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Graduate and Professional Students' Financial Hardships During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence from the gradSERU COVID-19 Survey

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gradSERU COVID-19 SURVEY

Graduate and Professional Students' Financial Hardships During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence from the gradSERU COVID-19 Survey

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While approximately one-third of graduate and professional students did not experience financial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic, 27% experienced unexpected increases in their living expenses, 24% experienced unexpected increases in spending for technology, and 24% experienced a loss or reduction in income from other family members (Figure 1). According to the Graduate Student Experience in the Research University (gradSERU) COVID-19 survey of 7,690 graduate and professional students enrolled at five large, public research universities, an additional 19% experienced the loss or cancellation of an expected job or internship offer and 16% experienced loss of wages from off-campus employment (Figure 1).

Furthermore, the gradSERU COVID-19 survey data suggest that fewer graduate and professional students experienced additional hardships, including loss of wages from on-campus employment (8%), loss or reduction of a scholarship (3%), loss or reduction of insurance coverage (2%), loss or reduction of grant aid (2%), and loss or reduction of student loan aid (1%) (Figure 2).

There are also disparities in the financial hardships encountered by students based upon students' parental education levels, caretaking responsibilities for adults or children, and social class background, as reported below.

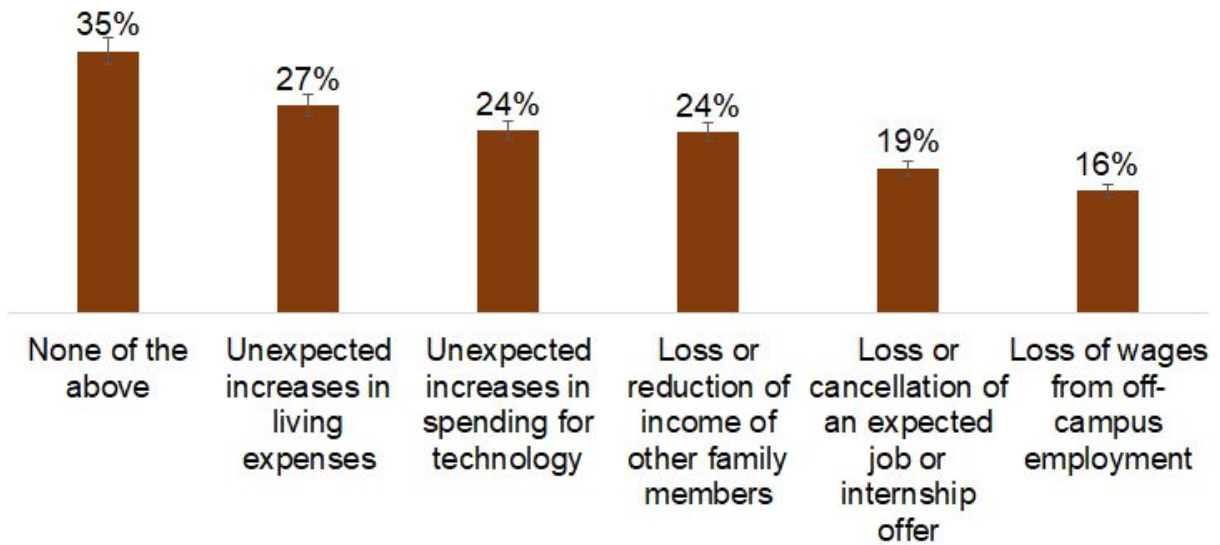


Figure 1. Graduate and professional students' financial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic.

