



## PERC RESEARCH BRIEF

### **Multicultural Engagement Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**Brief 5** of the *Student Engagement Practice and Planning in the COVID-19 Environment Research Series*

October 2020



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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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The University of Tennessee, Postsecondary Education Research Center  
305 Bailey Education Complex  
1126 Volunteer Blvd  
Knoxville, TN 37996  
T +01 1 865.974.3972

[perc@utk.edu](mailto:perc@utk.edu)  
perc.utk.edu

**Author(s):**

Heather N. Hall  
Miranda N. Rutan  
Sarah R. Williams  
Dr. Amanda Assalone  
Britta Svoboda  
Dr. Meghan Grace  
Dr. J. Patrick Biddix

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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?**

Student engagement is practiced in a variety of ways and through the work of numerous departments and functional areas. One such area is multicultural engagement, which engages students through campus-based programming, services, organizations, and community spaces. Multicultural engagement initiatives are often supported by numerous departments or functional areas on a campus. Providing invaluable opportunities, professionals have worked to adapt multicultural engagement practices to ensure important programs, services, and community building can occur in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This brief will provide research insights for multicultural engagement plans and practices for fall 2020. Two key themes emerged from the data:

1. Virtual and hybrid programming are prominent methods utilized to provide multicultural engagement opportunities.
2. Operations for managing designated physical spaces have been adapted to provide community building environments.

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

For more details, read the full report available at [perc.utk.edu/covid-19](http://perc.utk.edu/covid-19).

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Heather N. Hall is a College Student Personnel MS Candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Miranda N. Rutan is a College Student Personnel MS Candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Sarah R. Williams is a College Student Personnel MS Candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Dr. Amanda Assalone is the Research Manager for PERC at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Britta Svoboda is a Ph.D. student studying Higher Education Administration and serves as Program Manager for Graduate and Executive Education for the Haslam College of Business at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Dr. Meghan Grace is a consultant with Plaid, LLC. and an affiliate with PERC at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Dr. J. Patrick Biddix is Associate Director for PERC, Program Coordinator for Higher Education Administration, and Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

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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.

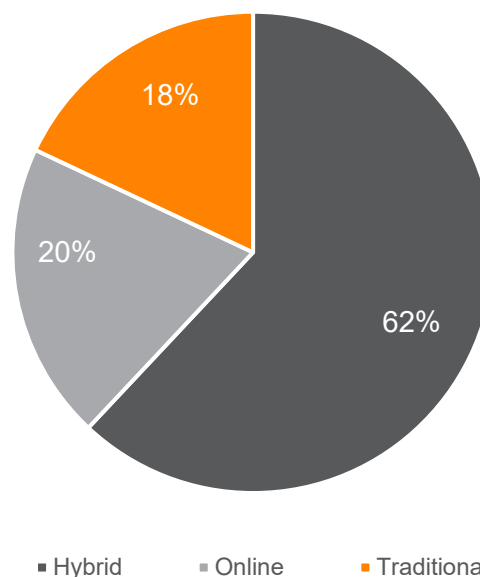
The purpose of this project is to understand and to inform student engagement planning and practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team examined institutional plans and student engagement practices from a sample of 45 institutions through three models of engagement (Appendix A):

**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%) planned to engage in hybrid engagement models at the institution-wide level in the fall (Figure 1). Just 18% reported plans to re-open in the fall with fully traditional engagement models and 20% of institutions planned for a fully online fall semester. As the semester has progressed, some institutions which originally planned for a traditional model have shifted to either a hybrid or online model. Originally, 12 institutions in the sample communicated plans for utilizing a traditional model and four of the 12 have changed their institution-wide modality to hybrid or online by the publishing of this brief. Further, of the 28 institutions in the sample that originally planned for hybrid models of engagement, three institutions have shifted to implement fully online institution-wide engagement.

Institution-wide engagement plans critically influence each functional area and 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: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Evidence that Higher Education Works, Volume 3* (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.”

