

2020 CU Boulder New Student Survey: Summary of Open-Ended Responses for Matriculated Students

We administer the New Student Survey annually to incoming students. Survey administration began May 4, 2020, was ongoing throughout summer 2020, and closed September 16, 2020.

We included two open-ended questions in the survey:

1. *"What would a successful CU Boulder experience look like to you?"*
2. *"In light of COVID-19, what is the one thing CU Boulder could do to help you feel more comfortable coming here in the fall?"*

In this report we describe the themes that characterize large proportions of the students' written comments in response to these questions.

RESPONSE RATES

The survey was open to 10,117 students who confirmed their admission to CU Boulder for fall 2020. At the close of the survey, 8,163 students had taken the survey for an 81% response rate among confirmed students. However, some confirmed students ultimately cancelled or deferred their enrollment (i.e., "summer melt"). This report focuses on only the new (i.e., matriculated) students that attended CU Boulder this fall. Among the 7,731 new students at CU Boulder in fall 2020, 7,151 responded to the survey for a 92% response rate (96% for first-time students, 79% for new transfer students).

Population	New (i.e., Matriculated) Students			All Confirmed Students		
	# Invites	# Responses	Response Rate	# Invites	# Responses	Response Rate
First-time Students	6,326	6,045	96%	8,191	6,875	84%
Transfer Students	1,405	1,106	79%	1,926	1,288	67%
TOTAL	7,731	7,151	92%	10,117	8,163	81%

OPEN-ENDED COMMENTS

"What would a successful CU Boulder experience look like to you?"

The great majority of the 7,151 survey respondents (89%; N = 6,333) specified what a successful experience would look like to them. Our analysis identified one dominant theme and six lesser but prominent themes. Many respondent comments contained topics that were classified in multiple themes, e.g., "Getting good grades, having a good time socially, getting outside and doing things, and being involved in clubs and groups" and "Enjoying my time, feeling like I belong, and graduating."

The dominant theme was **Learning and Academic Achievement**.

- Of the 6,333 students who wrote comments, 2,441 (39%) mentioned the academic experience, e.g., studying, getting good grades, learning, achieving a high GPA. Examples of these comments are:
 - "A successful CU Boulder experience would look like: having a quality learning experience that is worth the money, learning the desired skills that I can use to discover a career path, and graduating with a degree that I am proud of earning."
 - "Being academically successful, finding my next path for graduate study, becoming passionate about my major, and making friends/belonging."
 - "To me a successful CU Boulder experience would look like me talking to my professors and studying every chance I get in order to get the best grade I can and not be too stressed out."

The six other themes are:

- **Getting a degree.** Of those who wrote comments, 1,213 (19%) mentioned graduating or getting a degree. Some included a goal of graduating in no more than four years, some noted the prospect of their degree leading to a good job, and some mentioned successfully preparing for graduate or professional school. Examples of these comments are:
 - "Graduating with a degree I love."
 - "Ideally, one that ends with me graduating from my major early."
 - "Getting my college degree in time (4 years), and having the credentials to move on to Law school."
- **Participating in extracurricular and other social activities.** Of those who wrote comments, 1,002 (16%) referred to taking part in sports and other extracurricular activities, joining clubs, rushing for fraternities and sororities, attending sports events, and more generally participating in social activities. For example:
 - "Being able to have a lot of academic opportunities that would allow for a successful opportunity. Also being socially active and joining clubs."

- “Succeeding in my classes, while having a super exciting, fun, and interactive social life.”
- “Me being involved in various school activities and event, like going to football games, joining a sorority. Making new friends, doing well in school. Overall just enjoying all CU Boulder has to offer and more thats (*sic*) offered outside of the school.”
- **Having a sense of community.** Of those who wrote comments, 918 (14%) were looking forward to being part of a community. Students mentioned having a sense of belonging at CU Boulder, connection, involvement, fitting in, making long-lasting friendships, and feeling supported and welcome. For example:
 - “A successful CU Boulder experience would be fitting in with the community, finding my own place on campus, feeling at home, feeling comfortable with my advisors and teacher, as well as being able to do my work well.”
 - “Learning not only information about my major to get a job, but also empower me grow as an active citizen and a leader. I also want to meet lifelong friends and impact/grow the organizations I join.”
 - “A successful CU Boulder experience to me would be having the ability to call CU Boulder my second home.”
- **Being on campus.** 769 student comments (12%) noted the importance to the student of being on campus and/or living in the residence halls. Examples are:
 - “Being on campus for my first year in fall!”
 - “Having a college experience on campus, playing lacrosse, socializing, and doing well in school.”
 - “Actually be able to go to class and stay in the dorms”
- **Having fun, enjoying classes and college life, having new experiences.** 757 student comments (12%) referred to the students’ looking forward to trying new things, having new experiences, having fun, and enjoying being in college. For example:
 - “Being able to make new friends and have new experiences. However, the most important thing is getting my degree.”
 - “Having the best 4 years of my life and graduating with a clear path of my future.”
 - “A successful CU Boulder experience to me would be a blend between learning and overall enjoyment both socially and literally. I want to learn and have fun doing so. “
- **Taking at least some classes in person.** 743 student comments (12%) expressed the students’ desire to attend all of their classes in person or have at least some in-person classes. Examples of these comments are:
 - “having zero online classes, being on campus full time.”
 - “I want to get a realistic feel for the academics at CU Boulder. This includes: face-to-face instruction for math/chem/physics courses, research opportunities in labs, and access to academic and departmental resources.”
 - “A successful experience for my first year would look like a mix of both online and in person classes. I would still like to have in person lectures, studios, etc. for classes that are smaller sized, but am alright with online learning for large lecture halls because these classes are less personalized.”

