

Fall 2020

# **Experiences and Needs of International Students at Minnesota State University Mankato**

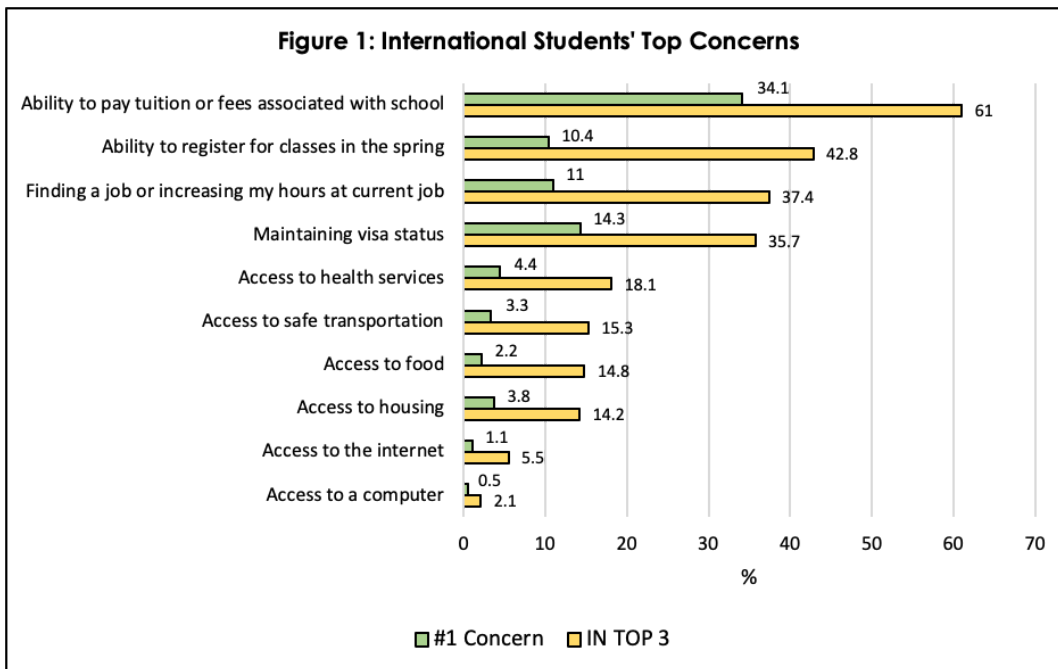
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# Executive Summary

In the summer of 2020, a survey was conducted to assess the impact of the novel coronavirus on the circumstances of international students at Minnesota State University Mankato. Since the release of that report there have been efforts to help international students and a new semester has started. The new semester has come with new modes of learning, as well as new opportunities and challenges for international students. Therefore, this survey was conducted to assess the current needs of international students at Minnesota State Mankato and to determine to the degree to which earlier initiatives have been effective.

## TOP CONCERNS



RESPONDENTS STUDYING IN MANKATO WERE ASKED ABOUT THEIR TOP THREE CONCERNS AT THIS TIME. PAYING TUITION, REGISTERING FOR SPRING CLASSES (WHICH REQUIRES STUDENTS TO PAY OFF ALL BUT \$750 OF THEIR TUITION BALANCE), FINDING A JOB OR INCREASING HOURS AT WORK, AND MAINTAINING VISA STATUS ARE NOTED MOST FREQUENTLY AMONG THEIR TOP THREE CONCERNS.

## FINANCIAL SUPPORT

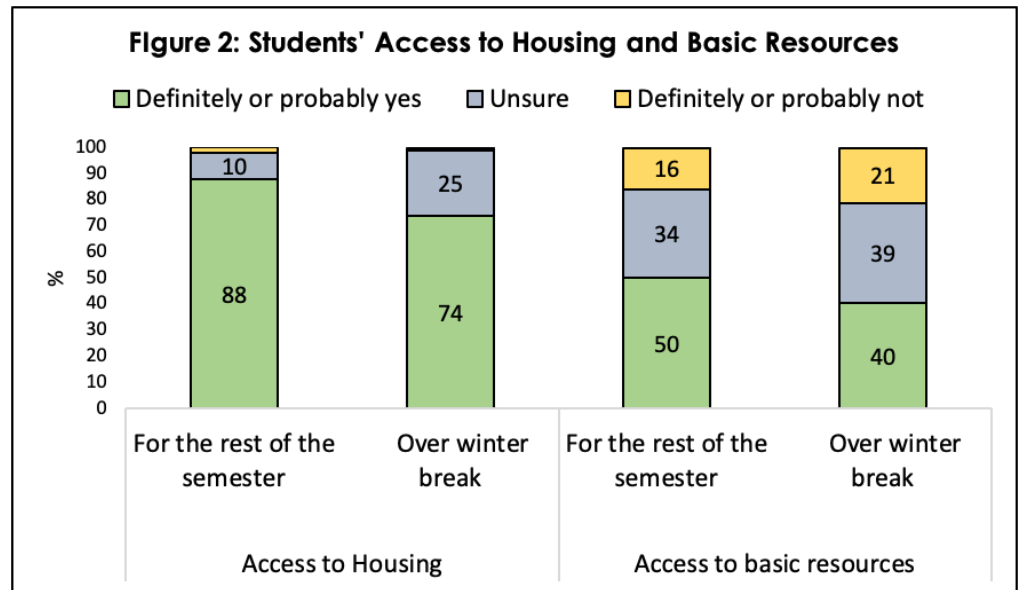
**52%** Percentage of respondents studying in Mankato who are employed by the University

