

# ONE YEAR OF COVID-19 IN HIGHER EDUCATION

*Lessons Learned and Best Practices*



**Made Possible by Ready Education,  
Bryan Alexander, and NASPA Members**

---

# Table of Contents

About the Survey	3
→ Why this report matters	4
→ Key findings	5
Introduction	6
The Macrodynamics of a Year Mostly Off-Campus	7
Understanding the Student Experience	13
Successes and Failures	15
Conclusion	17



# About the Survey (175 PARTICIPANTS)

## Respondent Department or Division

**14%**

Faculty

**51%**

Student Affairs

**5%**

Student Success/  
Retention

**4%**

Health/Wellness/  
Counseling

**4%**

IT & Academic  
Technology

**1%**

Institutional  
Effectiveness/  
Assessment

**2%**

Recruitment/  
Admissions/Enrollment

**7%**

Academic Affairs

**2%**

Marketing/  
Communications

**2%**

Senior  
Administration

**7%**

Other

## Respondent Job Level and Role

**4%**

C-Level Executive

**1%**

President/  
Chancellor

**19%**

Vice President/  
Assistant VP

**26%**

Director/Assistant  
Director

**9%**

Dean

**2%**

Department  
Chair

**12%**

Faculty

**7%**

Manager

**3%**

Specialist

**12%**

Advisor/  
Coordinator

**5%**

Other

---

# Why This Report Matters

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher educational institutions implemented many changes, and made many more predictions.<sup>1</sup> Educational institutions at every level were forced to quickly adapt to remote learning models and embrace new technologies and, as the pandemic raged on, these institutions embraced a ‘new normal’ — one that will have a lasting impact on the way students and teachers engage with each other, with the curriculum, and adapt to future changes.

Ready Education, in partnership with internationally recognized futurist and researcher Bryan Alexander, conducted a survey of 175 leading educators including NASPA members in a variety of roles across the country to explore their thoughts on the impact of COVID-19 on students, schools, and the future of education.

**The results were eye-opening. In just 12 months, the pandemic left a lasting, likely irrevocable, impact on the fabric of higher education. The data illustrates new trends in higher education and how the sector has transformed beyond a post-COVID environment.**



---

# Key Survey Findings



Students played an active role in community building



Student-to-staff access improved



Remote services continued to increase and improve



Student engagement among the leading concerns for educators



Students' mental well-being declined due to isolation and lack of on-campus resources



Higher education institutions revealed they need more methods to access disadvantaged and at-risk students

## These findings revealed best practices for safely re-opening

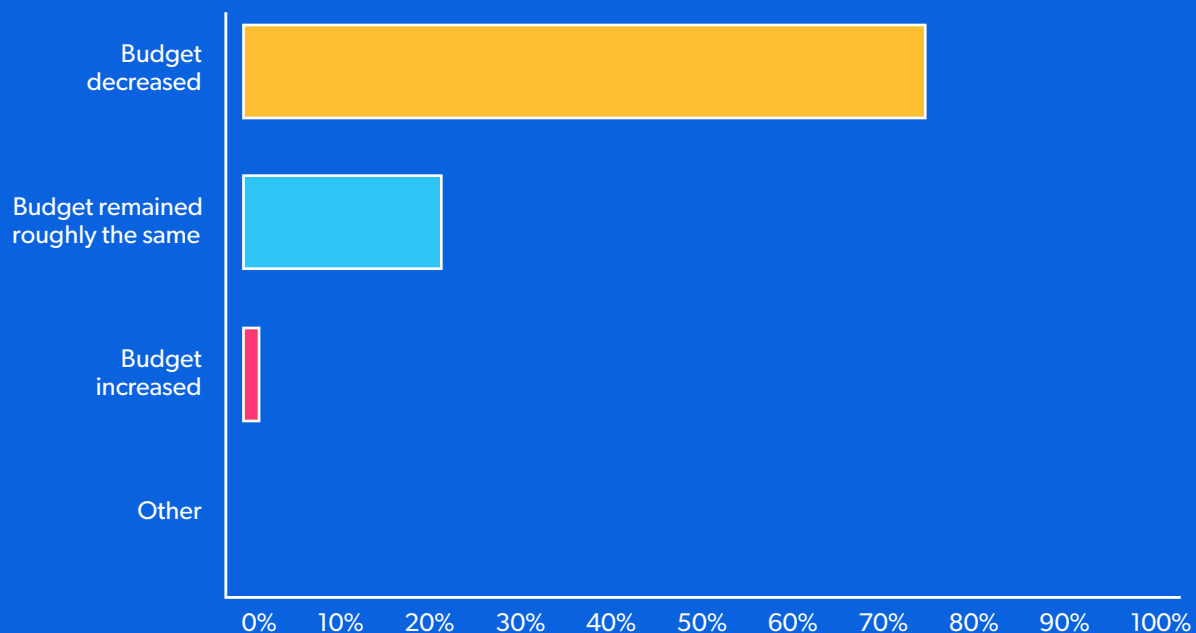
- **Develop initiatives and have tools ready to safely re-open by early summer**
- **Understand the nuances of the COVID response and develop workflows**
- **Have a cross-functional COVID Task Force to ensure effective coordination**
- **Create tools that allow students and staff to engage in a virtual/hybrid environment for students who prefer to remain online once schools reopen**

