DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

AFTER-ACTION REPORT:

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION ONLINE RAPID RESPONSE
SPRING 2020

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic impacted the world in late 2019, and struck the state of Missouri in spring 2020. This abrupt crisis forced almost all postsecondary institutions to adapt quickly and change at least some aspects of instructional practices. The Missouri Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development (MDHEWD) wrote this After Action Report to focus specifically on the rapid transition to remote instruction starting March 2020 as a response to local and statewide stay-at-home orders and social distancing guidelines.

The department collected data through surveys, forums, and interviews with Chief Academic Officers at a sampling of Missouri postsecondary institutions. More than 75 public, private and Missouri certified colleges and universities provided input from March through May. This report tells the story of institutions' responses to COVID-19 through defining the challenges and successes campuses identified. Further, this report relays how campuses will ensure success in the future as they review lessons learned and create policies to secure postsecondary education's continued response to thrive in a post-COVID world.

The overarching conclusion is that while many institutions expected the worst, and faced many difficult challenges, institutions in fact experienced positive opportunities to create stronger communities, become more flexible for students, and develop strategies to flourish going forward. This crisis allowed campuses to identify the issues and inequities facing students today, and to be intentional and proactive in determining how to serve today's students more effectively. As one campus noted, "Sometimes a crisis shows us the benefit of what we can do."

MAJOR CHALLENGES DURING THE TRANSITION

To understand the scope of how much institutions overcame and accomplished, it is important to know the major challenges campuses faced during the transition from in-person to online course delivery:

- **Limits to institutional technical capacity to support online learning.**

- **Quality of online education implemented rapidly during the pandemic.**

- **Practical, hands-on courses unable to meet in-person, and the struggle to find holistic solutions and resources to meet these needs.**

- **Limited and varying student access to remote education tools, including internet connectivity, hardware, software, e-books, e-journals, and e-resources for research purposes.** Several institutions stated students and faculty in rural communities did not have access to broadband internet, and other institutions stated affordability was an issue for many of their students. In some cases, students had to use their phones as their only means to complete assignments. Due to the equity concerns cited by institutions, MDHEWD is going to collect and analyze disaggregated data regarding how the COVID-19 pandemic affected our vulnerable and at-risk populations, and publish an after action report in 2021 with the findings.

- **Student experiences.** One institution reported students "didn't mind where they had to go, they minded leaving what they had to leave." Another campus reported half its students found the transition harder than they thought, and several campuses reported students felt "they didn't sign up for this." Among the difficulties, students missed interactions with faculty and connections with their peers, stating they felt lost and alone, and many lost the ability to have private study space while their families were also home during the pandemic. Still others contended with lost jobs, closed child care facilities, and lack of basic needs.

- **Early decision-making and communication with students, faculty, and staff.** Some campuses regretted decisions to transition to remote learning were not made sooner and communicated more quickly. In most cases, the move to remote learning was extremely rapid and made due to a swift escalation of concerns about health and safety. In the future, institutions would like to make decisions earlier on, and communicate those decisions quickly to all campus stakeholders to allow more time to transition and adjust.

SURVEYED INSTITUTIONS

74%
of institutions reported less than 25% of faculty do not have training to teach in online setting.

65%
of institutions report less than 25% of students do not have software necessary for online learning.

64%
of institutions report less than 25% of students do not have hardware or equipment to engage in online learning.

STRATEGIES CAMPUSES USED TO OVERCOME CHALLENGES

Even while facing the adversity of the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic, institutions worked in new ways to ensure student learning and engagement. Five major themes surfaced around the strategies campuses utilized to successfully overcome immediate and lasting challenges of the pandemic:

1 OVERALL EXPERIENCE

Many institutions reported that while expecting the worst, the overall experience was more positive than negative, and the transition went better than expected. One institution reported that a faculty survey found 95 percent of faculty found the experience went as well as or better than expected.

Institutions reported feeling pride in how faculty, staff, and students responded to the pandemic. "There was a very real sense of community: everyone on campus volunteered for anything as needed, few complained, more meetings were held between groups, everyone began to know each other on a more personal level, and they all worked together." Several colleges rallied employees and called every student during the semester; one college reported calling every student twice.

Institutions reported that no matter what, learning continued: virtually through asynchronous and synchronous means, and when students couldn't access online education, some institutions mailed assignments back and forth with students.

2 RAPID PACE OF CHANGE

Many institutions planned their remote transition during spring break and did not lose any study time, while others took one additional week around spring break. During that time, campuses revised syllabi, reconsidered course expectations, researched and implemented new platforms for instructional delivery, hosted professional development for faculty to help them prepare for teaching in a new medium, reached out to students to assess needs, and numerous other activities to prepare for the move to remote study. One

One campus reported moving 1,600 sections to remote learning in one week.

institution likened this change to "asking a city to entirely redesign the city's bus routes and start new ones in one week." Some institutions commented that the pandemic "forced us into a space that faculty thought would break them – but it didn't." Another institution added, "Faculty rose to the challenge." Overwhelmingly, institutions were proud that they were able to make the transition in the timeframe they set for themselves; "to make a change of that magnitude in that amount of time was just amazing."

