

PERC RESEARCH BRIEF

Residence Life Engagement Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Brief 3 of the *Student Engagement Practice and Planning in the COVID-19 Environment Research Series*

August 2020



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION
RESEARCH CENTER

Based in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in the College of Education, Health & Human Sciences at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, the mission of the Postsecondary Education Research Center (PERC) is to identify, conduct, and coordinate research on initiatives and ideas designed to enhance higher education at the institution, state, and national levels to enhance policy and practice.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has had monumental impacts on higher education institutions and the ways in which colleges and universities operate. Notably, there have been major shifts in how student affairs professionals facilitate meaningful student engagement in a time when in-person experiences are not possible. To date, the primary focus of most institutions has been on shifting instruction. Yet, researchers consistently have demonstrated that instructional practices alone are not sufficient to engage and ultimately retain students. The study aims to address the following question: **How is student engagement practiced in the age of a global crisis?**

How student engagement is practiced varies when examining the many functional areas that work to promote student engagement on a campus. One such area is residence life, which engages students with the common goals of providing safe and enriching residential experiences in which students can build meaningful interpersonal connections with others and find a sense of community and belonging on campus.

This brief will provide research insights for residence life engagement plans and practices for fall 2020:

Three key themes emerged from the data:

1. A large proportion of institutions plan to utilize hybrid engagement models that focus on adapted policies and occupancy protocols.
2. Student population size is playing a role in the few institutions opting to utilize traditional engagement models.
3. Residence life staff are working to balance health guidelines in facilities management, as well as creating meaningful ways for students and staff to connect and build community.

The brief concludes with a “Emerging Practices” section that focuses on programming philosophies, strategies, and initiatives that present potential for creating innovative and engaging residence life experiences.

For more details, read the full report available at perc.utk.edu/covid-19.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, COVID-19 began to spread quickly through the United States. With many dangerous side effects and threats to health and safety, the spread of COVID-19 necessitated pause and/or adaptation in strategies for postsecondary education. By late March 2020, most institutions had ceased in-person campus operations and transitioned classes to online settings for the remainder of the term. As faculty transitioned academic and support services online, student affairs practitioners worked to maintain core engagement functions supporting student extracurricular and co-curricular experiences.

In June 2020, the Postsecondary Education Research Center (PERC) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, embarked on studying institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially regarding plans for programming, services, and initiatives that occur beyond the classroom and aim to promote and facilitate student engagement.

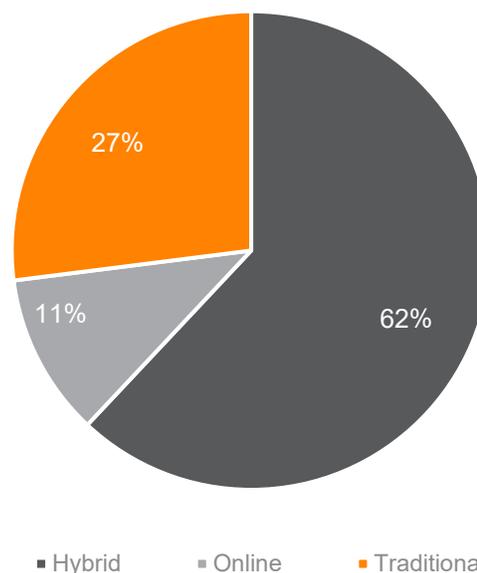
The purpose of this project is to understand and to inform student engagement planning and practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team examined institutional plans and student engagement practices from a sample of 45 institutions through three models of engagement (Appendix A):

Traditional: Delivered on-campus, typically through in-person or face-to-face experiences

Online: Delivered through fully online, virtual, or digital strategies

Hybrid: Delivered through a combination of traditional in-person or face-to-face experiences and online or digital experiences.