# The New Normal and Education

While COVID-19 hit different regions of the United States at various paces in early 2020, many consider March of 2021 to be the one-year anniversary of the pandemic’s encroachment into everyday lives. The profound loss and learnings of that year have reshaped nearly every industry, higher education being among the top sectors most impacted by COVID-19. The financial impact, which educators expect to exceed \$120 billion, has forced higher education institutions to take radical steps to keep staff, faculty, and the student body safe. Online learning reigned the higher education environment, with many institutions investing in additional remote resources and technologies.

Calls for sweeping and fundamental change in higher education are nothing new. But now, the realities of post-pandemic higher education have turned those motivations into imperatives.<sup>2</sup>

## How did your team’s budget change in 2020?



# The Macrodynamics of a Year Off-Campus

The survey also provides some context to the survey results by analyzing the pandemic's economic and behavioral impact on higher education.

The macrodynamics revealed a fairly limited spectrum of impacts. Higher education institutions were largely categorized into two groups – those who went with a fully online, remote learning experience and those who tried to resume face-to-face activity or adopt a hybrid approach.

**When asked if they preferred in-person, hybrid, or all-remote instructional formats, students reported a preference for hybrid models (46%). 42% of students chose in-class only instruction, and just 12% reported they preferred online only instruction.<sup>3</sup>**

