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New Jersey COVID-19 Questionnaire Reveals Economic, Financial and Mental Toll of Pandemic on College Students

Majority of Student Respondents Indicated Confidence in Institutions' Mitigation Measures and Safety Protocols

TRENTON — The Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE) today released findings of a fall 2021 questionnaire indicating that New Jersey college students continue facing significant mental health, economic and financial challenges nearly two years into the COVID-19 pandemic and have confidence in their institutions' public health and safety measures.

The questionnaire solicited insight from more than 15,500 undergraduate and graduate students from 60 New Jersey higher education institutions about increased in-person activity on campus, management of mental and physical health, and financial strains posed by the ongoing public health crisis.

About 70 percent of all respondents rated their pandemic-related level of stress and anxiety during the fall 2021 as higher than fall 2020, with more than 70 percent of total respondents agreeing that their institution clearly communicated COVID-19 policies and 60 percent expressing confidence in their institution's general health and safety measures.

Among Hispanic, Black, American Indian, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander respondents, 76 percent rated their stress level as higher than fall 2020, compared to 64 percent among White respondents. Additionally, 43 percent of minority respondents indicated that they lost a job as a result of the pandemic (45 percent had a family member who lost a job), compared to 33 percent and 27 percent, respectively, of White respondents. About 45 percent of minority respondents incurred significant credit card debt over the last year, compared to 23 percent among White respondents.

"These jarring findings demonstrate the pandemic's disparate toll on New Jersey's marginalized communities and underscore the need for all institutions to ensure that every student, regardless of life circumstances, is equitably supported," said **Dr. Brian K. Bridges, Secretary of Higher Education**. "As mental health issues in particular mount, our concerns in New Jersey mirror those nationally - that these and other devastating social and economic issues that existed before the pandemic have been exacerbated and will further deepen educational inequities for years to come."

OSHE is preparing institution-level reports with comparative benchmark data to assist colleges and universities in further analyzing and utilizing these findings to improve student services.

Additional Summary Findings

- About 55 percent of respondents who identified as student parents indicated childcare was a major or moderate struggle to afford, with 63 percent of single parents noting these expenses as major challenges.

- About 13 percent of all respondents said they were concerned that they would not have enough food to eat in the next 30 days.
- Community college (24 percent) and proprietary degree-granting institution (23 percent) respondents were more likely to receive unemployment benefits.

Through the State's Higher Education Restart Advisory Group, comprised of institutional presidents, faculty and students, OSHE continues assisting New Jersey's higher education sector in responding to the pandemic's evolving challenges and shaping policies through stakeholder engagement. Over the course of the pandemic, OSHE has distributed more than \$323 million in federal Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) and Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) funding — in addition to funding provided directly to institutions — to address everything from mental health to remote learning hurdles. OSHE also published a series of resource guides to assist communities in improving supports to address mental health and foster supportive campus cultures.

For more information, please visit nj.gov/highereducation/COVID-19.shtml.