DEPARTMENT OF
HIGHER EDUCATION &
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

AFTER-ACTION REPORT:

WRAPAROUND SERVICES

SPRING 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities students and their families face during the course of their college experience. As one institution noted:

> **"Students with no child care experienced difficulties in completing coursework and taking care of children. Students who were considered essential workers had to work more hours and had difficulty balancing work, school, and family. Students had to take care of younger siblings while parents were working additional hours, and students had to work additional hours due to parents losing jobs or unable to work due to health reasons. These situations made it difficult for students to balance their competing demands."**

Now, more than ever, the wraparound services institutions offer – food and housing, physical and mental health care, disability and other support services, career and career preparation, and access to technology, among many others – are vital to student success. This After-Action Report focuses specifically on the continuity of services institutions provided as they shifted from an on-campus to a virtual environment during the spring 2020 semester in response to local and statewide stay-at-home orders and social distancing guidelines. It also retells the story of students' experiences and how they interacted with their institutions during this unprecedented time.

Qualitative data was collected through surveys, forums, and interviews with Chief Student Affairs Officers at a sampling of Missouri's postsecondary institutions. Of approximately 75 public, private and Missouri certified colleges and universities contacted, 20 percent provided input from June through August. This report details the challenges institutions faced, the creative ways they worked through those challenges to continue serving students in need, and the work they're doing to ensure future success. The Missouri Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development also spoke with a handful of students to understand the experience from their perspective, and to gauge how well they felt supported during the pandemic.

In short, institutions faced substantial structural barriers that made it difficult to continue serving students as they were accustomed. Additionally, students faced substantial barriers in both their personal and academic lives that conflicted with their academic goals and ability to study. However, the changes undertaken by higher education institutions to adapt to the crisis and students' needs have improved wraparound services, with one institution noting, "It seems that online is [students'] comfort space, their environment… We've seen an improvement in how students respond to wraparound services in a virtual setting."

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MAJOR CHALLENGES DURING THE TRANSITION

While most students' biggest struggle was staying focused, other students faced unimaginable situations after institutions closed campuses in March 2020. As one student wrote, "Unfortunately, with the advent of the [COVID-19] outbreak, it was determined that I may have been putting my family at risk of infection and was barred from re-entering the household after the first week of the outbreak. Since that time, I have been living out of my car, only having access to the internet from the driveway." As institutions created new processes and implemented new platforms, they encountered several issues that made it challenging to continue meeting students' wraparound needs.

1

SERVING STUDENTS ACROSS STATE LINES

While serving students across state lines was difficult for most of the services institutions provided, it was especially challenging to continue providing mental health services. In 2018, Missouri joined the Psychology Interjurisdictional Compact (PSYPACT) to allow for easier practice of telepsychology across state lines. Missouri is one of 13 states to enact the compact, including two states from which Missouri draws many of its out-of-state students: Texas and Illinois. To realize PSYPACT's benefits, individual practitioners must apply for and obtain an E.Passport from the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards and apply for and obtain an Authority to Practice Interjurisdictional Telepsychology from the PSYPACT Commission. Despite Missouri's adoption of PSYPACT, licensure restrictions prevented many counselors from providing the continuity of care that they would have preferred. As a result, this remains the foremost issue for institutions, especially as they plan for the fall.

2

ACCESS

As more services were moved online to a virtual setting, institutions struggled to meet the needs of students and staff who did not have computers or consistent, reliable internet access. One of the students MDHEWD spoke with stated he remained in his college apartment because he did not have reliable internet at his family's house to complete coursework. In some cases, students did not even have phone service at their home address. As one institution noted, "Even giving students a hotspot was difficult because many students did not have a good cell phone signal in order to connect a hotspot."

3

DISJOINTED COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Some institutions regretted how long it took to create a unified communication plan. As a result, students received information from different departments on different days, meaning students had to check their email almost every day to ensure they did not miss important information, and a couple of the students MDHEWD spoke with indicated they were not that good about checking their email. Thus, students missed many critical updates from their campuses.

4

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Those institutions who felt they did well communicating with students via email, social media, or through calling campaigns still struggled to engage students in some of the activities they organized to maintain a sense of community. MDHEWD spoke with one student who said there were several events she wanted to attend, but she was unable to do so because of increased work obligations that overlapped with event times.