3 MEETING STUDENTS' ACCESS NEEDS TO STUDY REMOTELY

As a rapid transition to help students without internet or hardware access, institutions reported such strategies as distributing devices with built-in internet connectivity or hotspots, setting up Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) access to laboratory computers with specialty software for remote access, creating laptop loaner programs that included even mailing laptops to students, ensuring computer labs stayed open (with appropriate social distancing) with staffing from National Guard program students, constructing "study stations" in the hallways to maintain social distancing, and designing scholarships or grants for students to purchase hardware or reimburse students for internet service provider (ISP) costs. Other institutions reported providing Wi-Fi in parking lots and green spaces, and many saw heavy use of this strategy, one institution commenting it "looked like a drive-in theater at times." Still others located local ISPs that provided internet free or at a reduced rate.

4 ONLINE/REMOTE LEARNING

Several campuses reported it was important to ensure students felt they were not completing just online courses, and attempted to include the interactions students look for on college campuses. Many institutions created online support, such as remote tutoring programs and writing centers, career counseling and academic advising, and increased IT support hours (in some cases, 24/7 hours). Some institutions even reported greater opportunities with remote education, such as having professional guest speakers from around the country and faculty experiment with new platforms, such as Moodle, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams; software options for specialized courses in music, nursing, and lab courses; and learning tools, such as Ponopto.

84% of institutions report assessing barriers to online education.

At the same time, institutions said it was important to keep courses simple, and emphasized the quality of work completed, not the quantity of work being given. To further support this, one institution created a spreadsheet to track learning outcomes in new remote courses, and another institution reported its faculty honed in assignments and content to better match course objectives. Remote learning also allowed faculty creativity in meeting learning objectives - sculpture students used found objects in their art, creative writing students responded to the events happening around them, music students were mailed keyboards, and nursing students performed virtual clinicals.

Additionally, many institutions stated they were able to use the resources of their online and instructional design staff, who communicated online pedagogy best practices and hosted training and webinars to assist faculty.

5 STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Several institutions surveyed students or met with student groups to check in and gain feedback. Institutions reported many strategies to engage students, including creating funny Facebook classes, holding virtual ceremonies and Facebook live events for students to ask questions, and designing faculty and staff motivational videos for students. One institution noted its attempt to retain a sense of normalcy for students by keeping schedules the same and creating "in the hallway" chatting time for students by opening virtual lecture rooms early and closing them fifteen minutes after lectures were completed. At another institution faculty created Slack channels so students felt free to interact on course content without being evaluated like is often the case in Learning Management System (LMS) discussion boards.

One campus noted its intrusive advising campaign to call every student during the spring 2020 semester decreased withdraw rates by as much as 25% from the spring 2019 semester.

Some campuses saw the pandemic as an opportunity to prepare students to deal with adversity and crisis, and learn skills in adaptability, telework, resiliency, and as preparation for "real life" conditions. One campus found ultimately that students were "agile, prepared, and ready for the challenge."

Many campuses reported creating "calling campaigns" to call every student. Some campuses noted a positive outcome from this intrusive advising model: a decrease in the student withdrawal rate from the spring 2019 semester to the spring 2020 semester. One institution felt this change was a combination of faculty course flexibility and the more intrusive advising model.

ENSURING STUDENT SUCCESS IN THE FUTURE

Learning from spring 2020 experiences, campuses are creating strategies for future improvements. These strategies converge around seven themes that consist of initiatives, projects, and policies to review as both changes during the COVID-19 pandemic and potential permanent changes to support students and provide more flexibility in services. As one campus noted:

> "We want to be better prepared for the future when it comes to the needs of students. Students have many reasons for missing classes beyond pandemics – kids that need to stay home, cars breaking down, needing to go into work... the traditional model may not be the best model for our students moving forward. A hybrid approach to our classes that combines in-person and online components may be the best move… This pandemic really made us consider these extenuating circumstances… and started us down a train of thought regarding how we can be more flexible for our students in the future."

1 CAMPUS INFRASTRUCTURE

Institutions are debriefing and reflecting on what went well and what did not at individual campuses, and using this as an experience to learn from and to update continuity of operations plans and utilize the summer to determine how to best reopen in the fall.

Quite a bit of work is being done in technology. Campuses discussed upgrading or enhancing their bandwidth and infrastructure, and some campuses discussed procuring a new LMS or using the system in new or more consistent ways to aid online learning and the student experience. Also, institutions want to distribute devices and hotspots to students in need, begin issuing laptops to all faculty instead of desktop computers, and review instructional designer capacity with increased remote and hybrid education. Finally, one campus discussed wanting to procure a campus-wide texting system so faculty can communicate with students via text.

Additionally, institutions discussed continuing work with accreditors and licensors for necessary changes and updates to be more flexible in the fall. And one institution is updating its syllabi to reflect potential changes in modality for the fall and to ensure students without internet access or devices for online study notify the campus in advance.

