



## Development of the 2020 HEDS Returning Student Survey Part of the HEDS Student Success Project

We usually design our surveys to give people useful information about what's happening at their institution and compare that with what's happening at other institutions. This survey is different. We are concerned that COVID-19-related challenges of this spring coupled with uncertainty about the future might lead students to question the value of higher education or reconsider their educational plans. We understand that students are facing tremendous stress and uncertainty now. At the same time, we worry that short-term concerns and pressures might make students lose sight of their long-term goals. With this as a backdrop, we've designed a survey to a) help students reflect on what they hope to achieve by attending college, b) prompt students to consider strategies that could improve their chances of achieving those goals, and c) foster a conversation on their goals and strategies with their advisor or other people on campus. Our goal in designing this survey is to help your students reconnect with the goals they identified for themselves when they chose to attend your institution.

Before COVID-19 hit, we were planning a pilot year for the HEDS Student Success Project in 2020-2021, including a survey to help students identify their long-term goals and think about how college would help them achieve those goals. The impact of COVID-19 on HEDS institutions reinforced the importance of pursuing a project focused on student success as it altered our plans for the pilot year. We've designed this new survey based on what we've learned about student success in fall 2019 and early winter 2020 along with what we've been seeing from our COVID-19 student survey this spring.

### Background on the HEDS Student Success Project

Although many institutions have developed programs aimed at students' success, the term "success" has typically been defined in terms of key institutional measures like progress towards degree and graduation rates. We started the HEDS Student Success Project (SSP) last summer by asking the question, "How do students define success?" Beginning in fall 2019 and continuing through mid-winter, we visited five campuses and met with students to discuss their views on success. Our conversations with students started with the following question, "Imagine some point in the future, after you're done with school and you're leading a successful life. What does your life look like? What are you doing? How are you living?"

We heard consistent patterns in the ways that students described a successful life regardless of their background or the institution they attended. Across the five campuses, students framed a successful life in terms of being "happy," and they described happiness as having meaningful work and meaningful relationships. A successful life was a "comfortable" life. Comfortable meant having a nice, but not extravagant, place to live; making enough money so they didn't stress about their finances and could pay off their college debt; and having a job that gave them vacation time and sick leave. Students also spoke about the importance of having balance in their lives and having time for relationships and activities outside of work.



Here are some examples of how students we interviewed answered the question, “Imagine some point in the future, after you’re done with school and you’re leading a successful life. What does your life look like? What are you doing? How are you living?”:

- “I have a ‘career’ doing something I thoroughly enjoy. I have a family and live in a house with enough space and a garage and a man cave. I have a plethora of options and opportunities. Not in debt. Choice. Financially independent. Emotionally and mentally stable. I can support and elevate those around me.”
- “It is a Saturday morning around 9 a.m. and I am awake not because of class, but because I am. I’m living in a 2-bedroom apartment outside of Boston. My loans are all paid off. I have two beautiful rescue dogs. I open my laptop and self-schedule my month. I also have no loans and work in a pediatric ward or adult ICU at [name deleted] Hospital. I travel and am able to financially support myself.”
- “My life is debt free, and I’m happy with a steady job and a loving family.”
- “I am happy. That’s the most important thing for me. I am happy. I’m living in a house or apartment; I make a living comfortable enough that I’m not worried about rent. I’m not living paycheck-to-paycheck. I feel comfortable, knowledgeable, and I can hold intelligent conversations with people who have different views than me. Overall, I hope that I am happy.”
- “I have a family, am happy, and enjoy going to work every day. I have minimal stress paying bills and am not worried about money and finances. I make enough to give back. I’m comfortable. I can go out to eat and take vacations with my family. My kids can play sports because I can afford it. I can provide for my family.”
- “I’d like to be on the bioethics board at a hospital. I’m also thinking of doing occupational therapy. I love kids. I hopefully have a job and my own house. I like the idea of a house, but realistically it will be an apartment somewhere along the West Coast. My family has never had their own house. We’ve always had to rent. I’m working, supporting my mom and grandparents, and I guess just living what I hope will be my best life. My end goal is to retire and live in Hawaii where I have family.”
- “I imagine myself in a stable job with a stable income, having a family, working at something that brings me joy; driven by passion.”
- “I have a job as a lawyer where work is bringing me contentment and satisfaction. I make enough income to comfortably support myself and possibly a partner, as well as care for and support loved ones, such as parents and siblings. My job provides flexible hours, and I am able to make time for and afford things like vacations and a few hobbies.”
- “Living with BALANCE. Enjoyment. I want to have a job that excites/challenges me. I want to wake up every day excited to go to work. I’m able to support myself and my family. I have hobbies outside of work life. I might have a tough day at work, but I have other things outside of work to go to. COMMUNITY.”
- “A job that I enjoy—something that makes a positive impact on others. I’m living comfortably, as in I have the ability to treat myself once in a while without having to worry. I’m having new experiences, pushing myself out of my comfort zone. Happy.”
- “Family. I believe in what the company I work for is doing and how it does it. I really enjoy my co-workers – they’re people I want to be with. I’m financially comfortable enough not to live paycheck-to-paycheck. I have a great group of close friends, more suburbs than big city, and I’m involved with [my sport] in some aspect.”