5

FAMILIARITY WITH PLATFORMS

Institutions adopted new technologies during the transition – such as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, etc. – but students and staff often struggled to learn these platforms before they were implemented. As a result, "Virtual communication training for staff members and instructors was key" and had to be turned around quickly. One institution noted, "To implement this new plan, the school conducted its first round of meetings with staff and then training sessions to get them caught up with the new initiatives on virtual meetings." Trainings were also rolled out to students; two students MDHEWD spoke with expressed appreciation for the how-to videos on using the Learning Management System, which were helpful as their learning experience shifted.

STRATEGIES CAMPUSES USED TO OVERCOME CHALLENGES

As one institution stated, "[The pandemic] has forced us to look at any barriers in the way of our students' success going forward." To overcome these challenges, institutions got creative. The solutions they utilized fall into seven categories:

1 REFERRING STUDENTS FOR SERVICES

As students left college and their adopted towns, institutions served students virtually where they could. For example, staff at one institution would spend multiple hours every day reading through new executive orders in other states to see if licensure waivers had been granted to provide counseling to students in need. If students were identified as needing food assistance, counseling services, or other needs the institution could not provide at a distance, staff researched opportunities in students' hometowns. However, this was not always successful; one institution noted a lot of students were not comfortable going to other food banks or asking for help.

2 EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE

The majority of the surveyed institutions with residence halls reported keeping at least one hall open to house students who needed a place to stay. Most often, the students in need were international students who were unable to leave the country, but there were some domestic students who were able to document a hardship that allowed them to stay. Qualifications for housing ranged from an existing housing contract to lack of safety or statement of need.

Institutions utilized their food pantries in different ways during this time as well. Some used them to serve students who lived on campus, as dining services closed with the campus. Others boxed up the goods and had pickup or delivery options available to local students. Many reported emptying their pantries and relying on donations from local organizations to restock.

Most institutions also had or created an emergency fund they used to help students pay bills, acquire internet access, purchase food, access childcare, and secure other services to succeed through the spring semester. Another institution created a new fund to fill the gap created by students losing job hours. While several of these needs could have been fulfilled by CARES Act funding, some students in need were ineligible for the funds and still others needed help before that funding became available. One institution said, "If we had access to the CARES Act money earlier, we could have provided laptops to students and help curb the financial issues they were facing."

3 MEETING STUDENTS' ACCESS NEEDS

Institutions also took different approaches to meeting students' technology access needs. One institution said over 60 percent of its students are first generation, and the area high schools that feed into the college loan laptops to their students during high school only, so many come to college without a computer; those students who did have the hardware often did not have internet access. As a result, this campus maintained open hours in computer labs and mapped campus buildings and parking lots so students who were unable or did not feel comfortable utilizing the computer lab would know how far the Wi-Fi extended. Other institutions loaned out computer equipment, sometimes pulling from their own computer labs, while others purchased hot spots to provide internet access to those without. Still another institution established a "popup computer lab" for commuter students.

4 PERSONAL OUTREACH

Every institution MDHEWD spoke with completed calling campaigns and/or surveyed students. These efforts included check-ins with students to see how they were doing and if there was anything those students needed to be successful. MDHEWD spoke to one student who said she continued to receive check-ins from faculty through the summer, which helped her feel like she was not alone.

To support this increased outreach, several institutions expanded use of their early alert systems to do more than report academic or behavioral issues. At one institution, the system had an employee-facing and a student-facing side of the system so students could “raise their hand” and ask for help; those students were assigned to a volunteer staff mentor who could reach out and check in on the student on a regular basis.

5 CREATING ONE-STOP SHOPS FOR INFORMATION

Many institutions created a single COVID webpage that contained all the information students needed to know. It was a way to disseminate information broadly, keep the public informed about new developments as they were happening, and reduce the spread of false information. Two institutions MDHEWD spoke with also sent out a daily newsletter to students, which staff thought was a good way to share information compiled from across the campus, as well as advertise the services they provided. One institution also provided one phone number for students to call no matter their need – academic or student affairs. This allowed staff to triage calls and get students to the right individuals the first time, hopefully providing services more quickly.

One of the students MDHEWD spoke with said her institution did a good job updating students about what is going on and why, so she never felt like she was in the dark or like they were keeping something from her.