## To what degree are your support/administrative staff working remote vs. in-person?

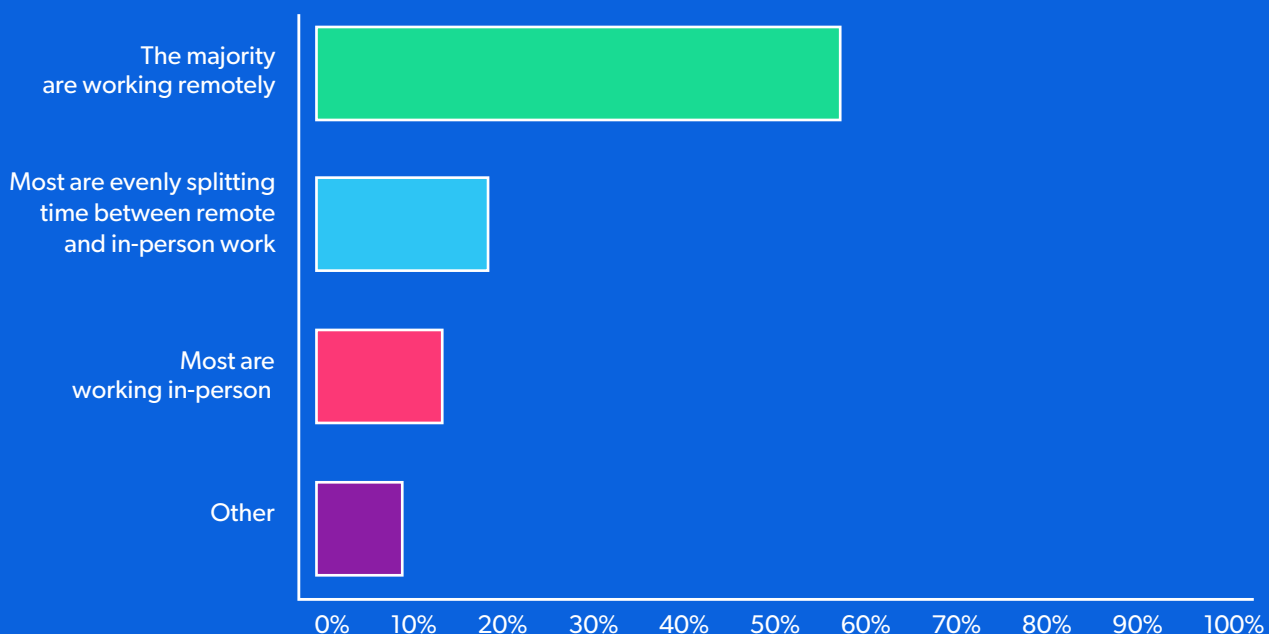


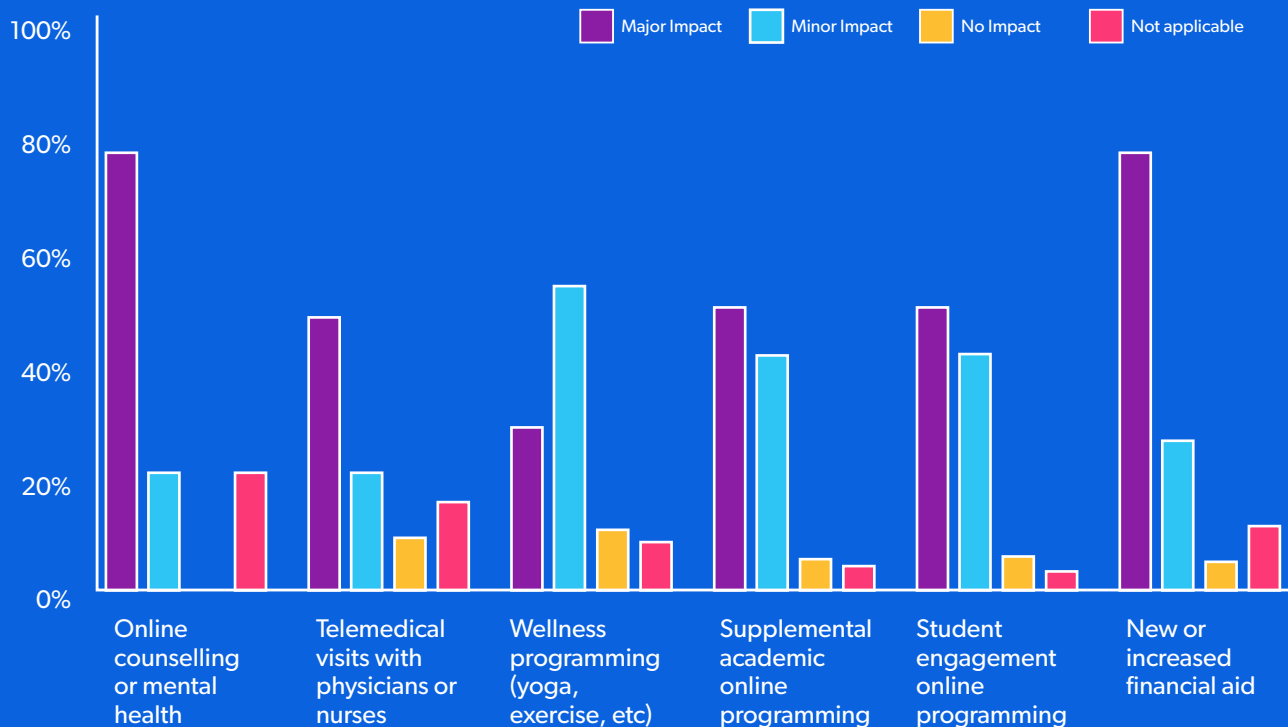
Figure 2 Nearly 60% of respondents have staff, faculty, and students working remotely, while 35% had a part-time in-person or completely in-person presence.



As a result of the pandemic, the majority of survey respondents also committed to fully remote learning. But universities have become much more than vehicles for education and research as student services have soared over recent decades. That meant that several resources had to migrate online, too. This led to several interesting innovations and compromises, including online mental health services, virtual reproductions of events and clubs, and supplemental learning resources such as tutoring and study groups.



