BACKGROUND INFORMATION
THEC's Policy, Planning & Research (PPR) Bureau continues to evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Tennessee higher education. Enclosed is a brief memo\(^1\) outlining, in a Question and Answer format, the questions posed by the Commission in November with responses to questions that can be readily answered today with available data and details for questions that will be answerable in the future.

Several of these questions centered on the student experience: How are students faring? Are they taking coursework in-person or online? What are the challenges students are facing in the wake of the pandemic?

THEC staff will present on the COVID-19 student survey conducted in October 2020. The presentation will focus on the student response, seeking to inform the questions posed above and illuminate the student voice during these unprecedented times. Below is an overview of the findings from the survey.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
In October 2020, THEC's PPR Bureau surveyed students across the state in order to understand how COVID-19 has affected them and their educational plans. This survey aimed to provide a student voice to ongoing policy discussion related to the COVID-19 pandemic and Tennessee postsecondary education. This memo outlines the survey findings and implications.\(^2\)

Key findings from the survey include:
- Approximately 1 in 4 respondents indicated their housing was affected due to COVID-19, and 60 percent indicated personal and family finances were affected.
- When asked about the likelihood of making changes to their educational plans due to COVID-19, approximately 30 percent of all respondents indicated that postponing graduation was likely or highly likely.
- When asked their concerns, the greatest proportion of respondents (71 percent) were concerned about their personal well-being, and 68 percent of respondents were concerned about taking full-time coursework.

\(^1\) Enclosed find a question and answer follow-up to questions posed by the THEC Commission in November 2020.
\(^2\) This is the second survey of this kind administered by THEC in 2020.
• In general, students were satisfied with the institutional response to COVID-19, though open-ended responses highlighted three potential needs: (1) improvements to online/distance education practices and experiences; (2) supplemental financial aid; and (3) better transparency and communication to students concerning COVID-19 data.

SURVEY SAMPLE
A stratified random sample of 30,000 undergraduates was taken from the fall 2020 census enrollment records at public community colleges and universities. Contact information for these students came from financial aid records in e*GRandS, the State of Tennessee’s financial aid data system.\(^3\)

The survey, administered via email by QuestionPro, remained open for three weeks. This resulted in 1,943 total responses and 1,717 complete responses. After data cleaning, the sample for analysis consisted of 1,686 responses.\(^4\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Random Sample</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>% of Sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TBR Community Colleges</td>
<td>12,085</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC I Universities</td>
<td>11,236</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Tennessee</td>
<td>6,680</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents were predominantly women (64.8 percent), White (75.5 percent), classified as Seniors (40.9 percent),\(^5\) and enrolled in full-time hours (64.1 percent).\(^6\) When participants were asked if they anticipated meeting graduating requirements in fall 2020, roughly 75 percent self-reported they would not. A student’s response to this question determined whether they would be asked questions pertaining to changes in their undergraduate educational plans as a result of COVID-19. Regarding their coursework in fall 2020, approximately 54 percent of respondents indicated they enrolled exclusively in online coursework.

HOW HAS COVID-19 PERSONALLY AFFECTED UNDERGRADUATES?
Students were first asked whether the COVID-19 pandemic affected their housing, personal income, and family income. The Figure 1 below displays the proportion of students within each postsecondary sector that answered ‘Yes.’

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\(^3\) More information on e*GRandS may be found here: https://www.collegefortn.org/resources/egrands/

\(^4\) For cases with missing values, the analyses presented in this memo leveraged pairwise deletion. The resulting sample size is generalizable within a 99% confidence level and approximately a 3% margin of error.

\(^5\) Included students classified as “Seniors” and “Fifth-Year Undergraduates”.

\(^6\) Data on gender, race, and student level come from the fall 2020 14-day census records.
Figure 1. Proportion of survey respondents by sector that indicated having housing, personal income, or family income affected as a result of COVID-19.

Compared to a similar survey administered during spring 2020, a smaller proportion of students in the university sector reported having housing affected in fall 2020. For personal and family income, the proportions of students reporting being affected are largely consistent with the earlier survey. In general, a larger share of university students reported having personal income affected compared to community college students, though the share of students by sector becomes more consistent for those who reported that COVID-19 affected their family's income.

**HOW HAS COVID-19 AFFECTED UNDERGRADUATES' EDUCATIONAL PLANS?**

Students who did not self-report meeting graduation requirements in fall 2020 (n=1,272) were asked how likely they were to make changes to their educational plans using a scale of 1 (Highly Unlikely) to 5 (Highly Likely). Figure 2 below displays the proportion of respondents within each sector that indicated that the change was likely or highly likely.

In general, students enrolled within the University of Tennessee system indicated the lowest likelihood of changing majors (X̄=1.5), transferring (X̄=1.7), or withdrawing (X̄=1.8) but reported the highest likelihood for postponing graduation (X̄=2.7). Inversely, community college students reported the highest likelihood of changing majors (X̄=2.2), transferring (X̄=2.3), or withdrawing (X̄=2.2). On average, both community college (X̄=2.6) and LGI university (X̄=2.6) students indicated lower likelihoods of postponing graduation when compared to University of Tennessee students and to the total sample.
HOW CONCERNED ARE STUDENTS?
Survey participants were asked to indicate their level of concern, measured on a scale of 1 (No. Concerned at All) to 5 (Very Concerned), on a list of options. Table 1 below presents the average score and the share of respondents that indicated being somewhat or very concerned for each item.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics on Survey Respondent Concerns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concern</th>
<th>Average Score</th>
<th>% Concerned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Well-Being</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>70.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking Full-Time Coursework</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for Family Members</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying for Tuition Fees</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>53.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying for Housing &amp; Food</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>49.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying for Internet</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying for Technology</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying for Transportation</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On average, LGI university students were significantly more concerned about paying for housing and food and about caring for family members than community college students.7