Figure 1. Institution-Wide Fall Engagement Plans



At the time of data collection for this brief, nearly two-thirds of colleges and universities in the sample (62%) plan to engage in hybrid engagement models at the institution-wide level in the fall (Figure 1). Just over a quarter (27%) reported plans to re-open in the fall with fully traditional engagement models. Fewer institutions (9%) have announced plans for a fully online fall semester. Institution-wide engagement plans will critically influence each functional area and will serve as a foundational base to address the primary study question:

How is student engagement practiced in the midst of a global crisis?

Leading student engagement scholar, Dr. John Braxton weighs in on the importance of student engagement:

“Student engagement constitutes an important vehicle for college student success. Engagement and involvement are interchangeable terms (Tinto, 2012) that both pertain to the amount of physical and psychological energy students put into their college experience (Astin, 1984). Academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular stand as some of the forms of the college student experience in which student involvement takes place (Mayhew, et al., 2016). Interpersonal involvement includes faculty and student interactions and peer interactions (Mayhew, et al., 2016).

Student involvement fosters such aspects of college student success as first year persistence (Braxton, et al, 2014) and graduation (Tinto, 2012). Without persistence and or graduation, student attainment of other forms of success unlikely occur. These other forms of student success include cognitive growth, career development and a wide array of types of personal development. For the types of student development, readers should consult *How College Affects Students: 21st Century Evidence that Higher Education Works, Volume 3* by (Mayhew, et al., 2016).

The COVID-19 Pandemic places major constraints on the various forms of student involvement in general and those in the form of face-to-face interaction in

particular. The pandemic will likely result in some students not returning to their college for the fall 2020 semester. Put differently, institutional student persistence rates at some colleges and universities will decrease. Perhaps, some of the lessons learned from extensive use of remote teaching during the 2020 spring semester may suggest ways in which colleges and universities can offer alternative approaches to student engagement during the fall 2020 semester and beyond as we continue to cope with the enormous challenges of the pandemic.”

Residence Life Engagement

Residence Life programming strives to help new students become acquainted with their university community, develop friendships, and establish a sense of belonging at their institution. Programming typically includes social activities that engage residents in opportunities that focus on developing life skills, personal wellness, professional and academic development, and culture and diversity. Residence life staff often host meet and greet dinners, community building workshops, mentorship seminars, or guest speaker presentations tailored to meet the needs and interests of their residents. Residence life also has a focus and oversight of facilities and operations, such as assisting students with the logistics of moving in and out of the residence halls, addressing issues concerning the maintenance and security of facilities, and keeping residents informed about important campus and community information that directly impacts them.

Residence life professionals across the country are working to plan and implement

experiences that fulfill the goals of residence life while balancing new safety protocol and public health guidelines. Chandra Myrick, Executive Director of University Housing at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville shares the following:

“Residence life programs on college and university campuses provide physical shelter, opportunities for students to connect with one another, and experiences for self-exploration and discovery. A residence hall serves as a ‘home away from home’ for many students, not just because it is where they live, but also where they learn about themselves and others. The residential experience for students is often enhanced by the services and support provided by live-in staff who perform varying roles related to community development, conflict resolution, safety and security assurance, campus resources referral, academic services and support, and personal development.

The impact of COVID-19 on residence life programs has and will continue to be long-lasting. Many residence life programs were challenged with supporting students while planning and implementing move-out plans during the spring term when most colleges and universities transitioned to fully online courses and remote learning. Similar to other student affairs units, residence life programs must now tackle the reality of a ‘new normal’ where virtual engagement is not just a solution to temporary problem, but a new way to reimagine how we deliver information, engage with

students, and build and maintain meaningful communities.

COVID-19 has also financially impacted residence life programs in unimaginable ways. Once seen as financially solvent entities, may residence life programs are faced with limited financial and personnel resources while being called upon to enhance cleaning efforts, provide alternative housing for isolation and/or quarantine purposes, and offer even more support in an effort to keep students safe and healthy during a global pandemic. While residence life program are accustomed to crisis management, COVID-19 will certainly prove to be a defining moment for the way in which these programs transform and protect students’ lives.”