2 COMMUNICATION

The importance of intentional, transparent, and regular communication cannot be underscored enough. Many institutions highlighted their communication strategies with colleagues and students improved during this period, and it was more intentional and informative – communication at some institutions was daily or weekly, some institutions communicated successfully with faculty through Facebook, one institution reported the use of artificial intelligence-based bots to facilitate communication, and phone calls became an effective means to reach students. One institution hosted in-person town halls for students prior to COVID-19 that were sparsely attended but found attendance and engagement increased when they began hosting them virtually. Another institution created a "triage" network where faculty could receive information about resources available from other faculty and administrators. Regardless of the modality, institutions expressed a desire to continue these new, and more frequent, communication efforts.

3 POLICIES

Institutions discussed reviewing policies to determine future changes. For example, some institutions want to be more flexible with transcript policies for transfer students or are looking at temporary policy changes, such as extended withdrawal and incomplete periods, to determine if there is any viability to permanent policy changes. Another institution wants to create a student VPN policy and provide resources to successfully implement this policy. Several institutions discussed creating policies to utilize their LMS in more consistent ways across campus, no matter how the course would be delivered. These policies range from requiring the syllabus to be uploaded to specifying how the course materials will be organized.

4 REMOTE/ONLINE EDUCATION

Many institutions want to make improvements to distance learning (using new tools learned from spring 2020). Some institutions are reviewing "high-flex," hybrid, or "flipped" course models to create more flexibility for students, and want to increase quality online education capabilities through software, infrastructure, and faculty development. Further, several institutions reported increasing licenses for online teaching software and faculty access to internet connectivity, allowing faculty to create pre-recorded lectures in case they need to pivot quickly in the future, and increasing campus utilization of an LMS. One institution stated online education requires an investment of both time and money, and it intends to standardize the learning process so faculty are using similar methods and programs for online education. Another campus reiterated the importance of universally expanding its Digital U platform, which greatly enhanced its transition to online education, so that all programs and faculty integrate the platform to "lead to technology-enhanced learning holistically across our campus."

Other campuses want to utilize Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) programs or online Learning Consortium training to enhance faculty development, switch to Open Education Resources (OER) instead of textbooks, and increase MOREnet services and capability, as well as other strategies.

Although not specific to college campuses, every institution cited lack of access to reliable, quality, or affordable broadband internet throughout the state as a major inhibitor to online learning. Many pressed this as a statewide need to ensure equitable access to education and learning resources necessary for all Missourians.

5 PRACTICAL, HANDS-ON COURSES

Many campuses are increasing Zoom licenses to record hands-on experiences and hold private lessons, or utilize home lab kits, lab simulations, virtual clinical simulators, virtual learning labs with student VDI access, and virtual reality to aid in learning. One institution is creating digital software backpacks that contain program-specific specialty software for students.

6 STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND TOOLS FOR SUCCESS

Much discussion centered on student success support. One campus noted it may have had artificial barriers for student course enrollment, so it is looking at long-term changes for students to enroll more easily. Several campuses want to find free online proctoring services for students, though access to webcams for all students remains a barrier. Institutions again stated the need to increase internet connectivity, hardware, and software access for students, and that students need to receive training on how to use new learning software.

> **Some campuses found students like Zoom virtual office hours, so they are expanding the use of Zoom to create virtual office hours to meet students' flexibility needs.**

Campuses also mentioned the accessibility needs of students, and that they need ADA support and compliance software, increased student access to assistive technology, and closed captioning for online courses, among other strategies to accommodate students in a virtual setting.

Other campuses highlighted the importance for humans to connect; one campus noted the use of technology to help create connections in a world with social distancing, and that institutions need to determine how to engage students, faculty, and staff in the "college" experience post-COVID.

7 COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Many institutions mentioned partners through the COVID-19 pandemic. As examples, local ISPs provided internet service at free or reduced rates for students, publishers provided free access to e-books, and online proctoring services reduced the cost of proctored online exams. Also, many public libraries offer free Wi-Fi and some offer hotspot check-outs, among many other community-support efforts. It is important in the future that institutions continue these partnerships throughout their communities and be creative in serving their students.

FINAL THOUGHTS

While many postsecondary education leaders fear the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on the future of education, this report highlights not only the successes and the benefits of how institutions bravely responded, but also how as human beings, crisis creates community. When asked, Chief Academic Officers stated over and over how proud they are of their colleagues throughout their institutions, and the comradery and sense of teamwork that prevailed in not only supporting students, but also their local communities. One institution stated, "The whole campus came together to rise to the challenge." It is this collective sense of "we are all in it together" that will ensure postsecondary institutions continue to adapt and grow, increase educational access to all populations in the state, and thrive in meeting the future world's needs.

One campus summarized higher education's response to the COVID-19 pandemic best, "As a community, we realized that we are more flexible than we imagined and we can move faster than we thought possible. Given the pace of change in higher education this is the best lesson of all."