## What impact did the following have on your efforts to engage and support students during the COVID-19 pandemic?





---

Mental well-being and health were huge priorities for higher education institutions as they continued to adapt to new ways of learning throughout the year. **Students faced considerable strife, mentally and economically.** Institutions launched campaigns to encourage healthy behaviors, such as Wellness Walks, and warned against engaging in risky coping methods, such as excessive drinking. A recent study from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill<sup>4</sup> found that a group of first-year students reported significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety in the wake of COVID-19 than they did before the pandemic hit. The students themselves played an important role in mental health, too. Students did not receive the attention they deserved in creating their own support hubs and peer-to-peer programs throughout the year, yet remained integral in circulating safe COVID-19 guidelines, holding their peers accountable to wear masks and respect social distancing.

While all this was happening on and off-campus, statewide and national response continued to plague the country and leave institutions in limbo mode. The varying procedures by states, counties, cities, and jurisdictions across the United States made it difficult to create a cohesive approach to prevention and containment, especially in densely populated settings like campuses. Contact tracing became an important component for institutions to use, in addition to typical masking and social distancing practices.



---

## Tiffin University: How One Ohio University is Fighting COVID-19 Transmission on Campus.

Keeping students safe in the COVID-19 pandemic was a challenge Tiffin University approached seriously. They launched a COVID-19 task force that brought in best practices for social distancing, including hybrid education, social distancing signage, and even contactless move-in to their residences. But what helped their Associate Dean of Students and Director of Campus Safety “sleep better” was launching a pre-screening and contact tracing program. The result? Not a single transmitted case on campus.

**“It weighed on me how we were going to do contact tracing, and once we got the app where we wanted it to be, it made my life a lot easier. I’ve been able to sleep better.”**

*Jacob Simon,  
Associate Dean of Students, Tiffin University*

[Read the full case study](#)



# Which of the following did you use on campus to reduce the spread of COVID-19?

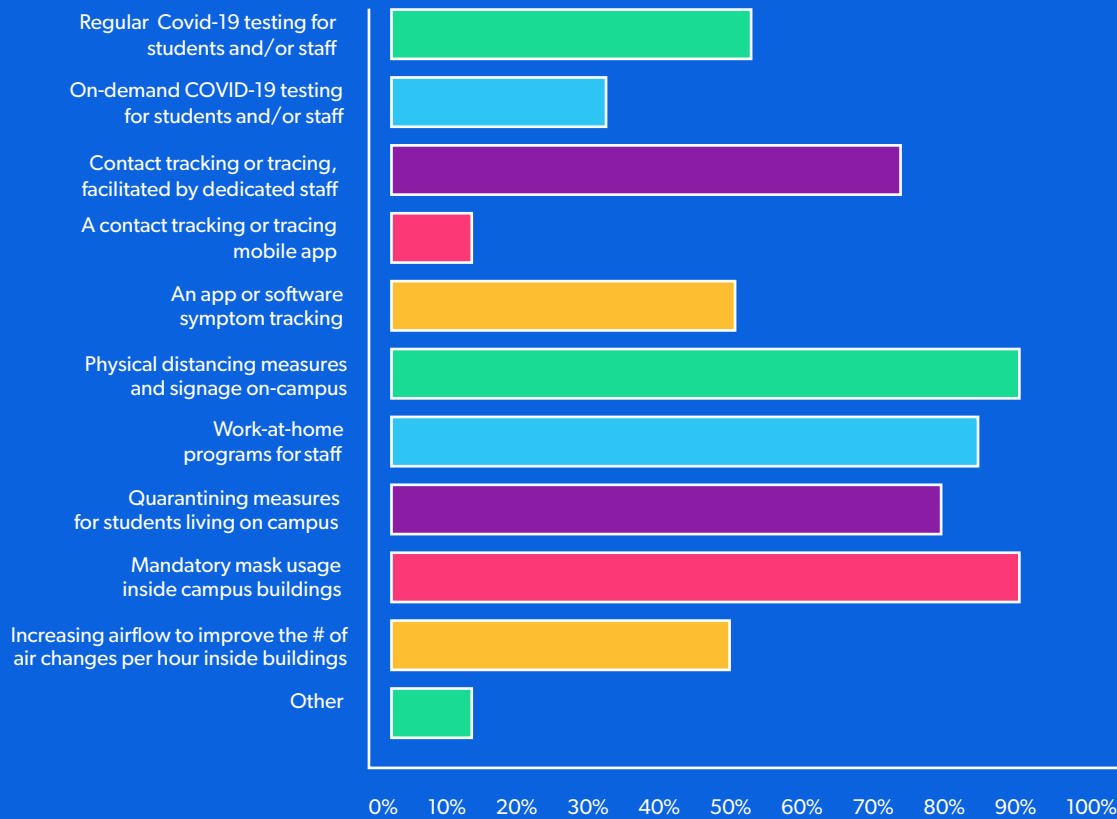


Figure 5 73% of respondents used contact tracing to reduce the spread of COVID-19

Other policies at the state and federal level allowed universities to tap into new funding sources and bridge the divide of dormant revenue generators. Over half of survey respondents expressed the view that new funding, grants, and other government aid had a major impact on their universities' financial viability.

