



DEPARTMENT OF  
HIGHER EDUCATION &  
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

# AFTER-ACTION REPORT:

## SPRING 2020 INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE TO COVID-19

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# INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE TO COVID-19

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Postsecondary institutions in 175 countries grappled with deciding how best to meet the unprecedented situation that the spread of COVID-19 presented in spring 2020. With health concerns as the first priority, the immediate plan of action was to close doors and offer alternative course-delivery modes for in-person classes as soon as possible. This interruption to postsecondary institutions affected more than 220 million students around the world, including approximately 19.9 million students in the U.S. and about 380,000 students in the state of Missouri.

The concern over the spread of COVID-19 in the United States began in March, around the middle of the spring semester for schools on the semester system and just before the start of the spring quarter for schools on the quarter system. A review of data from Georgetown University and the College Crisis Initiative, or C2i – a dashboard created by Davidson College that provides up-to-date information on colleges and universities – revealed that most higher education institutions followed a similar pattern in responding to the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> The following timeline covers the last part of January 2020 until April 2020.

First, institutions watched travel advisories posted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) due to widespread community transmission of COVID-19, offered advisories, and eventually restricted non-essential domestic and international travel. For example, Harvard University strongly advised against traveling to “Level 3” countries as early as the last week of January 2020. By late February 2020, Stanford University explicitly prohibited travel to certain “Level 3” countries and canceled overseas studies programs. Many institutions followed suit in March 2020.

Second, institutions used spring break season during March 2020 to make decisions on how to protect faculty, staff, and students from the coronavirus. Strategies included creating or revisiting pandemic response teams, immediately suspending in-person events, and implementing various approaches to online and distance learning modalities. For example, on March 2, 2020, Sacred Heart University created a pandemic planning team that would work closely with the CDC and local and state health officials. On March 6, 2020, the University of Washington was one of the first major universities to cancel in-person classes. On March 7, 2020, Yale University asked the campus community to cancel events that had 100 or more participants. On March 10, 2020, Lincoln University in Pennsylvania suspended in-person classes for the rest of the semester and dismissed classes for the rest of the week to give faculty time to transition to online-only learning beginning on March 16, 2020. In Missouri, Truman State University, on the other hand, announced on March 11, 2020, that even though in-person classes were suspended temporarily the week following spring break, students were encouraged to continue coursework. Truman State extended the suspension of in-person classes for the rest of the semester on March 16, 2020. By April 3, 2020, only 2 percent of the 1,442 institutions represented by the College Crisis Initiative project had *not* made any decisions on what to do about in-person classes.

Lastly, with the mode of class delivery addressed, institutions started limiting access to facilities and moving employees to work remotely, especially as health officials confirmed positive COVID-19 cases within these institutions and their communities. For example, on March 16, 2020, Fort Hays State University did not permit telecommuting for employees. However, two days later, the university president directed university employees to work remotely. The appropriateness of working in this manner was reassessed on a weekly basis. Some institutions, such as the University of Central Missouri, kept offices and residence halls open for students even as the university delivered all of its classes virtually starting March 16, 2020. However, with multiple cases of COVID-19 reported later that month, the University of Central Missouri enacted “work remote” procedures, effectively shutting down access to most buildings except for those essential to students, such as the library.

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<sup>1</sup> C2i. (2020). “Crisis breeds innovation.” Available at <https://collegecrisis.org/>

# MAJOR CHALLENGES DURING THE TRANSITION

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The widespread shift of higher education to online learning in March 2020 has had a profound impact on faculty, staff, and students. As institutions' online-learning usage went into overdrive, it raised important questions about access to and equity in postsecondary education, uncovering digital and economic divides. Additionally, the financial toll of the pandemic response has created financial uncertainty. The most pressing concerns by April 2020 were focused on summer and fall enrollment.

## 1

### DIGITAL AND ECONOMIC DIVIDES

Online learning requires time management skills and motivation.<sup>2</sup> Some disciplines were able to adapt to online learning more easily than others. As a result, students already struggling academically due to existing digital and economic divides suffered even more in online courses.

According to a study of 40,000 Washington State students, a contributing factor may be that different populations of students and course contexts have different exposures to technology.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a large variance might be lacking in technology proficiency and access among college students. The study also assessed whether gender and race presented a difference in online learners. Studies have revealed mixed outcomes. Some have found that there was no difference between male and female online learners, while others have concluded that the sample of women was more motivated, communicated online better, and scheduled their online studies in a more detailed manner. As for white students, the Washington State study suggested they may perform better when compared to Black and Hispanic students because of an economic disadvantage of attending lower quality primary and secondary schools.