**53%** Percentage of respondents studying in Mankato who receive financial support from family

**30%** Percentage of respondents studying in Mankato who are both unemployed and do not have financial support from family.

# ACCESS TO NECESSITIES

RESPONDENTS WHO ARE STUDYING IN MANKATO WERE ASKED ABOUT THEIR ACCESS TO BASIC RESOURCES AND HOUSING. HALF OF RESPONDENTS WERE EITHER UNSURE OR DID NOT THINK THEY WOULD HAVE ACCESS TO BASIC RESOURCES FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE SEMESTER; MORE THAN HALF WORRY THEY WILL NOT HAVE BASIC NECESSITIES OVER WINTER BREAK.



# TRANSPORTATION

**57%**

Percentage of respondents studying in Mankato who take the bus.

**77%**

Percentage of respondents taking the bus who think there is adequate service to the grocery store

**72%**

Percentage of respondents of respondents taking the bus who think that weekend bus service is inadequate

# EMPLOYMENT

RESPONSES TO THE SURVEY INDICATE THAT A KEY REASON FOR STUDENTS' FINANCIAL STRAIN MAY BE UNEMPLOYMENT AND UNDEREMPLOYMENT. SINCE VISA RESTRICTIONS LIMIT MOST INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS STUDYING IN THE US TO WORKING ONLY 20 HOURS/WEEK AT ON CAMPUS JOBS, THE UNIVERSITY SHOULD WORK TO ENSURE JOB OPPORTUNITIES ARE AVAILABLE AND ACCESSIBLE.

- Only **52%** of respondents studying in Mankato are employed at the University.
- Of those, **70%** indicate they would like to work more hours and **22%** are working fewer than 16 hours per week

**64%**

THE PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO HAVE SOUGHT EMPLOYMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY THAT REPORTED NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES WITH THE PROCESS.

# RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNIVERSITY

**87%**

THE PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS, BOTH IN MANKATO AND STUDYING REMOTELY, WHO THINK THAT MINNESOTA STATE MANKATO SHOULD DO MORE TO HELP INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS.

## Background

In the summer of 2020, a survey was conducted to assess the impact of the novel coronavirus on the circumstances of international students at Minnesota State University Mankato. That survey also sought to identify ways to help these students.<sup>1</sup>

Since the release of that report there have been efforts to help international students and a new semester has started. The new semester has come with new modes of learning, as well as new opportunities and challenges for international students, amidst the continuing global pandemic. It is therefore important to assess the current needs of international students at Minnesota State Mankato to determine to the degree to which earlier initiatives have helped and what students' current needs are.

All international students at Minnesota State Mankato were invited to participate in the survey. Though most of these students live and study in the Mankato, Minnesota area, there are some students who are currently studying remotely, either in their home country or living in the US away from the Mankato area. Most of the survey questions were relevant only to those students currently residing in the Mankato area, as these are the students who are directly impacted by and have access to many of the resources asked about in the survey, such as public transportation in Mankato, local food resources, and on campus health services, etc. Therefore, the majority of this report focuses *only* on international students in the Mankato area. For this reason:

**When discussing report findings this report is referring only to respondents and students who are studying and living in the Mankato area, unless report language specifies that a question includes students who are not in the Mankato area.**

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<sup>1</sup> The full report of the summer 2020 needs assessment is available at:  
[http://www.carolglasser.com/uploads/1/1/3/3/113395265/cornoavirus\\_impact\\_on\\_international\\_students\\_final\\_report.pdf](http://www.carolglasser.com/uploads/1/1/3/3/113395265/cornoavirus_impact_on_international_students_final_report.pdf)

## Methods

International students from Minnesota State Mankato were invited to participate in an online survey. Survey questions address finances, living situation, employment, transportation, and other topics relevant to international students' experiences.

