

# Responding to the Ongoing COVID-19 Crisis and to Calls for Racial Justice

A Survey of College and  
University Presidents

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# Introduction

In March 2020, as states were declaring public health emergencies and as the World Health Organization declared the global outbreak of COVID-19 to be a pandemic, college and university campuses across the country were closed and the sudden and historic transition to remote learning and online education got underway. To gain insights into the thinking of campus leaders as they planned to respond strategically to the financial fallout from this unprecedented crisis for higher education, AAC&U partnered with ABC Insights and rpk GROUP to survey members of the AAC&U Presidents' Trust, a broad and diverse network of higher education leaders representing four-year public and private institutions and two-year community colleges. The findings from that March survey indicated that the initial response of most college and university presidents of the 142 presidents responding to the survey (a response rate of 49.8%) was to “hunker down” and “weather the storm” by laying off administrative staff, implementing hiring freezes, and reexamining operational processes to identify efficiencies. The majority of presidents of four-year public institutions (53 percent) and two-year institutions (67 percent) did not then anticipate cuts to academic programs, while a slight majority of presidents (52 percent) of four-year private institutions anticipated making at least some such cuts.

Four months later, the storm has not ended; the global pandemic continues to spread. If anything, the winds have intensified and shifted directions. The killing of George Floyd in late May sparked a national movement for racial justice, resulting in levels of political protest not seen since the 1960s. With the spring semester behind them, and with planning for the fall well underway, how have the views and priorities of college and university presidents changed with respect to the financial impact of the COVID-19 crisis? And how are they planning to respond to calls for racial justice and to address anti-Black racism within their institutions and on their campuses?

To explore these questions, AAC&U again partnered with ABC Insights to conduct a follow-up survey of members of the AAC&U Presidents Trust. Between June 25 and July 12, 2020, 119 college and university presidents responded to the follow-up survey (a 44.7 percent response rate). The majority of respondents were presidents of four-year private colleges or universities (55 percent) with fewer than five thousand students; presidents of medium-to-large public universities were the next largest group of respondents (38 percent).

Community college presidents of medium-to-large institutions were the smallest group of respondents in both the follow-up (July) and the initial (March) surveys, comprising 7 percent and 19 percent, respectively, of the total sample. The AAC&U Presidents' Trust is a membership group committed to advancing and advocating the value of a liberal education for all students in recognition of dual commitments to equity and to maintaining a thriving democracy.

### **Major Findings**

Four months into the still-ongoing crisis, there are indications that presidents may not be forecasting “worst case” scenarios for their institutions. In July, slightly more presidents said they expect to maintain, rather than raise, tuition rates (85 percent, up from 81 percent in March), and more presidents anticipated no cuts to academic programs or faculty positions (a 10 percent increase since March). Underlying these responses may be the finding that presidents are cautiously optimistic when it comes to revenue and enrollment. In March and again in July, the majority of the presidents surveyed anticipated revenue losses of between 5 and 14.9 percent (61 percent and 66 percent, respectively). More tellingly, however, is that the percentage of presidents who anticipated a severe decline in revenue (i.e., losses greater than 15 percent) dropped from 30 percent in March to just 10 percent in July.

The July survey found that 61 percent of presidents expect a change in fall enrollment somewhere between a 5 percent increase and a 5 percent decrease, with an average of 84 percent of presidents indicating they intend to convene in person at some point in the fall. The proportion of presidents (21 percent) projecting a 0–5 percent decrease in enrollment was exactly the same size as the proportion projecting a 0–5 percent increase. Approximately one in five presidents anticipate no change in enrollment. The following responses reflect this cautious optimism, but also the continuing uncertainty:

- *“I am optimistic about the opportunity to gain [some] individuals who may have lost jobs because of the pandemic.”*
- *“New student deposits and continuing student registrations are on par with last year. Students want to return, whether they will have the resources to actualize that interest is yet to be seen.”*
- *“Right now, we are down about 5%, but I imagine we will lose more as the semester approaches.”*

Why do presidents not appear to be in panic mode? It could be because they are engaging in careful behind-the-scenes belt-tightening that will not be viewed as having a direct impact on students.

Since March, the number of presidents who plan simply to “hunker down” dropped by 12 percent. Instead, a number of budget-friendly steps have emerged as counters to the “wait and see” strategy. For example, the proportion of presidents who plan to lay off staff grew from 72 percent in March to 88 percent in July. And although the proportion of presidents who expect to implement a hiring freeze remained essentially unchanged from March to July (83 percent and 82 percent, respectively), the proportion of presidents who expect to cut administrative jobs jumped by 16 percentage points over the same period. Between March and July, the percentage of presidents planning to implement across-the-board budget cuts grew by 9 points (from 55 percent to 64 percent), and the number of presidents planning to cut benefits doubled (from 21 percent to 42 percent). The July survey also revealed that 59 percent of presidents expect to decrease pay for senior staff.

