

To: Institutions using the HEDS Fall 2020 COVID-19 Student Survey
From: Charlie Blaich and Kathy Wise
Re: Data Byte #1 – Review of students’ living and learning environments during fall 2020
Date: 1/13/2021

Introduction

We began our review of data from the Fall 2020 HEDS COVID-19 Student Survey by asking two questions:

1. Where were students living during the fall term?
2. How were they taking their classes?

Not only were these the first two questions on the survey, but students’ responses to these questions were, in a sense, the outcomes of the planning and difficult choices that administrators, staff, faculty, and students made last summer. In this first of a series of short memos summarizing findings from our fall COVID-19 surveys—memos we’re calling “Data Bytes”—we review what roughly 21,500 students from 29 institutions said in response to these two questions.

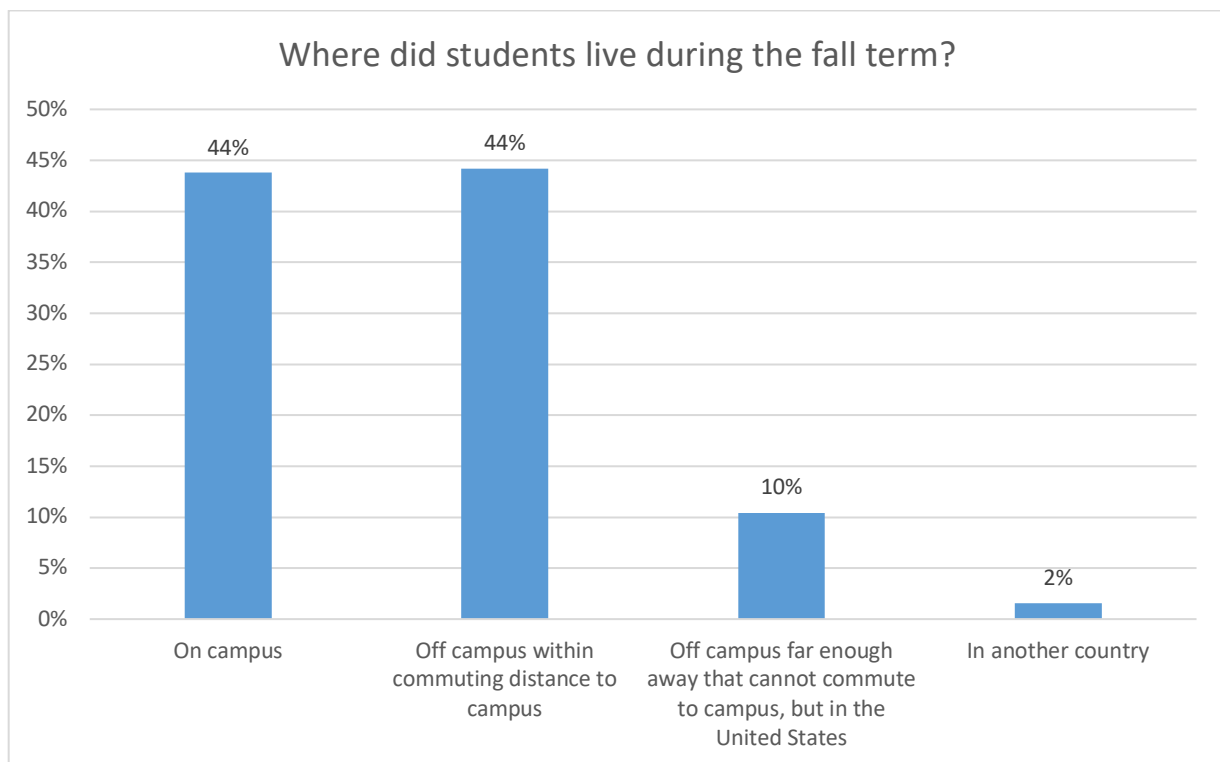
Data

We’ll start with the first question, which appeared in our survey like this:

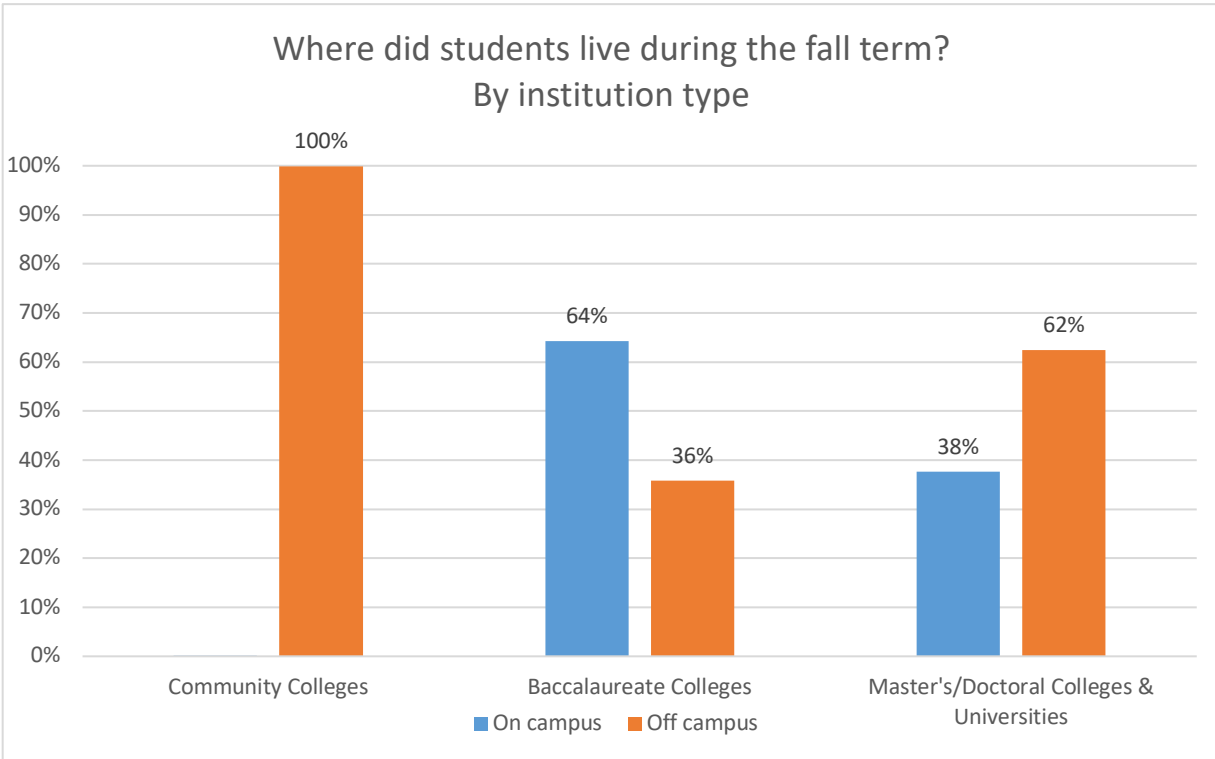
What best describes where you are living this term?

- A. Living on campus
- B. Living off campus within commuting distance to campus
- C. Living off campus far enough away that I cannot commute to campus, but in the United States
- D. Living in another country

As you can see in the figure below, most students who took our survey either lived on or near campus.



All community college students who took our survey lived off campus, as did most students at larger public and private four-year institutions. On the other hand, most liberal arts college students lived on campus. (See figure below.)