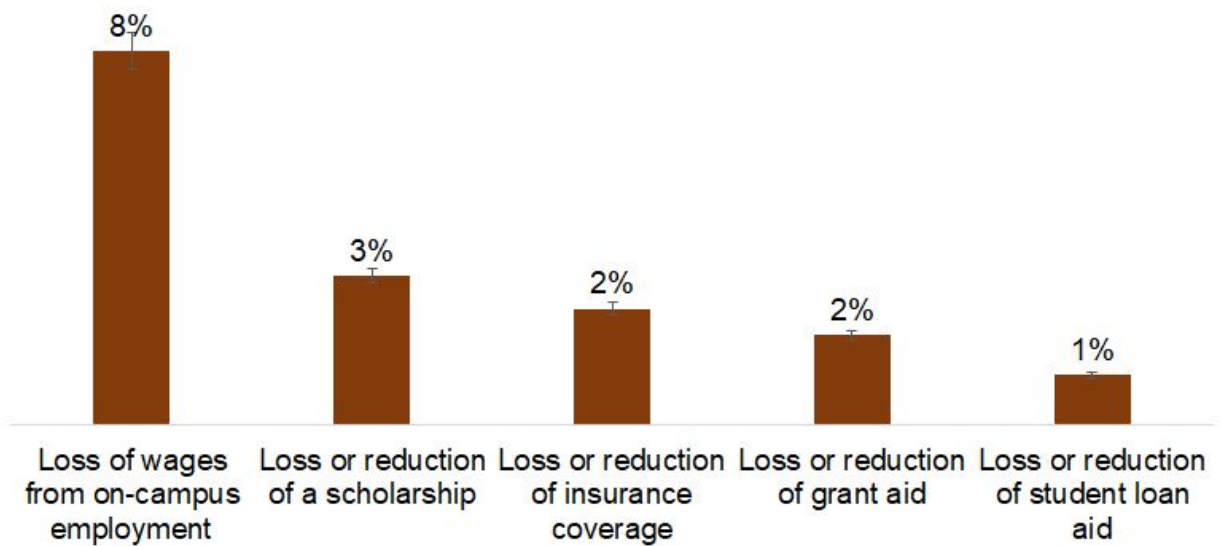


Figure 2. Graduate and professional students' financial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Disparities by Parental Education

The results of the survey suggest that first-generation graduate and professional students—those whose parents have not earned a bachelor’s degree or higher—were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely than their continuing generation peers to experience unexpected increases in spending for technology, loss or reduction in a scholarship, loss of reduction of insurance coverage, and loss or reduction of income from other family members (Figure 3). First-generation students constituted one-quarter of the sample.

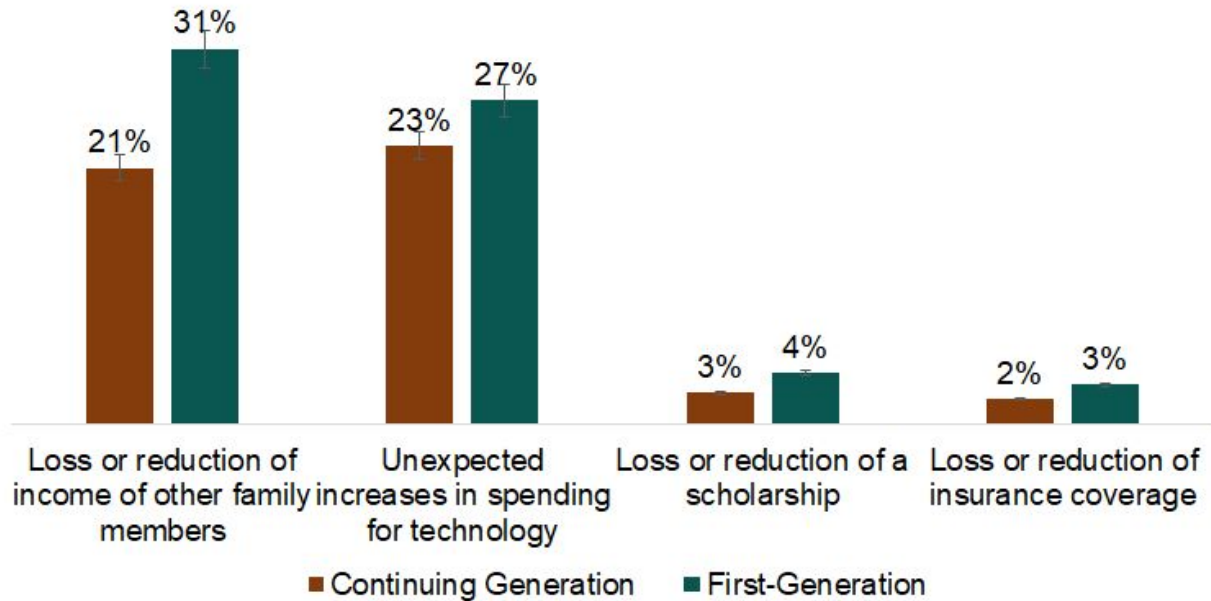


Figure 3. Graduate and professional students’ financial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic by their parental education.