Along with strategic budget cuts that may or may not ultimately affect students, presidents are anticipating the implications of a palpable shift in the national consciousness with regard to racial discrimination. The multiple waves of protest following the killings of Black citizens by police have contributed to a growing national movement for racial justice and foregrounded the urgent need to address systemic racism within higher education. The July survey found that, on average, 80 percent of presidents believe it is either “very likely” or “likely” that student activism will occur on their campuses in the fall.

This finding is, in part, a function of institutional size: 69 percent of presidents of institutions with more than fifteen thousand students believe that student activism is “very likely,” which is 20–30 points higher than the percentage of presidents of smaller institutions who believe such activism is “very likely.” The July survey also explored presidents’ plans to address anti-Black discrimination and racial justice on their campuses in both the short and the long terms. Short-term plans are largely focused on communication with students, faculty, and staff. The following responses indicate the forms of dialogue that presidents are planning to promote on campus this fall:

- *“Working with faculty, staff, and students to deepen our understanding of racial injustice and inequity, engaging discussion groups, taking actions to create healing spaces on campus, conducting listening sessions with students and acting to address their concerns”*
- *“Having multiple town hall meetings at the start to help develop a game plan for action”*
- *“Listening sessions for students, faculty and staff—some strictly for our Black community members in these different groups—to get more of a sense of critical actions steps”*
- *“Focus groups to surveys to action plans that stress dialogue and coming to common ground, creating a willingness to stand together, establishing safe places, addressing racists behavior, countering words with other words”*

Whereas presidents' short-term planning is focused primarily on dialogue and communication across stakeholders—and with students, in particular—long-term planning is focused on structural change. Respondents cited long-term approaches ranging from strategic hiring and curriculum reform to broad interrogation of institutional practices and policies in order to suss out inequities and strategic planning efforts to address them. The following open-ended comments illustrate how presidents are framing these plans:

- *“Creating a Division of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity besides just having a [Chief Diversity Officer]”*
- *“Adding more courses and faculty who can shed light on these issues”*
- *“Diagnosing and taking action regarding structural racism and inequities in the University.”*
- *“Instituting curriculum requirements”*
- *“This is core to our strategic plan. Our senior leadership and board now better reflect the lived experiences of students. The curriculum and faculty need to be a serious focus moving forward.”*

## Conclusion

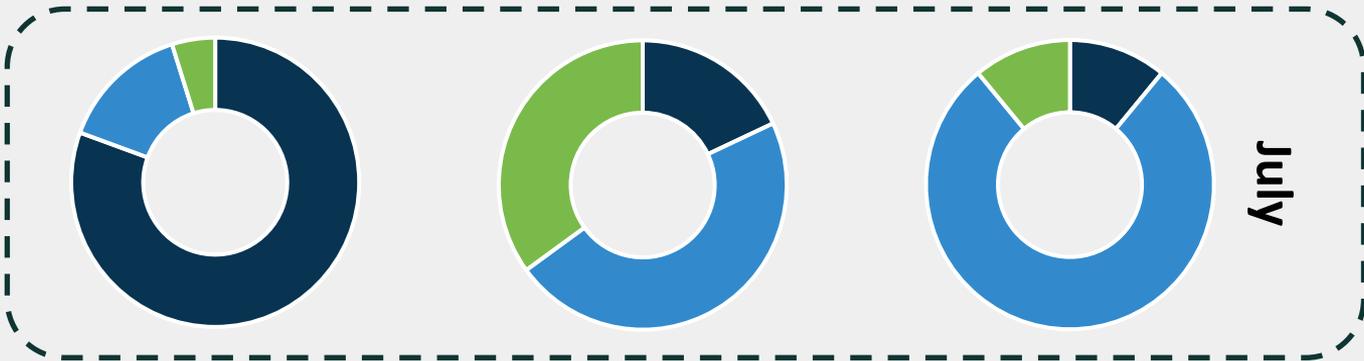
This follow-up report offers a window on the thinking of college and university presidents four months into the ongoing crisis touched off by the outbreak of COVID-19 and in the midst of a growing national—indeed, global—movement for racial justice and an end to anti-Black racism. Taken together, the findings signal a resolve on the part of presidents across the higher education landscape to protect students and the core educational mission of their institutions by avoiding tuition increases and cuts to academic programs, focusing instead on reductions in operational expenses and staffing. However, fewer “hands on deck” will likely be felt by students eventually. The question is whether they will notice and, if so, when? In the meantime, budget cuts will need to be balanced with the need to demonstrate responsiveness to systemic inequalities on campuses; to identify, acknowledge, and confront inequities; and to wade into difficult conversations—whether face to face or virtually.

