population. It builds on existing knowledge concerning the experiences of workers and learners by documenting how their academic, employment, and life experiences inform their concerns and expectations for the return to campus and work.

When Governor Newsom announced that Californians aged adults would be eligible for COVID-19 vaccinations, there was hope that a return to college was imminent. Despite the push for COVID-19 vaccinations and the use of community mitigation strategies like the continued use of masking, Los Angeles County continues to be impacted by the emergence of the new COVID-19 variants. Within this new reality, students are being asked to return to campus and work after a year of remote learning and modified work schedules. In the last few months, several reports have speculated about how California's college campuses might fare in view of how other colleges and universities are managing COVID-19.[6] It is our hope that the broader community, educators, and policy stakeholders gain a better understanding of the realities workers and learners face in Los Angeles County in the midst of a global pandemic. We invite all stakeholders to engage in discussions around the various intersections of workers who study at public colleges, universities, and vocational programs throughout Los Angeles, with the goal of improving conditions for workers and learners.

About This Study

This study was conducted by a team of students in the UCLA Labor Summer Research Program, a six-week concurrent seminar and field research class. The 2021 cohort included 30 students who designed and collected surveys and interviews throughout the month of August. The research team identified transitional concerns and attitudes relevant to workers and learners and arranged them into three key domains: school, work, and life impacts. The survey took approximately 30 minutes to complete; the interviews took 30–60 minutes.

To qualify, participants had to be enrolled in college and employed during the 2020–2021 academic year, planned to return to school and be working during Fall 2021 in Los Angeles County, and be 18 years old or older. Researchers used convenience sampling and recruited participants from their networks and publicized via email, social media, and word-of-mouth. Participants received a $20 gift card for the completion of the survey and/or interview. To adhere to COVID-19 safety precautions, students conducted surveys and interviews via Zoom or phone.

The research team collected 128 surveys over a nine-day period and conducted 29 interviews over a seven-day period. Students analyzed the data and coded interviews using Qualtrics and Google Sheets and presented their key findings and recommendations through a public webinar. Due to the limitations of fielding during COVID-19, our sample skewed toward UCLA students, young college students, women and Latinx workers and learners.

As a part of LSRP, each student developed their own report brief. We developed this report integrating the students' analyses. This report consists of three main parts. The first section provides an overview of workers and learners' experience during COVID-19 and remote learning and working during the pandemic. The second section explores the practices and challenges of going back to in-person learning and continuing to work during the pandemic. The third section provides information on some of the personal impacts of the pandemic and related transitions. The report concludes with a set of recommendations.

1. Learning and Working During COVID-19

Students in LA County faced unprecedented challenges during COVID-19. The onset of the pandemic warranted a rapid transition to remote learning, which created a wide variety of responses and experiences. The pandemic impacted all students, but workers and learners were uniquely impacted. Transitioning to remote learning also required adopting and adapting to various new resources and methods in the learning environment.

Flexible Practice During the Remote Learning

The pandemic forced colleges to move classes online, which produced an array of complications, but provided greater flexibility for working students. During the year and a half of remote learning, many professors modified learning formats and offered resources, such as class recordings, flexible office hours, and flexible deadlines, that accommodated students struggling with the new way of learning.

Nearly two-thirds of workers and learners reported that most or all of their professors provided access to class recordings. For workers and learners, class recordings became a learning tool allowing them to revisit content on their own time, allowing much-needed flexibility with their work schedules. A STEM major at UCLA working as a program support assistant preferred having class recordings:

Putting up recordings online is a good one. Some classes did bruin cast but it wasn't every class—where they record the class and upload it. And some [East Los Angeles Community College] professors will do podcasts but def not every class whereas this past year it's super accessible to go back to lecture and recordings and see what the professor said in that moment I missed out. So it would definitely be helpful for prof to be aware of how that is such a powerful learning resources for students to have a recording of the lecture in whatever format whether it be a podcast or video even thorough lecture notes would be helpful because I've definitely had lectures in person where you go to class and that's it. But this past year professors have been good at providing resources—so just that would be good to carry over.

In addition, about half of the students shared that most or all of their professors had set up flexible office hours. The flexibility and the format provided new opportunities for students to meet with their professors. A UCLA humanities major found office hours and professors to be more accessible. She explained:

[With] professors, I feel like my communication with them has been the same. Or maybe it's even increased because I feel more comfortable going to the virtual office hours or emailing them for questions, since they become more responsive to emails during COVID than they would during in-person school years.

Another UCLA student who was majoring in STEM and economics expressed similar sentiments, discussing how virtual office hours made professors more approachable and easier to connect with; as this student offered:

[I]t has made it easier to connect with my professors because I would go to office hours a lot more and things were a lot more flexible and just talking with them over Zoom was … easier than it would have been going to office hours in person.
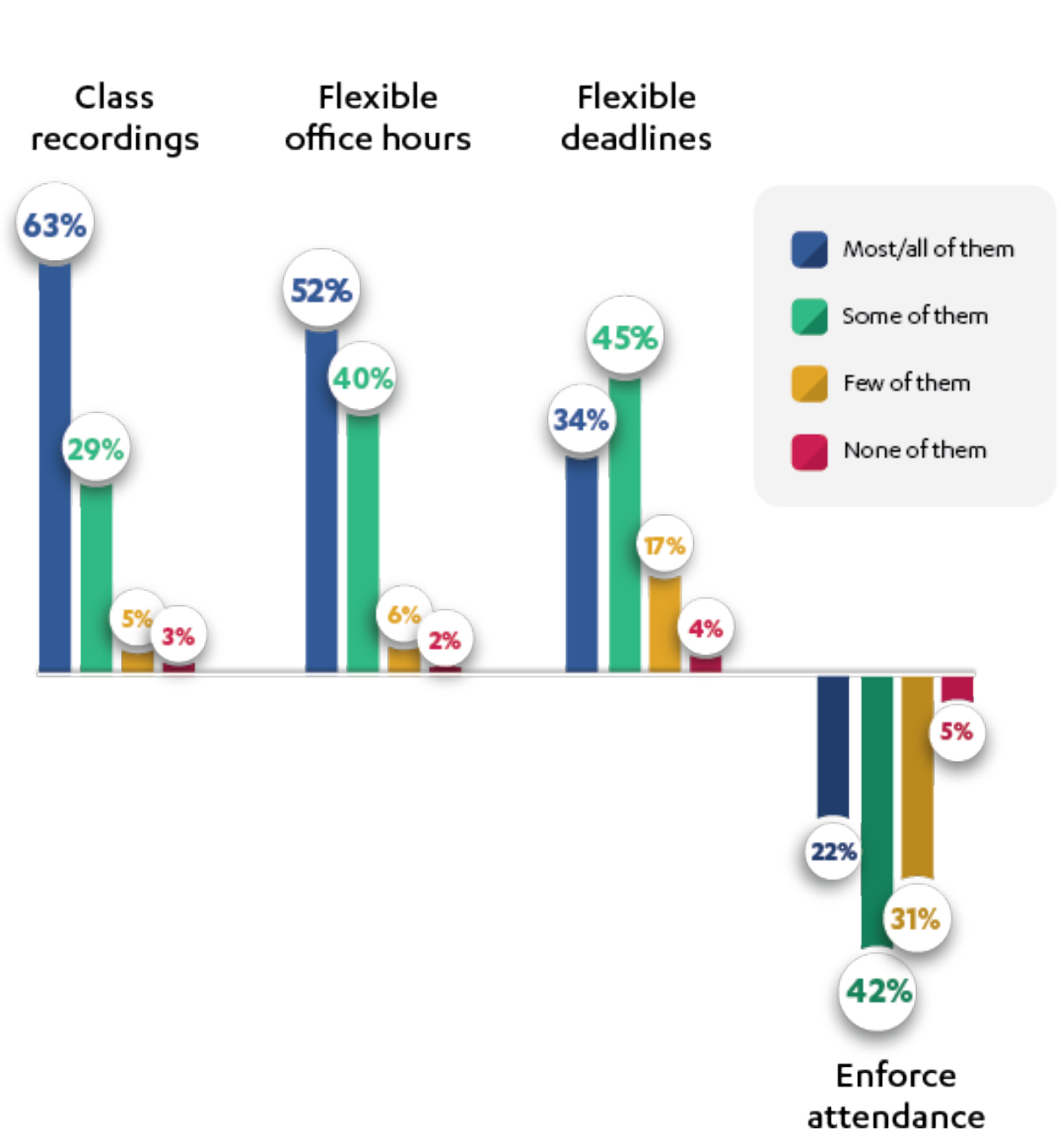
Offering office hours without requiring workers and learners to show up in-person addresses the limited contact they have with instructors and, in turn, improve their academic success.[7]

Students also reported that some faculty provided flexible deadlines on assignments, but the rate of doing so for most or all of their professors was lower than the other accommodations. An ELACC student described how professors extended deadlines when they realized students were struggling to meet them. She said, "We just had a lot of work. And I feel like, professors were very understanding and like, modifying the schedule and making it so that all students can be successful in the class."

Not enforcing attendance was another form of flexibility, allowing students to take time off if they became sick or had to juggle other responsibilities. But about two-thirds of students reported that

most or some of their professors continued to enforce attendance during remote learning. One UCLA student noticed a petition circulating to stop making "attendance mandatory or part of a grade because students are going to be sick inevitably, people are going to have to miss class if they get COVID or anything." She added her support for this: "I think that's definitely the biggest thing that I would like for Fall quarter or just in general from now on."

Figure 1: Professors Who Provide Flexible Practices During Remote Learning

Class recordings: 63% Most/all of them, 29% Some of them, 5% Few of them, 3% None of them

Flexible office hours: 52% Most/all of them, 40% Some of them, 6% Few of them, 2% None of them

Flexible deadlines: 34% Most/all of them, 45% Some of them, 17% Few of them, 4% None of them

Enforce attendance: 42% Most/all of them, 31% Some of them, 22% Few of them, 5% None of them

Legend:
- Most/all of them
- Some of them
- Few of them
- None of them

As schools transition back into the classroom, workers and learners would like to transfer the accommodations provided during virtual learning to in-person learning. Students expressed that a flexible learning environment in which faculty prioritize students' emotional and academic well-being was instrumental to their academic success, and hoped that similar practices would continue in person. Flexibility offered more autonomy to working students who might already be juggling multiple responsibilities in addition to navigating the wider implications of the pandemic. Moreover, as students return to in-person learning, the uncertainty will be exacerbated by the looming possibility of COVID surges, factoring in commute times, and stringent work schedules.

Nearly all students agreed that flexibility in deadlines, office hours, and attendance should be established upon return to campus. They also wanted to see the practice of recorded class lectures continue. Workers and learners' insights were in line with recommendations that colleges and universities have encouraged among their teaching faculty.[8] Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic invited course instructors to re-imagine their course policies to better support student learning. Our research participants emphasized how these accommodations are not only helpful for workers and learners during COVID-19, but for learners in general.