Disparities by Child Caretaking Status

The results of the survey also suggest that students who were responsible for caring for children during the pandemic were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely than their peers to experience loss or reduction in a scholarship, loss or reduction of student loan aid, and loss or reduction of income from other family members (Figure 4). Students who were responsible for taking care of children during the pandemic were also significantly more likely to select the “other, please specify” option and a review of their qualitative comments suggests that the most common themes provided by those students include child care costs, family-related illnesses and expenses, and living expenses. In the sample, 14% of graduate and professional students were responsible for caring for children during the pandemic.

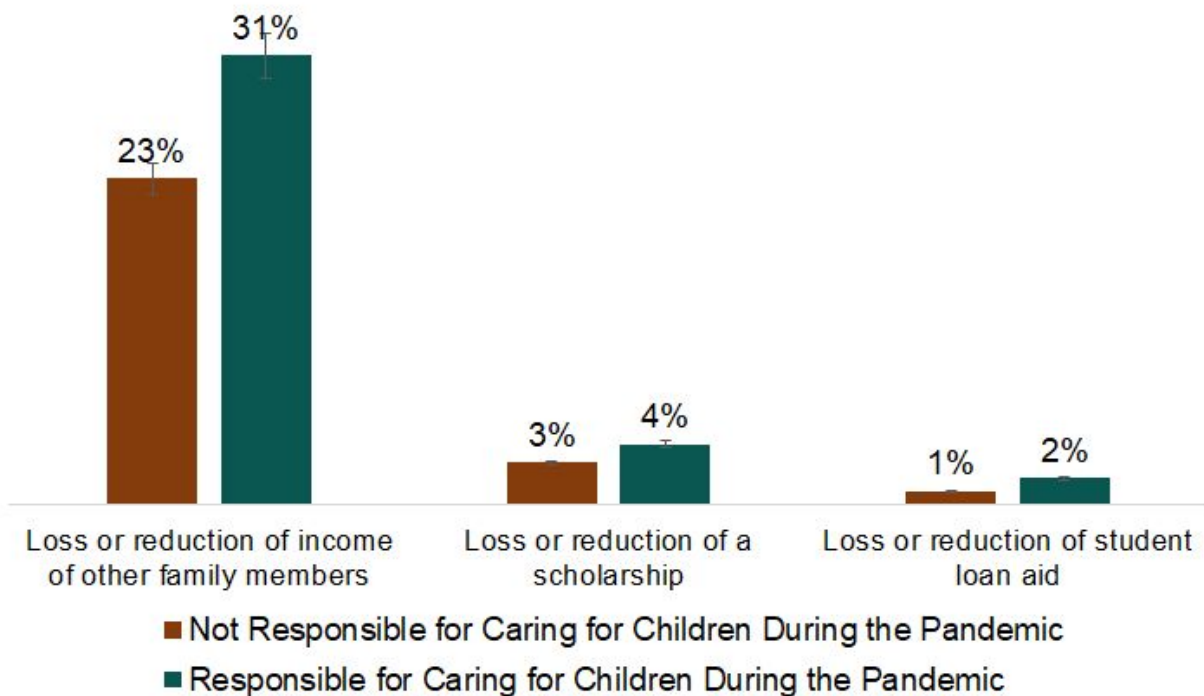


Figure 4. Graduate and professional students' financial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic by their child caretaking responsibilities.