## **Multicultural Engagement**

Multicultural engagement is a widely varied functional area in higher education concerned with an overall desire for students to understand and advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion. There are many purposes for multicultural offices, departments, and clubs, and the resources tend to be vast and comprehensive. Multicultural engagement may include initiatives such as programming and events with various goals of education, community building, networking, expression, and a multitude of other purposes. Multicultural engagement may also include trainings and workshops; advocacy for the needs of diverse student populations; resources and referrals, such as gender-inclusive housing

resources or referrals to women’s health centers in the local community, and much more.

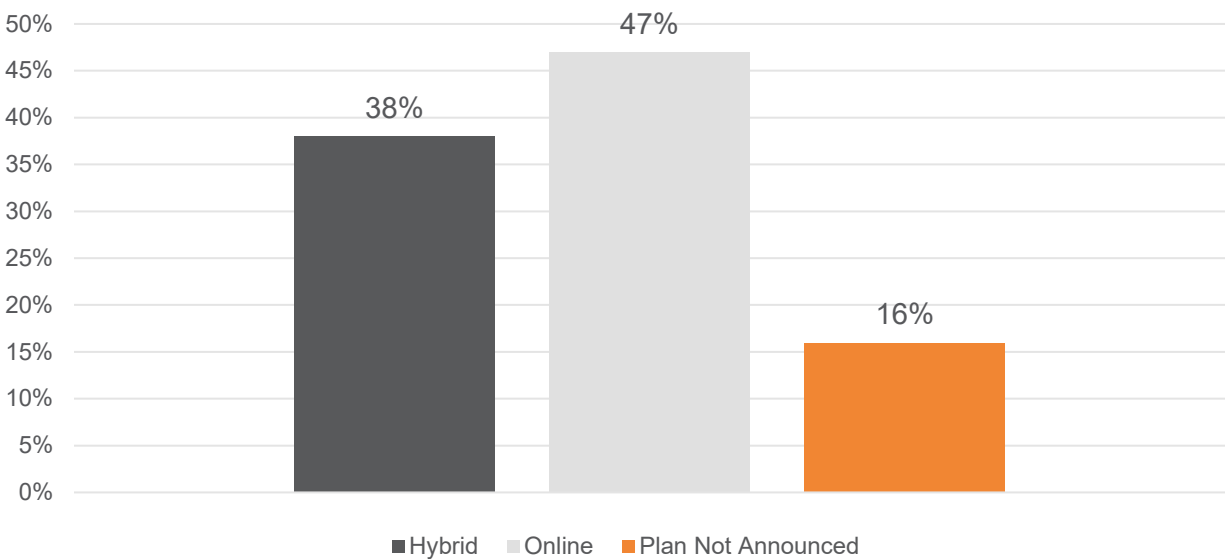
This research brief is focused on student engagement initiatives of the multicultural engagement functional area across 45 institutions included in the study sample. It is important to note that some institutions in the study sample do not have central offices for general multicultural engagement or diversity and inclusion, but may have centers focused on specific identity groups, such as women’s centers or LGBTQ+ offices, or may instead offer student organizations and affinity groups that provide programming, education, and resources for campus. For the purpose of this study, the benchmarking research is primarily derived from institutional offices,

departments, and centers for multicultural engagement as well as student clubs and organizations that support multicultural programming.

## II. MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT

At the time of data collection for this brief, institutional models for multicultural engagement fell into two primary categories: online or hybrid (Figure 2). Although eight institutions in the sample plan to utilize a traditional model campus-wide, no institution strictly offers in-person engagement for multicultural engagement.

**Figure 2. Multicultural Engagement Models**



Just under half (46.67%) of institutions in the sample plan to provide multicultural engagement opportunities through an online model. While many institutions in the sample offered hybrid models for reopening this fall, the majority of multicultural related offices

(i.e., Multicultural Student Life; Division of Diversity and Inclusion; Cultural Student Life, etc.) are offering online programming in a virtual or remote format. Webinars, speaker series, and virtual affinity spaces are common practices being utilized by institutions operating with both virtual and

hybrid models for multicultural engagement. Offices, centers, and departments focusing on multicultural engagement are also offering hybrid engagement experiences (e.g., in-person office hours; physical space operations; and outdoor events) and virtual support to students through one-on-one meetings and office hours while professional staff work remotely.