# Survey Sample Breakdown by Institutional Type & Size

4-Year Private Universities

4-Year Public Universities

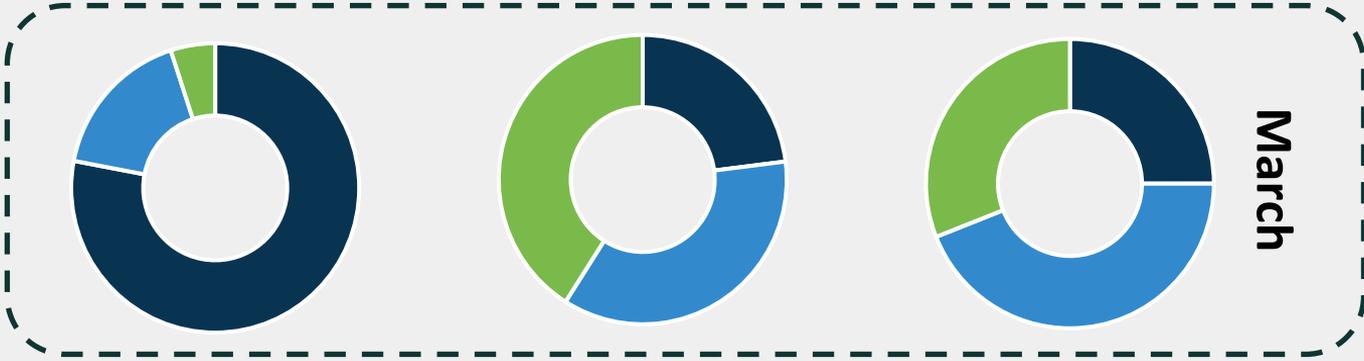
2-Year Community Colleges



Small: 0 – 5,000 Students

Medium: 5,001 – 15,000 Students

Large: 15,001+ Students



# Key Findings Summary

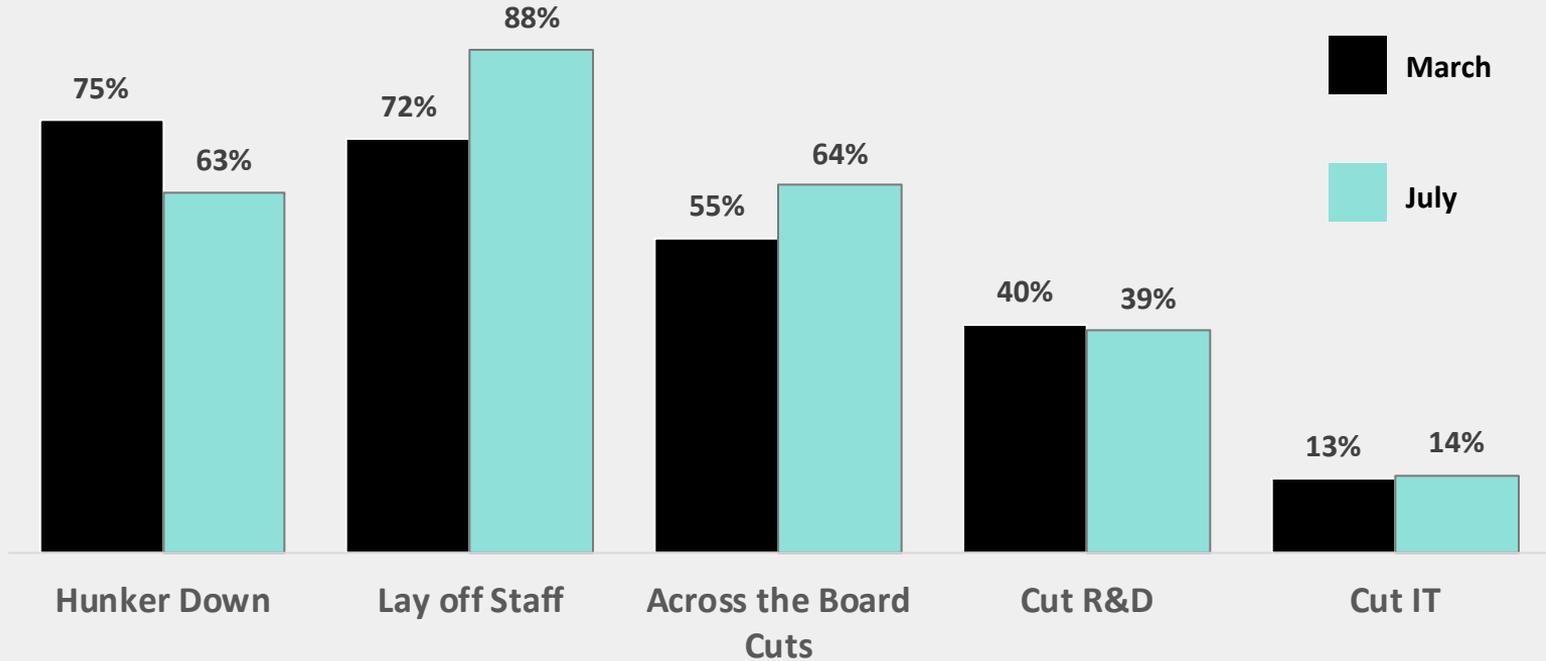
## Comparison of Responses to Covid-19 between March and July 2020