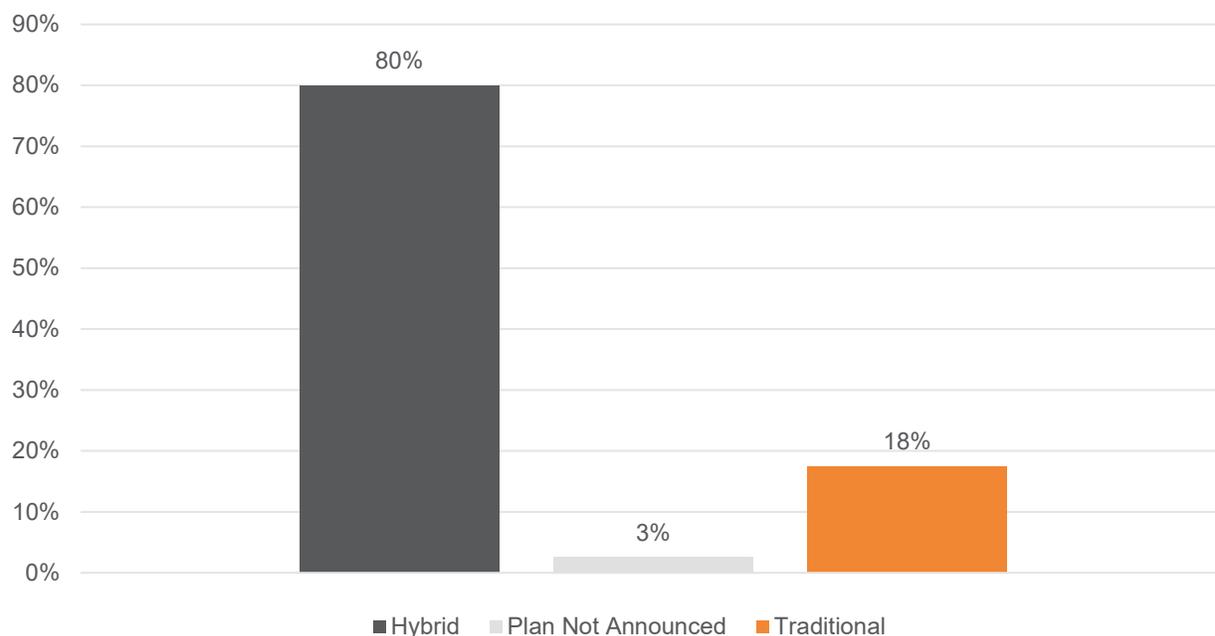
For the purpose of this study, housing and residence life department engagement models were classified as “hybrid,” “online,” and “traditional.” Hybrid engagement was operationally defined as institutions that are reducing hall density/capacity and changing programming models to facilitate some or all programs online. Traditional engagement was categorized as an institution with minimal to no changes to its procedures and practices due to COVID-19. This was inclusive of institutions that will likely encourage students to wear face masks and to practice social distancing but the residential life operations and programming will remain in-person. Online, though no institutions chose this engagement method in this study, was categorized as institutions closing their residence halls for the fall due to COVID-19 and not offering on-campus housing facilities and residential experiences.

II. MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT

At the time of collection, 80% of institutions in the study sample with residential facilities (40) plan to reduce occupancy in residence halls and restrict in-person programming and activities (Figure 2). Few institutions in the study sample (20%) plan to continue operations with minimal to no changes to

occupancy and in-person programming. Only one institution has not announced final plans at the time of data collection. However, all institutions in the study sample are encouraging students to wear face masks and to social distance six feet apart from one another. Several institutions are continuously adding new information and updates concerning move-in and on-campus living to their websites at the time of data collection.