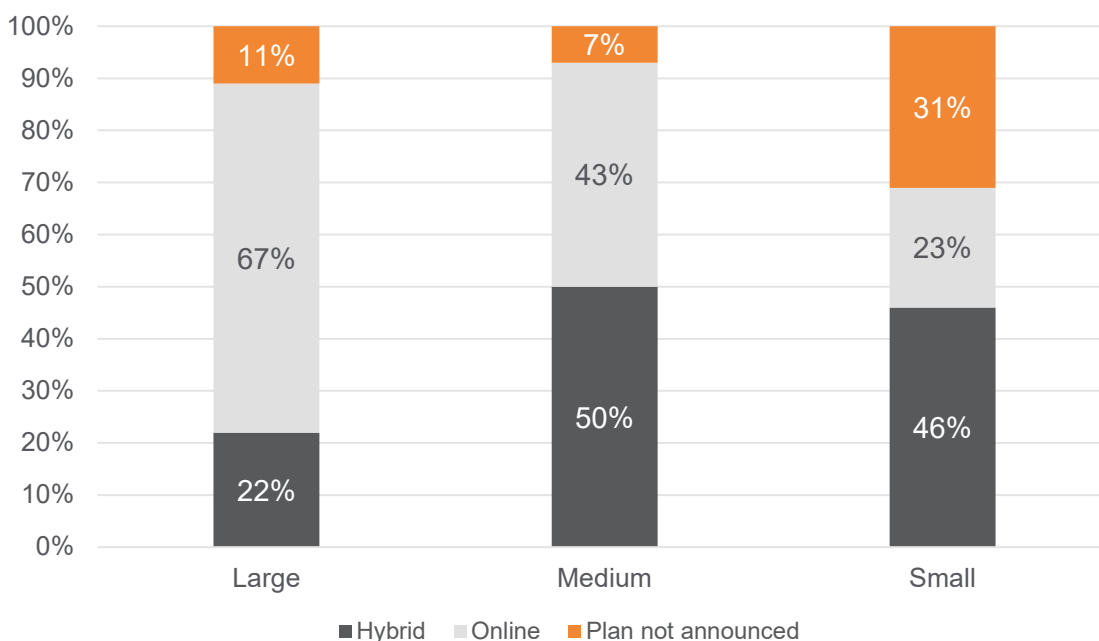
### III. DIFFERENCES BY INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

As each institution has created engagement plans to fit its interests and needs, the characteristics of the institution will likely play a role in the ways in which student engagement in the form of multicultural engagement is practiced. Of note, institution size and governance may be a factor in how institutions are planning for and practicing multicultural engagement.

#### Size

Differences in planned engagement models for multicultural engagement emerged when considering the size of an institution’s student population. Among institutions in the study sample, larger institutions are utilizing online settings more than smaller institutions (Figure 3). This may be due to the fact that larger institutions are serving a higher volume of students, so it is harder to offer programs in-person and continue to follow the proper COVID-19 guidelines. Hybrid options are more popular at medium and small institutions than at large institutions, but the use of online and remote programming is still present at all institutions. Smaller institutions may be better able to physically meet while still staying safe because they are serving a smaller population of students, which may afford them more flexibility in implementing hybrid engagement options for multicultural engagement.