- The vast majority of presidents still plan to maintain tuition and implement hiring freezes.
- **Fewer** presidents now anticipate cuts to academic programs and faculty positions.
- **Fewer** presidents now expect severe (>15%) revenue losses.
- **More** presidents now expect to lay off staff, implement across-the-board cuts, and cut administrative jobs.
- **More** presidents now expect to cut benefits.

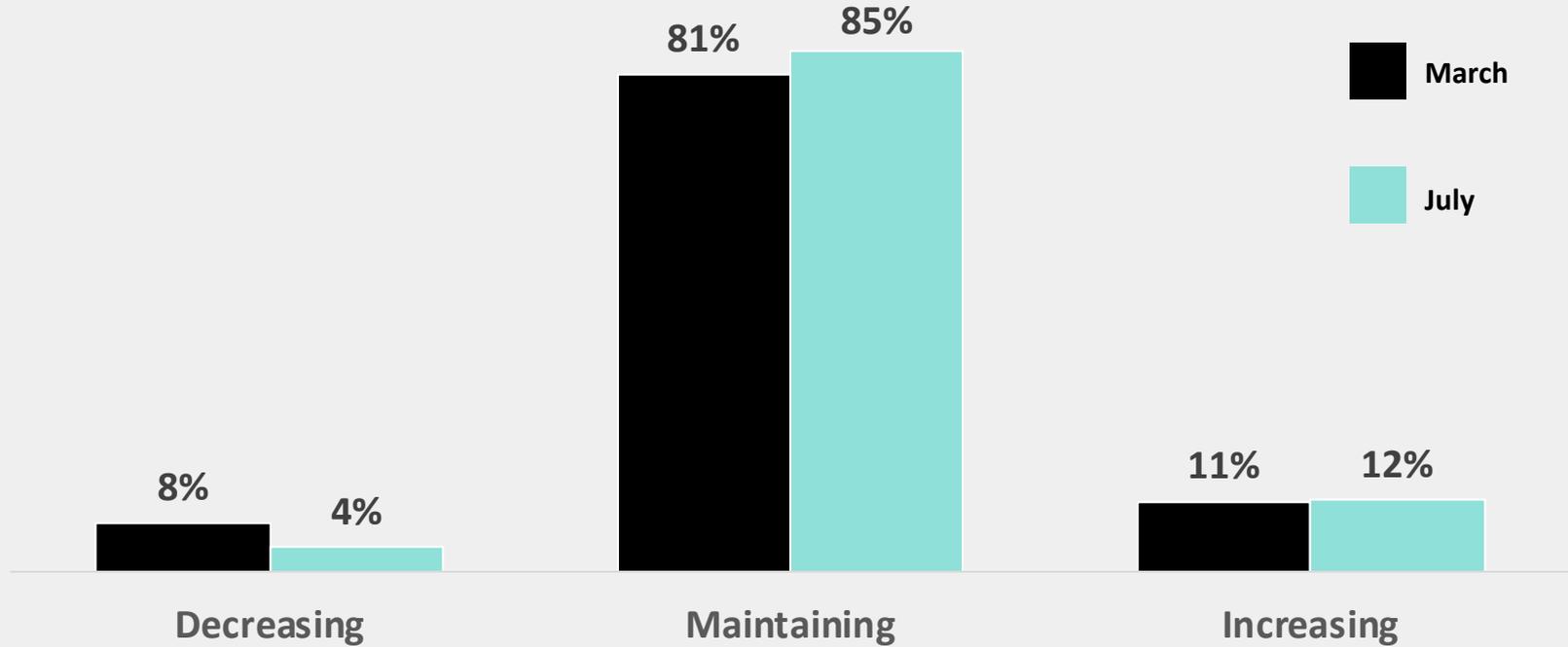
## New Findings – July 2020

- 1 in 5 presidents expect no change in fall enrollment.
- Presidents of small private institutions are most likely to bring students back for face-to-face instruction in the fall.
- The vast majority of presidents anticipate racial justice–motivated student activism, particularly at large institutions.
- Presidential planning to address issues of racial injustice range from open dialogues to long-term structural changes.