Small but non-negligible proportions of student comments depicted two other themes that are meaningful for this population, including making friends (8% of those who wrote comments) and personal growth and development (6%).

Two additional themes that emerged from the analysis more specifically reference circumstances and/or concerns associated with COVID-19’s impact on students’ experience at the university, specifically “having a normal or typical college experience” (10%) and “staying safe and having the university implement and enforce appropriate policies and precautions” (5%). These pandemic-related themes also appear as themes in responses to the COVID-specific open-ended survey question and are expanded on below.

“In light of COVID-19, what is the one thing CU Boulder could do to help you feel more comfortable coming here in the Fall?”

The great majority of the 7,151 survey respondents (90%; N = 6,470) described what the university could do to help them feel more comfortable coming to campus this fall. Our analysis identified two primary themes and four lesser themes.

The two primary themes identified by the analysis were:

- **Communication and planning.** 1,244 student comments (19%) referred to the students’ desire for clear, timely, and transparent communication about the COVID-19 situation, its impact on campus, and actions undertaken to deal with it. For example:
 - “Have and share a clear and concise plan for multiple modes of operation.”
 - “Have daily updates on events. Even if there are no updates, just have it say ‘no new updates for this date.’”
 - “Keep us informed with transparent communication of plans and facts.”

- **Health and Safety.** 1,243 student comments (19%) mentioned that the university's having and enforcing policies and rules to ensure student health and safety during the pandemic would help them feel more comfortable about coming to campus this fall. Students mentioned social distancing, wearing masks, hand sanitizers, and cleaning/sanitization. As noted above, 5% of respondents raised similar concerns in their comments made in response to the first open-ended survey item. Examples of comments on this topic are:
 - "I am concerned about people at CU (especially other students) not taking the virus seriously, as I think many people don't think it will effect (*sic*) them/are certain that they will recover, so repeatedly informing the community of COVID-19 symptoms, risks, precautions, community data, etc and strict enforcement of safety policy is important to me."
 - "Clean and disinfect regularly"
 - "i would say to do online classes until we really know about the virus or we get a vaccine for the virus, becasue (*sic*) i do not want to take the chance at getting the virus."
 - "Providing free masks and keeping classes at 50% capacity so students can sit further apart."

Other themes that emerged from the analysis are:

- **Having a Normal or Typical College Experience.** 832 student comments (13%) indicated a desire to be on campus and have a normal/typical/traditional college experience. As noted above, 10% of respondents expressed this hope in their comments made in response to the first open-ended survey item. Examples of these comments (from both items) are:
 - "Have in person learning. Have residence halls open, and class sizes without online learning, or at least the option for in person studies. Inter-mural sports should be opened to allow a sense of normalcy on campus and keep people active. Keep closing down campus to a last resort."
 - "All four years living the traditional college experience. Having a dorm on campus and not off of campus like I was assigned. Access to the student center/gym."
 - "Let's get back to normal, at least as normal as possible."
- **Concerns About Classes.** 645 student comments (10%) described concerns about classes, including in-person and online options and class size. For example:
 - "We want safe in-person classes with online options. If online, ensure high quality."
 - "Have smaller class sizes."
 - "We don't like remote learning. Help students and teachers be better at remote learning."
- **Concerns About Living Situation.** 437 student comments (7%) referred to concerns about residence halls and other housing issues. For example:
 - "Limit the number of people that can live in the dorms, allow freshman (*sic*) from Colorado the option to live off campus, and make sure everything is sanitized well."
 - "Give us more control over our dorm and roommates."
 - "It would be good if we could be socially distanced by not having roommates."
- **Having a Sense of Community.** 383 student comments (6%) described wanting to have opportunities to build a sense of community. For example:
 - "Help us connect and build community, including both freshmen and transfer students."
 - "Cultivating opportunities to get involved and connected to form a community and sense of home."
 - "Building a sense of community and having different outlets for students to talk to students/ staff"

Smaller proportions of student comments referred to financial concerns (4%) and to concerns about mental and physical health (4%).