Participants were recruited to the survey using the international student list serve provided by the Kearney Center for International Student Services (KCI) at Minnesota State Mankato. This email list contains all current international students, many former international students, as well as faculty, staff, and others who have requested to be added to the email list. The survey invitation specifically invites currently enrolled graduate and undergraduate international students to participate; a screener question on the survey filtered out respondents who were not eligible for the survey. Due to the immediate need of this data to address student needs, the survey was only in the field for one week, with a single reminder email sent to the list serve.

Respondents who did not qualify for the survey and those who completed fewer than two-thirds of the survey questions were removed from the final analysis. The current international student population in the fall 2020 semester is 1,172 students; the survey has a final sample size of 226 and a response rate of 19%.

## Respondents

Of the 226 respondents, 44 indicated they are not currently living in the Mankato area. Among those not in the Mankato area, 25% remain in Minnesota, 10% are in another US state, and 63% are living in a country other

	<b>All Respondents</b>	<b>Respondents in Mankato</b>	<b>All International Students at MNSU</b>
	%	%	%
Freshman	16	14	17
Sophomore	11	14	13
Junior	23	19	19
Senior	26	28	36
Graduate Student	22	23	13
Unsure/Other	2	2	2

than the US. In total, the international student office estimates about 120 students (10%) are currently living in countries other the US (personal communication, KCI). This means

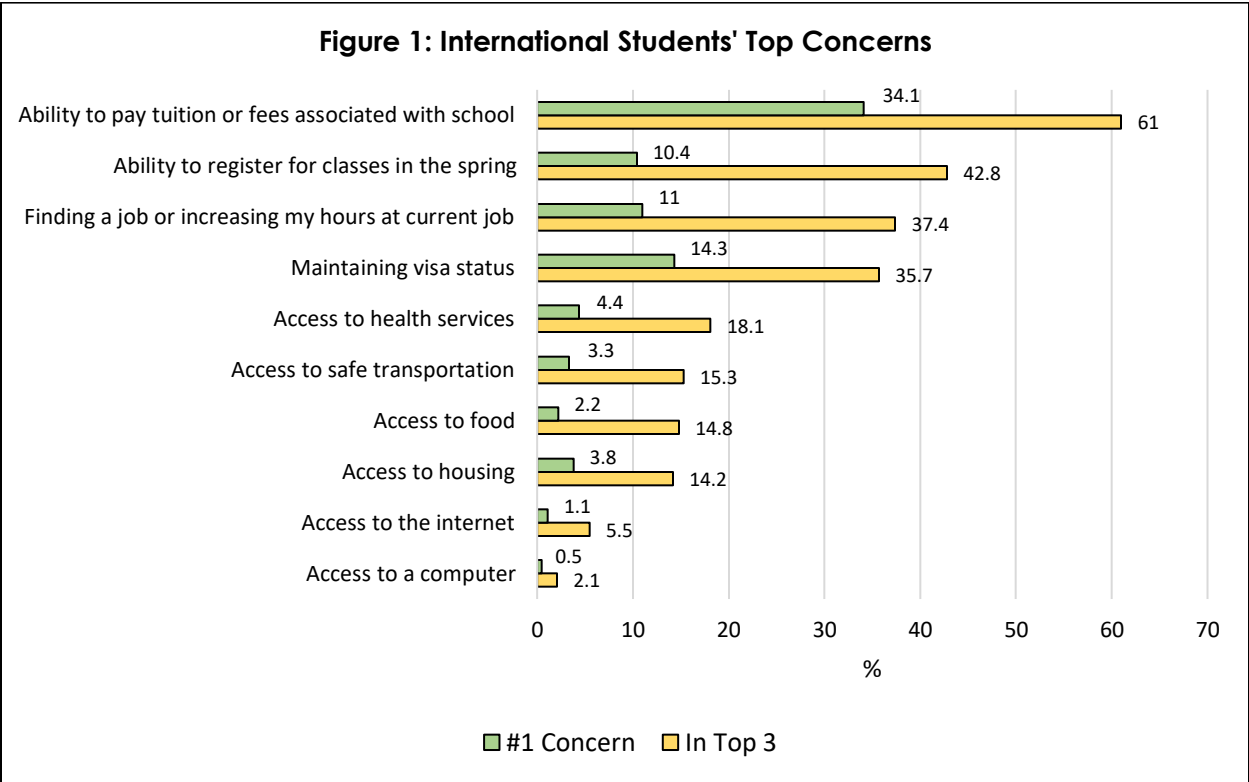
that a similar percentage of survey respondents (11%) are living outside the US as in the general international student population.

