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ADMISSIONS & STUDENT AID

How Is Covid-19 Changing Prospective Students' Plans? Here's an Early Look

By *Eric Hoover* | MARCH 25, 2020



Georgia Institute of Technology

The spread of the coronavirus has forced colleges to cancel countless on-campus programs scheduled for March and April.

In this spring of jaw-clenching uncertainty, everyone expects Covid-19 to derail the plans of prospective college students. One big question is: How many?

Hordes of them, the results of a new survey suggest. One in six high-school seniors who expected to attend a four-year college full time before the outbreak of the novel coronavirus now think that they will choose a different path this fall. Three out of five students, though still intending to enroll in a bachelor's-degree program, are concerned

about their ability to attend their first-choice college.

Learn more in a live chat

Craig Goebel, a principal at the Art & Science Group, will host a live chat on Thursday, March 26, at 3 p.m., Eastern time, on *The Chronicle's* Facebook group Higher Ed and the Coronavirus. Become a member to tune in.

Those findings come from a national survey of 487 prospective college students conducted by the Art & Science Group, a higher-education consulting firm. The results provide an early look at how the outbreak is shaping teenagers' perceptions of college —

and how their near-future plans might change.

“These findings are pretty stark,” said Craig Goebel, a principal at the Art & Science Group. “And they might be underrepresenting the potential impact of what Covid-19 could be once all is said and done this fall.”

Sure, you’ve seen the recent footage of college students partying on spring-break beaches, ignoring recommendations to practice social distancing. You’ve heard the criticism that teenagers and 20-somethings aren’t taking the global pandemic seriously enough.

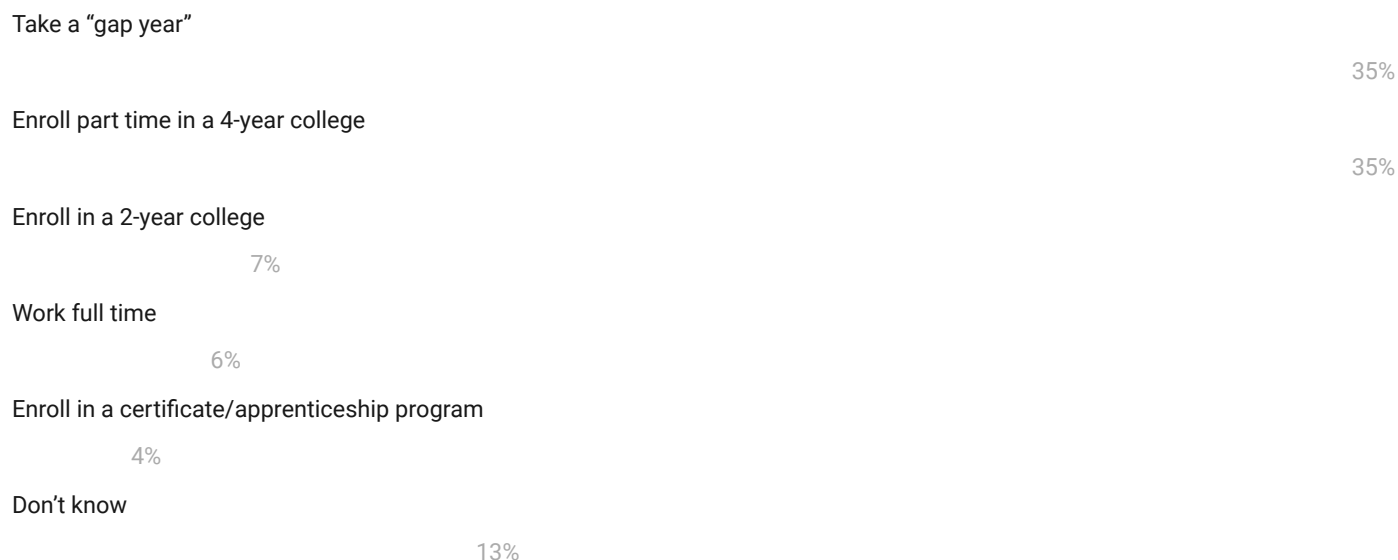
But prospective undergraduate students are thinking — a lot — about how the coronavirus might affect their college choices, the survey suggests. Nearly all respondents (90 percent) said they consume information about the outbreak at least once a day, with 10 percent doing so hourly.