Whatever the case may be, this pandemic has shown that students of color and students with low income were more likely to have issues maintaining their access to effective and reliable technology, including laptops, smartphones, and internet connectivity. Unfortunately, university lockdowns and shelter-in-place orders created a loss of livelihood among many students, exacerbating the effects of low-income students. Among those affected the hardest were students with disabilities. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, 19.3 percent of persons with disabilities were employed in 2019, which was in contrast to 66.3 percent of persons without a disability.<sup>4</sup> In addition to income loss, some students with disabilities could not readily ensure accommodations were in place for distance learning as some teaching tools were not always available. Also, scheduling and coordinating with institutions was more difficult due to closures of offices providing student services.

These various problems experienced by vulnerable and at-risk college student populations should be quickly addressed as increased technology use is expected to continue through the 2020-21 academic year and beyond. As of October 2020, 96 percent of the institutions represented in C2i's data dashboard incorporated some type of online learning component during the fall 2020 term. This percentage includes 64 institutions in the state of Missouri, three of which planned to go fully online.

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<sup>2</sup> Purdue University Global. (7 May 2019). "4 Common Challenges Facing Online Learners and How to Overcome Them." Available at <https://www.purdueglobal.edu/blog/online-learning/4-challenges-facing-online-learners/>

<sup>3</sup> Xu, Di, & Jaggars, Shanna S. (2014). "Performance Gaps between Online and Face-to-Face Courses: Differences across Types of Students and Academic Subject Area." *The Journal of Higher Education*. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2014.11777343>

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (26 February 2020). "Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics Summary."

## 2

### FINANCIAL UNCERTAINTY

Students were not the only ones dealing with financial uncertainty. Even with federal coronavirus aid, leadership from colleges and universities felt the funding levels would be inadequate to cover unexpected costs from many areas associated with the pandemic response, especially since many were already struggling financially prior to the pandemic. Increased technology costs, from providing laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots to students for free or very low cost, was one area in which this occurred. For example, the University at Buffalo expanded Wi-Fi access into several parking lots in order to allow faculty, staff, and students to complete their work from their vehicles.

The next area of expanded costs was from enhanced cleaning. Many institutions spent additional money to deep clean dorms and other facilities. Lastly, many institutions had a high number of students living on campus during the regular in-person academic year. With revenue already locked in for the semester, prorated refunds for room and board resulted in a substantial amount. For instance, the University of Wisconsin system with its 13 campuses was set to issue about \$78 million in refunds.

## 3

### ENROLLMENT UNCERTAINTY

Colleges and universities faced uncertainty when it came to summer and fall enrollment as students and their families grappled with return on investment (ROI) for education and online education quality concerns, on top of health concerns from the pandemic. The choice to pursue higher education was already a hard sell for many colleges and universities to make, as rising costs ate away at expected positive returns from the students' educational investments. Now, as the pandemic wreaked havoc on the financial well-being of many students and their families, students were left to explore alternatives to attending college. Additionally, vulnerable and at-risk students are struggling to continue pursuing postsecondary education.

According to a recent U.S. Census Bureau survey, 35 percent of those with a household income of less than \$25,000 canceled their plans for fall. In Missouri, approximately 22 percent of postsecondary students surveyed fell under this household income category.<sup>5</sup> The Art & Science Group also found, from an April 2020 survey, that 17 percent of students have changed their college plans from going full time to deferring enrollment for up to a year or going part time instead.<sup>6</sup> The Art & Science Group also found that 67 percent of students expected to pay much less in tuition and fees if the only option for the fall term was online learning. Many students and parents have argued that remote learning is not equivalent to in-person instruction because of the lack of interaction among peers and faculty. Additionally, adopting an online or hybrid approach requires additional expenditures to upgrade IT systems, provide technology access to all students, switch student services to remote access, create course and library materials for online delivery, upgrade classrooms to allow for distance learning, and purchase additional equipment such as cameras and microphones. The American Council on Education (ACE) estimated that reopening the fall 2020 semester with these additional operating expenses could cost colleges and universities up to \$70 billion.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (9 September 2020). "Week 13 Household Pulse Survey: August 19 – August 31." Available at <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2020/demo/hhp/hhp13.html>

<sup>6</sup> Art & Science Group LLC. (April 2020). "Looking Ahead to Fall 2020: How COVID-19 Continues to Influence the Choice of College-Going Students." Available at <http://artsci.com/studentpoll-covid-19-edition-2>

<sup>7</sup> American Council on Education. (6 July 2020). "ACE, Higher Education Groups Outline Costs of Reopening Campuses This Fall in Letter to Senate." Available at <https://www.acenet.edu/News-Room/Pages/ACE-Higher-Education-Groups-Outline-Costs-of-Reopening-Campuses-This-Fall-in-Letter-to-Senate.aspx>

# STRATEGIES CAMPUSES USED TO OVERCOME CHALLENGES

The switch by higher education institutions to online learning, cancellation of large events, and remote work for employees meant that mitigating actions needed to be taken to address the impact of these initial responses.