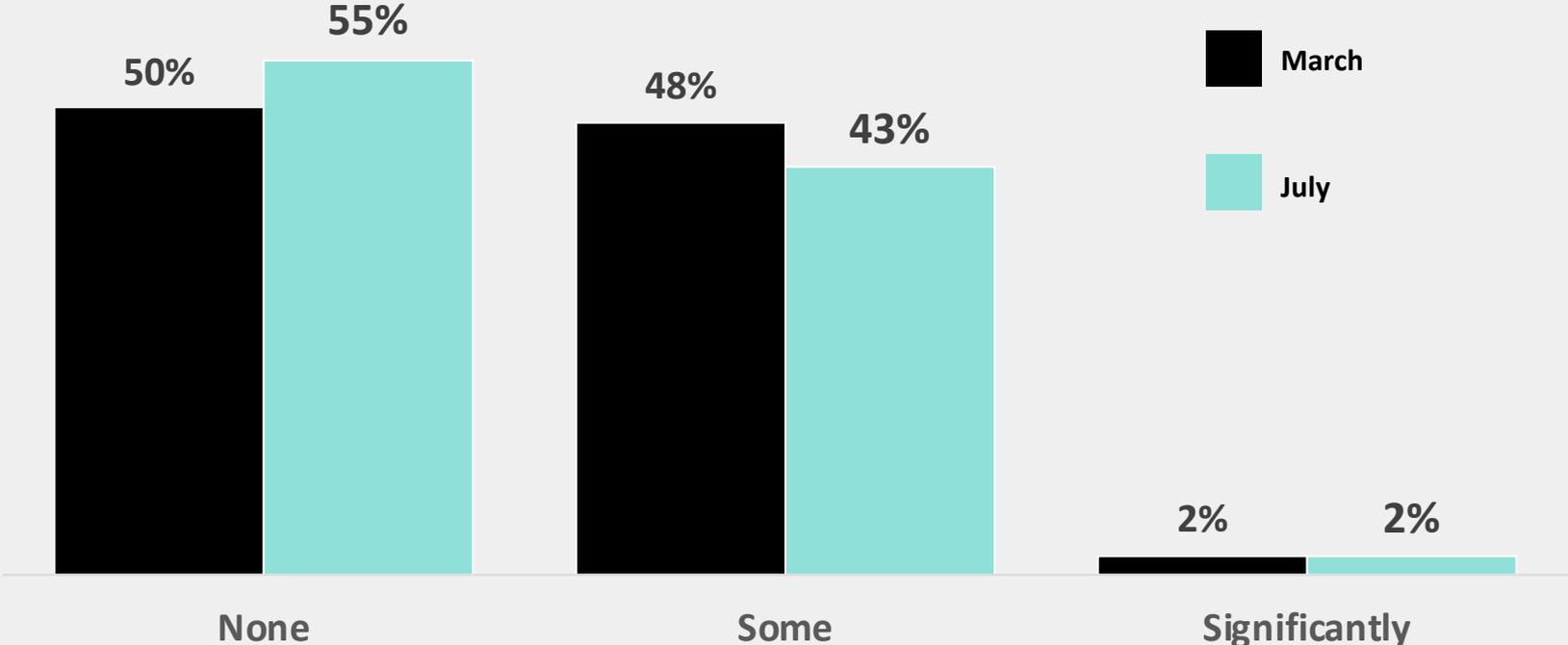
# Are you considering the following as you and your team are dealing with Covid-19 over the next few years?