**\$77B**

Money provided to higher education in three rounds of coronavirus stimulus relief.<sup>6</sup>

# What impact did the following have on your institution's ability to address financial challenges?

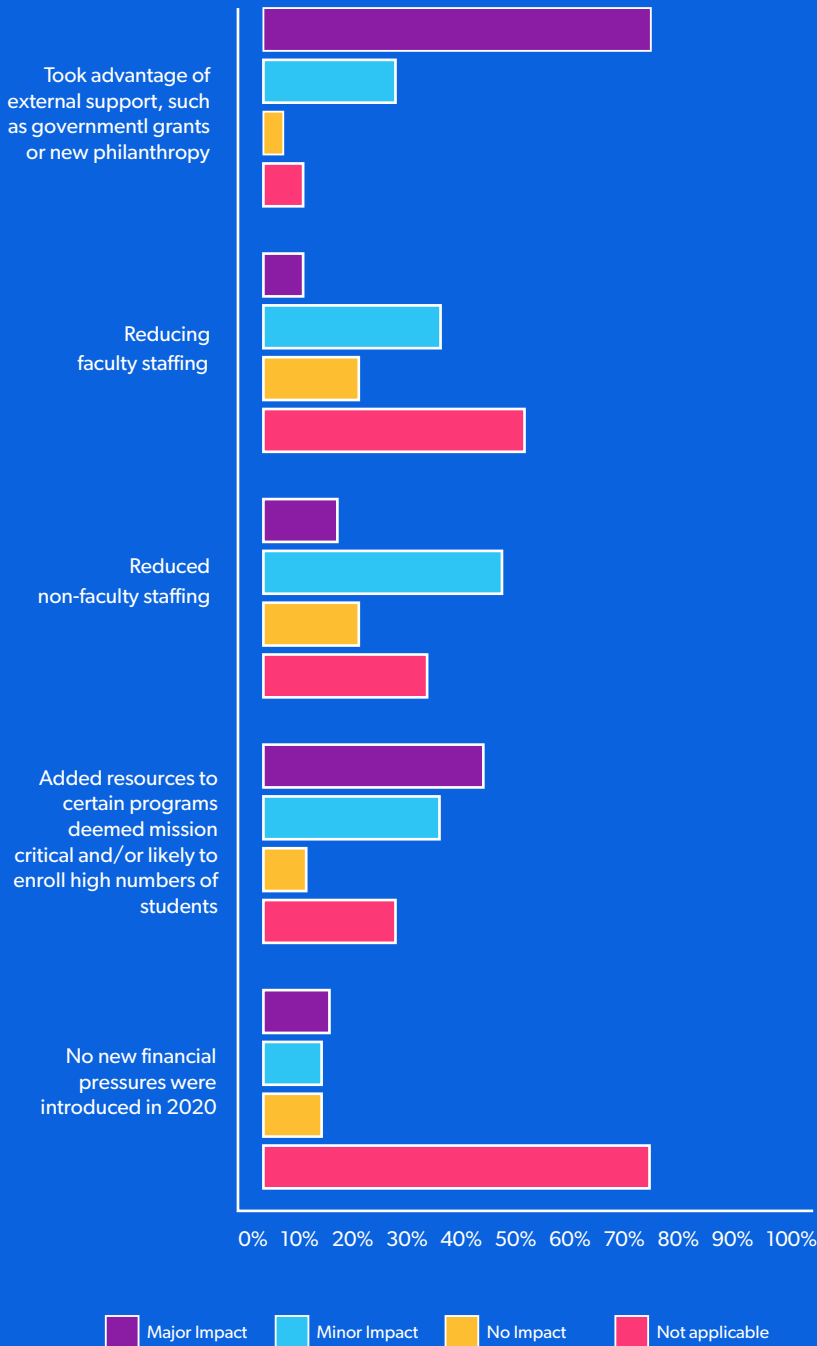


Figure 7 Educators relied on a wide range of technology, with video conferencing leading the pack at 92%

This data indicates that the nation's disconnected COVID-19 strategies will impact international enrollment as well – both in international students that come to the U.S. to study, and American students participating in study abroad programs and research. This will cause the enrollment focus to shift as schools have now become focused on supporting students at home. Relying on various technology resources, institutions leaned heavily on video conferencing and learning management systems (LMS) to deliver content and resources to students.