## 1

### SUPPORT AND TRAINING FOR FACULTY

Switching to online learning undoubtedly focused on the student experience. However, success in this online modality hinges on the efforts of faculty members. Faculty members had to not only ensure a smooth transition from in-person to online learning but also address the needs of the most vulnerable student populations. Some institutions had teaching and learning centers that offered faculty training and support, including specific recommendations on how to support students. Many colleges, universities, and other organizations also curated a list of distance learning management solutions. For example, the University of Missouri created a resources page for instructors which included information about available workshops/seminars and tips for adaptations of lecture and lab courses. Zoom, the company that offers video conferencing solutions, also created a page to help educators learn how to effectively use the organization's software for distance education.<sup>8</sup>

## 2

### SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

**Financial Support.** The cancellation of in-person classes and activities, including work-study programs and on-campus jobs, affected many college students' ability to afford not only costs associated with college but also essential daily items. For example, a survey of 1,500 undergraduate students at Arizona State University showed that 40 percent lost a job, internship, or job offer. Postsecondary institutions responded in many ways to the financial burden caused by the pandemic, especially to the most vulnerable students. One way was through crowdsourcing efforts. At institutions like The University of Texas at Austin, students and alumni worked together to create spreadsheets for students to describe needs, in the hope that others could try to meet them. Another response was distribution of aid from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which provided around \$6 billion in emergency grants to currently enrolled students. Many colleges moved quickly to identify eligible students in order to push out funds. Lastly, students received pro-rated refunds for room and board charges.

**Technological Support.** The cancellation of in-person classes meant that classes were offered online. However, not all students had access to the necessary technology to handle remote teaching and learning. From an April 2020 poll of 267 institutions, conducted by EDUCAUSE, students had the most difficulty with bandwidth and Wi-Fi access, followed by access to the necessary devices such as laptops. According to the same poll, 47 percent of the institutions loaned hotspots to address internet access issues; 81 percent of the institutions loaned laptops or other devices to students. Other institutions, such as Mississippi State University, went a step further by offering financial assistance to cover the cost of internet access while also providing limited access to the university library. In addition to libraries, some institutions, including The University of Buffalo, created Wi-Fi ready parking lots.

**Academic Support and Student Services.** In addition to allowing students to continue with their learning online, institutions provided solutions for students to alleviate the stress from the disruption. Institutions recognized that they could not hold students to expectations constructed for normal circumstances with regards to an unplanned instructional experience. Thus, students had the option to choose a standard letter grade or pass/fail with explanations behind the circumstances of the grade, sometimes up until the last day of classes. Institutions also maintained online access via video or audio conferencing to other areas of student services, including advising, counseling, academic support resources, and accessibility services.

<sup>8</sup> Zoom. (2020). "Support during the COVID-19 Pandemic." Available at <http://zoom.us/docs/en-us/covid19.html>

# 3

## ADDRESSING FINANCIAL UNCERTAINTY

Faced with unexpected expenses from refunds to students for room and board and from technology costs to support the sudden pivot to online learning, the biggest concern of institutions was the financial impact of the pandemic. According to an April 2020 survey by the American Council on Education (ACE), higher education presidents worried most about summer and fall enrollment numbers, long-term viability, and short-term viability. The biggest immediate actions taken were efficiency and cost-control measures and freezing of new staff hires. Also, many institutions anticipated that they would eventually lay off staff, merge or eliminate academic programs, and freeze faculty hiring as well.

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## ENSURING SUCCESS IN THE FUTURE

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Many in higher education have already demonstrated creative solutions from relieving students' financial burdens to reimagining traditional academic policies. To ensure success in the future, higher education leaders can identify and determine best practices from the successful strategies employed during this pandemic, and how those could be applied. As such, a subsequent document released by this department will cover best practices and their implications for the future. This document is forthcoming and will be available on the MDHEWD website.<sup>9</sup>

## FINAL THOUGHTS

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It cannot yet be stated for certain if any institutions of higher education have pulled off a successful reopening until the end of the fall term or maybe even the academic year. This After Action Report focused on the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying immediate actions taken to mitigate the negative effects of any short-term strategies. Fortunately, this crisis also presents opportunities to create a new higher education system. For instance, as digital and economic divides became even more apparent last spring with the pivot to online learning, there is an opportunity to make higher education more equitable for all students.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://dhewd.mo.gov/covid-19.php>