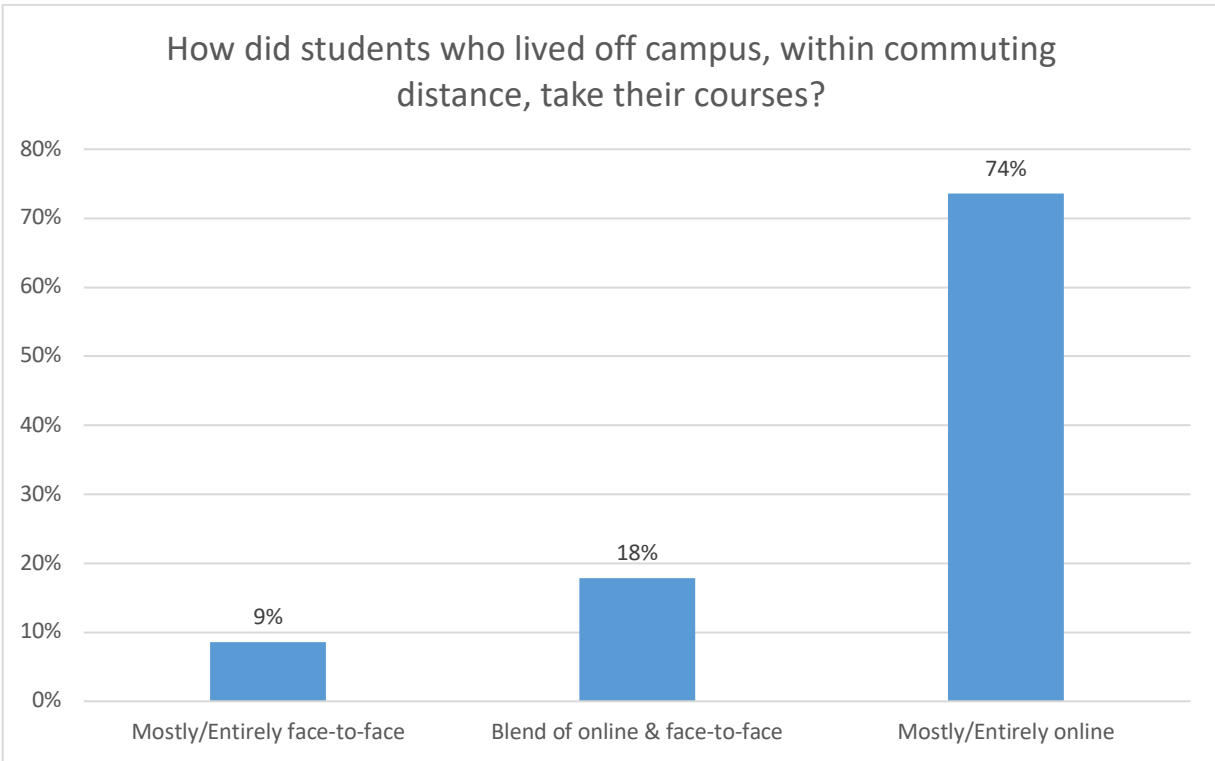
Next, we turn to the relationship between where students lived and how they were being taught. In our survey, we asked students the following question:

*What best describes how your classes are being taught this term?*¹

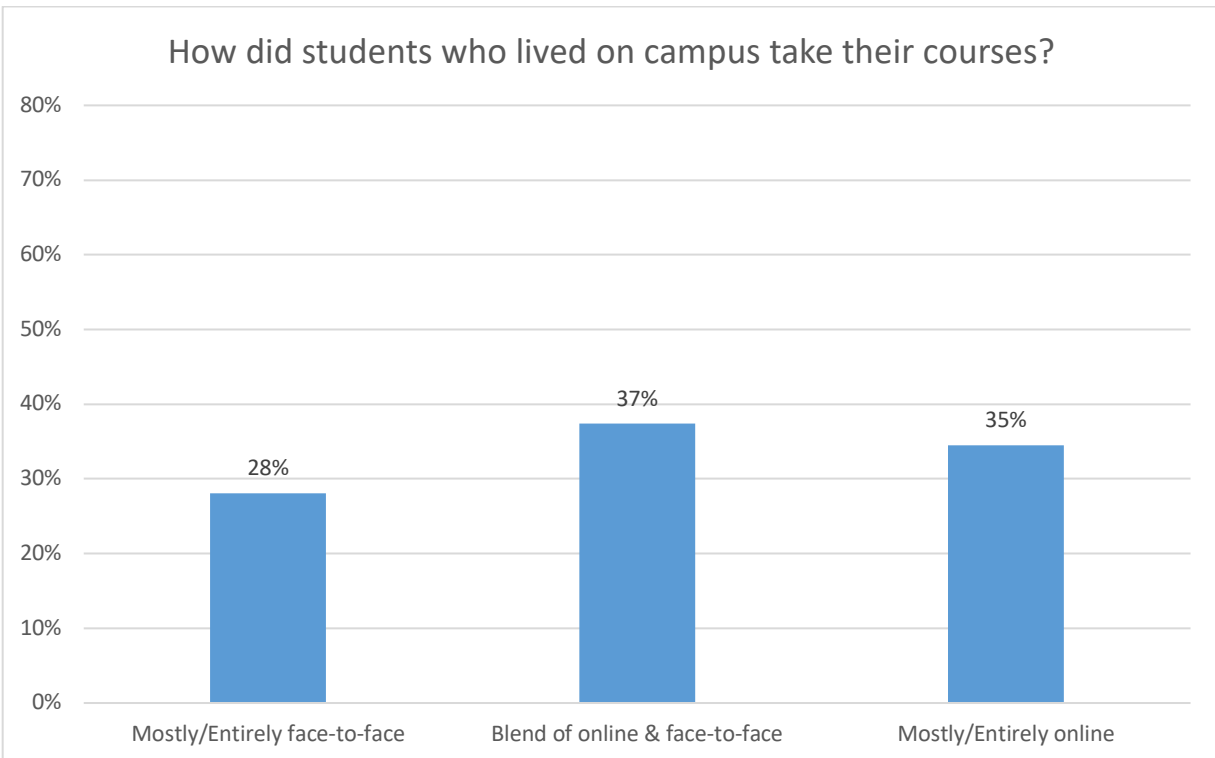
- A. Entirely face-to-face
- B. Primarily face-to-face with occasional online interactions
- C. A roughly even blend of face-to-face and online interactions
- D. Mostly online with occasional face-to-face interactions
- E. Entirely online

First, students who lived far enough away that they could not commute to campus, including those who lived abroad, were taking their classes online. What about students who lived off campus but were close enough to commute? Not surprisingly, most of them were taking most of their classes online. But not all of them. As you can see in the following figure, roughly a quarter of these students were taking a substantial proportion of their courses face-to-face.

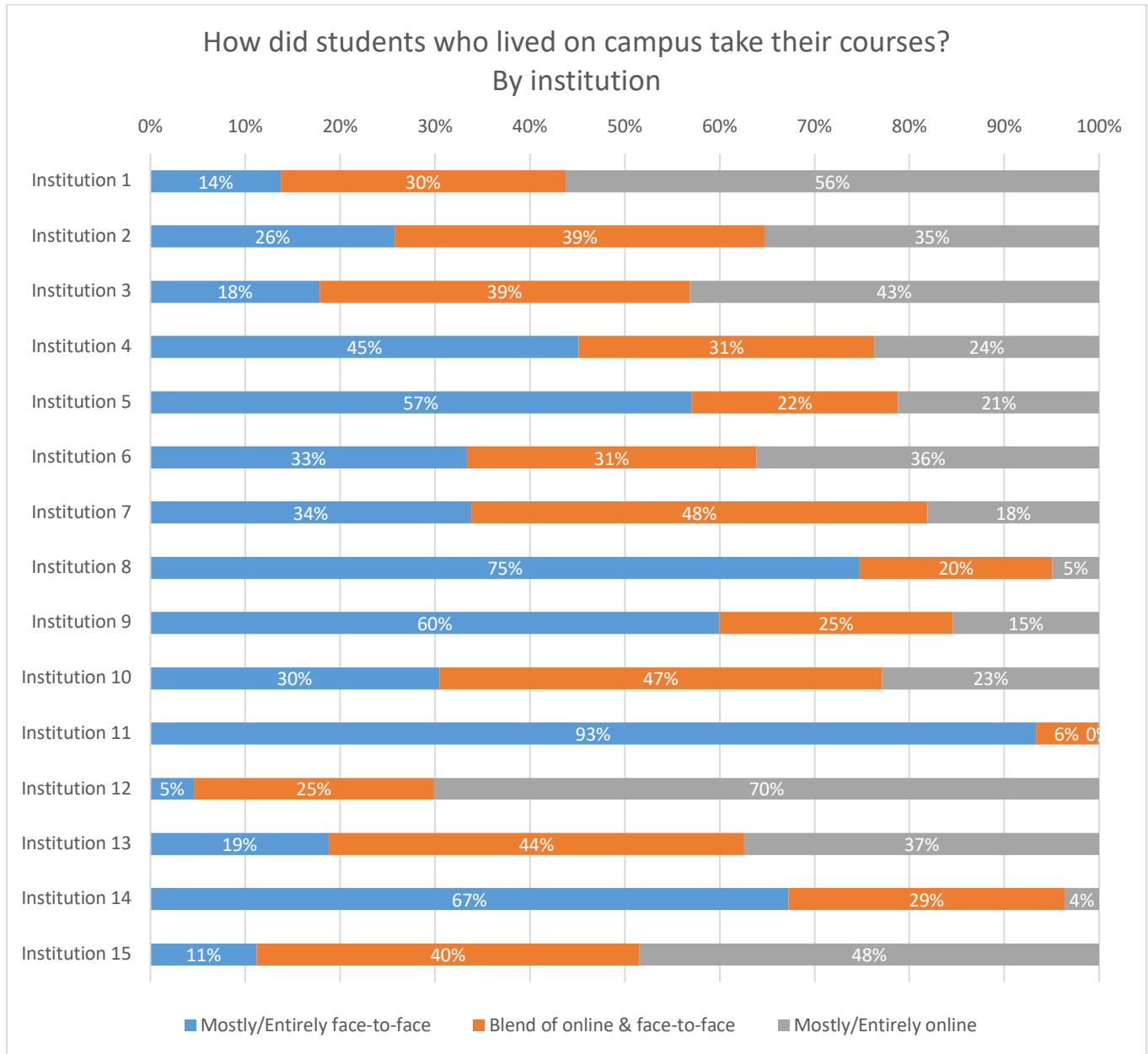
¹We've combined responses A & B as well as responses D & E in the graphs of the data from this question.