**Figure 3. Multicultural Engagement Models, by Size**



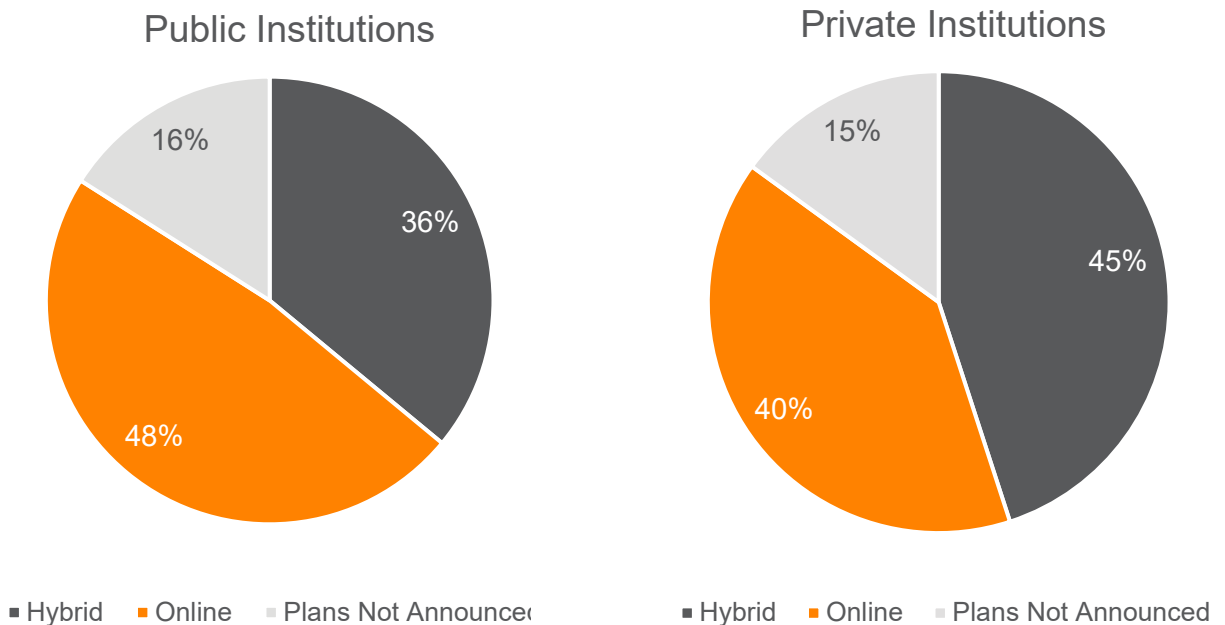


## Governance

While differences emerged when considering institution size, little difference was present when examining institutions of different governance structures. Within the study sample, there were slightly more private institutions with plans to use a

hybrid model than public institutions (Figure 4). However, at the time of collection, more public institutions had announced plans for fully online formats of multicultural engagement.

**Figure 4. Multicultural Engagement Models, by Governance Classification**



## IV. ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Although many institutions designate specific offices to provide multicultural engagement experiences to faculty, staff, students, and the surrounding community, there are often overlaps on campus as multiple offices, centers, and departments contribute to promoting and providing programming related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. As a result, among the

institutions included in the sample, the organizational structure of where multicultural engagement is housed (e.g., Division of Student Life; Division of Diversity, Equity, and Engagement; academic led divisions) influences the modality and programming for multicultural engagement. The institutions in the sample were examined by exploring how multicultural engagement was practiced

through divisional structure and student organizations.

## Divisional Direction

Multicultural engagement often operates across divisional structures in which multiple departments and units throughout campus may share a mission to support multicultural engagement. The various departments and units that support a divisional structure may implement multicultural engagement through different models and methods. All sample institutions with divisional structures have announced plans to offer virtual programming. However, student success and student life divisions engage in additional in-person multicultural engagement primarily through student organizations or Welcome Week events. Divisions managing student-facing offices are working towards implementing hybrid or in-person events as much as possible, but programs with larger scopes or possible attendance (e.g., [the University of Idaho's Black Lives Matter Speaker Series](#)) remain virtual. Traditionally in-person affinity and support groups (e.g. [the University of Arizona's LGBTQ+ support group](#)) hosted within academic, equity/inclusion, and student success divisions have transitioned to virtual offerings. Some academic and equity/inclusion division programs plan to utilize virtual formats through academic speaker series and professional development workshops (e.g., [Wake Forest's Diversity and Inclusion workshops](#)).