Survey respondents are generally similar to the international student population in terms of year in school. However, there is an underrepresentation of Seniors and an overrepresentation of graduate students in the survey population. This may have an impact on questions related to employment as graduate students often have different routes to employment than undergraduates through opportunities such as research and teaching assistanceships.

### **Greatest Concerns of International Students**

Respondents currently in the Mankato area were provided a list of issues that have been identified as concerns of international students at this time. They were asked to rank their top concerns by ranking their number 1, number 2, and number 3 concerns. Figure 1 presents the results of this question, indicating what percentage of students ranked each issue as among their top three concerns, as well as the percentage that ranked each item as their number 1 concern. These concerns will be discussed briefly in this section and expanded on in later sections of the report.

Ability to pay tuition and fees is the number one concern of respondents at this time, with 61% of respondents in Mankato noting this is among their top three concerns and 34% mentioning it as their number one concern. The next most frequently chosen concern of respondents was the ability to register for classes in the spring, with 43% citing this among their top three concerns. A reason students may not be able to register for spring classes is that their tuition balances are too high. When asked, 67% of respondents “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” with the statement “I am worried my current tuition balance will prevent me for registering for classes in the spring.” Minnesota State Mankato has asked the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system to raise the upper limit of the allowable balance, but this request has not been granted (personal communication, Office of the Provost).



Over a third of students also note that finding a job or increasing the number of hours they work (37.4%) and maintaining their visa status (35.7%) are among their top three concerns. It is important to note that inability to pay University fees and register for classes directly impacts international students' ability to maintain their visa status. These top concerns for students remain similar to their concerns in the summer of 2020, when respondents most frequently cited the ability to pay tuition and fees, finding a job or increasing the number of hours they work, and maintaining their visa status as their top concerns.

These concerns are all related to one another and highlight the financial strain international students are currently experiencing. Importantly, two of these are tied directly to education expenses; this should encourage the University to find ways to relieve financial stress during such a uniquely challenging time.

While less frequently listed as respondents' top three concerns, a notable number of respondents cite access to health services (18.1%), access to transportation (15.3%), access to food (14.8%), and access to housing (14.2%) as major concerns. As will be discussed later in this report, 38% of respondents are worried about where their next meal will come from. Given the high number of students experiencing food insecurity, the fact that concerns about paying school related fees ranks higher than access to food for many students, highlights the financial stress students are experiencing tied to their education.

Infrequently listed as top concerns were access to the internet (5.5%) and access to a computer (2.1%). When asked, 82% of respondents agreed that they have access to reliable internet. This suggests that students either have good internet access through their housing and/or that current programs through the University to provide access to computers and on campus internet access is working well.

In addition to being asked to rank their greatest concerns, respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement "I think the University should do more to help international students at this time." Eighty seven percent of respondents, both in Mankato and studying remotely, either "strongly" or "somewhat" agreed with this statement. This highlights that international students expect the University to be a major part of the solutions to the financial strain and other issues they are experiencing.

Respondents who thought the University should be doing more to help them were then asked to write in one thing they thought the University can do to better serve international students. Responses were received by 130 respondents, most of whom listed more than one area in which they thought the University could help. The issues most commonly cited in the comments include wanting more access to traditional funding sources (e.g. scholarships, financial aid, or grants) (33%), the cost of tuition and/or fees (25.4%), frustrations over health insurance (25.4%), and challenges with employment (23.8%). Less frequently mentioned were access to transportation (5.4%), housing (3.8%), and food (3%). Over one quarter (28.5%) of the comments also mentioned other specific issues or



concerns respondents were having. All of the comments are available in Appendix A. These comments will be discussed in more detail in relevant sections of the report below.

## Financial Situation

International students currently rely most heavily on their family and employment at the University for their financial survival, with about half of respondents indicating these are sources of financial support. A minority of students have other modes of support, including grant money from Remember Me Too (8%) and the University (4%), assistance from roommates (7%) or other sources (6%), employment outside the university (6%)<sup>2</sup>, and/or scholarships from their home country (6%).

These sources of income are not meeting many students' current needs. As this report will discuss in more detail below, while some issues such as housing insecurity and access to basic hygiene products appear to have improved since the summer, other issues brought on by financial strain remain problematic. These include food insecurity and stress over making final payments on student health insurance plans, among others. Notably, much of the financial strain evident from this survey is directly related to issues of retention and scholastic success, such as a high number of students worried about paying their tuition balances in time to register for spring classes and an inability to purchase books and other materials needed for class.

	%
Family support	53
Employment at the University	52
Grant money received from Remember Me Too	8
Assistance from roommates	7
Donations or assistance from other sources	6
Employment outside of the University	6
Scholarships from your home country	6
Emergency grant money received through the University	4
Other	4

<sup>2</sup> Please note that very few international students qualify to work outside of the university. Due to student visa regulations, most international students are only able to be employed through University.

EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES. Over the summer, employment was not available to most international students. It was hypothesized that this was a key reason that students were experiencing high levels of food and housing insecurity. Therefore, this survey asked several questions about students' experiences with employment to better understand the employment experiences of students.

While most international students qualify to work at the University, only 52% of respondents indicate they are currently employed through the university. This may be due in part to students relying on family for financial support. However, of the of the 47% of respondents who did not receive financial support from family, over half (52.7%) are also unemployed. This suggests there are students who are surviving without any clear, stable means of support.

Of the respondents indicating that they do not currently work at the university, 22% noted that they did seek employment through the University. This suggests there may be a lack of employment opportunities for students or that the routes to employment are unclear or overly challenging to maneuver.

Students who are currently employed at or indicated that they sought employment from the University were asked to write in comments about their experiences looking for jobs at Minnesota State Mankato. Eighty-five students, most of whom are currently employed at the University, submitted replies. Overall, respondents report a mix of positive, neutral and negative experiences with the employment process on campus, though two-thirds of the responses discussed negative experiences. These include being told that there are no jobs currently available when they apply, a sense that preferential treatment is given to people who are referred by friends, an overly bureaucratic and nontransparent process, and dissatisfaction with the nature of the work open to international students (e.g. food services, lack of work study opportunities). Several students also reported they get a sense that preferential treatment is given to domestic students, or that in certain jobs selection is based on country of origin. A full list of these comments is available in Appendix A.

Respondents also noted an inability to work as many hours as desired. As one survey respondent describes, both unemployment and underemployment are challenges:

“[I]t’s not easy finding a job during this time with Covid, and getting enough hours to survive is another concern.”

When asked, 70% of those students employed by Minnesota State Mankato indicated they would like to work more hours than they do. Only about half (53.9%) of these respondents are working 16-20 hours a week. About one-fifth are working 6-10 hours (18%) or 11-15 hours (20.2%), while some respondents (4.5%) are working five or fewer hours.

Scholarships, Grants and Aid. A minority of respondents indicated grants as a source of financial support. Eight percent noted receiving grants from Remember Me Too, 6% receive scholarships from their home country, and 4% have received emergency grant money from the University. No questions were asked about whether students received other types of scholarships or financial aid to indicate the total level of funding respondents are receiving. However, when asked what the University can do to better support students, one third of respondents indicated issues surrounding funding. Most often expressed was a desire to have more opportunities to apply for financial aid, scholarships, and grants. Several respondents also noted that they understand they documented their financial independence as a condition of being accepted to Minnesota State Mankato, but pointed out the pandemic has changed their financial reality:

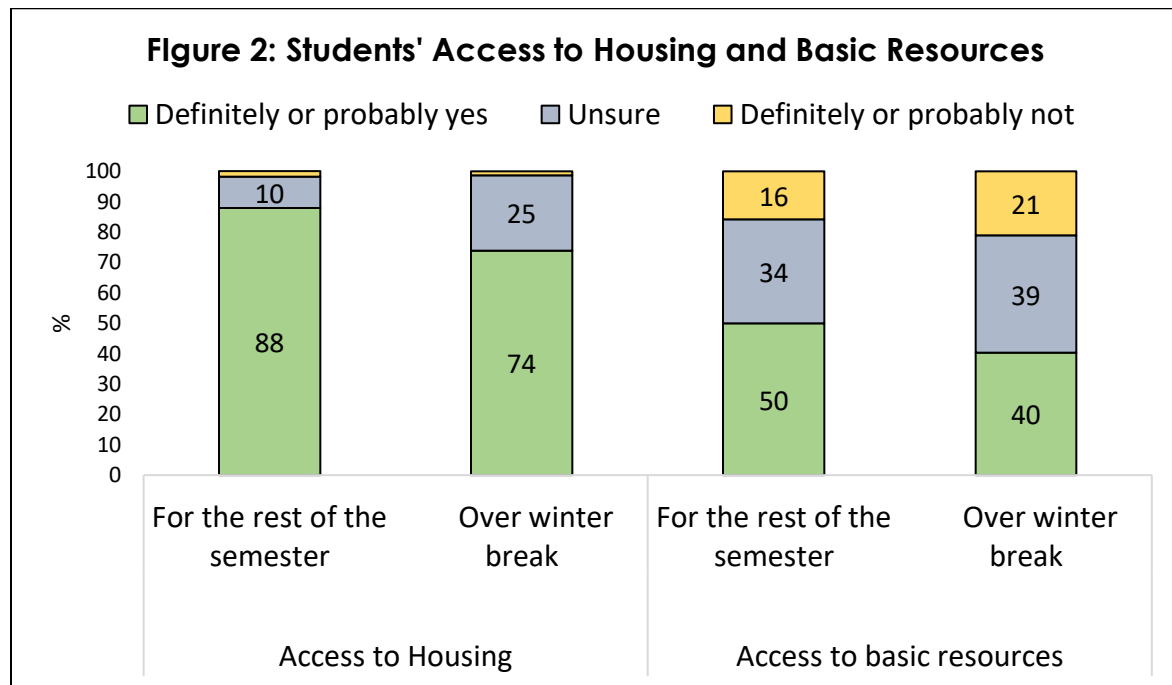
“I already have a job...I got lucky. Due to the pandemic, my parents do not have a lot of money to support me. I even apply for a scholarship next semester, and I am waiting for the answer. However, this semester I work six (6) hours a week. This is not enough to take care of myself.”

