PERC RESEARCH BRIEF

Student Activities Engagement Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Brief 6 of the *Student Engagement Practice and Planning in the COVID-19 Environment Research Series*

October 2020

THE UNIVERSITY OF
TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

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?**

Student engagement is practiced through the work of numerous departments and functional areas. One such area is student activities, which provides opportunities for engagement through clubs and organizations, programming, and campus events. Student activities serve as vital experiences for students to become acquainted with campus, meet fellow students, and find extracurricular involvement opportunities. While many student activities formerly took place on campus and in-person, professionals have worked to redesign and adapt practices that can occur safely in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

1. Hybrid programming are the most prominent methods utilized to provide student activities and campus events.
2. Support for student groups and organizations has shifted to assist in planning campus events that adhere to safety guidelines while also being engaging and meaningful.
3. Student activities held on campus are being restricted in terms of numbers of attendees or even being ranked as a lower priority during space allocation processes.

The brief concludes with a "Emerging Practices" section that focuses on programming, philosophies, strategies, and initiatives that present potential for creating innovative and meaningful student activities 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
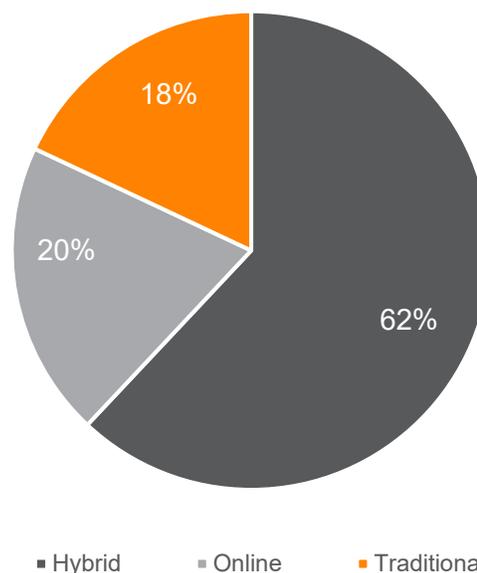
At the time of data collection for this brief, nearly two-thirds of colleges and universities in the sample (62%) planned to engage in hybrid engagement models at the institution-wide level in the fall (Figure 1). Just 18% reported plans to re-open in the fall with fully traditional engagement models 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: 21st 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."

Student Activities

Campus and student activities exist on college and university campuses to create a meaningful experience for students by providing inclusive spaces for learning and entertainment that can define a student's experience. Campus activities provide students with the opportunities to make connections, and departments across the country are working to creatively reimagine programs, events, and traditions to still effectively engage students while practicing caution and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Student activities as a functional area can encompass a variety of different types of programming, entertainment, and organizations. During the average year, engagement with student activities varies,

but student organizations and campus events are two large programming proponents within the student activities that are active year around. As the school year begins, student organization recruitment and campus events are some of the first points of engagement for incoming students in the fall semester. Therefore, campus and student activities, as a functional area, is the focal point of the findings and discussion in this brief.

II. MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT

At the time of collection, 40% of the institutions in the study sample had announced plans for hybrid models of engagement for student activities (see figure 2). Institutions with a hybrid model of student activities engagement plan to use a mixture of in-person experiences and remote or online events for campus events.

Student organizations are encouraged to do so as well. Many institutions with plans for hybrid models for student activities engagement require student organizations to submit a safety plan for in-person events that outline how the organization will hold the event or meeting while adhering to university regulations and CDC guidelines. Several institutions have provided student organizations with resources on how to creatively engage organization members while adhering to social distancing. Many institutions utilizing a hybrid model for student activities engagement have also created strict guidelines for in-person campus events, restricting capacities and locations of events. On many hybrid model campuses, in-person events that are approved are being limited to current students only and cannot be held off-campus.