Turning to students who lived on campus, we expected they would be in face-to-face classes for most of their courses. We were wrong. As you can see in the figure below, most on-campus students took many of their courses online.



The picture gets more complicated when you look at the variation in students’ responses to this question at different institutions. The figure below provides institutional-level data from 15 colleges and universities where more than half of the students were living on campus in fall 2020. This figure shows how students who lived on campus answered the question about how their classes were being taught. Among this group of institutions, the percentage of students who lived on campus that took most or all of their classes face-to-face ranged from 5–93%. At the same time, the proportion of students who lived on campus that took mostly online classes ranged from 4–70%.



The range of learning environments within, and between, institutions that brought students back to live on campus in fall 2020 is even more complex than the previous figure indicates. Based on evolving local circumstances, many faculty changed their classes during the term from face-to-face to hybrid, or even fully online, to adapt to how their students were doing, the number of students in quarantine, or their own COVID-19 status. And even if

faculty didn't change the way they were teaching their classes, students might move from taking face-to-face classes to online classes if they contracted COVID-19, if they were placed in quarantine, or if they decided to move home during the term.

Conclusion

For faculty, staff, and administrators at institutions that brought their students back to campus in fall 2020, it will be important to be mindful of the range of learning environments that students faced. Even in normal, non-COVID times, students face more variability in their courses than we often acknowledge. Faculty who teach different sections of the same course may teach and assess student learning in very different ways. They may even cover very different content. Furthermore, faculty who teach the same course over and over often change the way they teach, the assignments they give, and the material they cover as time passes. At most institutions, the idea that there is a common Intro Psych, First-Year Comp, or Calc 101 experience is a fiction. This COVID year will only magnify the differences in what students at our institutions experience in their courses. It will be critical for us to have a better understanding of the range in what our students experienced and learned, both positive and negative, during this COVID year when we begin to build our post-COVID learning environments. Many of our comfortable, "normal times" assumptions about our students may not hold.

Of course, students who've been taking all of their courses off campus and online have also experienced and learned a range of things, some good and some not-so-good, during the pandemic. We will explore some of the experiences of online students in our next report.