Figure 2. Residence Life Engagement Models



III. DIFFERENCES BY INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The majority of four-year institutions in the study sample will operate and host residence life programs using a hybrid model, engaging students both online and in-person with strict safety guidelines and capacity limitations, but there are some

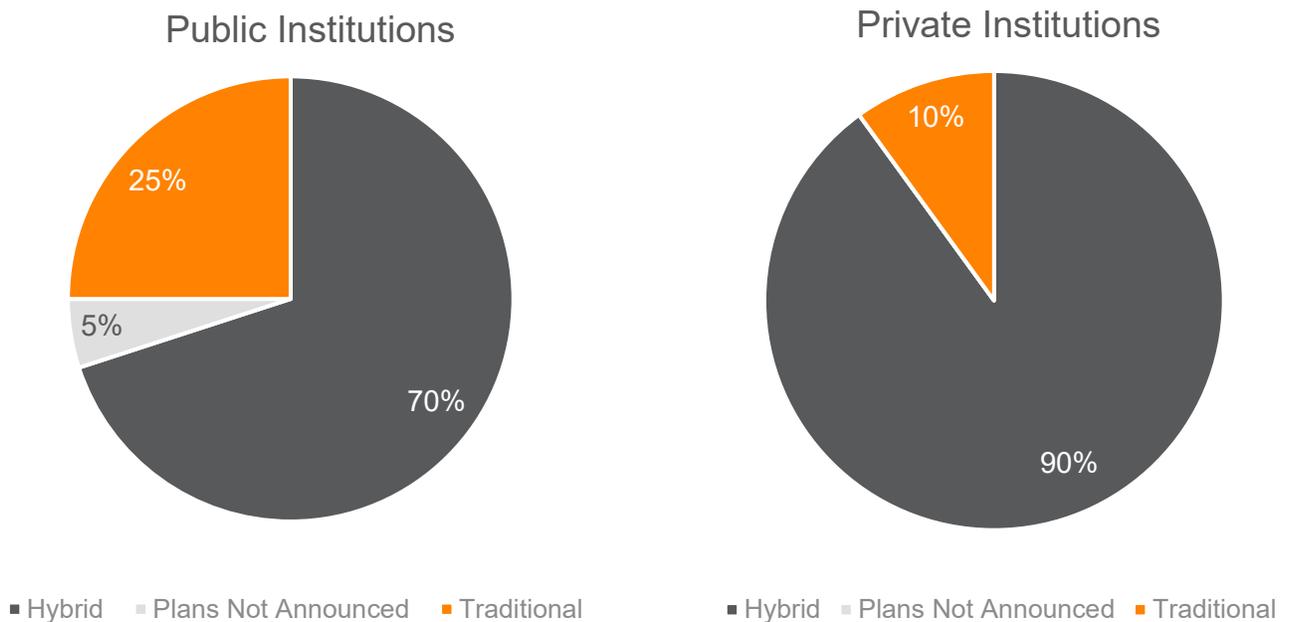
differences that have emerged when considering institutional characteristics such as governance, size, and geographic location.

Governance

Differences exist among public and private institutions in regard to the planned models of engagement for residence life. While

small variations, there are more public institutions in the study sample opting for traditional models of engagement than private institutions (Figure 3).