Figure 2. Student Activities Engagement Models

Bar chart showing: Hybrid 40%, Online 22%, Traditional 5%, Plan Not Announced 33%.
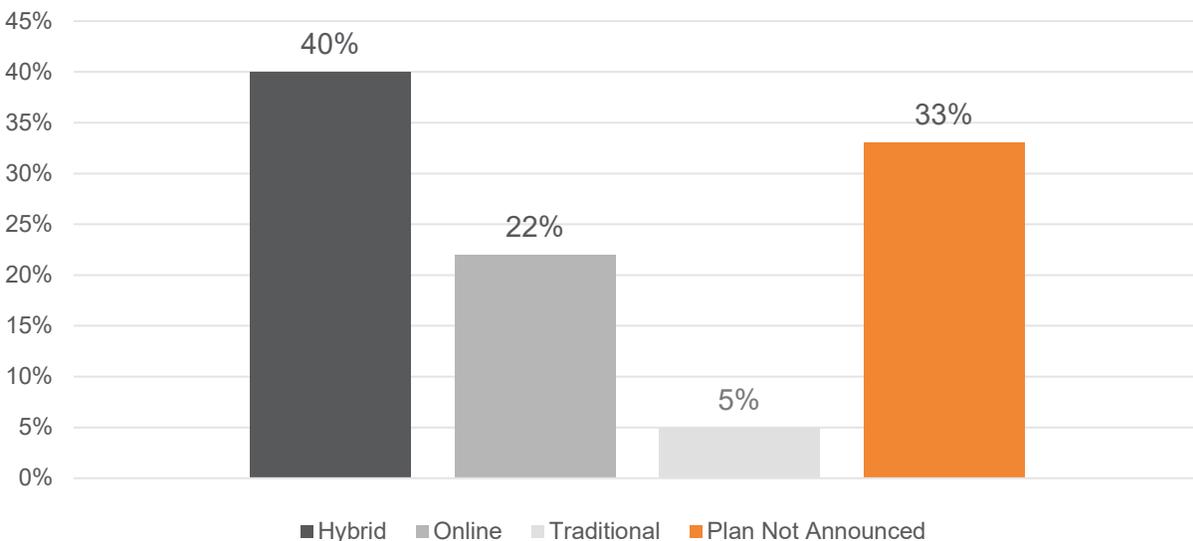
A little under a quarter (22%) of institutions in the sample have announced plans for online models of engagement for student activities. It is interesting to note that six of the 11institutions in the sample that plan for online student activities engagement models have pivoted from hybrid or traditional models to completely remote or virtual institution-wide engagement for the Fall 2020 semester. Institutions practicing online models of student activities engagement are highlighting virtual student organization fairs, virtual meeting places, and making creative updates to campus events. Some institutions with hybrid institution-wide engagement models that are still operating with some in-person instruction have opted to utilize online models for student activities. This has allowed all students to participate regardless of location while minimizing physical gatherings on campus to reduce opportunities for potential exposure.

A third (33%) of institutions in the sample have not officially announced plans for the model of engagement of student activities. Many of these institutions have not updated event calendars or student activities websites since early June. These institutions may also be opting to share information internally or directly with students via email or engagement platforms.

III. DIFFERENCES BY INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Institutions have varying policies and procedures for campus operations that are linked to the number of students they serve and the governing entity that provides guidance to the institutions. The institution-wide practices and plans for re-opening, as well as CDC and state guidelines, directly influence planned models of engagement for campus activities. Therefore, there are small, but notable differences in models of engagement when considering size and governance.

Size

While only less than a third of institutions have not announced a planned model of engagement, large institutions make up the largest portion of institutions that have not announced plans of engagement yet (Figure 3). Notably, small institutions in the sample were the only institutions planning for traditional engagement models for student activities. Medium institutions predominantly favor hybrid engagement models for student activities, with few medium-sized institutions opting for online models.