ABOUT  
**560K**  
 The drop in the number of undergraduates enrolled in the fall of 2020, a 3.6-percent decrease from a year earlier.<sup>7</sup>

---

# Understanding the Student Experience

While many of the tactics and practices institutions utilized above served the vast majority of students, the lack of campus accessibility had serious implications for homeless students.

Annastacia Espinoza, a Golden West College student, became an advocate for homeless students during the pandemic. Espinoza was homeless prior to the pandemic and depended on campus amenities to shower, sleep, and charge her phone and laptop. Espinoza's circumstances are not novel. According to the National Center for Homeless Education,<sup>8</sup> **“the number of enrolled students who have experienced homelessness at some point during the last three school years has increased to more than 1.5 million.”**

The pandemic has revealed some critical gaps in how institutions serve homeless students. Many institutions do not know the full breadth of their student homeless population since those students do not always reveal their circumstances due to the stigma surrounding the issue.

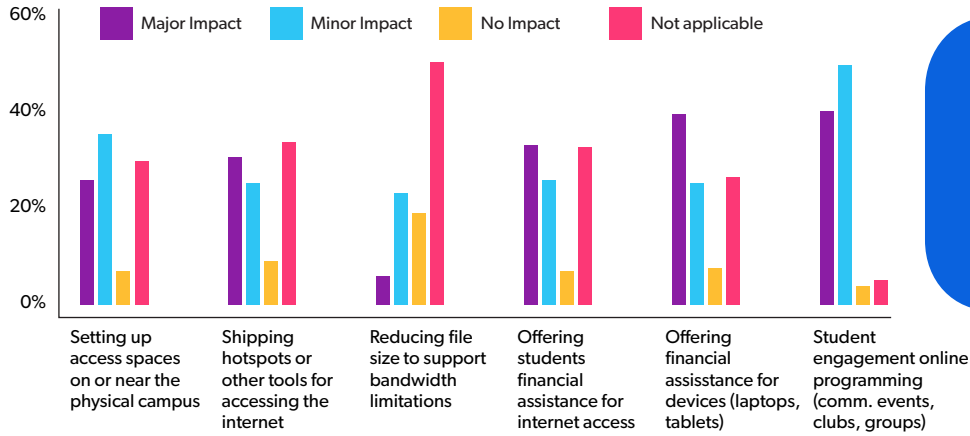
Many institutions did create opportunities for disadvantaged, low-income, and other susceptible groups. **Popular tactics include laptop loaner programs, financial assistance, and hotspot access.**

Espinoza is a vocal advocate, telling others about her circumstances – students and staff alike – to encourage other students to step forward. Her leadership led California Community Colleges to hire her as a mental health advocate for peer-to-peer outreach. A crucial tool to help her in this role was the Golden West College app, where she could post resources and actively reach out to students who need an online community to support them. **The app also creates a safer, private environment where students feel more comfortable seeking out resources versus going in-person, on campus.**

Engaging with similarly positioned peers helped students thwart feelings of loneliness and isolation, issues that have been severely affecting both homeless and sheltered students alike. The survey revealed similar sentiments about the importance of online communities.



## What impact did the following approaches have on your institution's ability to support access to online learning?



**"Need more hotspots and loaner laptops for low income students to bridge the digital divide"**

Figure 9 The pandemic impacted disadvantaged and low-income students harder than typical student groups.