Figure 2: Students That Want Flexible Practices to Continue During In-Person Learning
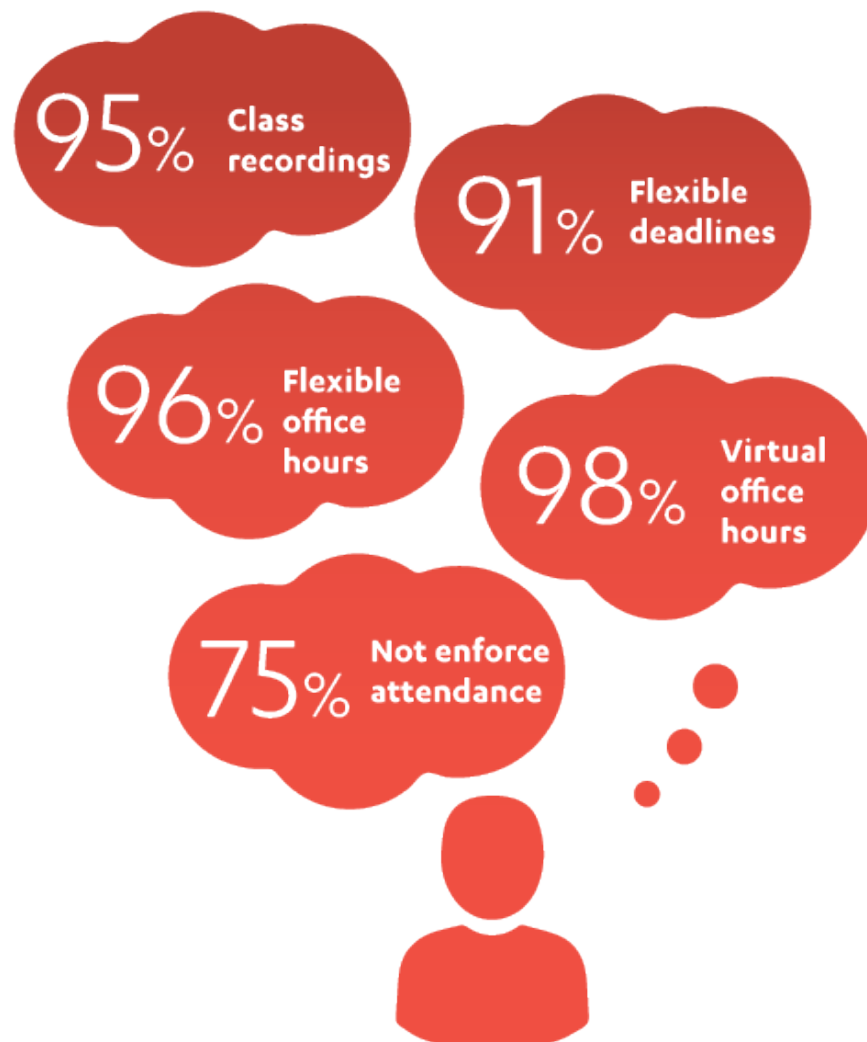
Remote Learning Impact on Work Schedules

Remote learning also allowed for work time flexibility for workers and learners. Before the pandemic, workers and learners had strict class schedules around which they had to schedule their work, or vice versa. Remote learning practices provided workers with more control over their work schedules. More than half of workers reported that remote learning allowed more flexibility to set their work schedules all the time; and a third reported enjoying this flexibility some of the time.

**Figure 3: Remote Learning Allows More Flexibility to Set Work Schedule**
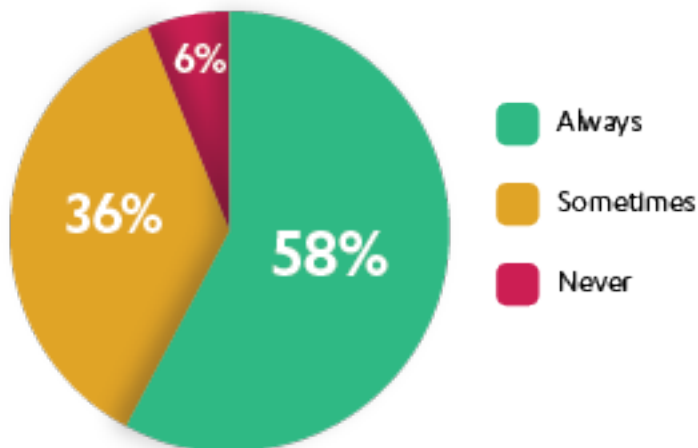
One trend that emerged across interviews was that remote learning enabled workers and learners to put in more work hours while catching up on their studies when they were off. For instance, a social science major at California State University Los Angeles (CSULA) was able to maximize her work time. She stated:

> It was easier for me to do online and to just adjust my schedule and do other stuff. Like it's easiest to just kind of like schedule everything based on like, cause you have the preference to be, to watch the pre-recording. If you have an internship, you don't have to lose hours. I can't make it to this meeting because I have class like no, like you're able to move things around them more. That's cool.

More than half of workers and learners reported that remote learning decreased scheduling conflicts with work. For many, working remotely meant less commute time and being able to take additional hours at work. A UCLA student with an office job said:

> With all the online learning I've done, I have to admit that it feels like I've had a lot more time on my hands, thanks to the online system. Some classes are asynchronous and I was able to do them at my own pace and time and that gave me a lot of time to focus on going to work without stressing about whether to miss this class or not. I'm definitely going to miss that aspect.

Figure 4: Impact of Remote Learning on Job Schedules

- It decreased scheduling conflicts
- It did not affect planning of work schedule
- It increased scheduling conflicts

17% / 18% / 65%
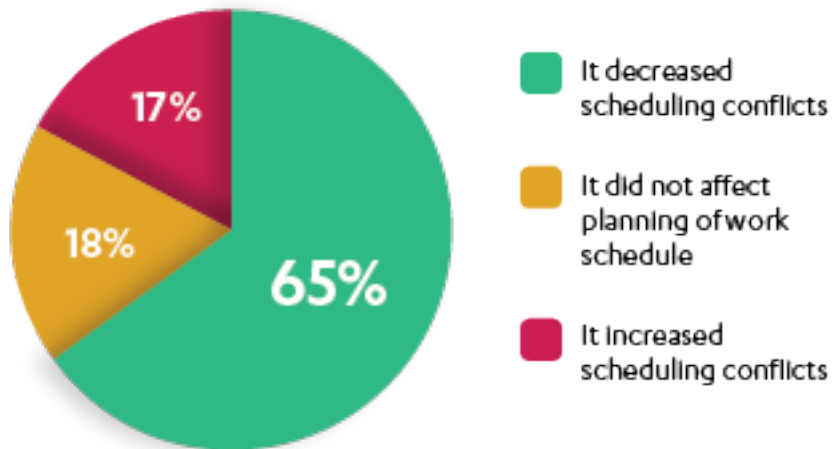
While schedule flexibility was helpful for some to strike a balance between school and work, it can be an additional stressor for those forced to prioritize school or work over the other. Half of students said that COVID-19 reduced their ability to balance school and work. A UCLA student who worked as a programming assistant described her experience:

> I had a very hard time with time management. And also, with balancing work and life, I feel like everything kind of bled together when I was working remotely and learning remotely. And I would work within hours that were not necessarily scheduled and was kind of working 24/7.

Figure 5: COVID-19 Reduced Ability to Balance School and Work

- Agree
- Disagree

50% / 50%
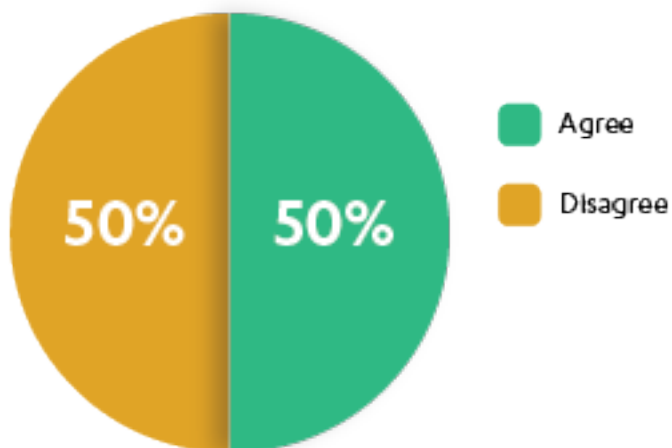
The increased ability to ostensibly maximize productivity comes with its tradeoffs. Many expressed that they have had to put work above school, as earning money to pay for tuition and supporting themselves and family members was non-negotiable, whereas educational pursuits were more of a luxury. A UCLA student working in food service described how they prioritized work over school:

> Because during the pandemic, I was, I actually let my work schedule determine my school schedule. So having the opportunity to watch the lecture whenever helps me work more and make more money. So I think that's counterintuitive to it of going back to school in person, actually. I don't think that's a good study for me.

Along with increasing workloads, the COVID-19 pandemic largely eradicated traditional casual breaks such as socializing or walking to class . The high-impact schedule puts more stress on workers and learners and can contribute to burn out. A UCLA STEM major working 40 hours a week explained that "after Zoom, it's like already five or six. I've been awake since 4 something. And I chill for the rest of my day, and then start [work] again at 5am."

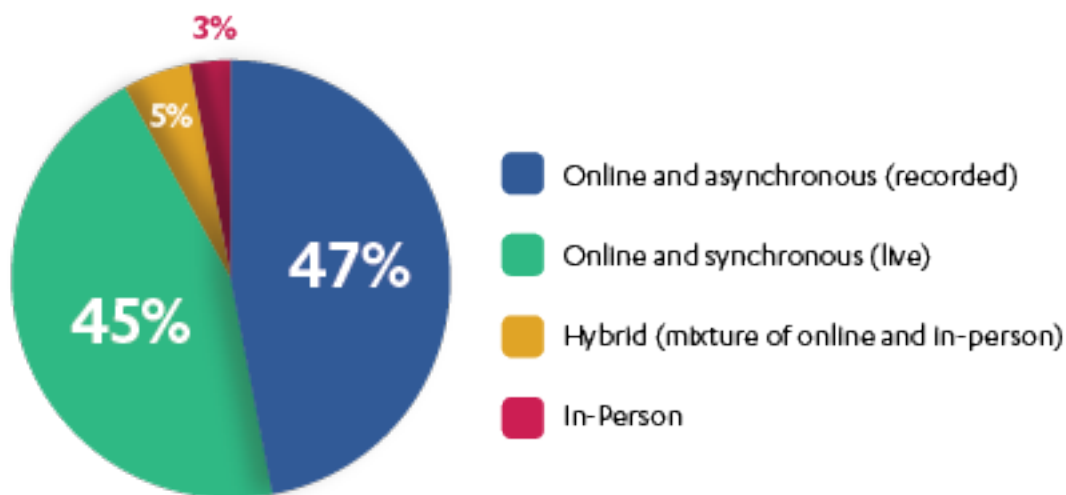## Remote/Onsite Learning and Working

Remote learning offered students flexibility in their schedule as well as an opportunity to learn at their own pace and take on other responsibilities while still focusing on their academics. A little more than half of students said they valued remote learning more than they did prior to the pandemic. An accounting intern, a UCLA worker and learner and accounting intern reported, "remote learning provided me with more flexibility when it comes to my working hours and the time I dedicate to school. But now I won't be able to work and watch recorded lectures at night you know."

Figure 6: Value Remote Learning Since the Pandemic
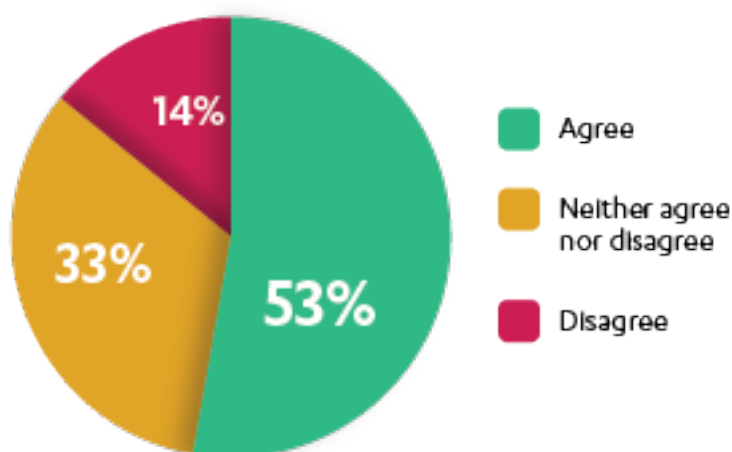
When surveyed what class format would be most accommodating for student workers, many students chose online and asynchronous or hybrid learning. The availability of class recordings allowed students to take advantage of an asynchronous learning model, in which they have the option to watch lectures on their own time, pausing and rewinding as needed. Missing class to report to work is a common trend among workers and learners. With class recordings, workers and learners were able to access the curriculum without falling behind academically. A UCLA humanities student noted, "some classes are asynchronous and I was able to do them at my own pace and time and that gave me a lot of time to focus on going to work without stressing about whether to miss this class or not. I'm definitely going to miss that aspect."

Figure 7: Preferred Class Format

- 47% Online and asynchronous (recorded)
- 45% Online and synchronous (live)
- 5% Hybrid (mixture of online and in-person)
- 3% In-Person

Workers and learners experienced myriad changes to their work format throughout the pandemic. The majority of surveyed workers worked in education or service jobs that are onsite and customer-facing, like retail and restaurants.

