

# Fall 2020 CU Boulder Follow-Up New Student Survey: Executive Summary

In this report, we summarize key findings from the **Fall 2020 Follow-Up New Student Survey (FUNSS)**. This survey asked newly enrolled undergraduate students (first-time first-year students and transfer students) to reflect on their first six weeks at CU Boulder regarding their overall experience thus far, obstacles to success, plans for continued enrollment, sense of belonging, commitment to CU Boulder, and self-efficacy. The findings in this report offer a summary of top-level results for all 1,986 survey respondents.

## RESPONSE RATES

Survey administration began October 7, 2020, and closed October 21, 2020. The survey was open to all 7,664 new undergraduate students. A total of 1,986 students (**26%**) answered the survey in full or in part. Response rates were relatively stable across demographic groups:

- Residency, entry type (first-time or transfer) and race/ethnicity groups had response rates that varied minimally, from 23% - 28%.
- Gender had somewhat more variation with 22% of men and 31% of women responding to the survey.
- Schools/colleges had similar variation in their response rates, ranging from 21% - 29%. However, the two smallest schools/colleges had notably higher response rates (Education 36%, Music 50%).

## OVERALL EXPERIENCE

Overall, new students at CU Boulder are feeling better about the start of their academic life than their non-academic life as a new college student:

- Almost three-fourths (72%) of survey respondents *somewhat to strongly* agreed that their *academic life* at CU Boulder was off to a good start.
- Nearly half (44%) of respondents agreed<sup>1</sup> that their *non-academic* life was off to a good start.

## OBSTACLES TO SUCCESS

To better understand students' challenges for a successful transition to college, students were given a list of academic and non-academic obstacles and asked to rate whether they were a major obstacle, a small obstacle or not an obstacle.

### Academic success:

- By far, the most commonly cited obstacle to students' academic success was their *inability to concentrate on their work*: Over a third (36%) of respondents said it was a *major* obstacle.
- The two next most frequently cited academic obstacles were students' *reluctance to ask for academic help when needed* and their self-reported *weak study habits*: 19% and 17% reported these as a major obstacle, respectively.
- Students were given an opportunity to write-in any other academic obstacles to their success at CU Boulder. Among the 333 students who provided a written comment, the most commonly cited other academic obstacle – mentioned by about 35% of the students who responded – was *dissatisfaction with remote/online learning for their classes due to COVID-19*.

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<sup>1</sup> "Agreed" or "agreement" in this report signifies that ratings of 4 to 6 on the following six-point agreement scale were chosen: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=somewhat disagree, 4=somewhat agree, 5=agree, 6=strongly agree.

### Non-Academic success:

- The two most frequently cited obstacles to students' non-academic success were: *making new friends* (44% major) and *feeling depressed, stressed or upset* (39% major).
- The three next most commonly cited major obstacles reported by respondents were: *maintaining a balance between social and academic life* (24%), *paying for living or educational expenses* (22%) and *poor study environment* (18%).
- Students were given an opportunity to write-in any other non-academic obstacles to their success at CU Boulder. Among the 341 students who provided a written comment, the two most commonly cited "other" non-academic obstacles were the *lack of social life* (e.g., *inability to make friends*), and the *cost of their education in light of their remote learning experience*.

## INTENTION TO RETURN TO CU BOULDER IN SPRING 2021

- Nearly all (93%) survey respondents said they *definitely* (47%) or *probably* (45%) intend to come back to CU Boulder in spring 2021.
- For the 7% (n=114) of respondents who said they *definitely or probably would not* return to CU Boulder in spring 2021:
  - Most (89%) agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic is playing a role in their spring 2021 enrollment decision (with 61% strongly agreeing).
  - About half of the students indicated they would most likely be attending another college or university; about 24% of students said that they plan to have paid employment; 15% do not have a plan yet; the remaining 11% had other plans (e.g., volunteer activity, military service or some other activity).

## BELONGING AND COMMITMENT

### Belonging at CU Boulder:

- About three-fourths of students agree that they feel like they fit in at CU Boulder (75%) and belong at CU Boulder (76%). Slightly fewer (69%) agree that they view CU Boulder as their home during their undergraduate career.
- About half of students agree that they feel a connection with the CU Boulder community (52%).