**"When a student feels heard and like they have support, academic success flies"**

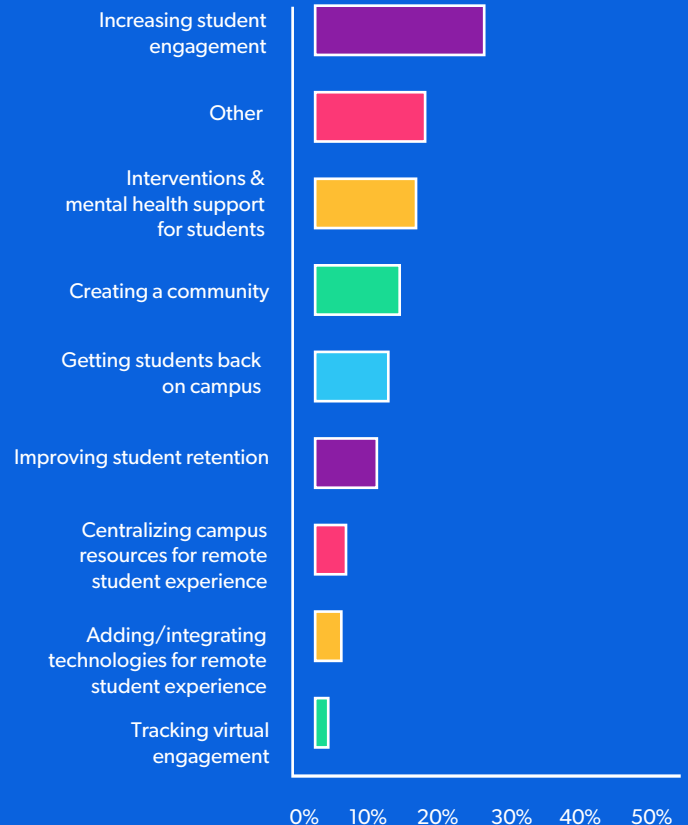
– Annastacia Espinoza

**"One bad interaction with staff or faculty can discourage a student from reaching out again."**

– Annastacia Espinoza

As educators continue to explore ways to improve student engagement, it's important to build a strong connection to the campus outside of a classroom.

## What is your biggest priority right now related to COVID-19?





---

# Successes and Failures

The survey data revealed several trends and insights into the long-term impact of COVID-19 on higher education. When asked about their opinions about the successes and failures of their initiatives, survey respondents shared many concerns.

Survey respondents overwhelmingly felt that the importance of student engagement and the interactions of on-campus relations were under-appreciated. Respondents also reported a lack of innovation when it came to appropriately outfitting outdoor spaces for classwork.

**ENGAGEMENT**  
**DIGITAL DIVIDE** ACCESSIBILITY  
COMMUNITY **LACK OF SUPPORT**  
POOR COMMUNICATION

Accessibility was also a concern. The pandemic shone a light on the “digital divide” or some students’ lack of access to appropriate tools and technology to engage in remote learning. In addition to a lack of proper device distribution, educational institutions weren’t able to provide reliable Wifi access to every student, and some students couldn’t access or weren’t accepted to programs without that connection. Additionally, survey respondents reported that accessibility technology like closed captioning wasn’t always available to students who needed it, which is essential to students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing and is even mandated by Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Additionally, survey respondents consistently reported general failures in effective online communication during virtual coursework and a lack of community building to replace the lack of face-to-face interaction between students and teachers.



# Golden West College Case Study: The Importance of an Online Campus Community in a Pandemic

With an increased need to keep students engaged, Golden West College (GWC) looked to implement and optimize a mobile-first student engagement approach to enhance well-being among socially-distanced students, provide a channel for rapid communication about COVID-19, and provide a community to help students thrive.

## The result?

**5X**

increase in student  
-to-student messaging

**101%**

increase in public  
channel posts

**82%**

increased engagement

**“During these times, connections are vital. The app gave me the opportunity to be there for my students, as a student leader, and a mental health and social justice activist.”**

[Read the full case study](#)

Despite these perspectives on shortfalls, **nearly 90%** of survey respondents felt their institution successfully adapted to COVID-19. Inside Higher Ed also predicts that the strengths and weaknesses of distance delivery models revealed by the pandemic, more universities will permanently enter the online education space, which may attract some students to pursue online options.

## How do you agree with the following statement: my institution successfully adapted to the COVID-19 Pandemic?

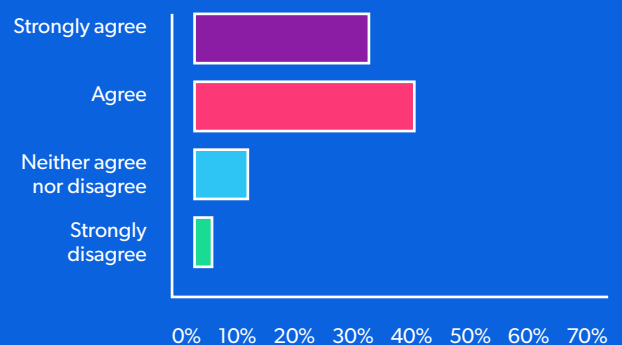


Figure 10 Industry-wide barriers aside, many respondents reported success in adapting to COVID-19

---

# Conclusion

There's no doubt the COVID-19 pandemic left, and will continue to leave, a huge impact on students and educational institutions of every level across the world. The mental health impact of the pandemic cannot be overestimated. Students are struggling with isolation, stress, and the implications of a post-COVID world.