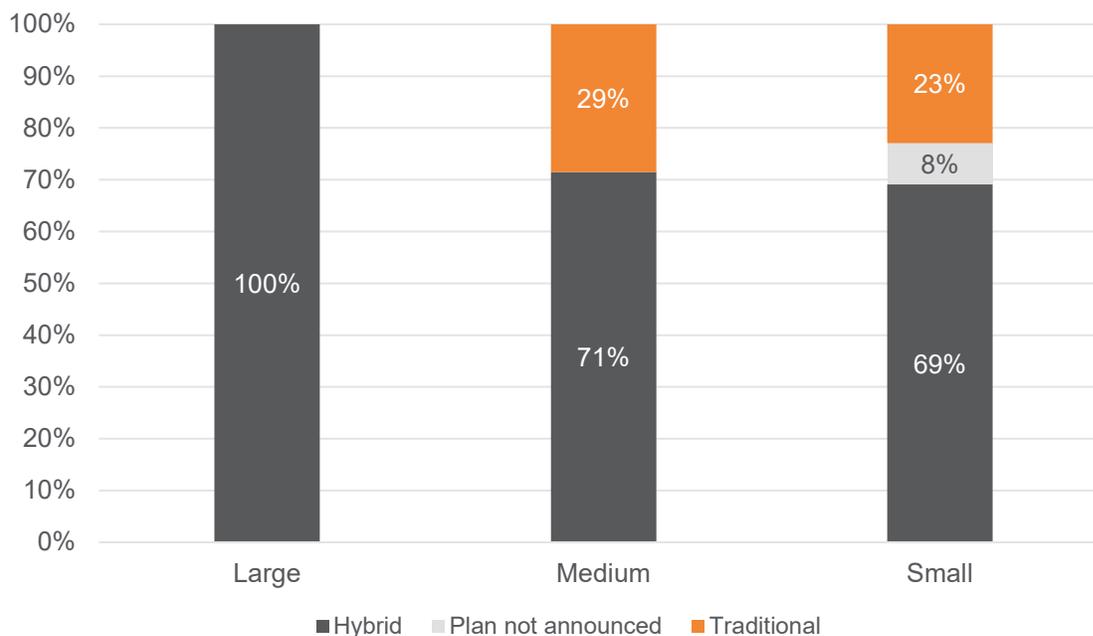
Figure 3. Residence Life Engagement Models, by Governance Type



Size

Considering the role that student population size can play in regard to residential occupancy capacity, it is no surprise that minor differences have emerged when examining residence life student engagement (Figure 4). Of the seven institutions that plan to operate residence life with traditional models with minimal to no changes in operations, four are classified as medium-size (serving 3,000-

9,999 students). The remaining three institutions opting for a traditional model fall within in the small-size (serving fewer than 3,000 students) category. Only one small institution had not publicly announced adapted plans for residence life in the fall semester in response to the pandemic. All of the large institutions (serving more than 10,000 students) in the study sample plan to operate with hybrid models.

Figure 4. Residence Life Engagement Models, by Size Classification

Region

Regionally, there was little difference found among institutions in the sample, with the majority of institutions planning to operate with hybrid models. However, institutions in the Southeast represent a larger portion of institutions planning to utilize traditional engagement models and making minimal changes to their residence life operations and programming.

IV. EMERGING PRACTICES

Nearly all institutions in the sample that offer campus residential experiences have introduced new policies and procedures and have adapted practices that are necessary for serving their community while ensuring the safety and well-being of students residing on campus. From occupancy reduction to alternate programming methods, residence life professionals across the country are working to plan and implement engagement initiatives that are both safe and meaningful for residents. The following are some emerging practices that have been

announced by institutions in the study sample and help illuminate how student engagement professionals are facilitating residence life.

Reducing Occupancy and Hall Density

Several institutions have chosen to reduce population density within the residence halls to minimize interactions with others and encourage physical distancing among students. This is being executed in a variety of ways, including converting double rooms into singles or leaving some rooms vacant on floors so that there are fewer residents sharing the same common spaces on each floor. As each institution has a unique occupancy situation, adjusting facility capacity can be utilized to fit the needs of each institution.

To reduce the number of residents seeking on-campus housing, many institutions are highly encouraging students to live off-campus if possible and are exempting students from prior live-on policies. Several institutions have made decisions regarding

which students can live on campus by considering the following guidelines for prioritizing the need of living on campus: students whose permanent residence is located within a designated distance from campus, first-year students, students who are experiencing housing insecurity, and students who do not have means of transportation to commute to campus.