### **Access to Necessities**

Basic Necessities. Respondents lack sufficient access to some basic necessities. As Figure 2 highlights, only half of the respondents indicated that they will be able to afford their basic necessities, such as food and bills, for the rest of the semester; only 40% expect to be able to afford them over the winter break. Working on ways to continue to provide

employment or other support for international students over winter break should be addressed.

Food Insecurity. Food insecurity remains an issue for international students at Minnesota State Mankato. When asked if they agree with the statement “I worry about where my next meal will come from,” 38% “strongly” or “somewhat” agreed. This particular question was also asked of students who are not currently in the Mankato area and about 27% of these students also agree with this statement. This shows a high level of food insecurity among international students whether they are near campus or not. That levels of food insecurity are higher among the population the University can most easily serve is concerning.



Currently there are a number of efforts in the Mankato community, by Remember Me Too, and from the University to address food insecurity among students. These include, but are not limited to, food shelves (Campus Cupboard, Echo Food Shelf), occasional free farmers markets on campus, the Swipe Out Hunger program, assistance applying for SNAP benefits, and meal pick-up at Campus Kitchen. While these efforts are important, the consistently high number of students experiencing food insecurity is alarming and suggests better

promotion of currently available resources, attempts to ensure these resources are appropriate for all diets, and increasing access to food should be a top priority.<sup>3</sup>

Housing Insecurity. Several respondents indicated that they will most likely not have access to housing over the remainder of the semester and/or winter break. Another 10% are unsure if they will have housing for the remainder of the semester and 25% are uncertain if they will have housing over winter break. The number of students with housing insecurity has improved since the summer survey. Reasons for this decrease most likely include improved access to employment on campus with the start of the semester and a loss of those students with the most financial difficulties, as these were the students most likely to be unable to pay off University account balances in time to register. A number of interventions were taken after the summer survey period that are likely also contributing to this improvement. The University provided temporary housing to a few dozen students at the end of the summer, which may have helped some financially recover and establish more secure housing. In addition, Remember Me Too secured several grants and initiated fundraising efforts; they were able to provide over \$42,000 of rental assistance to help 81 students with housing expenses.

Regardless of these improvements, any student experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity should be a major concern, particularly in the case of international students who are less likely to have family nearby for support. It is also important to note that just because students have housing does not mean they could not benefit from housing support. Some students have to choose between housing and other expenses and can have a direct impact on student success and retention. One respondent describes this struggle:

...[J]ust because I am not struggling to pay rent doesn't mean I am not struggling. I had to choose between rent and books for this semester and I

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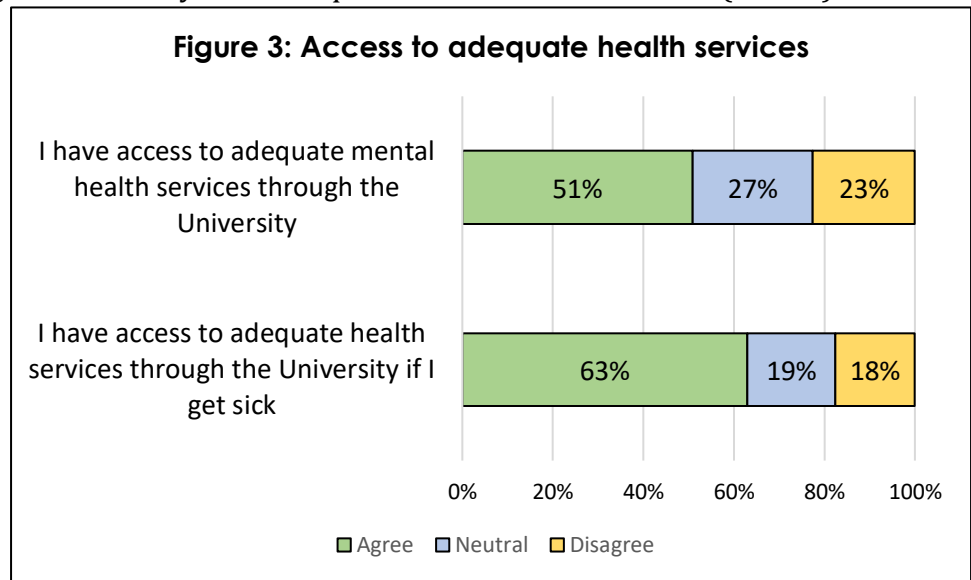
<sup>3</sup> Questions were asked to assess students' use and knowledge of various resources, including employment, grants, and food access resources. The answer patterns on employment related items included in this question had low levels internal validity with other survey items, suggesting confusing question wording. Therefore, responses to these items should be interpreted cautiously. Approaching these findings with that in mind, responses to these questions indicate that fewer than half respondents were aware of any of the available food assistance resources such as Campus Kitchen, Campus Cupboard, Echo Food Shelf, and Swipe Out Hunger. Responses also indicated very low utilization of these services.