Disparities by Adult Caretaking Status

Students who were responsible for caring for other adults during the pandemic were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely than their peers to experience all of the financial hardships (Figures 5 and 6). Most notably, students who were responsible for caring for adults were twice as likely to experience a loss or reduction of income from other family members, loss or reduction in insurance coverage, and loss or reduction of grant aid, and loss or reduction in student loan aid. In our sample, 18% of graduate and professional students were responsible for caring for other adults during the COVID-19 pandemic.

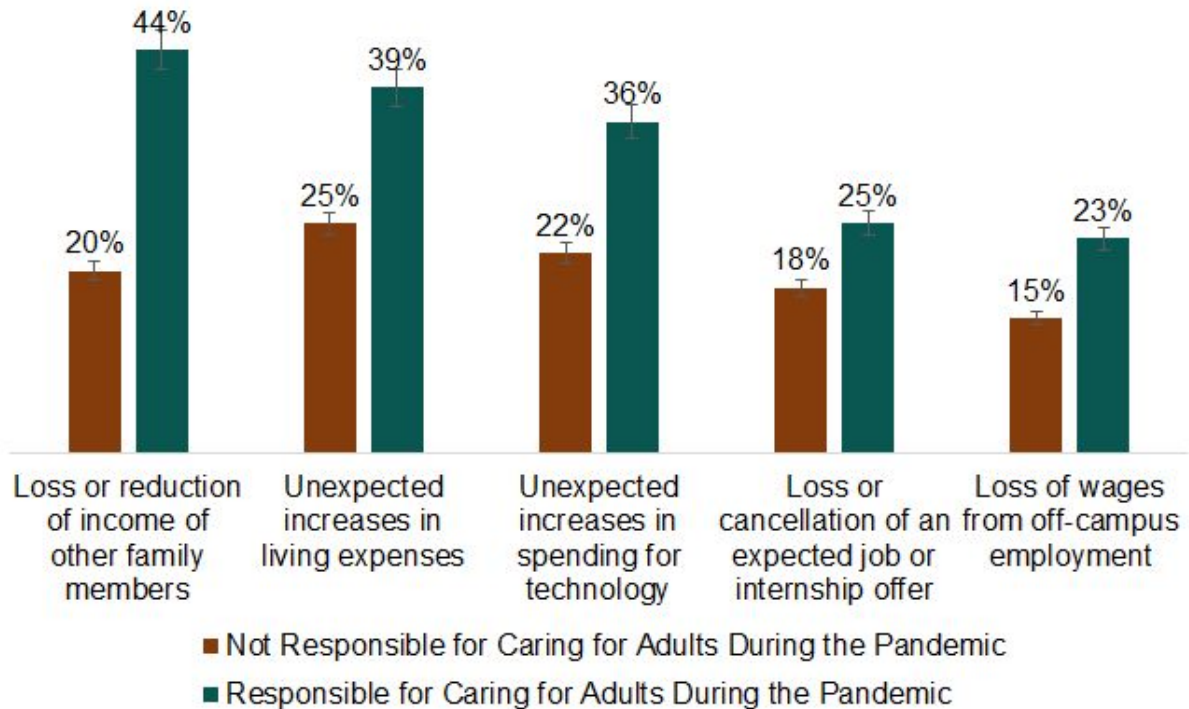


Figure 5. Graduate and professional students' financial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic by their adult caretaking responsibilities.