## Student Organizations

In many cases, student organizations supplement the multicultural engagement initiatives of student life and student affairs offices and divisions. Many institutions in the study sample are limiting in-person gatherings, requiring social distancing practices, and urging students to gather in outdoor spaces. Seton Hall's Black Student Union promoted attending a [Black Lives Matter Painting & Presentation Ceremony](#) held outside, requiring masks and social

distancing. The Hispanic Student Society at Texas Tech held a [Raider Welcome](#) event with several date and time options that students signed-up to attend. Additionally, in-person events and gatherings reference or defer to [CDC guidelines](#) for social distancing and hygiene practices. Student organizations are encouraged to offer virtual options for all in-person events to include those individuals operating remotely or who feel uncomfortable physically attending events. DePauw University's [Events and Gatherings](#) page provides an example of a safety plan submission outlining the requirement for all events to be shared virtually.

## V. EMERGING PRACTICES

### Maximizing Hybrid Models

While over 37% of institutions have implemented a hybrid model of multicultural student engagement, this model varies at each institution. Through analyzing trends from this sample, there are a few ways that institutions have maximized the hybrid model. When offering a program in-person, institutions have made easily accessible, user friendly, RSVP interfaces to ensure the center or organization can accommodate those desiring to attend. Princeton University's Carl A. Fields Center for Equality and Cultural Understanding advertises a [curated calendar](#) with descriptions and Zoom link registrations. When utilizing a hybrid method of engagement, institutions offer both in-person and virtual options for an event. Both offerings are customized to best serve students attending in either format. With in-person events, institutions are utilizing large, outdoor spaces to allow for safety while maximizing student attendance. For example, the [University of Tennessee](#) hosted a drive-in movie night with a showing of *The Hate U Give*. If physical

center spaces are open, modified hours and offerings are reflected on their websites, allowing for students, faculty, and staff to be able to find current offerings and programs. Physical office spaces are discussed in length in the next section.

## Managing Physical and Virtual Office Spaces

Some institutions manage spaces dedicated to multicultural engagement, such as women's centers; LGBTQ+ centers; Black cultural centers, etc. Operating physical spaces for multicultural engagement necessitates additional planning to ensure safety while also achieving community building goals. While some institutions with physical spaces operate remotely due to lack of space for social distancing, other organizations have adjusted to continue in-person operations. Wake Forest University provides specific space usage information for its [Women's Center](#), [LGBTQ+ Center](#), and Intercultural Center. Students at Wake Forest also received information on the Intercultural Center reopening plan through their student email. In these plans, the centers address specifics on open hours for offices, guidelines for lounge spaces, and general programming updates. Notably, the Wake Forest University LGBTQ+ Center created a [web page](#) specifically for lounge space guidelines and rules, including occupancy limits, reservation systems, personal hygiene when entering the space, and other social distancing protocols.

Although some institutions have transitioned to completely online, office hours and one-on-one engagement are being facilitated in virtual ways to ensure that connections between staff and students can still happen. Penn State's Multicultural Resource Center offers virtual engagement with [MRC counselors](#), who are available to assist students with both in and out of classroom guidance. East Los Angeles College's [Dream Resource Centers](#) created a live chat during virtual

offer hours to help students easily navigate their website. Creating these accommodations for virtual engagement allows students to maximize their engagement with staff members amidst a pandemic. The University of Arizona's [LGBTQ Resource Center](#) offers a weekly virtual support group for students, faculty, and staff to create a safe virtual space. This virtual support group is led by LGBTQ+ staff and provides resources and guidance to those participating.

## Online Webinars, Speaker Series, and Workshops

With current restrictions on in-person events and gatherings, institutions are offering unique webinars, online speaker series, and workshops. Texas Tech's [Women's and Gender Studies](#) transitioned to having all virtual workshops and speaker series. This allows for easy accessibility for students, faculty, and staff who are navigating their website to see upcoming speaker series and webinars. Azusa Pacific University's [Center for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusive Excellence](#) showcases online diversity workshop videos accessible for all Azusa students, faculty, and staff to allow for learning opportunities without the need of a scheduled facilitation. Having video-based workshops, whether pre-recorded or live, offers flexibility for groups, along with meeting the ever-growing demand of multicultural competency workshops.

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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, 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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