Figure 8: Top 4 Industries

| 29%	16%	12%	10%
Education/university	Food service, restaurant, bars	Retail, grocery	Healthcare

For some, remote work was not an option, as they were essential workers. For others, remote work was a seamless transition. On the whole, the preferences of students who were workers and learners did not align with their model of work. Nearly two-thirds of respondents would have preferred to work in either a remote or a hybrid environment. This preference could be attributed to the safety associated with remote/hybrid as well as to the ease of scheduling that accompanies this model. As a

social sciences major at UCLA explained:

> I think hybrid options are very important . . . If somebody is ill like we need to have a way to deal with that, obviously they don't need to work, but like I'm just saying like, "Oh my family members are sick I can't come into the office. I need to help take care of them. Can I work from home for a week and a half until they get better?'"

Figure 9: Work Site Experience and Preference
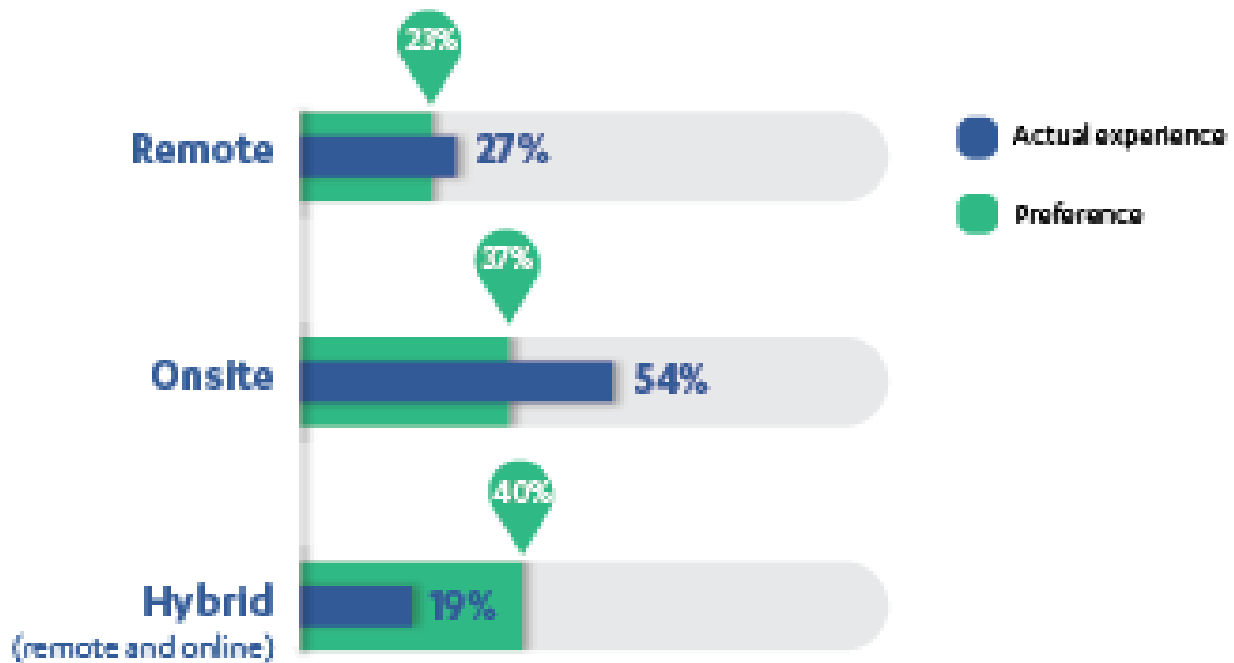
Despite clear interest that remote work continue, there are some concerns over remote surveillance. Overall, just about a third of workers and learners were concerned about being tracked by their employer.

Figure 10: Work Tracked Online or Remotely by Employer
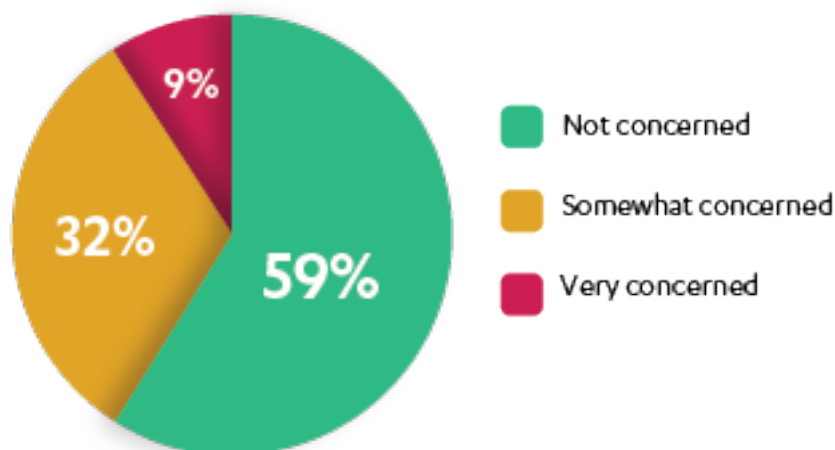
Challenges During Remote Learning

The pandemic opened up new practices but also limited opportunities for workers and learners, including the way students could interact with others, especially their peers and professors, and access networking resources. Nearly all of the students found that remote learning negatively impacted the way they engaged with other fellow students. A UCLA STEM student described her experience:

> It is so difficult to make friends online, especially in classes. You usually just talk to people in your breakout rooms and before it was so much easier to turn to the person next to you and start talking to them.

Students also reported that the pandemic had limited their access to jobs and internships. As we saw in the previous section, though flexible office hours supported students, many students still noted that remote learning limited their engagement with professors.

**Figure 11: Remote Learning Reduced Engagement and Access**
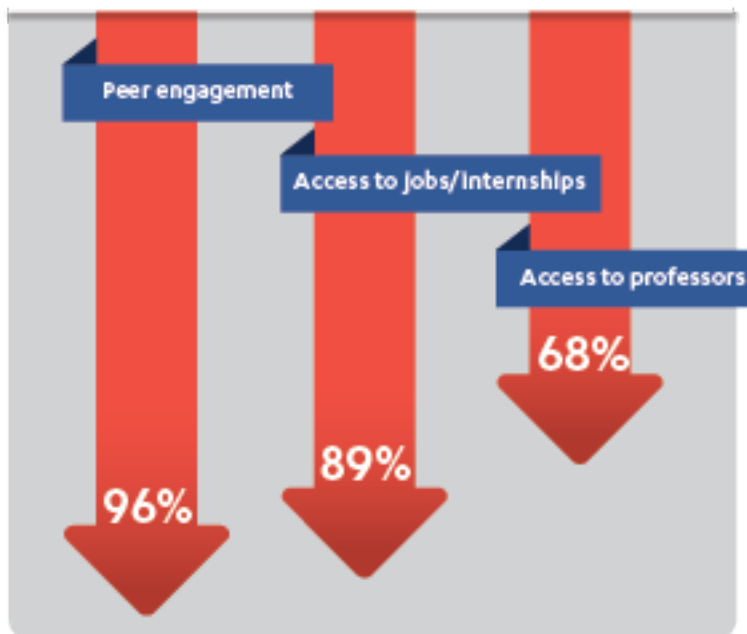
A Santa Monica City College student believed that in-person learning would help with networking; as she explained:

> We're going to just get to know each other better than we would interfacing through like slack or like through social media or through Zoom classrooms, I think. It'll make the bonds with my peers stronger and with my professors as well, I think it will make all of the interactions that I have, and all of the different people that I meet, I think the ties will become stronger being on being back on campus.

Remote learning also puts student continuity at risk, with many considering leaving their program. About 1 in 3 students said that they considered dropping out of school during remote learning. An ELACC student felt she missed out on the campus and college experience. As she put it, "So for me to have to spend another year online, I will feel like it will really discourage me from wanting to continue." For others, having limited social interaction with peers and staring at a screen for hours was tiring and unmotivating. A student at Santa Monica College described her academic underperformance by saying, "[B]eing online, I felt like it impacted me negatively. I saw that my grades dropped more than usual, and I found myself having less motivation to even be paying attention in classes" A UCLA STEM student echoed this experience: "On Zoom it's definitely easy to get distracted and get super lazy at home so I think just being in the school setting surrounded by peers and in-person will be a motivating factor."

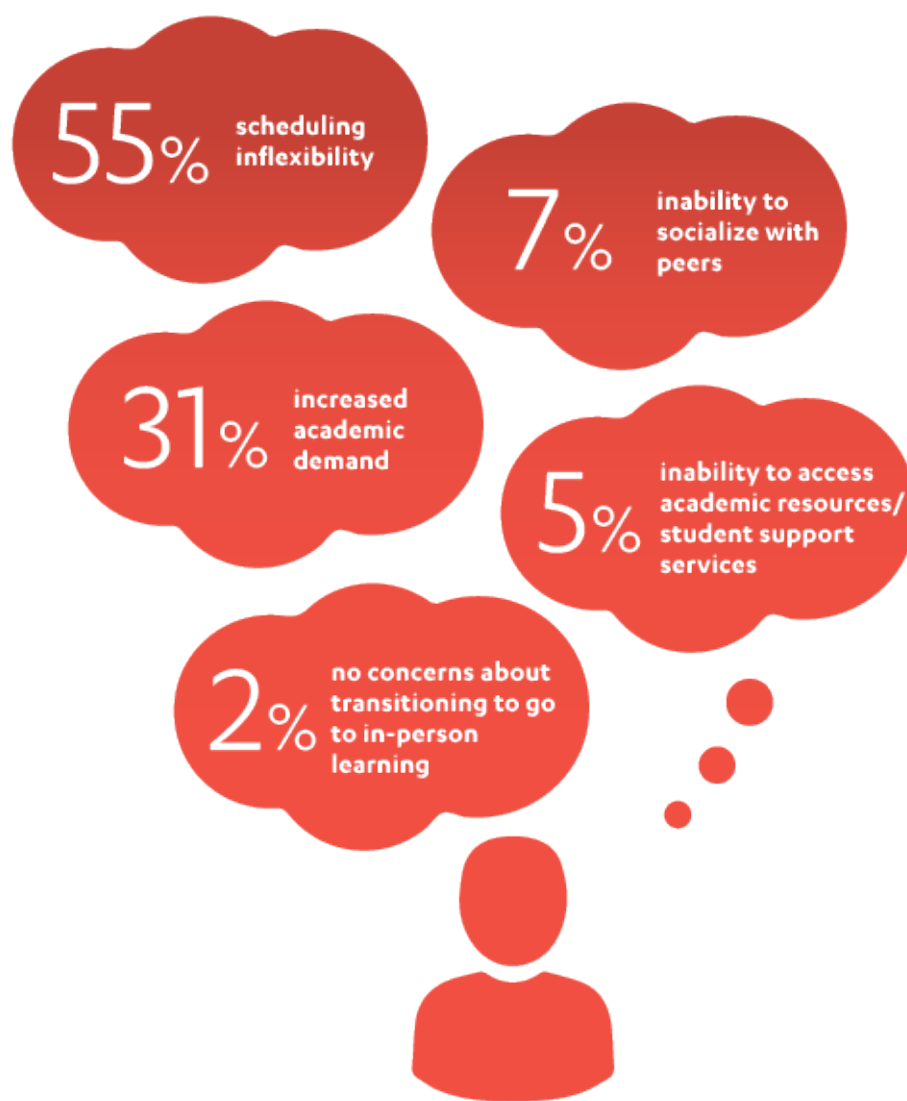**Figure 12: Considered Dropping Out of School**
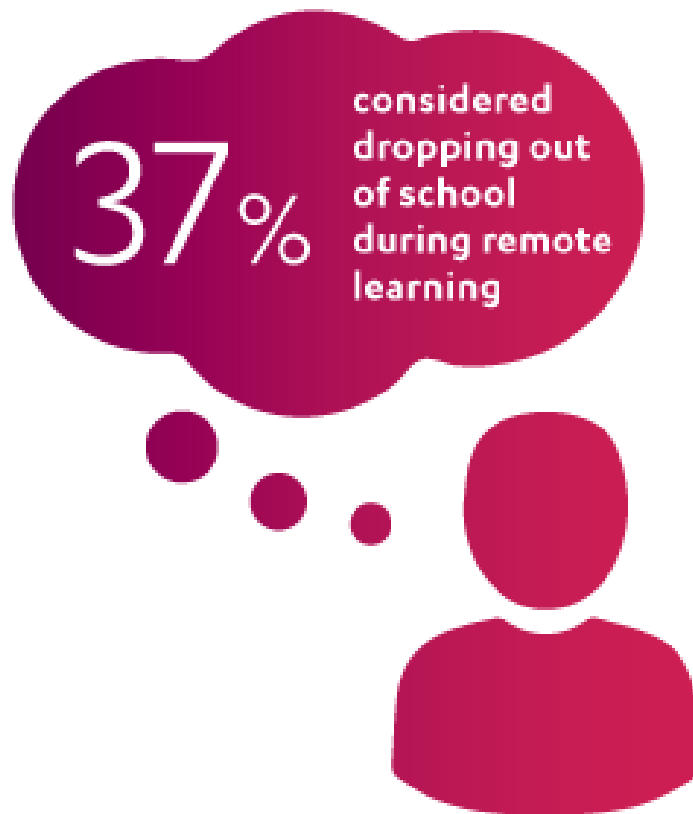
2. Return to Campus and Work

I n-person learning will revive some sense of normalcy for students. While many college students looked forward to engaging in-person learning, workers and learners face certain challenges when it comes to juggling both work and school responsibilities. Remote learning afforded students the opportunity to balance both commitments with greater flexibility.