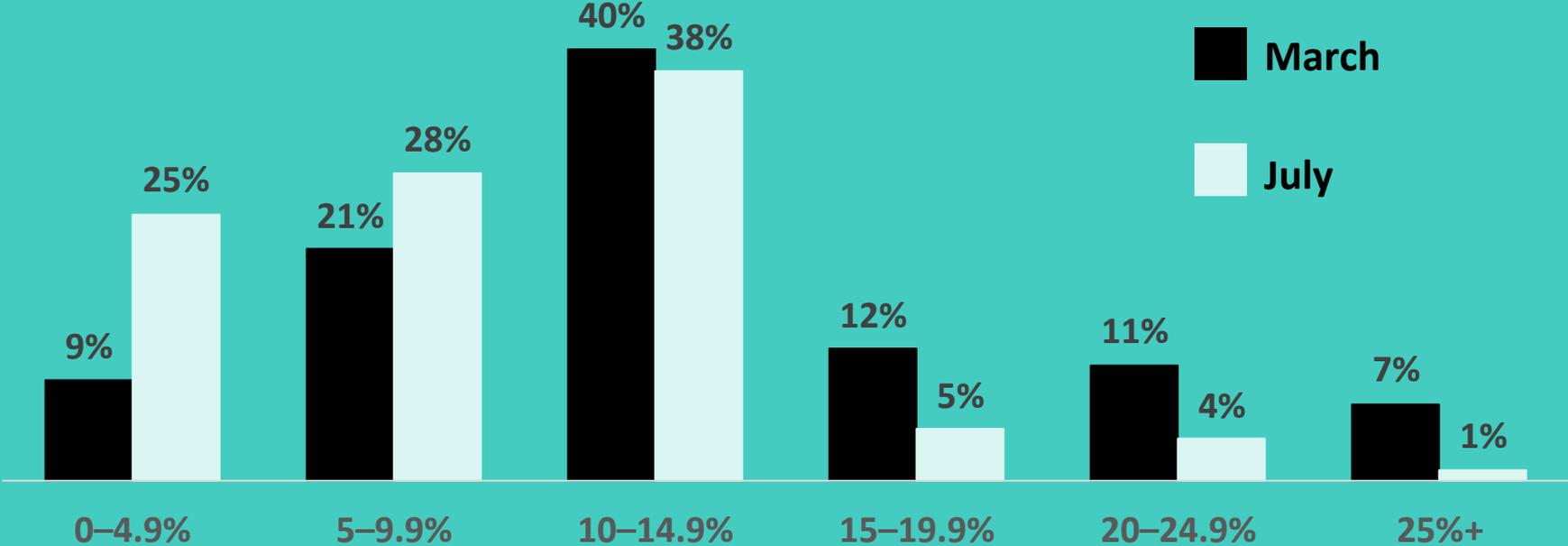
# We anticipate doing the following to tuition:

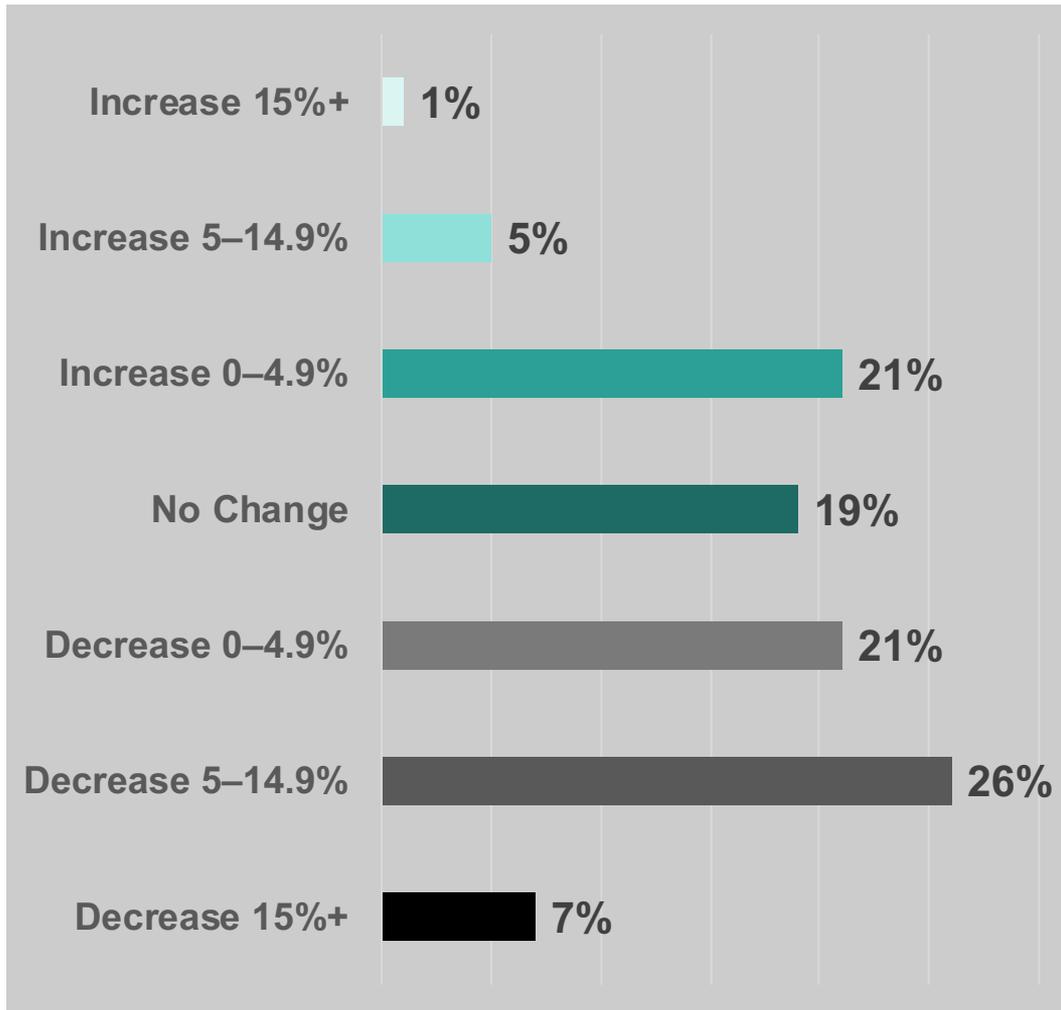


# We anticipate cutting academic programs and faculty positions...



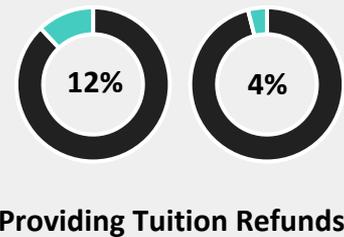
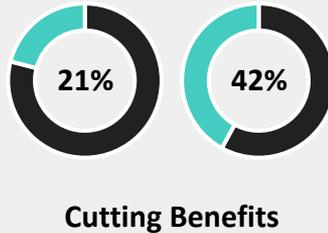
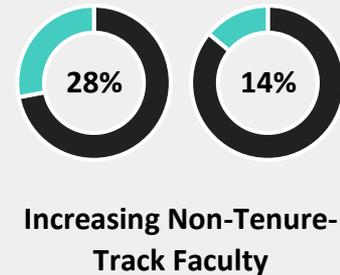
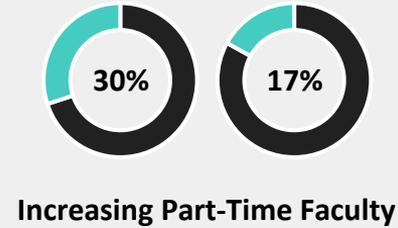
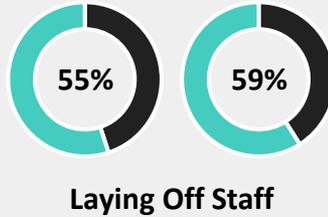
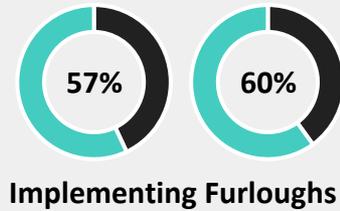
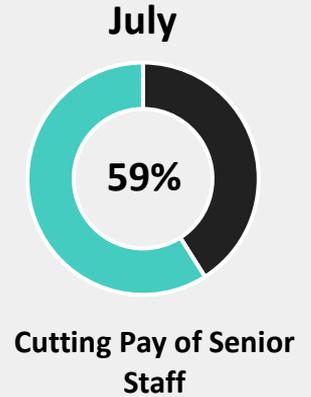
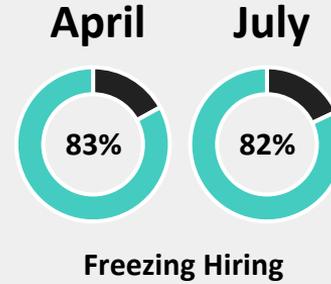
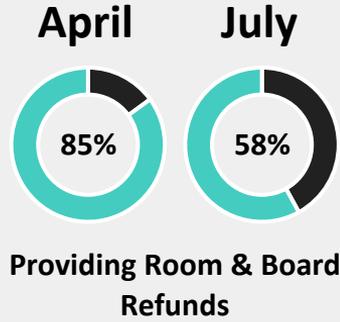
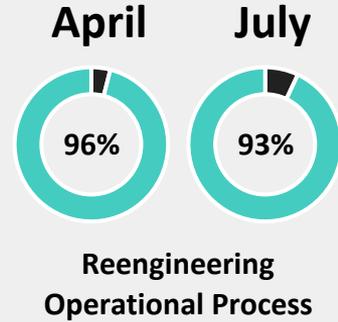
# Estimate the negative impact on revenue for the next fiscal year...