**53%**

of higher education presidents listed student mental health among their top 5 concerns<sup>11</sup>

**42%**

pointed to faculty and staff mental health as being among their biggest worries.<sup>11</sup>

While the negative effects of lost in-classroom time, social interaction, and community building will leave a lasting impact, the shift to mostly-remote learning also forced educational institutions to embrace digital transformation quickly, explore ways to better serve diverse student bodies, and create strategies for change management amid crisis.

The key takeaways institutions need to consider as part of their COVID-19 strategy include the need for greater student engagement, not just as a means to retain students and increase enrollment, but to encourage healthier environments for students. The survey revealed that community hubs and resources played an important role in cultivating these environments.

From an operations perspective, administrators agreed that accessibility limitations and the reduced capacity to serve a diverse student body were among the top roadblocks in creating a successful remote or hybrid learning environment.

**Moving forward, higher education institutions will likely continue to introduce additional remote technology tools as the potential of new COVID-19 strains could place universities and other industries back in lockdown. Higher education also has an opportunity to enhance its mental health and wellness services and create resources for at-risk and disadvantaged student bodies, who suffered disproportionately during the pandemic.**

# Next Steps

1

## Watch the One-Year of COVID Webinar

The COVID-19 pandemic impacts higher education across every dimension and will continue to demand administrators' agility as it curtails in 2021. [Watch this webinar](#) to explore the stories from the students living it and mental health experts trying to curb the mental health crisis.

[Watch the webinar](#)

2

## Safely Re-Open Your Campus

Hear how the team at Tiffin University adopted a solution that enabled them to bring students safely back to campus and, "made it so that [their Dean of Students] was able to sleep at night," in [this webinar](#). Or, if you're ready to look at technology for safely re-opening your campus, explore [Ready Contact Trace](#).

[Watch the webinar](#)

3

## Read the Retention Report

Student retention is a challenge that has only grown in magnitude since the pandemic has moved the campus community from mostly in-person, to mostly online. Read the [Student Retention Research Report](#), published in collaboration with Concordia University Wisconsin and Eastern Michigan University, to learn how you can improve retention by as much as 4%.

[Read the report](#)

<sup>1</sup>From "What Higher Ed Has Learned From COVID-19 So Far." L. Gardner, October 28, 2020, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Copyright 2020

<sup>2</sup>From Learning From COVID-19 by E.J. Maloney and J. Kim, January 3, 2021, *Inside Higher Ed*.

<sup>3</sup>From The Early Impacts of COVID-19 on the Community College Student Experience by LL Garcia, M. Bohlig and C. Adkins, July 10, 2020, *Diverse*. Copyright 2021 by Copyright Holder.

<sup>4</sup>From "Depression and anxiety among first-year college students worsen during pandemic" University Communications, March 3, 2021, *University of North Carolina University Communications*. Copyright 2021 by Copyright Holder.

<sup>5</sup>See *Ready Education* webinar "How One Ohio University is Fighting COVID-19 Transmission on Campus" (2020), for the full case study.

<sup>6</sup>From "What Higher Education Has Endured for the Past Year" A.W. June and J. Elias, March 11, 2021, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Copyright 2021 by Copyright Holder.

<sup>7</sup>From "Fall 2020 College Enrollment Declines 2.5%: Nearly Twice the Rate of Decline of Fall 2019" T. Sedmak, December 17, 2020, *National Student Clearinghouse*. Copyright 2021 by Copyright Holder.

<sup>8</sup>From "'They're Invisible': Number of Homeless Students Reaches New High" T. Walker, February 12, 2020, *National Education Association*. Copyright 2021 by Copyright Holder.

<sup>9</sup>See *Ready Education* "The Importance of an Online Campus Community in a Pandemic" (2020), for the full case study.

<sup>10</sup>From "10 Observations on COVID-19 and Higher Ed" J. Kroger, December 15, 2020, *Inside Higher Ed*. Copyright 2021 by Copyright Holder.