### Commitment to CU Boulder:

Most survey respondents expressed their commitment to obtaining a CU Boulder degree:

- 80% agreed that they were confident choosing to attend CU Boulder was the right choice for them.
- 70% agreed that it is important to them to graduate from CU Boulder as opposed to another college or university.

## SELF-EFFICACY

A large majority of respondents expressed confidence in their ability to succeed at CU Boulder academically.

- **General success at CU:** 89% were in agreement that they can *achieve good grades at CU Boulder*, and 85% are *confident in their ability to succeed as a CU Boulder student*.
- **Writing and Math skills:** A higher proportion of students agreed that they are *prepared to write clearly and effectively* (89%) than agreed that they *have the math skills needed to succeed* (79%).
- **Study skills:** Most students (85%) agreed that they are confident in their *note-taking skills*; three-fourths (75%) are confident in their *time-management skills*, and just over two-thirds (69%) have confidence in their *test-taking ability*.
- **Remote learning environment:** Just under half of students (46%), however, agreed they were confident in their *ability to learn in a remote environment*.

## COMPARISON OF ANTICIPATED TO CURRENT EXPERIENCES

Some survey items in the Follow-up New Student Survey (FUNSS) were also included in the New Student Survey (NSS), which was administered to the same group of new undergraduate students prior to their arrival at CU Boulder. A comparison of *anticipated* sense of belonging, commitment to CU Boulder, and confidence in their skills to be successful as a college student (measured in the NSS) can therefore be made to students' *current sense of* belonging, commitment and self-efficacy once the fall semester began (measured in the FUNSS).

Typically, measures of a student's *anticipated* college experience tend to be more positive than measures of their *actual* college experience, as documented in previous ODA student surveys (e.g., see the [2018 NSS and FUNSS comparison report](#)). The COVID-19 pandemic has had an additional effect on students' experiences in fall 2020, predictably exacerbating the likelihood that students' anticipated college experience will more positive than their actual experience once college begins.

For the new undergraduate students that answered these questions on both surveys this year, this trend is again evident with respect to the following aspects of their experience:

- **Belonging.** A total of 1,870 students answered the sense of belonging questions on both surveys.
  - Prior to arriving at CU this fall, 98% of students agreed that "I expect to feel that I belong at CU Boulder" (NSS); at the fall semester midpoint, 76% of students agreed that "I feel that I belong at CU Boulder" (FUNSS).
  - The statement "[It is important to me to / I] feel like I fit in at CU Boulder" had a similar decrease of 22% in agreement (97% NSS, 75% FUNSS).
  - The other two "belonging" measures had larger observed differences between the summer and fall: "I [can] view CU Boulder as my home during my undergraduate years" (98% NSS, 69% FUNSS) and "I [expect to] feel a connection with the CU Boulder community" (97% NSS, 53% FUNSS).
- **Commitment to CU Boulder.** The commitment to CU Boulder questions were answered on both the NSS and FUNNS by 1,743 students. Like sense of belong, students' commitment to CU Boulder prior to arriving at CU (NSS) is higher than during their first semester as a college student (FUNSS), although the differences are somewhat smaller than for the belonging measures:
  - "I am confident that choosing to attend CU Boulder was the right choice" (98% NSS, 80% FUNSS);
  - "It is important to me to graduate from CU Boulder as opposed to another college or university" (87% NSS, 70% FUNSS).
- **Self-Efficacy.** There were 1,609 students that answered the self-efficacy questions on both surveys. Among these students, anticipated levels of self-efficacy prior to college (NSS) are also higher than their actual sense of self-efficacy once at college (FUNNS). The differences in self-efficacy between these two time points tend to be smaller than the observed differences for belonging and commitment:
  - **General success at CU:** (100% NSS, 89% FUNSS) of students were in agreement that they *can achieve good grades at CU Boulder*, and (100% NSS, 86% FUNSS) are *confident in their ability to succeed as a CU Boulder student*.
  - **Writing and Math skills:** (97% NSS, 90% FUNSS) of students agree that they are *prepared to write clearly and effectively*; (92% NSS, 79% FUNSS) agree they *have the math skills needed to succeed*.
  - **Study skills:** (96% NSS, 85% FUNSS) of students agreed that they are confident in their *note-taking skills*; (90% NSS, 75% FUNSS) are confident in their *time-management skills*, and (87% NSS, 69% FUNSS) have confidence in their *test-taking ability*.