Adjusting Move-In Practices to Reduce Traffic

Move-in practices at many institutions will change this year to ensure a safe and manageable flow of students and families. Some institutions have added more days for students to move in and have had residents sign up for scheduled move-in slots to space out the number of people moving through halls and on campus at once. Some institutions have opted to limit residents to having 1-2 guests to help them move in. Gonzaga University will welcome students to move onto campus using a phased approach over a sequence of three-day periods, that will allow first-year students to safely move in first, followed by the returning students.

The goal of these practices is ultimately to reduce traffic within the halls so that move-in limits the amount of interactions at one time. However, these changes may come with potential drawbacks. Adding the extra days will allow for more move-in time slots, which will also help to de-densify the slots. However, a potential negative implication of this practice is the exhaustion it can cause on residence hall staff as they work upwards of 10-12 move-in days leading up to the first day of class. Additionally, while limiting residents to 1-2 guests to assist them to move in reduces the number of people on campus and interacting with one another, there are also implications for families, as this may mean that members of a student's family may not be able to participate in an important first step of their college experience.

Limiting Guests and Visitors

Many institutions have also publicly announced major changes to the guest and visitation policies within residence halls. Some common variations of updated visitation policies include banning guests altogether, limiting residents to one non-resident guest at a time, limiting residents to one guest (resident or non-resident) at a time, and limiting residents to only university student guests. The larger institutions such as Penn State University and Ohio State University will prohibit non-university visitors and overnight guests in residence halls following student move-in. Most institutions, like Seton Hall University, will require university visitors to check-in through the front desk sign-in system, and other institutions will require non-university visitors to meet with residents outside. Each campus must evaluate what will work best for their situation, especially considering their location and institution size so that their visitation policy appropriately protects and serves their residents.

While limiting guests helps to reduce the number of non-residents in a hall, it can pose restraints as students attempt to build relationships with others who may not live in the same hall as them. Additionally, residents may want to have a sibling or friend spend a night or weekend with them during the school year, which can help them adjust and prevent homesickness. With new visitor policies and restrictions, this may no longer be possible at many institutions.

Rethinking Common and Shared Spaces

In addition to adjusted occupancy and visitor policies, some housing departments are reconsidering common spaces within residence halls. This may come in the form of closing common spaces or setting

occupancy limits to encourage physical distancing when possible while still providing spaces to build community. As common spaces change or are closed for general use, departments are considering other ways that residents can safely create connections with each other in ways that common spaces would traditionally facilitate. Further, in some residence halls, a common space may take the form of a shared kitchen or area for dining. Closing down or limiting these areas may have implications on food security as it would limit residents' ability to prepare meals on their own.

Safer in Place Periods

Some institutions are also utilizing a safer in place period to adjust and acclimate students to the adaptations and protocol in place within residence life. Tennessee State University will implement a 14 day "safer in place" policy upon arrival for all students in the residence halls. Students will move into the residence halls and complete the first two weeks of classes online before transitioning to in-person instruction. Students will be tested for COVID-19 before moving into the residence halls with daily symptom monitoring and temperature checks being conducted throughout campus. This policy will offer students extended time to transition to living in the residence halls and practicing safety and social distancing protocols before starting in-person classes. This procedure also aims to minimize the risk of infections by containing students to smaller groups and fewer facilities for 14 days before transitioning to the larger classroom environment and the broader campus community.

Transitioning Programming and Resident Interactions to Virtual Settings

Residence life programming prior to COVID-19 was traditionally facilitated through in-person experiences, as were many interactions between residence life staff and residents. However, in efforts to reduce the potential spread of COVID-19 through in-person interactions, many residence life departments are re-evaluating what programming and community building looks like within the halls. For some, this means limiting the number of participants for programs, requiring RSVPs for attendance to account for an expected number of students, moving programs outside to allow for adequate distancing, and even transitioning programs to completely online, facilitating programs through platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