Juggling School and Work (Again)

Students shared that in-person instruction fosters better relationships, but also that they would need time to adjust from limited interactions with peers to seeing them every day. Students also discussed how in-person learning would promote learning environments and allow the "hands on" experience they could not access through online learning formats. Many workers and learners thought returning in person to an academic environment might increase motivation. But, as discussed, workers and learners also expressed concerns that in-person instruction would eliminate the flexibility that came with remote learning. In fact, nearly one in two student workers reported scheduling inflexibility as their primary concern regarding transitioning to in-person learning—with increased academic demand in second place.

Figure 13: Primary Concern about Return to School

55% scheduling inflexibility

7% inability to socialize with peers

31% increased academic demand

5% inability to access academic resources/ student support services

2% no concerns about transitioning to go to in-person learning

As our previous reports found, workers and learners not only juggle multiple responsibilities, but also have limited time to travel from their worksite to campus. One student from California State University Northridge (CSUN) who worked as a driver expressed frustration about getting called into work on the days he had class but skipping class for the opportunity to earn more money was just too tempting. Like so many workers and learners, his dilemma was that without their job, they couldn't afford school, but without school, their wages would remain stagnant.

Many students need to work to pay for school, household, and other financial responsibilities. Returning to campus, however, meant that many had to cut back on the number of hours they worked. Nearly two-thirds of workers and learners expected to reduce their work hours when they returned to campus. Several students said they would shift from a full time to a part time schedule to accommodate their school work, life, and commute time. One student from Pasadena City College stated:

I can imagine the transition to in-person learning to affect my work schedule because of how much more crunched I will be on time, being that now I'll have to not only commute to work but also to school on certain days.

Other students would prioritize work hours over school because of the financial need. The CSUN student driver would maintain his hours but try to decrease commute time, "I'll still be working as a full timer because I need the money, but I might look for a job closer to my school." Overall, the students had many considerations, as they sought to budget their time differently to accommodate the competing demands of learning and in-person work.

Figure 14: Impact of Return to School on Work Hours

- Work hours will decrease — 63%
- Work hours will not change — 28%
- Work hours will increase — 9%
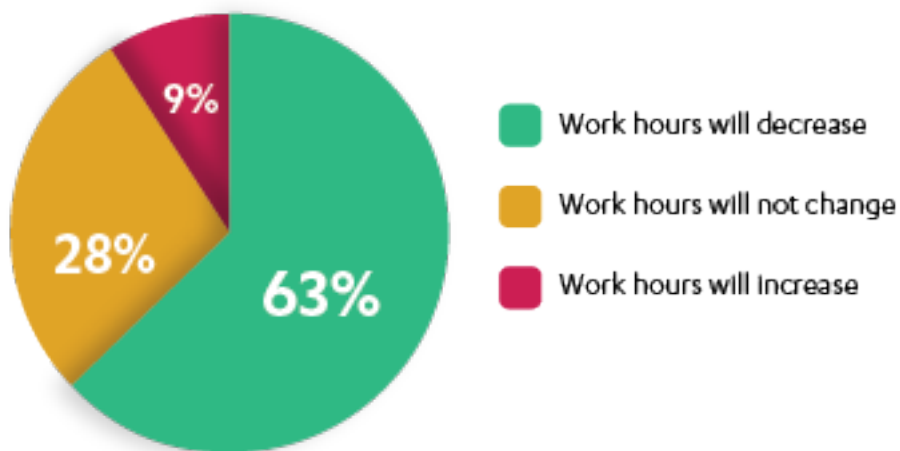
While they may have to decrease their hours, students felt that their workload would increase at their worksites as pandemic orders were lifted; for example, those in service job, predicted an increase in customer flow.

Figure 15: Workload Change with Lifting of Pandemic Lockdown Order

- Workload will increase — 52%
- Workload will not change — 37%
- Workload will decrease — 11%
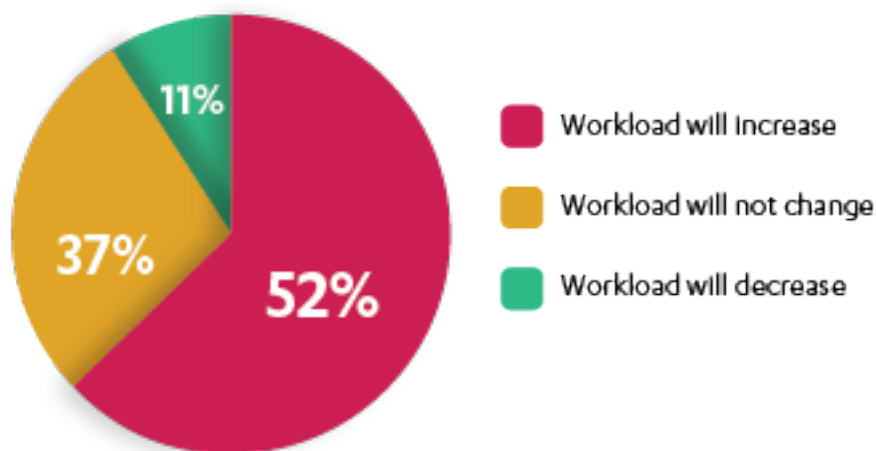
Safety Protocols and Vaccination Requirements at School

While the ongoing surge of cases and deaths—especially breakthrough cases due to the Delta variant—cast doubt on the timing of reopenings, most colleges and universities returned to partial or complete in-person learning in Fall 2021. Colleges and universities devised a safety plan to alleviate the residual effects of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic. These plans are meant to maximize the safety of in-person instruction, hopefully allowing for its continued practice. But in-person return gives rise to various new challenges that require proactive and preventive measures. Most students reported that their campus had a vaccine requirement and mask mandate. But just over half said their school conducted weekly testing. Overall, students were in favor of preventive measures against COVID-19, such as mandated vaccinations and masking, reflecting trends at the state-level.[9] Most of the students wanted mask mandates regardless of vaccination status, and over two-thirds wanted to see weekly testing on campuses.

Figure 16: Campus Safety Protocols
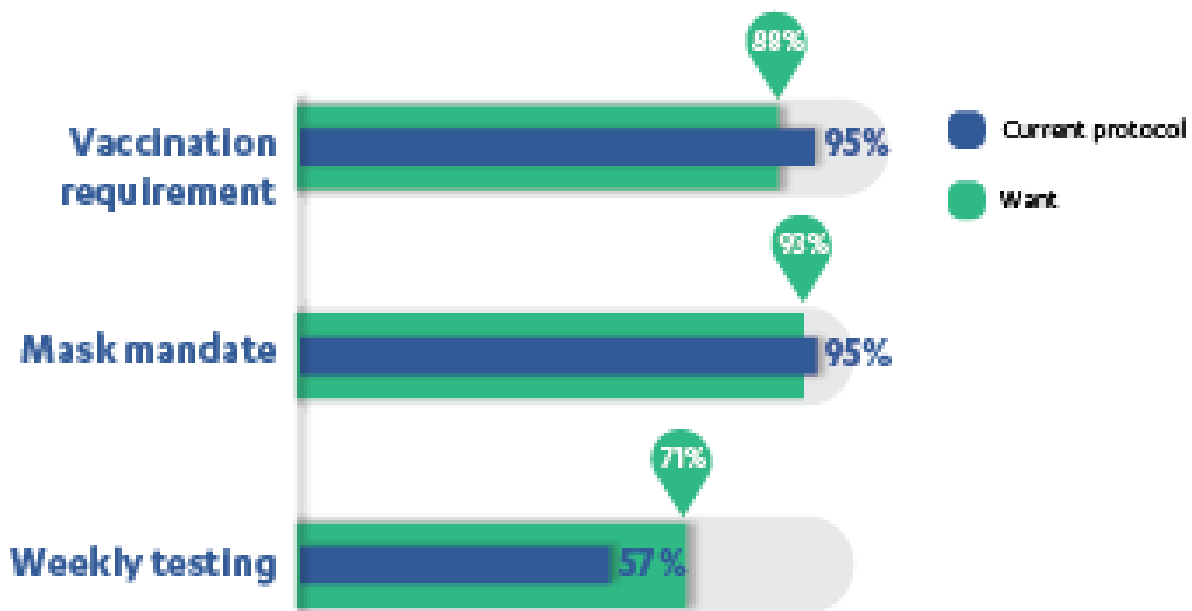
Students understood that wearing masks and getting vaccinated would be essential for in-person classes. A student at CSUN emphasized the importance of these measures:

> I'd say enforcing the COVID vaccine would help decrease the risk of being at school. Like I previously mentioned, I'm vaccinated and I'm planning on still wearing my mask, so I'm good. But making sure the other students do the same is ideal. It sucks wearing a mask, honestly. Like I am an active person and the mask often bothers me. So if everyone does their part then my ideal semester would exist.

The opportunity to be back on campus outweighed the discomfort that comes with wearing a mask—a sentiment shared by many.

A majority of students wanted like to return to smaller class sizes (35 students or fewer per classroom). Though each of the college campuses has its own mandates and protocols to mitigate the infection rate, some students remained uneasy about returning to large classrooms. A STEM major at LA Pierce College shared:

> I know some of those classrooms have hundreds of students. And I know that to some people the pandemic is technically over, but I'm, I'm still kinda scared of it, just because I've seen what it does to my patients. I know what it can do to me.

A UCLA student expressed similar sentiments: "I'm mostly concerned about the fact that there are 40,000 people on campus all the time… it's kind of concerning to me how we're going to fit all these students with socially distancing." Concerns about keeping physical distance is warranted given that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended it as a mitigation strategy on campuses where vaccination rates among students, staff, and faculty have not yet reached 100%.[10]

**Figure 17: Preferred Class Size**
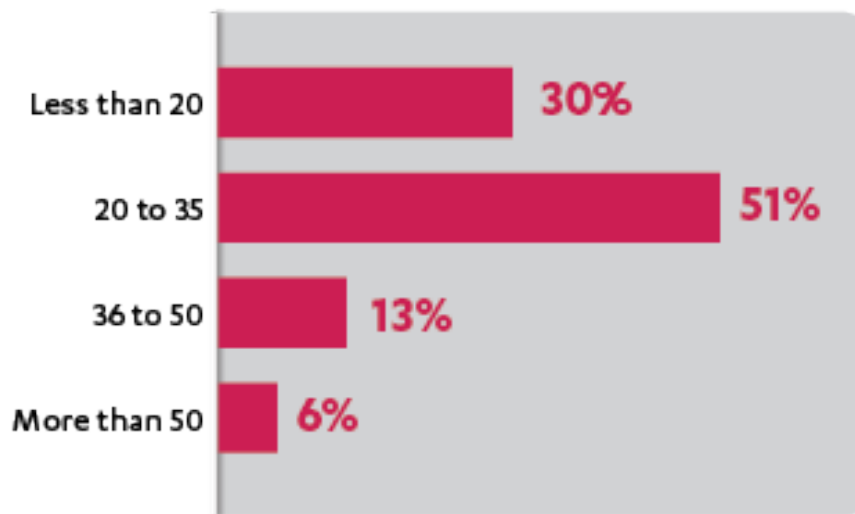
Safety Protocols and Vaccination Requirements at Work

Workers and learners reported that their workplaces had fewer requirements for safety than university policies. This gap is especially concerning given that many respondents work onsite in the food service and retail industries, which have faced a disproportionate risk of COVID-19 transmission and its negative impacts, including labor shortages.[11]

Most workers reported that their workplace required masks, but only half of the worksites had vaccine mandates. In addition, about half of the workers had to submit to a daily symptom survey—procedures in which employees check their temperatures and answer questions regarding their symptoms and exposure to the COVID-19 virus. Only a quarter of workplaces

required weekly testing. Workers and learners call on greater usage of safety protocols at work, measures that are yet to be implemented. Despite the low rate of vaccination mandates, the majority of respondents said they would prefer a vaccine mandate in their workplaces. The majority of workers prefer strict health protocols including daily symptom checks and weekly testing.