Amid school closures and lockdowns, many high-school seniors are switching up their immediate plans, the survey found. Of the 17 percent of respondents who didn’t think they would end up enrolling full time at a four-year college, a majority expected either to take a gap year (35 percent) or enroll part time in a bachelor’s program (35 percent). Seven percent indicated that they would attend a community college, and 6 percent said they would work full time.

Just 20 percent of students were confident that they would attend their first-choice college. “While we know there is always flux this time of year as students are getting their admissions notifications,” Goebel said, “it surprised us that more weren’t expecting to enroll at their first choice.”

A Change of Plans

The novel coronavirus has caused about one out of six high-school seniors to rethink their decision to enroll full time in a bachelor's-degree program this fall. Here's what they plan to do instead.



Source: Art & Science Group, LLC • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Respondents who said they weren't confident that they could choose the college atop their list (63 percent) cited various concerns. The most prevalent was cost: Twenty-one percent of those students said their "first-choice school may no longer be affordable for my family" because of the coronavirus. And 12 percent said either they or a family member had health concerns that required them to change their plans.

Several other coronavirus-related disruptions, the Art & Science Group found, had prompted students to reconsider their college choices: "Was not able to overnight at my first-choice school" (15 percent); "I am unable to try out or practice with a team for athletics" (11 percent).

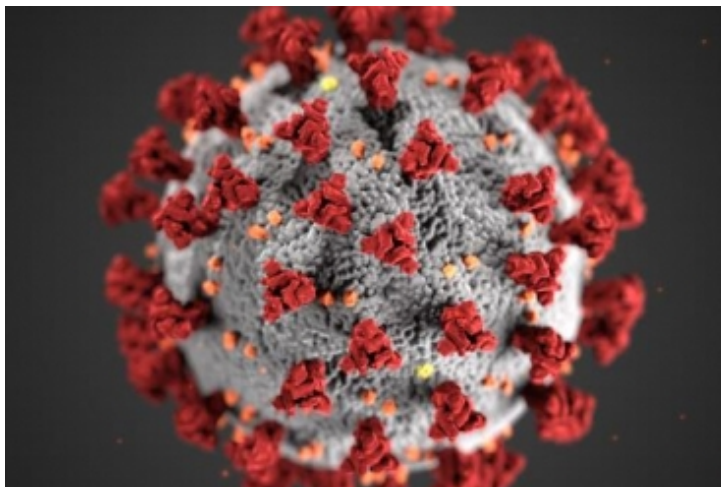
Campus visits play a large role in many students' college choices. For enrollment managers, those visits are an important gauge of who's likely to enroll. Yet the spread of the coronavirus forced colleges everywhere to cancel countless on-campus programs scheduled for March and April (58 percent of students surveyed said they had experienced, or expected to experience, such cancellations). That means many players in the process must make do without valuable information.

“The fact that all these visits have been interrupted for this year’s students,” said David Strauss, a principal at the firm, “is sending us into uncharted territory.”

Coronavirus Hits Campus

As colleges and universities have struggled to devise policies to respond to the quickly evolving situation, here are links to *The Chronicle*’s key coverage of how this worldwide health crisis is affecting campuses.

- [The Coronavirus Is Upending Higher Ed. Here Are the Latest Developments.](#)
- [How to Help Struggling Students Succeed Online](#)
- [Now Is Not the Time to Assess Online Learning](#) ✓ PREMIUM



The Art & Science Group also asked students about how Covid-19 might have influenced their thinking about the qualities they seek in a college. Thirty-five percent of students said that campuses “closer to home” were now a more realistic option than their first-choice college. Some said they were considering a less-expensive institution (32 percent), with a “more familiar social network” (22 percent), more rural (12 percent), smaller (15 percent), or “located in a safer area” (10 percent).

The survey, which was conducted from March 17 to 20, included responses from high-school seniors planning to graduate this spring. Sixty-four percent of them were female; 74 percent were white; 86 percent were attending a public high school. The respondents’ average household income was \$88,000.

Colleges are all different. Their market positions vary, and their applicant pools do, too. For those reasons, Strauss said, no colleges should apply the results of a national survey to their own particular enrollment picture.

Moreover, a snapshot of a prospective student's thoughts in a given moment can't reveal which college he or she will ultimately choose. It's early.

"We can't say now how students will behave in the end," Strauss said. "But what we do know is where their mind-sets are right now."

Eric Hoover writes about the challenges of getting to, and through, college. Follow him on Twitter @erichoov, or email him, at eric.hoover@chronicle.com.

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