6 STANDING UP VIRTUAL SERVICES

Services that could be migrated to a virtual setting were advising, career planning and resume writing, job fairs, campus tours, new student orientations, and telehealth, to name a few. Several institutions reassigned staff and student workers to help build these virtual services and create calling campaigns. This allowed institutions to stand these services up more quickly while also supporting the staff. MDHEWD spoke to a student who had an on-campus job, and she was grateful for the opportunity to still earn income during the pandemic.

7 CONCERN AND CARE FOR STAFF

One institution stressed the importance of checking in with staff on a regular basis during the pandemic. The more personal conversations, and direction of resources where necessary, meant staff were taken care of. Well-cared for staff means well-cared for students.

ENSURING SUCCESS IN THE FUTURE

Several institutions noted the COVID-19 pandemic allowed them to accomplish, very rapidly, changes they had long considered making, realizing more efficiencies as a result. As Missouri looks to the future, there remains a sense of urgency and uncertainty, especially, as one institution put it, the state is encountering a "second pandemic" of social injustice. To ensure student success and equity moving forward, institutions would like to improve in the following ways:

1

LONG-TERM EMERGENCY PLANNING

One institution performed tabletop exercises on a "hot topic" every year, and they felt this allowed them to respond to the pandemic more effectively. However, most institutions stated they planned for short-term emergencies like power outages, not long-term closures like they experienced in the spring. As a result, more institutions are reconsidering their emergency preparedness policies to account for widespread, ongoing emergencies.

2

MIXED MODALITY OFFERINGS

"We as higher education at large have learned how to be accessible," and students responded well to virtual services. As a result, institutions would like to continue these offerings in the future, especially now that they have built the capability to do so. One institution specifically noted that financial aid has found virtual communication with students to be very helpful.

One student MDHEWD spoke with was frustrated with the initial move to online instruction. However, the flexibility of virtual classes afforded her the opportunity to increase the number of hours she worked, thereby increasing the amount of money she could make to pay for school.

3

REVAMPED STUDENT ADVISING

Several institutions talked about the pandemic being the catalyst for rethinking how they do student advising. In one case, an institution piloted a model that gives students the autonomy to choose their classes, which are audited on the back end to ensure students remain on track. Given its success, the institution plans to continue this practice into the future. Another institution rethought how to deliver services by developing apps: an advisor scheduling app to schedule appointments and one that allows advisors to view transcripts and student records. Still another institution found students were more comfortable and engaged with virtual appointments, so it plans to retain the virtual option in the future.

4 COMMUNICATION

Several institutions talked about designing better communication plans for the future, especially for the fall semester so they are better prepared in the event of a second wave. One institution specifically said it has formed a communication subcommittee of its COVID task force to address this very issue. Other institutions will maintain the new communication channels they have adopted. For example, one institution remarked, “we are prepared for electronic and social media communication now, so there is no reason not to continue some of it.”

These increased, more personal communications were recognized and appreciated by all the students MDHEWD spoke with. One student noted several of his professors provided their phone numbers so students could reach out any time they had an issue or needed to talk.

5 CAMPUS PLANNING

Institutions are rethinking how they measure students’ needs and how they will fulfill those needs in the future. While some institutions prefer a hardship application to funnel resources to students who really need it, others would like to do away with the practice so there are fewer barriers for students in need. Another institution who shut down dining services in the spring mentioned it would not do so in the future.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As one institution stated, “planning for a pandemic is such a historic and life-altering situation. The expectation was just trying to survive and get through the spring semester successfully.”

Despite the struggle, the students MDHEWD spoke with appreciated the flexibility the institutions extended them during the spring semester of 2020, especially the different grading options that were implemented. These policies helped students plan and prioritize their work, which contributed to a more positive experience than they anticipated. MDHEWD staff attributes this to the herculean effort institutions undertook to serve their students, especially those in need. When asked, Chief Student Affairs Officers said they are proud of the compassion for students that their staff exhibited, and the way the entire campus community banded together to adapt and serve those in need.

Despite the challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has helped higher education leaders meet students where they are and has given staff a glimpse into their students’ lives. As a result, institutions are more focused and more intentional about student success, and they are measuring their efforts; for example, at one institution 29.7 percent of students did better than expected, and about 59.0 percent did as well as expected this year.

Missouri’s students and postsecondary institutions are strong, and they will emerge from this time more flexible than ever before. In the midst of all this change and uncertainty, all surveyed agreed that one thing is for certain: “normal will look different.”