Most of the students we've talked to saw college—including their majors, internships, and programs they participated in—as a means towards these ends. It's telling that most of the students didn't label a specific profession or occupation when they described what success looked like. They didn't go to college to major in X or Y. They majored in X or Y because they thought that major was a stepping-stone to a happy and successful life.

When students talked about stress, worries, and the possibility of leaving their institutions, they framed these things as obstacles along the path to success they'd laid out for themselves. College debt, the inability to get into classes or internships that they needed, opportunities that they'd failed to grab, and concerns about the financial sacrifices their parents were making created doubts about whether their institution was a means to the good life they were seeking. Indeed, for many of the students we spoke with, college was a perilous journey. Changes in financial aid, the availability of classes, finding professors they wanted to work with, identifying internship opportunities, etc., were all potential threats to their progress along that journey. Here's a quote from one of our reports to a college we visited:

Students are trying to balance many things—schoolwork, clubs, community service, work, athletics, friends, etc.—and they aren't just trying to find time to do all these things. They want to do them all well. At the same time, students have a vision of where they want to go in their lives, and they want to make decisions that help them along that path. We kept hearing students talk about making the “right decision.” It was as if they thought there was only one path forward. They knew they'd have to make many decisions along the way, but it seemed like they felt that at each decision point there was one decision that would help them along the path while all the other possible decisions would cost them time and possibly deter them from where they wanted to go. As one student put it, he worried about “not catching the most optimal opportunity.”

## The HEDS Returning Student Survey

Our interviews at these five institutions echoed in our minds as we read comments from thousands of students in the HEDS COVID-19 Institutional Response Student Survey. As we went through their comments, we became concerned that the convulsions students are experiencing this spring from COVID-19 might break the sometimes-fragile belief they have that attending their institution is a means of achieving success. That realization led us to create a survey that would remind, and perhaps reconnect, students with their longer-term goals—the goals that often prompted them to attend college—as well as highlight behaviors and strategies that would make it more likely for them to achieve their goals in these disruptive times.

The HEDS Returning Student Survey includes the following:

1. The open-ended “imagine some point in your future” question about living a successful life that we used in our interviews with students in fall 2019-winter 2020.
2. A question on desirable post-college outcomes that is based on what we heard in our conversations with students about what they wanted to achieve by graduating from college.



3. A question on worries and/or concerns about post-college outcomes that is based, once again, on what we've heard in our interviews with students.
4. A set of questions about resilience strategies using response options based on Martin and Marsh's 5-C model of Academic Resilience and two factors in Cassidy's Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30).<sup>1</sup>
5. The opportunity for students to share their survey responses with people or offices on campus (e.g., their advisor, an office that supports student success endeavors) so they can have a conversation about their goals and strategies.
6. Immediate feedback to students on how their responses to questions about: a) ways that college can help them achieve their goals, b) worries and concerns they have when they think about life after college, and c) resilience strategies compare with those of other students.

The survey is designed for students who will continue their studies this fall. The survey is free for HEDS institutions and \$750 for institutions that do not belong to HEDS.

---

<sup>1</sup> Martin, A. J. & Marsh, H. W. (2006). Academic resilience and its psychological and educational correlates: A construct validity approach. *Psychology in the Schools*, 43, 267-281.

Cassidy, S. (2016). The Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30): A new multidimensional construct measure. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01787>

For related information see:

Martin, A. J., Colmar, S. H., Davey, L.A., & Marsh, H.W. (2010). Longitudinal modelling of academic buoyancy and motivation: Do the '5Cs' hold up over time? *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 80, 473-496.

Holdsworth, S., Turner, M. & Scott-Young, C. M. (2018). ... Not drowning, waving. Resilience and university: a student perspective. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43, 1837-1853.