Figure 18: Safety Protocols at Work
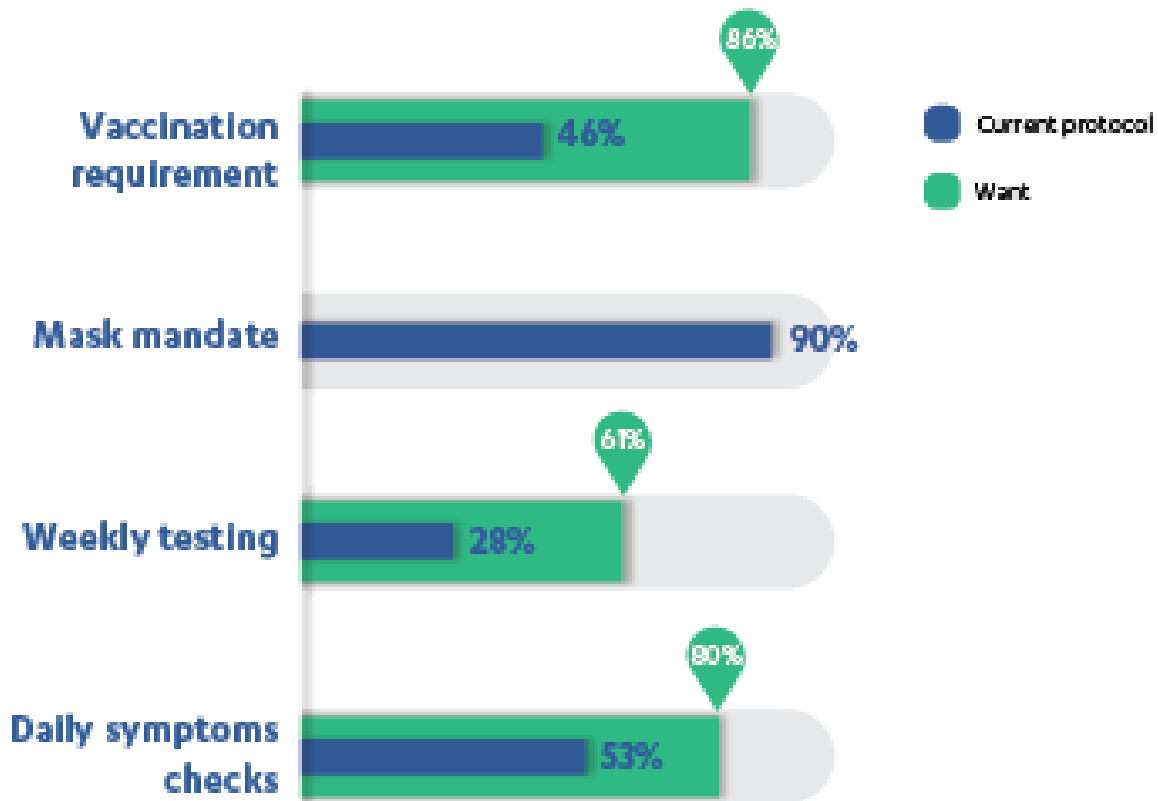
The ELACC student working as a cashier noted that she appreciated daily symptom checks before going into work:

> Yeah, like they have more rules. And like it's a longer process to go and clock into work. But I feel like they're necessary, especially if my coworker doesn't feel good. Or if I don't feel good. Like I wouldn't want to be around people, especially because I work in the food industry. So, it's really, it's really important that nobody goes in there sick.

And though mask mandates were widespread, a cashier in the food service sector added that mask enforcement varied according to manager, some of whom even allowed customers to go without masks. She described the challenge this dilemma created for the workers about whether to enforce it themselves:

> And I feel like that also keeps employees in this state of like, I don't even want to enforce it, because sometimes it's okay. And then sometimes it's not okay. And I feel like that miscommunication between employees and managers can create a hostile environment.

The inconsistent enforcement of mask usage puts the safety of workers at risk of contracting COVID-19 as well as of getting into altercations with customers, encounters that have been on the rise since the pandemic began.[12]

Throughout our interviews, workers and learners described prioritizing caring for themselves and one another. An office worker and UCLA student illustrated her and her coworkers' efforts to social distance despite the lack of actual mandates in place: "There's kind of an unspoken rule. We have created our own seating arrangements to make sure we're not sitting too close to each other, to make sure when people are in one room, some people are in another." In addition to the challenges of staying safe at work, since the pandemic, many frontline workers are also faced with labor shortages— whether due to low wages, health and safety concerns, or other personal challenges such as childcare support.[13] About half of workers reported that their worksite had a shortage of workers.

Figure 19: Experience Worker Shortage at Worksite
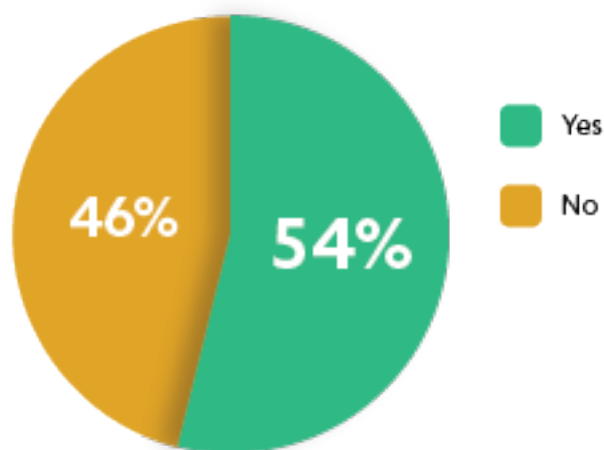
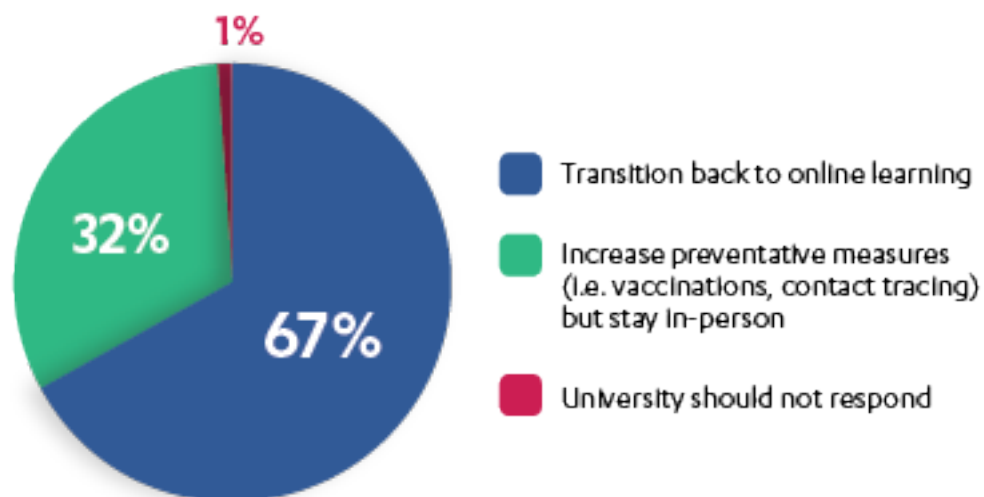## Concerns about Another COVID-19 Surge

Even with safety measures, another COVID wave is a looming possibility. A surge in COVID cases would hinder the current reopening plans for schools and workplaces. For workers and learners, this disruption to their routine would be detrimental to their academic success. Over half of respondents were somewhat concerned and almost a third were very concerned about exposure to COVID-19. A social science major at UCLA expressed their concerns over the possible increase in exposures on campus, "I'm not looking forward to getting emails about COVID cases on campus or people not abiding to protections."

Figure 20: Concerned about COVID-19 Exposure on Campus

- 13% — (green)
- 31% — (red)
- 56% — (gold)

Very concerned
Somewhat concerned
Not so concerned
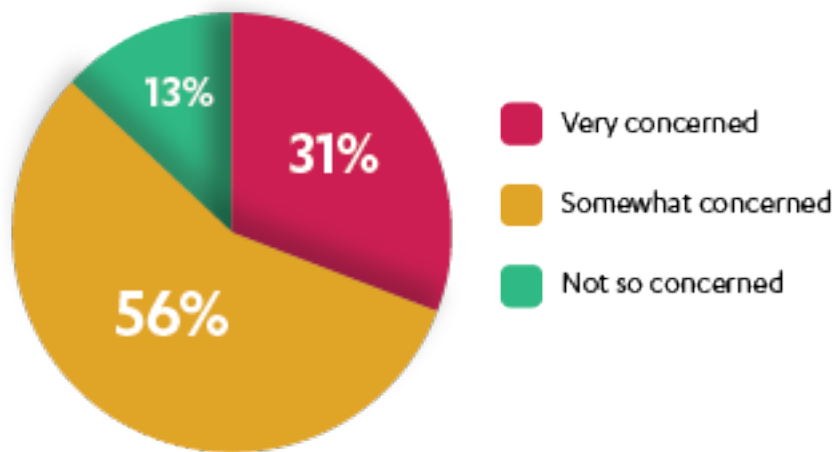
Although respondents were excited to see their friends and interact with people in person again, there was a general consensus that if COVID-19 worsened, online learning is likely the best way for universities to respond. Two-thirds of students registered their preference that their universities to transition back to online learning should COVID cases rise again.

Figure 21: University Plan of Action in Case of Another Surge

- 1% — (red)
- 32% — (green)
- 67% — (blue)

Transition back to online learning

Increase preventative measures (i.e. vaccinations, contact tracing) but stay in-person

University should not respond

Undeniably, another round of remote learning would have an impact on student well-being as well as force many of them to renegotiate learning spaces at home. As a result, students were concerned about the impact on their academic performance. A UCLA student explained that, during remote learning, the home setting had a detrimental effect on their studies. Indeed, the student explained:

Not having boundaries between school and home is proven to not be as healthy for your sleep schedule, and also not to be as good for your learning. When you have a separate place to learn and a separate place to relax, that tends to be better for your mental health. And when it's better for your mental health, you tend to learn better.

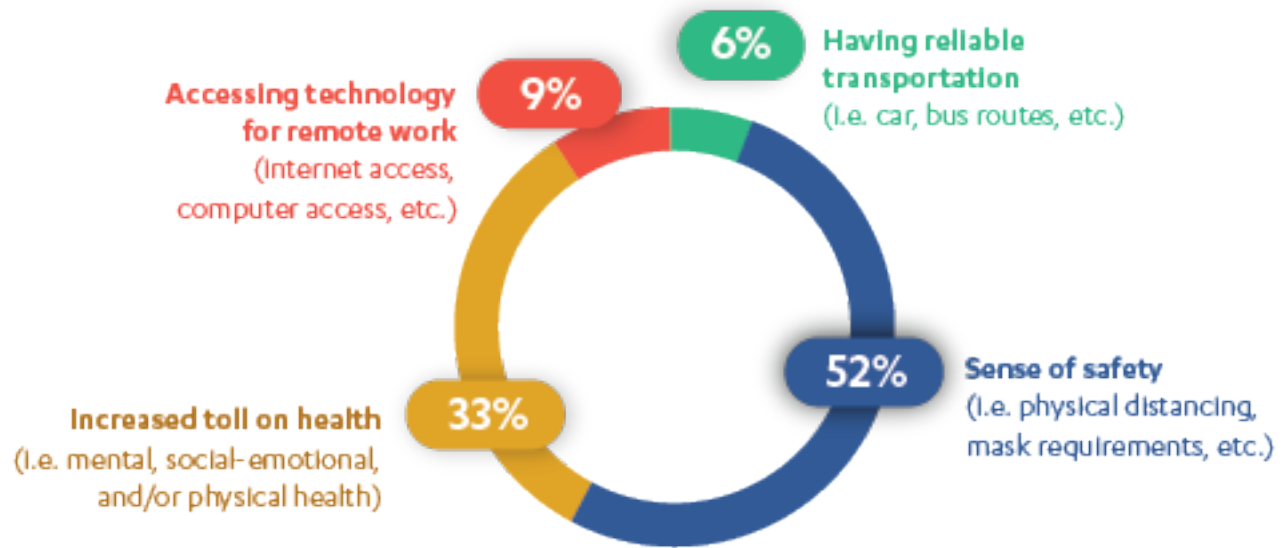Another student described the health impact in the following way:

The pandemic has taken a really big mental toll on most people, by now, and I don't really know how much longer of living like this, my brain can handle, so I think that that also so sucks and I really hope that it doesn't get worse.