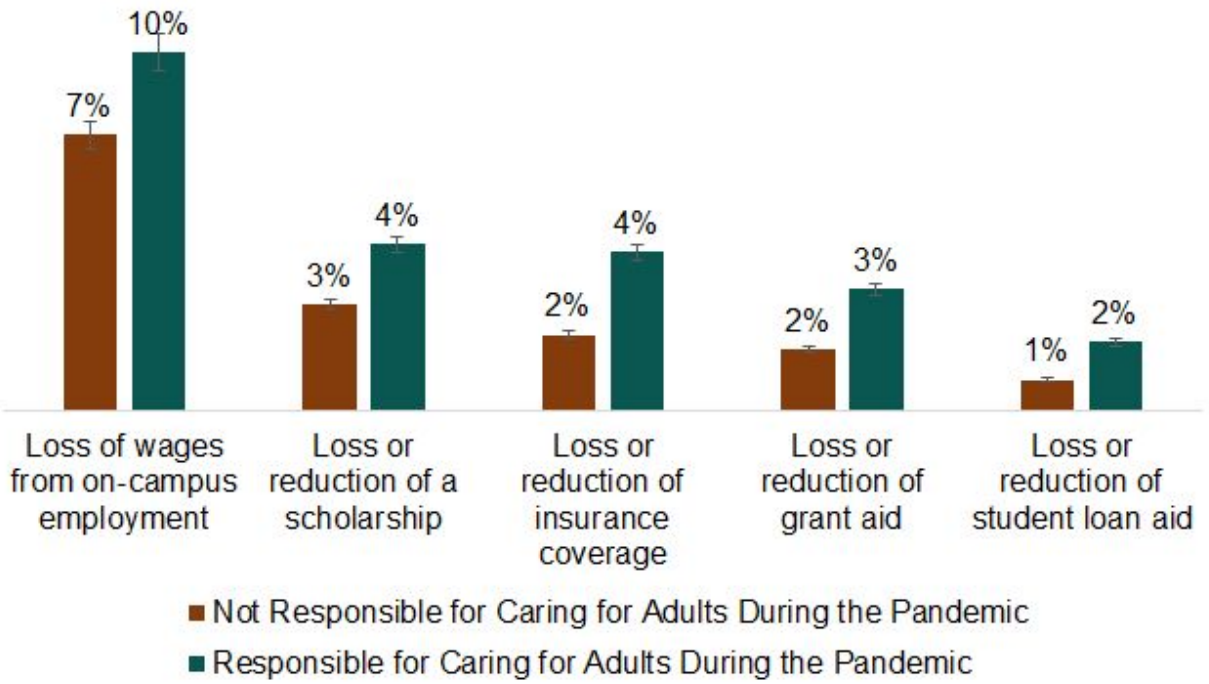


Figure 6. Graduate and professional students' financial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic by their adult caretaking responsibilities.

Disparities by Social Class

Students from low-income or poor and working-class students were also significantly ($p < .05$) more likely than their middle/upper-class peers to experience nearly all of the financial hardships (Figures 7-9). For instance, low-income or poor students were almost twice as likely as upper-middle or professional-middle class students to experience unexpected increases in spending for technology (37% compared to 19%), unexpected increases in living expenses (36% compared to 21%), and loss or reduction of income from other family members (35% compared to 16%) (Figure 7). Low-income or poor students were also over three times more likely than wealthy students to indicate that they experienced a loss or reduction of income from other family members (35% compared to 11%).

Low-income or poor students were also most likely to have experienced the loss of wages from off-campus employment, loss or reduction in scholarships, insurance coverage, and student loan aid compared to their peers from higher social class backgrounds (Figures 8 and 9). In the sample, 8% of students identified as low-income or poor, 22% working-class, 43% middle-class, 26% upper-middle or professional-middle class, and 1% wealthy.