chose rent so I don't have books for my courses and it clearly shows in my grades but I can't afford them at this moment because it was clearly a choice I had to make.

The issue of housing insecurity will need ongoing attention.

Access to Health Resources. Respondents were also asked if they felt they had adequate access to mental and physical health care services through the University (see Figure 3). Over half agreed that they have adequate mental health services (50.8%) and general health

services (62.9%) through the University. A notable number, however, did not agree (17.6% and 22.5%, respectively) these services are adequate. Another 27% of respondents



indicate they “neither agree nor disagree” that they have adequate access to mental health services and 19% are neutral about their access to general health services. It may also be that students who are neutral have not had to seek these services; it should be a priority to ensure they know how to access these services and that the services have the capacity to accommodate them.

Accessing health services is placing a financial strain on students. A majority (71.6%) of respondents “strongly” or “somewhat” agreed with the statement: “I am not sure if I will be able to afford my health insurance payment that is due in December.” In December international students will have a \$900 payment due to retain their health insurance. They will need to pay this to keep their account balances low enough to register for spring

classes and to remain in legal status under their student visas, not to mention to have basic healthcare during a global pandemic.

The health insurance payment was a concern of students in the summer as well and the University took steps to assist. In the past, a payment of \$1,801 was due in August. To assist students with this payment the University made arrangements so that students could pay this fee in two installments—\$901 in August and \$900 in December. Though this effort was important and certainly helped students through the fall semester, it is clear many will continue to struggle. As one student simply states:

“[P]aying for insurance before the end of the fall of semester is something that many of us can't afford right now.”

The University has indicated that they are under a contract with the insurance provider but will work in the next contract that is established for student insurance coverage to make having payments made in installments, rather than lump sum payments, a priority (personal communication, Office of the Provost).

Transportation. Walking was the form of transportation used most (70.3%) by respondents. This was followed by taking the bus (57.1%), getting rides from friends (32.4%), using their own vehicle (19.8%), and biking (11.0%). Those students who indicated that they take the bus were asked questions to assess their satisfaction with the current bus service. Overall, some aspects of the bus service seem to be working well while other aspects can be improved to better meet respondents' needs.

A majority (77.4%) of respondents indicate they “strongly” or “somewhat” agree that there is adequate bus service to the grocery store. About half (52.0%) “strongly” or “somewhat” agree that the bus service in Mankato takes them to the places they want to go. The most improvement can come in terms of weekend service and making busses safer during the novel coronavirus pandemic. Seventy two percent of respondents “strongly” or “somewhat”

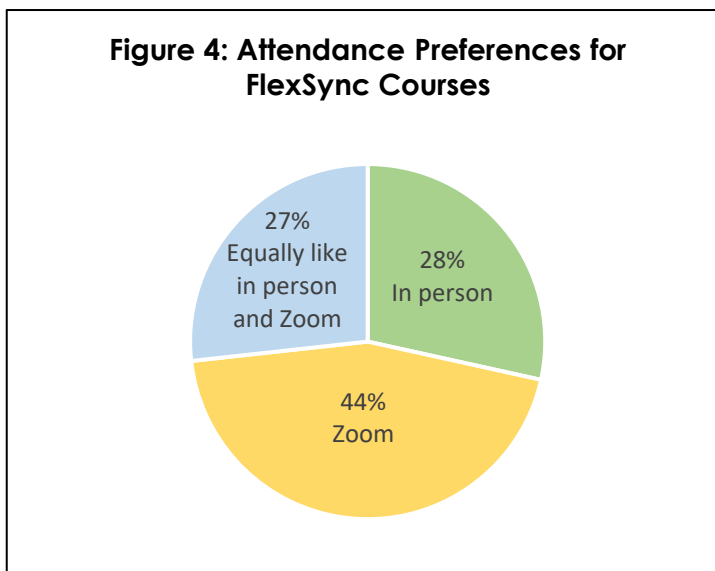
agree that there is not enough bus service on the weekends and 60% worry about their safety on the bus due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Other Resources. Most respondents (69.7%) also indicate they have access to basic hygiene products. However, this still leaves some students without access. Any opportunities to provide resources that students can pick up, such as food pick up, welcome packets, or free resources available in student spaces, should include basic hygiene products.