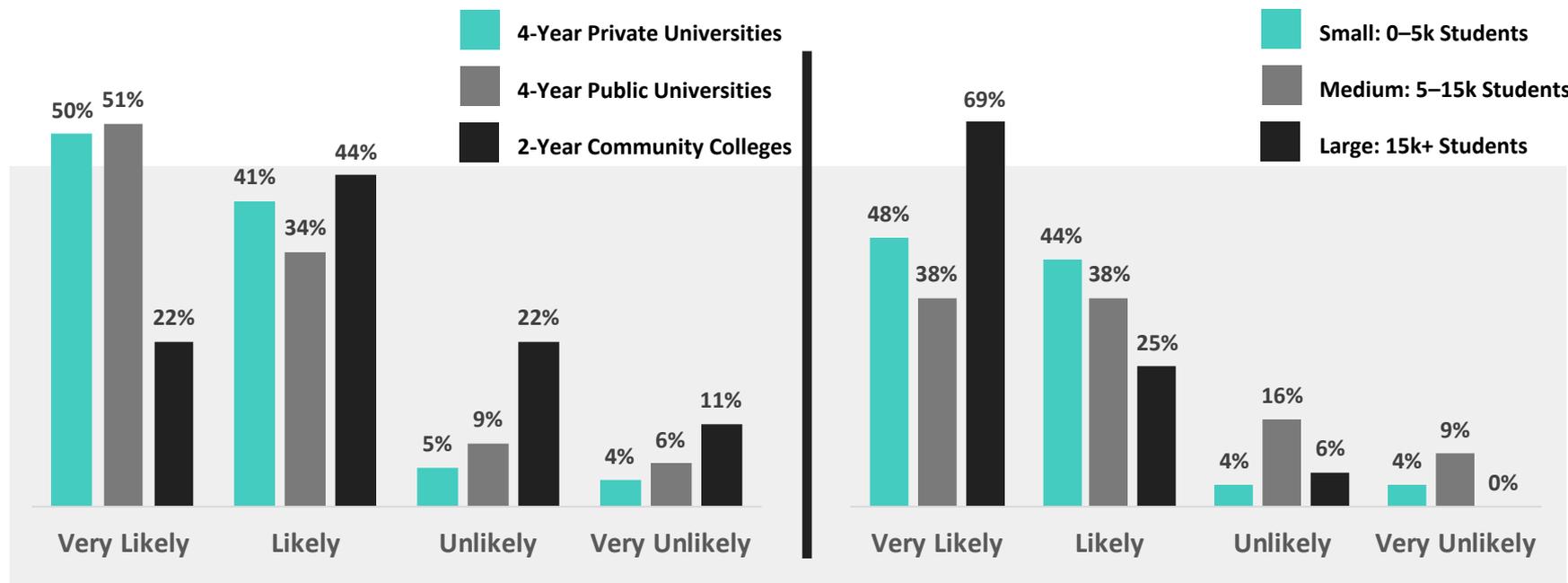
**As of July,  
what is your  
expectation for  
the change in  
enrollment over  
the course of  
the 2020–21  
academic year?**

# Do you anticipate doing the following:



# To what degree do you expect organized student activism on your campus this coming fall semester related to matters of racial justice and equity?

## July Results by Institutional Type & Size



**What short-term actions do you anticipate taking in the coming academic year to address issues of racial justice on your campus or in your local community?**

*“Having multiple town hall meetings at the start to help develop a game plan for action”*

*“Listening sessions for students, faculty and staff—some strictly for our Black community members in these different groups—to get more of a sense of critical actions steps”*

*“Focus groups to surveys to action plans that stress dialogue and coming to common ground, creating a willingness to stand together, establishing safe places, addressing racists behavior, countering words with other words”*

*“Creating a Division of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity besides just having a Chief Diversity Officer”*

*“Adding more courses and faculty who can shed light on these issues”*

*“Diagnosing and taking action regarding structural racism and inequities in the University.”*

*“This is core to our strategic plan. Our senior leadership and board now better reflect the lived experiences of students. The curriculum and faculty need to be a serious focus moving forward.”*

**What long-term planning do you anticipate engaging in during the coming academic year to address issues of racial justice on your campus or in your local community?**

To download copies of this report  
or the March 2020 report,  
please visit:

[www.aacu.org/presidentssurveys](http://www.aacu.org/presidentssurveys)

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Thank you!



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