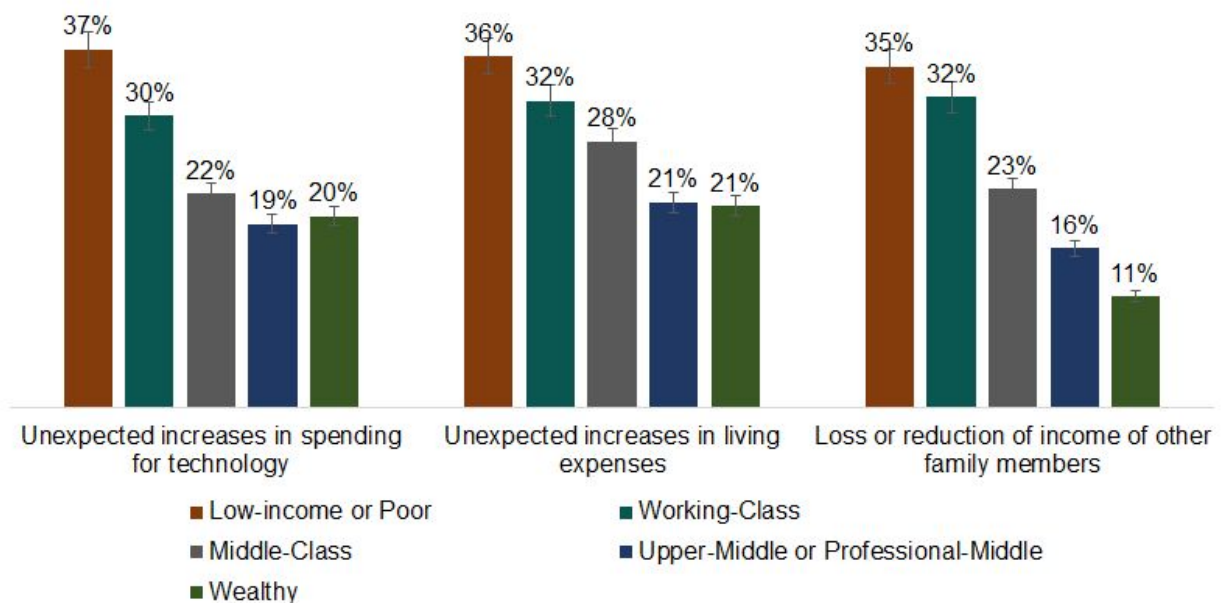


Figure 7. Graduate and professional students' financial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic by their social class.

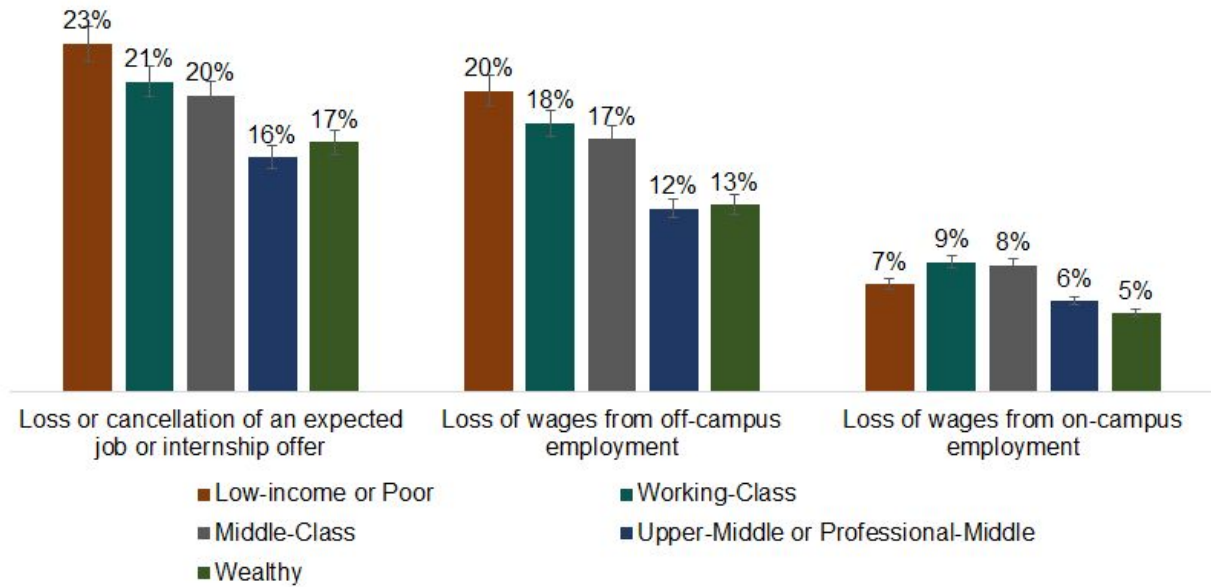


Figure 8. Graduate and professional students' financial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic by their social class.