## OPEN RESPONSES

Three open-ended questions were included in the survey:

1. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, what is the one thing CU Boulder could do to improve your experience in spring 2021?
2. Why is your **academic life** at CU Boulder not off to a good start? (Follow-up Question)
3. Why is your **non-academic life** at CU Boulder not off to a good start? (Follow-up Question)

For each question, responses were analyzed using SAS Enterprise Miner Text Topics, which examines the frequency of terms to find prevailing topics or themes in the responses. Each student response can belong to multiple text topics, or none.

The first question was presented to all students; 61% provided a response (1,206/1,984). The second question was presented to the 56% of students who said their non-academic life was not off to a good start; 85% provided a response (740/869). The third question was presented to the 28% of respondents who said their academic life was not off to a good start; 83% of those provided a response (362/436).

The prevailing themes are summarized below.

### Q1: In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, what is the one thing CU Boulder could do to improve your experience in spring 2021?

#### Academic themes:

- **Desire for in-person classes/learning:** Students find online learning difficult, and want as many classes as possible to be in-person. Many believe in-person learning is safe and not a source of COVID-19 transmission.
- **Changes to online classes:** These responses centered on online classes and how they could be changed. Some students recommended having more online classes (this often corresponded with the sentiment that students should not be brought back to campus at all), whereas other students said there should be fewer online classes. Some recommended using a different grading system or providing more group work.

#### Non-Academic themes:

- **Value:** Some students want tuition reduced or partially refunded, because they feel they are not receiving the typical college experience.
- **Provide opportunities to meet others in-person:** Many students would like CU Boulder to provide safe, structured ways for students to be together. Many felt clubs and organizations should offer safe ways for students to connect in-person. Students especially felt that they should be able to meet with and get to know students in their residence hall, and they believe it would be possible to get students together safely (e.g., outside, with masks, or among students in their residence halls).
- **Prioritize mental health:** Students expressed that mental health is suffering because of COVID-19 restrictions and needs to be a more of a priority. Some requested more mental health resources to help with depression and anxiety.
- **Loosen dorm room restrictions:** Students feel that other members of their residence hall floor should be allowed to gather in their dorm room. They feel that, at the very least, they should be allowed to have one or two other students in their dorm room, especially since many of these students share community bathrooms already.
- **Provide more food options:** Students expressed a desire for more food options at the dining halls on campus, especially healthy options like fruits and vegetables.

### Q2: Why is your **non-academic life** at CU Boulder not off to a good start?

- **Non-traditional college experience:** COVID restrictions are making it very difficult to have a true college experience: meeting other people, enjoying the university's resources (e.g., libraries), joining clubs, or attending class in-person.
- **Mental health is suffering due to lack of connection, COVID restrictions.** Many students report that they are struggling with anxiety, depression, and loneliness due to the isolation of the pandemic. Some describe the sense that they are in jail or prison in their dorm room.
- **Hard to meet new friends:** Due to the pandemic and COVID-19 restrictions, as well as online learning, meeting new people and friends is very difficult. Students who are living off-campus especially report a lack of connection to the CU Boulder community. Some expressed disappointment that CU Boulder hasn't made more of an effort to connect students in-person.
- **Virtual event fatigue:** Students who responded indicated they are tired of virtual events and don't feel that they enable them to connect to other students.

### Q3: Why is your **academic** life at CU Boulder not off to a good start?

- **Remote learning is hard:** Students who responded to this question described difficulties with remote learning. This seems especially true for challenging courses that have a lab portion. Many are stressed about performing poorly on online tests and quizzes, leading to low grades. These students wish learning could return to in-person, or that there was a way to revamp or restructure in-person learning.
- **Hard getting help and help for online learning:** Students who responded to this question feel online shy and aren't asking questions in an online format; they feel it's hard to get their questions answered during online courses, or when they're watching recorded lectures. Office hours feel busy and even at office hours, they don't feel their questions are answered. Students report teaching themselves the material.
- **Difficult to be motivated, focus and learn course material:** The students who gave answers to this question report having trouble absorbing and learning complex material in an online format. They have difficulty focusing in their room and want other areas available for studying, such as libraries.
- **Assignment challenges:** Students who responded to this question report that they have too many assignments and that much of it feels like busywork; some feel that professors are assigning more work than usual to compensate for the lack of in person learning and in-person exams. Variations in how instructors use Canvas or where they post materials adds to the challenge.