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7 Based on Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) results, statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.
Across all items, female students expressed greater concerns than male students. Mean comparisons of gender groups revealed that only the concern of paying for internet was statistically insignificant between males and females.⁸

**HOW SATISFIED WERE STUDENTS IN THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19?**
Survey respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction, based on a scale of 1 (Very Dissatisfied) to 5 (Very Satisfied), with their postsecondary institution's response to COVID-19 based on the precautions taken by the college, how quickly the college responded to safety concerns, and how well the college kept them informed. Table 2 below displays the average score for each item and the share of students in the total sample who indicated being satisfied or very satisfied.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Precautions Taken</th>
<th>Speed toRespond</th>
<th>Information Sharing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Response</td>
<td>% Satisfied</td>
<td>Average Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, students were generally satisfied with how their institutions responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, though they were least satisfied with the precautions taken.

In general, women were significantly more satisfied than men with how their institution has responded to COVID-19.⁹ On average, White students were less satisfied with the precautions taken by institutions than Black students. Compared to Black students, White students were also significantly less satisfied with the speed in which institutions responded to COVID-19 safety concerns.⁹

**WHAT COULD COLLEGES DO TO BETTER SUPPORT STUDENTS?**
At the conclusion of the survey, respondents were asked what their college could do to better serve them. A total of 884 students provided qualitative feedback. After data cleaning, 803 were further analyzed.¹⁰ The word cloud in Figure 3 below depicts common responses given to this question. The size of each word represents the frequency in which the word appears across responses.¹¹

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⁸ Based on independent t-test results, statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

⁹ Data on gender, race, and student level come from the fall 2020 14-day census records.

¹⁰ Responses used for analysis excluded those who responded with "N/A", "Nothing," etc. and those whose comments were deemed inappropriate.

¹¹ Common words excluded; limited to top 20 words.
Figure 3. Word cloud of open-ended survey responses to the question, “Based on your situation, what could your college do to better support you?”

In general, students indicated a need to improve their online/distance education experience. This was consistently referenced as the greatest need for improvement across all groups of students (by sector, gender, racial group, and student level). Many students were compelled or were encouraged to enroll in online or distance learning coursework in fall 2020 and were concerned with their performance and experience in a virtual environment. One university student described:

“I am falling behind due to only having online [classes] available, I have worked so hard to get into the program but now I feel that I am not getting everything I should be from my courses. I feel that I am missing a lot of pertinent information that will later be needed in the workforce.”

Specific suggestions regarding online/distance education experience included improving technology (and student access thereto), better preparing and training instructors to teach in an online environment, more consistent instructor-student interaction, reducing the cost associated with online coursework, and providing more flexibility on grading and completing assignments. Regarding the cost of online courses, one university student mentioned:

“Since most classes are virtual, I would have expected some reduction in tuition and fees. I’m not getting the benefits of the classroom and campus so why should I have to pay the same price when classes were all in person?”
Various forms of financial aid were also mentioned frequently by respondents. These included flexibility on financial aid and Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) deadlines and appeals, granting additional aid and funding to students, and reducing tuition and mandatory fees. One community college student mentioned:

"I think there needs to be more financial support for students like the [CARES] emergency funds for needs other than just supplies and school related costs."

Another mentioned:

"Provide easier ways to access financial aid and ways to make the process faster."

Students also echoed a need for better communication and transparency on campus COVID-19 incidences and policies. One community college student mentioned:

"The only thing I could think of is I wish the local campus where I am attending classes would better inform us on what is going on, such as when is campus open, when can we come visit, how is everyone there. Kind of like a 'just checking on you’ email and keeping us in the loop"

On COVID-19 reporting, one university student suggested:

"Informing students when a classmate has tested positive for the virus and providing a means of quick and easy testing for students/faculty who may have been exposed. It is difficult getting to campus and seeing almost no students, a little disheartening. Setting up spaces where students can study together or funding students to be able to use video chatting software without having to pay out of pocket."

**IMPLICATIONS**
The survey results outlined in this memo help to contextualize the unprecedented situations for students as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the majority of students reporting changes to income, roughly one-quarter reporting changes to housing, and nearly 71 percent expressing concern over personal well-being, students are facing additional stressors outside of their education that affect their health physically, emotionally, financially, and socially.

Regarding educational plans, one-quarter to one-third of students who will not meet graduation requirements by fall 2020 reported the likelihood of postponing graduation. Along with the undergraduate enrollment declines observed across the state, the survey findings imply that institutions may also expect delays in undergraduates’ time to degree.

Should institutions continue to rely on online and distance education classes to provide a safe learning environment, consideration should be given toward improving student experiences while maintaining academic quality. Unlike with the swift transition to emergency remote teaching (ERT) methods in spring 2020, fall 2020 permitted institutions
more time to prepare. Even so, survey respondents highlighted areas for improvement including, but not limited to, communicating clear course expectations, providing online student support and access to campus resources, adequately preparing instructors for online teaching, and ensuring regular correspondence between instructors and students.

INSTITUTIONAL REPORTS ON SURVEY RESULTS
In early January, Research & Strategy staff assembled descriptive summaries of the survey findings tailored to each institution, which included a complete listing of the open-ended responses given from students at that institution. The intent of these summary reports was to demonstrate the overall survey findings and to illustrate how the institution was represented within the total sample. These reports were supplied to the institutional research offices at each Locally Governed Institution. Institutional reports for colleges within the University of Tennessee System and the Tennessee Board of Regents were supplied to the system institutional research offices for further dissemination.