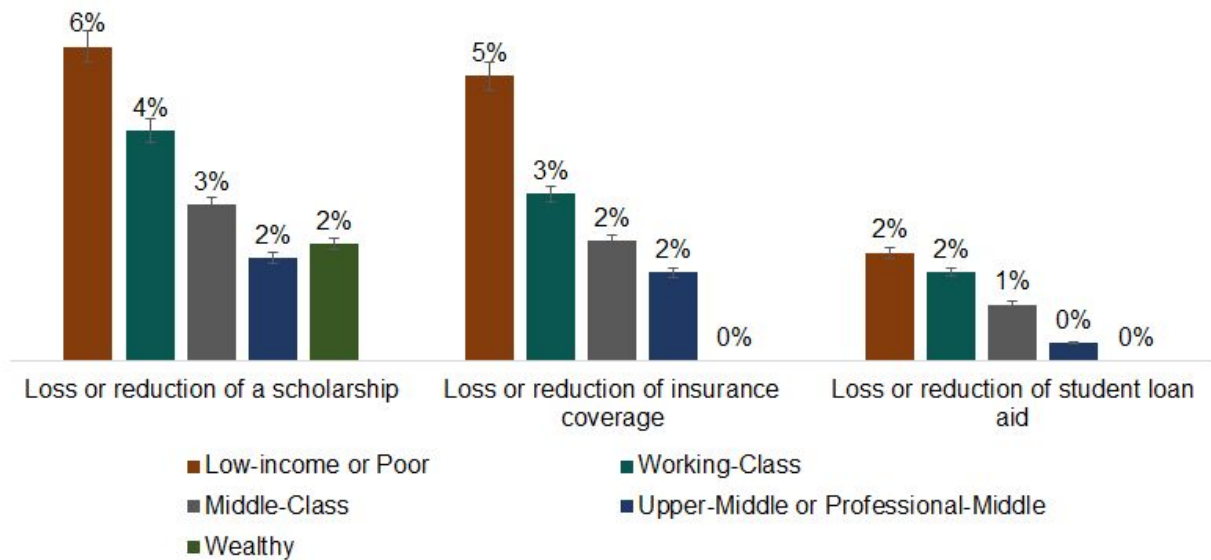


Figure 9. Graduate and professional students' financial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic by their social class.

Conclusion

Overall, the preliminary results of our survey suggest that many groups experienced significant financial hardships compared to their peers that place them at a continued disadvantage in graduate and professional education; specifically, first-generation students, students who were caregivers to children, students who were caregivers to adults, and students from lower social class backgrounds were far more likely to experience a wider array of financial hardships as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Higher education administrators, faculty, and practitioners should be attentive to those disparities in financial hardships encountered by students and proactively work to address their needs by taking the following steps:

- Ensuring financially marginalized students have access to the technology needed to access online education
- Seeking ways to help students reinstate scholarships or student loan aid
- Providing alternatives to off-campus employment to help students with funding their education
- Providing career development and job assistance resources or services to students' extended families
- Assist students with living expenses, including helping students and their families to access food pantries on campus or receive housing assistance (such as rental reduction programs or housing scholarships)
- Offer low-cost medical insurance programs or assisting students with obtaining insurance through local insurance marketplaces

About the gradSERU COVID-19 Survey

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium is currently administering a special survey on the impact of COVID-19 on student experience at 10 U.S. public research universities. The gradSERU COVID-19 Survey assesses five areas to better understand undergraduates, graduates, and professional students' experiences during the global pandemic: 1) students' transition to remote instruction, 2) the financial impact of COVID-19 for students, 3) students' health and wellbeing during the pandemic, 4) students' belonging and engagement, and 5) students' future plans. You can access the full survey instrument [here](#).

Sample

The survey was a census survey administered to graduate and professional students at five large, public research universities. The data collection started in May and is still ongoing at most universities. The report uses data from 7,690 graduate and professional students who completed the survey as of June 11, 2020. The response rate as of June 11, 2020 was 9-22% at the respective institutions.

About the SERU Consortium

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium is an academic and policy research collaboration based at Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California – Berkeley (CSHE) working in partnership with the University of Minnesota and partner institutions. More information about the gradSERU survey is available at www.gradseru.org.

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