### Educational Experiences

Due to the novel coronavirus, the new semester has come with new modes of teaching. While certain classes are still held in person, most classes at the University are being taught completely or partially online. The main modes of course dissemination are as follows:

- **In-person:** These courses primarily meet in a face to face setting on campus.
- **Online, synchronous:** These courses are fully online and everyone meets online at a designated time and day.
- **Online, asynchronous:** These courses are fully online and do NOT have a designated meeting time.
- **FlexSync/ HyFlex:** These are courses in which the instructor typically teaches in a classroom at the same time and days each week; students can choose to attend either in person or virtually via Zoom



Respondents are taking classes in a variety of these formats. Twenty-three percent are taking at least one in-person class, with about 49% taking online synchronous classes, 61% taking online asynchronous classes, and 64% taking a FlexSync course. The FlexSync course format is new at Minnesota State Mankato this semester, so students were asked



how they prefer to attend these classes—in person, online over Zoom, or in both formats. A plurality of students (44.4%) prefer to attend these classes remotely over Zoom, while about 28% prefer attending in person and 27% have no preference.

Financial stress among students appears to be an important factor impacting their educational experiences. Forty one percent of respondents in Mankato indicate they “strongly” or “somewhat” disagree with the statement “I am able to afford books and other required materials for my courses.” Presumably, one strategy for some students who are financially insecure is to study remotely and to live away from Mankato in locations where they might have work opportunities or other forms of support. However, about 35% of respondents who live and study away Mankato also indicate they “strongly” or “somewhat” disagree with this statement.

Concerns over tuition and/or fees were mentioned by one quarter of the respondents when asked to discuss what they think the University can best do to serve international students at this time. In addition, about 67% of respondents in Mankato and 60% of those living away from Mankato “strongly” or “somewhat” agree they are worried their current tuition balance will prevent them from registering for classes in the spring. This highlights the serious financial strain international students are experiencing during this pandemic.

These concerns over finances can cause students extreme stress, as one respondent explains:

“My experience at the beginning was okay but then things started to go downwards when family started having problems and [I] had to figure out how to pay the rest of my tuition and bills. This started affecting my mental health and classes and [to] date, I am struggling to balance them. It is hard to concentrate on studies when you worry about your next meal and when you worry if you will be able to register the next semester.”

## Conclusion

"I know before we came to the US we provided documentation showing that we are financially strong. However, circumstances can change which is out of our control and [I] think the school can do better to help. Thousands of international students are living in fear not because of food or cloths but because of their student status. We worry because some of us this is our only chance to get an education and some are the only support to their family. Its hard already being away from family and now this... [I] am worried whether or not [I] am going to continue this spring semester because emails about the insurance has been going round. We really need help."

As the above comment made by a survey respondent highlights, international students at Minnesota State Mankato are financially strained. This financial strain is coming from multiple sources and has serious impacts on students' overall wellbeing and success in school, as well as for student retention at the University.

This survey reveals that some areas are improving for international students—housing insecurity has decreased and more students have access to basic hygiene compared to this summer. Additionally, students appear to be more satisfied with some aspects of public bus service than initially hypothesized.

Though these improvements are to be celebrated, there are still major issues that need to be addressed. Survey results indicate that the University can possibly do the most for international students by improving on campus employment. The University should also continue finding ways to address alleviating food insecurity, making health insurance fees more manageable, and finding other ways to reduce students' financial strain. Remember Me Too can work with the University to address these issues. Remember Me Too and community groups should also continue to assist students with financial support for housing, as this seems to have helped reduced some of the housing insecurity over the summer, as well as continuing their work providing food access and other resources.

**[END OF REPORT]**

## **APPENDIX A: Open Ended Comments**

Responses to the open ended questions referred to in the report are available upon request to those who are working directly on issues that will help the international student population at Minnesota State Mankato. Comments have been edited where needed to protect the anonymity of respondents. If you would like a copy of the appendix please contact the report author at [carol.glasser@mnsu.edu](mailto:carol.glasser@mnsu.edu).