Residence life programming is important to the campus experience because it supports activities that promote student engagement, personal development, and a sense of belonging for residents; all of which are necessary for creating a positive college experience for students, and increasing student retention (Schudde, 2011). These programs provide students with resources and opportunities for advancing social, cultural, academic, and professional growth and development. Additionally, Resident Assistants, more commonly referred to as RAs, play an important role promoting student engagement as they are not only representatives of the university, but their role as peer mentors makes them an important resource to residents. Prior to the pandemic, many institutions required RAs to keep an interaction log or have a minimum number of in-person interactions with each of their residents per month, semester, etc. in efforts to check in with students and assess their well-being and overall student experience. Now, institutions are adapting these requirements

to allow for and encourage virtual communications to count toward their interaction logs and serve as documentation of conversations they have had with their residents. This process creates a flexible and accessible method for residence life staff to remain safely connected with residents and aware of what is working and is not working overall in the residential experience.

Screening and Isolation Protocol

It is very important that institutions prepare for the inevitable — no matter how many precautions are taken, COVID-19 cases will likely occur on campus this fall. This may be especially true within the residence halls, where students are more frequently sharing space and interacting with one another. Many institutions are working with campus health centers or local health departments to develop testing and screening protocols. Further, many have developed self-isolation and quarantine protocols for when a student tests positive for COVID-19. Most housing departments have also made it a priority to identify what spaces, whether on campus designated

halls or facilities located off-campus, will be utilized for isolation and quarantine spaces. However, it is not just a matter of moving a student to a space for self-isolation if they test positive or exhibit symptoms as there are numerous staff and fellow students who have engaged with the infected individuals that will be impacted as well. Institutions are also creating protocols and procedures that communicate how transitions will happen if a case occurs and how information will be disseminated in the halls. Further, institutions are creating plans to fully support students in self-isolation through collaborating with the campus dining options to ensure they have access to meals without risking spreading the infection to others.

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APPENDIX A.

Forty-five (45) institutions of higher education were selected to be included in this sample. The following characteristics were considered in selecting institutions to be included in the sample:

- *Governance*: Determination between public or private governance structure
- *Degree Programs*: Determination institutions granting two-year or four-year degrees.
- *Size*: Classification based on total student population as determined and adapted by the Carnegie Classifications on size.
 - *Small*: Institutions serving less than 3,000 students
 - *Medium*: Institutions serving between 3,000 and 9,999 students
 - *Large*: Institutions serving 10,000 or more students
- *Geographic Region*: Classification based on regions comprised of the following states:
 - *Northeast*: MA, MD, ME, NJ, NY, PA, VA, and Washington D.C.
 - *Southeast*: GA, FL, KY, LA, MS, NC, TN
 - *Midwest*: IA, IL, IN, MN, and OH
 - *Southwest*: AZ, TX
 - *West*: CA, CO, ID, OR, WA
- *Minority-Serving Institution Status*: Whether institution has a minority-serving designation.

The following institutions were included in the study sample:

- Adams State University
- Azusa Pacific University
- Clarion University
- Colgate University
- College of William & Mary
- DePauw University
- Dominican University
- East Los Angeles College
- Emory University
- Florida A&M University
- Gonzaga University
- Howard University
- Ivy Tech Community College
- Lone State College
- Miami-Dade College
- Mississippi University for Women
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- Murray State University
- Northern Virginia Community College
- Northwestern University
- The Ohio State University
- The Pennsylvania State University
- Princeton University
- Seton Hall University
- Seton Hill University
- Sewanee, the University of the South
- Spelman College
- St. Mary's College of Maryland
- Tennessee State University
- Texas Tech University
- The University of Arizona
- The University of California, Los Angeles
- University of Central Florida
- University of Idaho
- University of Maine
- University of Minnesota, Morris
- University of Northern Iowa
- University of Southern California
- University of Tennessee, Knoxville
- University of Texas, Austin
- Valparaiso University
- Vanderbilt University
- Wake Forest University
- Willamette University
- Xavier University of Louisiana



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