Figure 22: Primary Concern about Returning to Remote Learning due to Another COVID-19 Wave
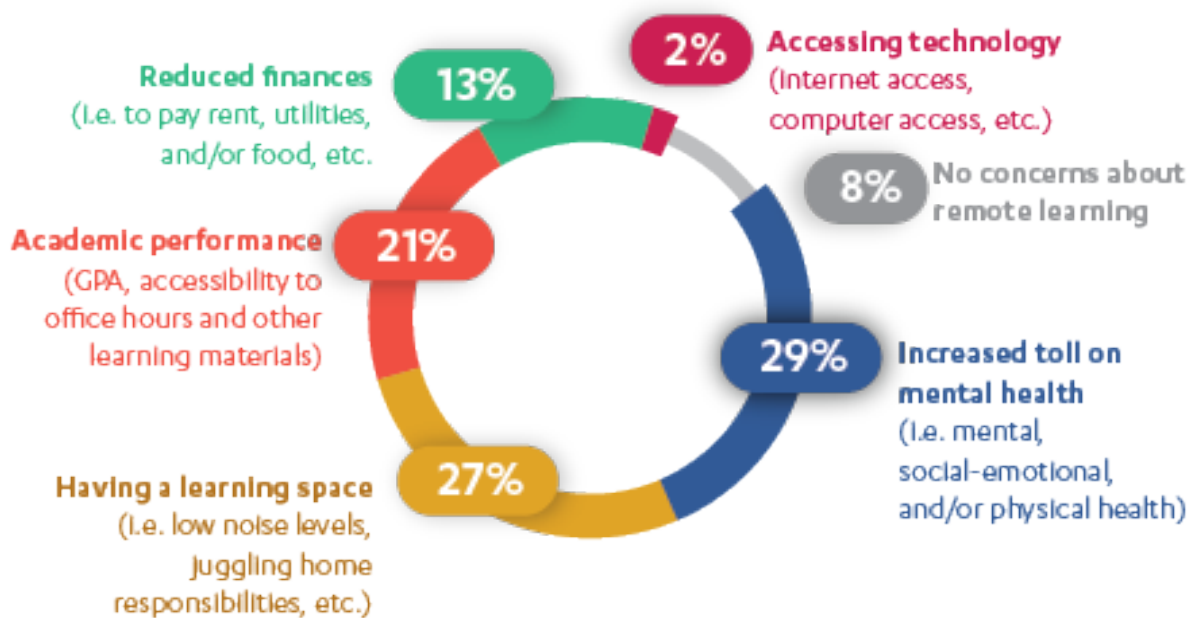
The reality of in-person work presents challenges during a COVID-19 surge, as those who cannot afford to take a break from work or who do not qualify for unemployment are forced to enter an unsafe work environment. The precarity of these circumstances puts workers and learners at a disadvantage, as so many of them work in essential sectors and support themselves in their educational/vocational pursuits with their earnings. Half of workers were concerned about the safety at work if there were to be another large COVID-19 wave, followed by an increased toll on their mental, social, and physical health.

Figure 23: Primary Concern about Working During Another COVID-19 Wave

6% Having reliable transportation (I.e. car, bus routes, etc.)

Accessing technology for remote work (Internet access, computer access, etc.) 9%

52% Sense of safety (I.e. physical distancing, mask requirements, etc.)

Increased toll on health (I.e. mental, social-emotional, and/or physical health) 33%

3. Health and Financial Well-Being

The long-term effects of the pandemic on health, financial well-being, and academics will become clearer over time. But some of the issues around access to resources, cost of education, housing access, and food insecurity that were pressing before the pandemic became increasingly difficult to manage during and continue to present challenges for workers and learners as they transition back to in-person work and school.

Stress and Access to Services

Overall, whether concerned about health and safety or about scheduling issues, students were experiencing some level of stress around returning to campuses. A quarter were very stressed and over half were somewhat stressed.

Figure 24: Stress Level about Returning to Campus

- Very stressed — 27%
- Somewhat stressed — 58%
- Not so stressed — 15%
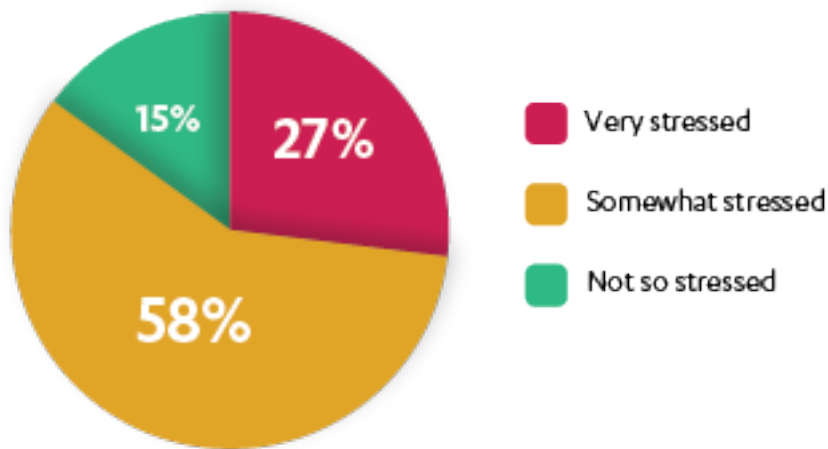
From 2009 to 2015, college counseling centers saw an average utilization increase of 30–40% among college students at a time when college enrollment had decreased by 7% nationwide.[14] The demand for mental health services on campus has only grown during the pandemic, as studies show that students are experiencing increased feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression.[15] Only half of survey respondents said they felt that their university made mental health services and counseling accessible to students during the pandemic.

Figure 25: Campus Mental Health Services Accessibility


- Yes — 52%
- No — 48%
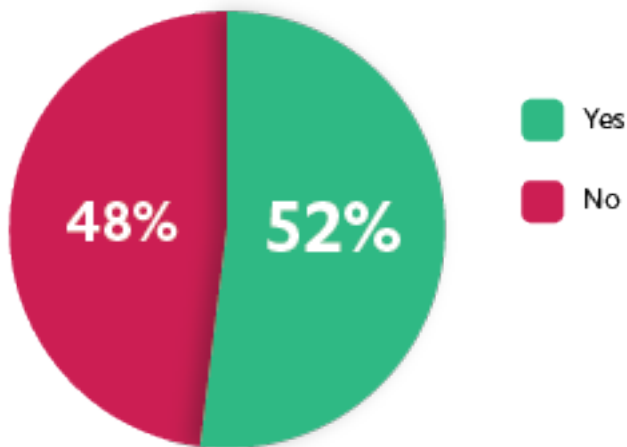
It is troubling to discover that students cannot adequately access mental health resources that are so vital during a global pandemic, especially with the increased stress levels registered in Los Angeles County.[16] A social sciences student and applied behavioral analyst felt that UCLA "should really emphasize to its students that mental health during this time, mental health is a priority and that doesn't mean putting a CAPS (Counseling and Psychological Services) link in your syllabus."

A CSU Los Angeles student expressed concern over the lack of adequate mental health services on their college campus: "My school . . . has two therapists for all the students. And there's over [30,000] students. So, in order to make an appointment with a therapist, you have to fill out this 10-week form and then, after they approve you, you'll get an appointment [in a month], which is way too long."

When it came to other services, most students were aware of academic resources but less familiar with resources around accessibility resources (e.g., Center of Accessible Education or test accommodations).

Figure 26: Awareness of Resources
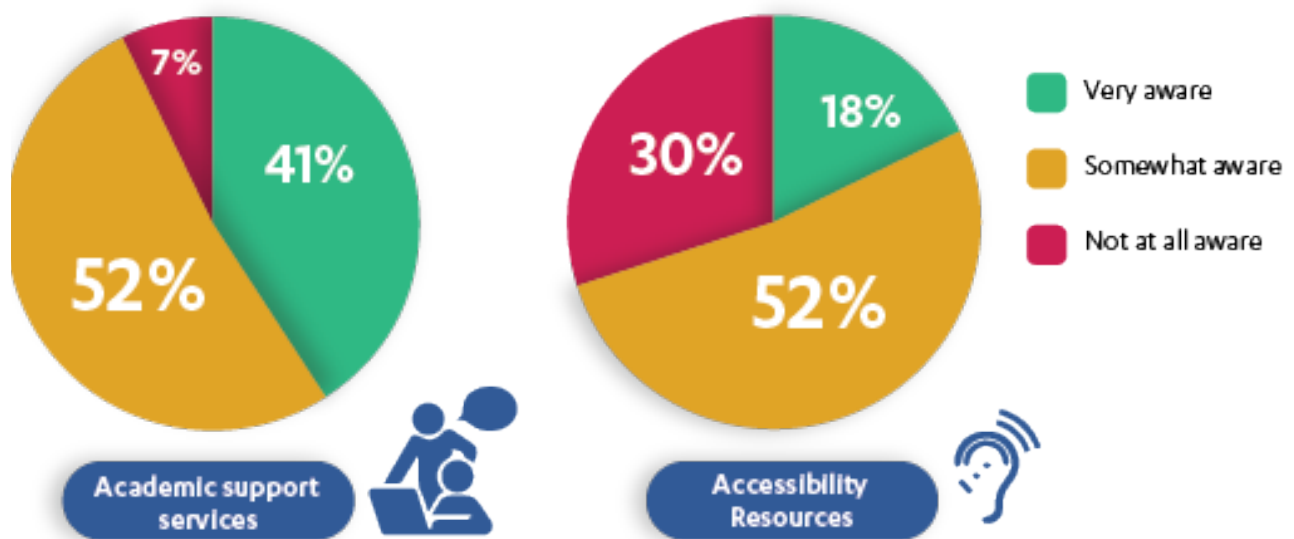
The Toll of Commuting

One obvious change workers and learners face is the commute, an especially pressing issue in Los Angeles, which has some of the worst commute times in the country.[17] About a quarter of respondents did not have a daily commute; but for the rest, public transportation, parking permits, and expensive on-campus housing are some of the basic expenses that college students must manage. After spending some time away from campus, students expressed financial concerns about commuting expenses, such as parking and gas. Half of students said they drove to campus, and less than a quarter used public transportation.

**Figure 27: Primary Transportation for Commute**
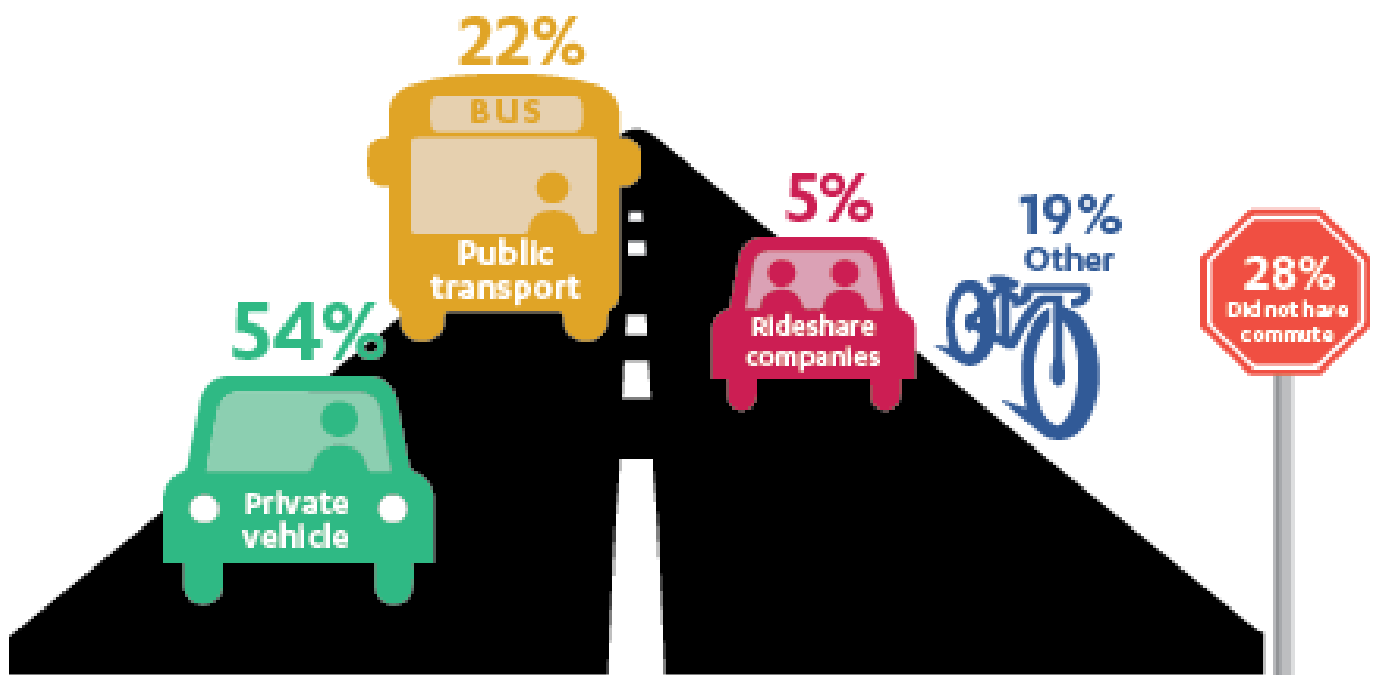
Often costly and time consuming, commuting methods—whether walking from class to class or commuting from home to school—left learners with less time to work. Most respondents reported that their daily commute from home to campus would increase in Fall 2021, while only 8% said it would decrease. A UCLA social science major employed as an administrative intern in transportation stated:

> Although I am glad to get back on campus, I feel like this transition is going to be tough because I am going to have to commute and I don't know, just getting used to in-person classes is going to be a big adjustment considering the fact that we've been online learning for the past year and a half. So it feels kind of uneasy.

Another student mentioned possibly quitting their off-campus job because driving to work and back to campus required an extra time commitment.

**Figure 28: Returning to Campus Impact on Commute Time**

Increase — 61%
Decrease — 31%
No change — 8%
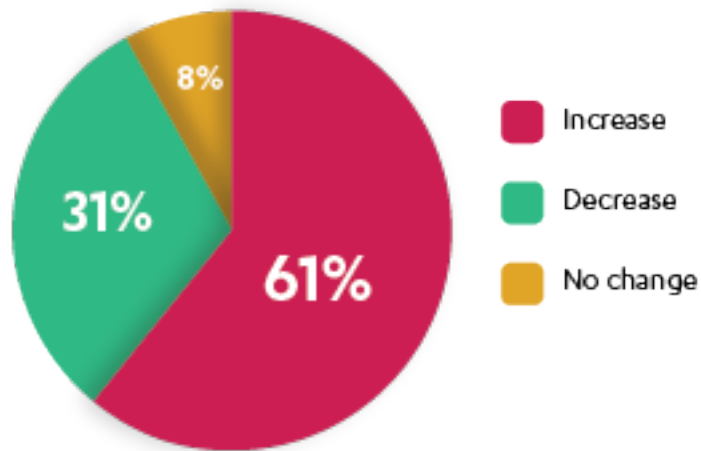
Further, the majority of those surveyed reported that such a commute would compound their stress. As a STEM major at UCLA said:

> The commute is a time commitment, as well as being there in person. Whereas this past year, I'd actually roll out of bed like two minutes before class and then click the link right. Now I'll have to dedicate maybe 30 minutes.

Commuting brings additional costs. Another student at Santa Monica College noted: "I'll have to buy a parking pass . . . . so it's going to cost me more money and then . . . gas to get to and from school." Many other interviewees similarly reflected that the time dedicated to transportation posed an issue.

Figure 29: Experience Stress Due to Commute

Yes — 62%
No — 38%
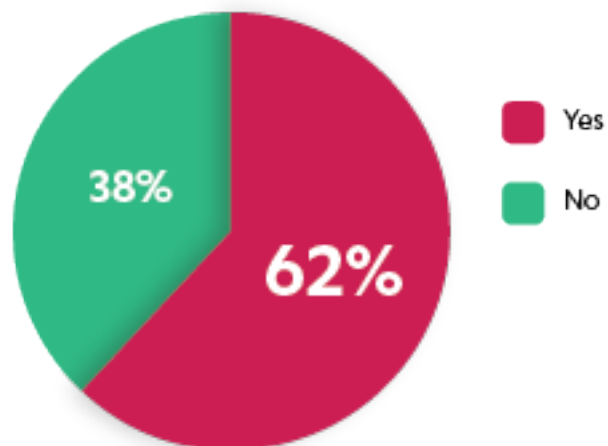
Financing Education

Emerging from this crisis, workers and learners shared many collective concerns about financial resources and stability. As the government divests from education, many students—especially workers and learners—must pick up additional hours and/or accrue debt to cover the cost. For many students, working while going to college is the new normal.[18] Half of students were somewhat concerned and a fifth were extremely concerned about paying for their education in the upcoming year.

Figure 30: Concern about Paying for Education for Upcoming School Year
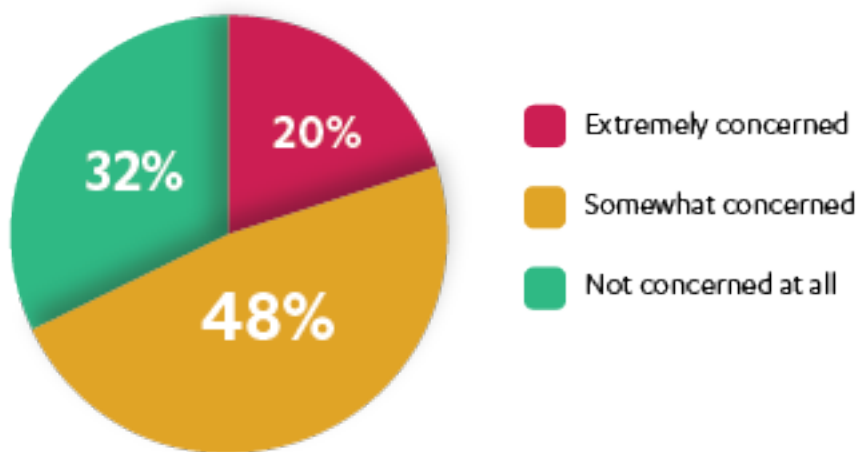
Three-quarters of student participants received some form of financial aid for the upcoming school year. A STEM major from Pasadena City College also working as a high school tutor remarked that "tuition is already costing us an arm and a leg" and explained that they receive less financial aid while the tuition increases every year. She also discussed the importance of their job to funding their education, stating, "if I can't work, then I won't be able to afford to learn either."

Figure 31: Received Financial Aid in 2021–2022
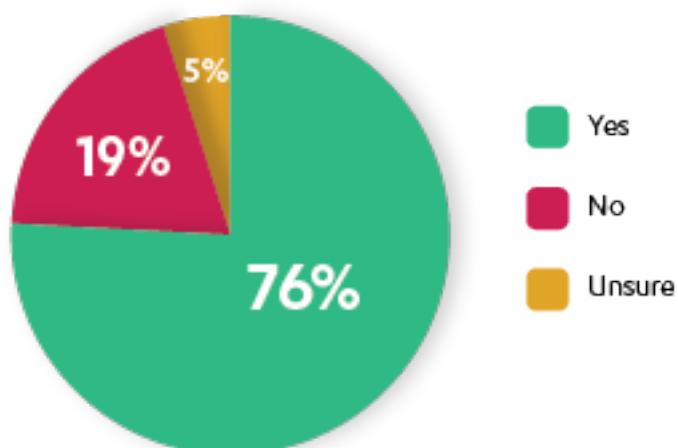
The financial strain is exacerbated for students whose parents make too much for a big financial aid package but not enough to support them. A second-year STEM major at Los Angeles Pierce College working in healthcare offered, "My parents make enough money for me to not receive much financial aid, but not enough that they can support me because they still have to support my family back home and my family here." This worker had to pay more in education and, in turn, work more hours. Further, during the pandemic, parts of the economy shut down, which produced higher unemployment levels. Still only about a third of the respondents had received any unemployment benefits.

Figure 32: Received Unemployment during COVID-19
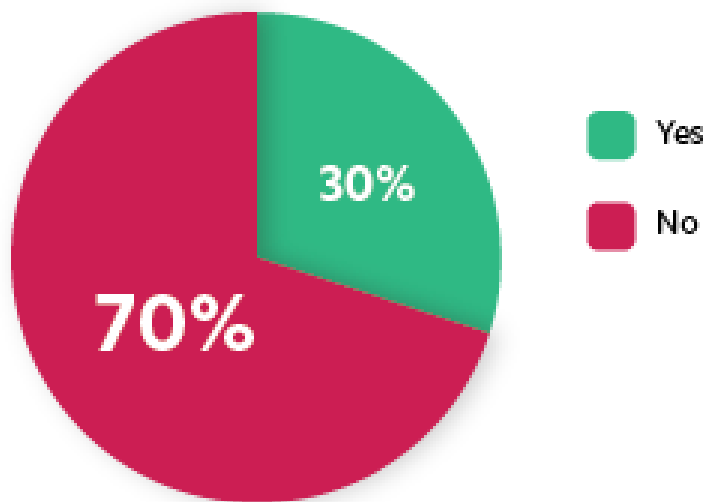
Food and Housing Insecurity

Workers and learners also face challenges around housing and food access. Given the high costs of living in Los Angeles, more than half of the respondents were somewhat concerned about paying for household expenses like rent or utilities, while over a quarter were extremely concerned. Half of students were extremely or somewhat concerned about paying for food. Three-quarters of students who supported others were worried about providing for a dependent in the upcoming school year.

Figure 33: Concern about Finances during 2021-2022

Legend: Household expenses · Paying for food · Supporting dependants

	Extremely concerned	Somewhat concerned	Not concerned at all	Did not have expense
Household expenses	28%	56%	16%	10%
Paying for food	16%	37%	47%	6%
Supporting dependants	23%	53%	24%	51%
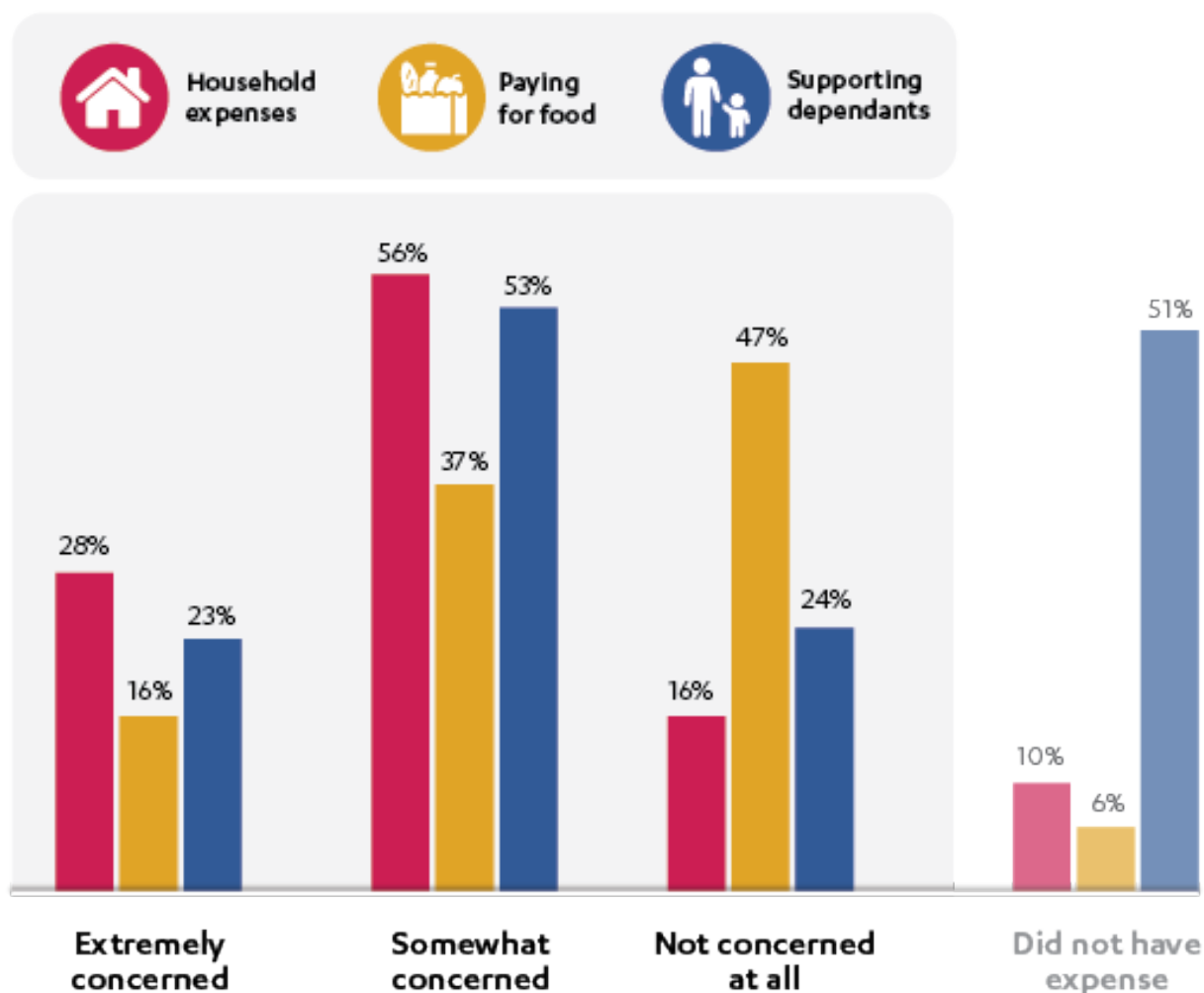
These workers and learners used their income to fund their education and living expenses, but still struggled despite their best efforts. A STEM major at Pasadena City College said:
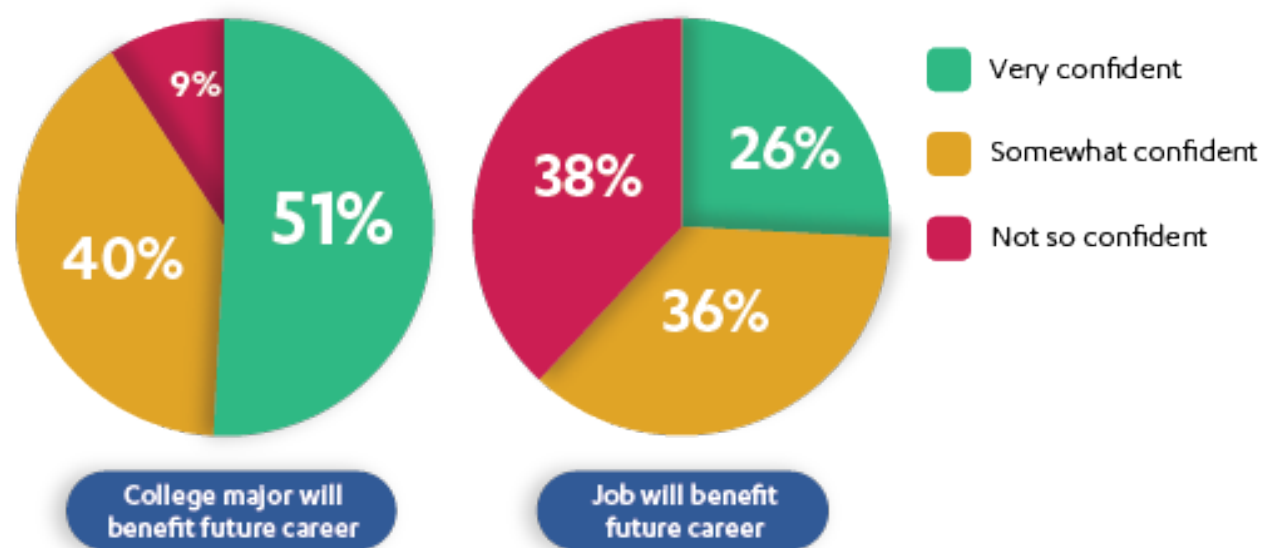
> For the past year and a half I have been living at home and could afford the luxury of not having to pay rent. Moving back to school just puts another burden and more pressure on me to make sure I can not only afford tuition, but also my rent.

Several interviewees shared feeling stressed out about leaving their families as they returned to campus. A student at UCLA noted: "We have like a lot of expectations and stuff going on at home that like you know we can't really like set aside, even though we have stuff here at school." A CSUN student referred to some resources the school provided such as food supplies, putting books online, and having PDF files for certain classes. He said, "So I'm definitely gonna sign up for that once I go to in-person classes because it's just a resource that will help any student even if we weren't in a pandemic, not having to pay for those really expensive books."

Future Goals and Work

For many of the individuals surveyed, the pandemic changed their future goals and academic plans. As mentioned earlier, nearly one-third of respondents considered dropping out of college during the pandemic. Others reconsidered the relationship between their major, current jobs, and future careers. When talking about the pandemic, one student at UCLA working in food service noted, "It really changed my perspective on life, whether to pursue education or start my career now." A majority of students felt that their college major would benefit their future career, but a third was not confident that their current job would have such a positive yield. The latter statistic foregrounds the disconnect between the aspirations of workers and learners and the reality of the opportunities available to them.

Figure 34: Confidence about Future

College major will benefit future career — Very confident 51%, Somewhat confident 40%, Not so confident 9%

Job will benefit future career — Very confident 26%, Somewhat confident 36%, Not so confident 38%

Perhaps the most significant impact workers and learners faced was the change to their career plans. Many respondents noted having to adjust their plans because of COVID-19. A UCLA student described such a change:

> I intended to apply to law school my 4th year, but with remote school and work at home, I could not focus enough to study for the LSAT. So, I'm postponing those plans and hoping to find a job instead.

Another student welcomed the chance to take some time off before starting grad school, explaining:

> I adjusted to the plan I had, um, grad school became a post year and then, like I just said, I'm just adjust the unseen other programs that are out there that might help me rather than like just exposing myself to another school year and another drainage."

College students who must work will take jobs that will support them and pay the bills, which are not necessarily jobs that align with their future career goals. A UCLA STEM major working in food service described feeling feel trapped in that industry, worrying about being pigeonholed even after earning a bachelor's degree from UCLA. The student described lacking confidence in both their job skills and their ability to leverage their experience into new opportunities more closely related to their future career. About a third of students were considering changing their jobs.

Figure 35: Plan to Keep the Same Job This Upcoming School Year (2021-2022)

Yes 57%
No 33%
Unsure 10%
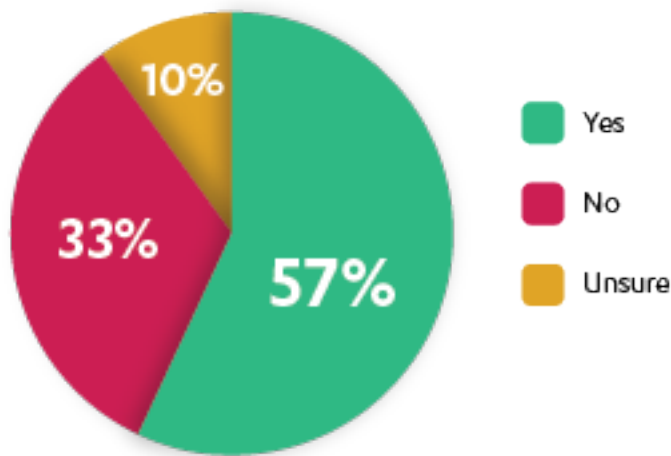
Recommendations

Transitioning back to normal after a global pandemic will be a process filled with challenges. Workers and learners have had to navigate these unprecedented times with little support and now must refamiliarize themselves with experiences that seem foreign. They remain vulnerable as they pursue their educational and career goals with multiple other responsibilities to juggle. The fundamental issues challenging these workers and learners exceed their individual efforts. Prioritizing measures that assist workers and learners is a way to improve the chances for a positive future for their social and economic prosperity. The following are specific recommendations brought up in the LSRP student briefs based on analysis of the research for improving these conditions.

1. **Ensure that campuses and workplaces are safe for workers and learners.** Colleges and workplaces should implement weekly contact tracing, free COVID-19 testing and vaccinations, mandated mask orders and social distancing, including policy enforcement. Classrooms should have limited capacity so students feel safer while learning. Employers should follow and enforce government-approved health guidelines and safety protocols.

2. **Continue to offer workers and learners with flexible academic practices.** University administrations and staff should promote a learning environment in which students can prioritize their well-being by offering recorded lectures and office hours, flexible deadlines, and flexible attendance. Professors and instructors should work with their students to determine what learning styles ensure their academic success. Professors and employers should give workers and learners the flexibility they need in order to do well in school and work.

3. **Expand campus resources and practices beyond the pandemic.** Colleges should be certain that students have access to free healthcare, free and unlimited counseling, mental health resources, and childcare for all. Campuses should address food insecurity among students and offer low-cost food and affordable housing options (such as more dorms and/or build more affordable housing cooperatives). They should also ensure a service friendly environment to eliminate any of the stigmas students face when looking for resources (i.e., mental health resources). Universities should also address public transportation accessibility and provide students with free transportation options.

4. **Create Stronger Pipelines between Jobs, Academics, and Careers.** Students would like to see majors and employment opportunities that are beneficial to students' careers. Colleges should encourage their campus career centers to support student access to information about internships and work opportunities related to their field of study. Lawmakers should support policies and laws that provide students with more financial aid, paid internships, and other paying, flexible, career-focused work opportunities. Career center funding and opportunities should be increased to build skills via workshops and training. As for work, universities should incentivize companies and organizations to include academically relevant job responsibilities in their students' workload and create inclusive policies that encourage employers to hire students in fields related to their companies' work.

5. **Support efforts to make college affordable and create policies that allow students to work less.** Policymakers and administrations need to push policies to make college affordable for all by providing free tuition, textbooks, laptops, and Wi-Fi. The government should provide full coverage through university grants so that students do not have to take out loans and while should cancel remaining student debt. It should also provide federal crisis aid to student workers regardless of dependent status. Universities and colleges overall should offer better financial aid packages for workers and learners, allowing them to work fewer hours and focus more on their studies. To help alleviate student financial concerns, local governments should increase wages to enable workers and learners to reduce their work hours.

Appendix A: Background on Survey Respondents

Table A1: Number of Surveys Collected by College System

67%	17%	16%
University of California	California State University (CSU)	California Community College (CCC)

Table A2: College Majors

Social sciences	55%
STEM	27%
Humanities	18%
Education	5%
Visual and performing arts	4%
Health	5%
Applied technology	

Table A3: Job industries

Education/university	29%
Food service	16%
Retail trade	12%
Healthcare	10%
Government and nonprofit	9%
Finance, insurance, and real estate	7%
Law	5%
Delivery	3%
Transportation	2%
Warehouse	2%
Arts and entertainment	2%
Other	2%
Technology services	1%

Table A4: Survey Sample Demographics

Age

19–20	30%
21–22	50%
23 and above	20%

Gemder

Female	67%
Male	30%
Transgender	<1%
Gender non-conforming, genderqueer, or gender questioning	<1%
Other	<1%
Prefer not to answer	<1%

Race/Ethnicity

Latinx or Hispanic	56%
Asian	27%
White (not Latinx or Hispanic)	13%
Multiracial	7%
Black or African American	5%
SWANA (Middle Eastern/Southwest Asian/North African)	4%
Native American/American Indian/Indigenous or Alaskan Native	2%
Prefer not to disclose	1%
Native or Pacific Islander	-

Children

No	91%
Yes	9%

Appendix B: Acknowledgments

This report was a collective and participatory effort by the Labor Summer Research Program Team 2021. We thank all the students, teachers, and advisers who contributed and worked with tireless commitment on this project. We dedicate the report to the workers and learners of Los Angeles County.

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Notes

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