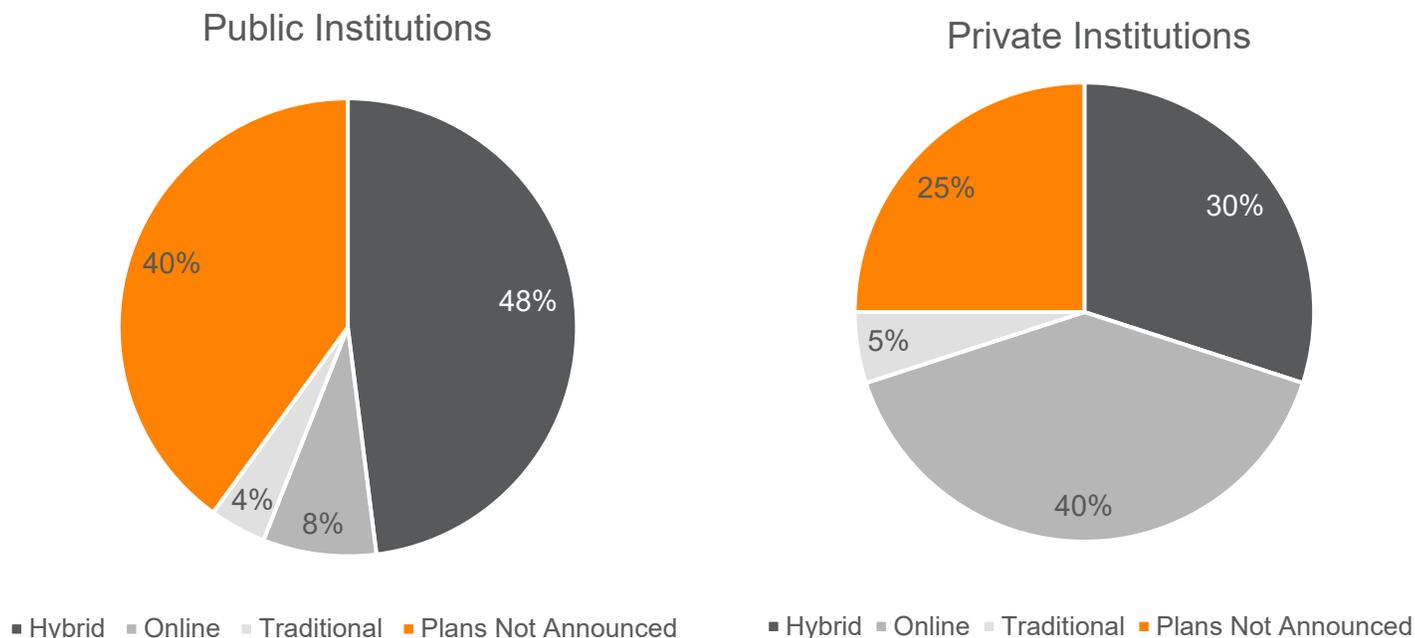## Figure 3. Student Activities Engagement Models, by Size
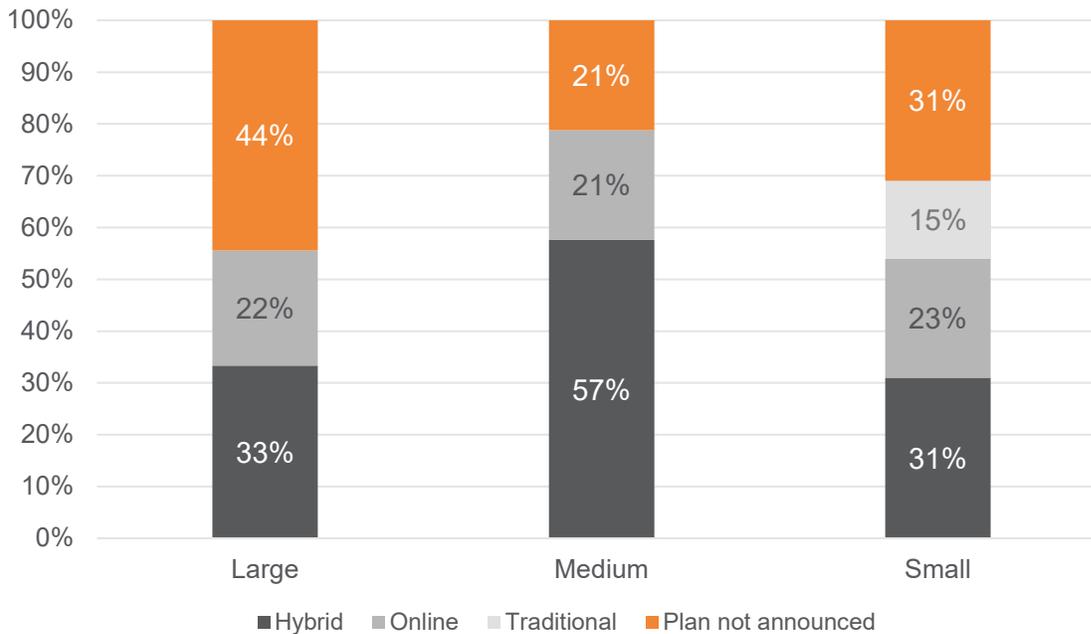
Governance

Of the public institutions in the sample, nearly half (48%) have announced plans for a hybrid model of engagement for student activities. All of the public institutions in the sample with a hybrid model of engagement for campus activities are also practicing hybrid-flex models for undergraduate instruction, meaning the institution is offering a mixture of in-person and virtual classes (Figure 4). An additional 40% of public institutions have not officially announced any model of engagement for campus activities (Figure 4). It is possible that institutions that have not officially announced a model of engagement have been communicating with student organizations through internal virtual formats like OrgSync and not updating publicly accessible websites or university calendars. With few public institutions planning for fully online student activities

(8%), it seems that many are trying to provide hybrid experiences that allow for some level of in-person interaction.

Among private institutions, under half (40%) have announced an online model of engagement for student activities (Figure 4). Some private institutions in the sample, while following a strict online model of engagement for student activities, have a hybrid model of engagement in place for instruction. So, while students may be physically on-campus taking courses, many student activities are being offered online to minimize in-person gathering. About a third of private institutions in the sample have a planned hybrid model of engagement for student activities, but very few are planning for traditional, in-person student activities (5%).

Figure 4. Student Activities Engagement Models, by Governance Classification

Public Institutions

48%
40%
4%
8%

■ Hybrid ■ Online ■ Traditional ■ Plans Not Announced

Private Institutions

25%
30%
5%
40%

■ Hybrid ■ Online ■ Traditional ■ Plans Not Announced

IV. EMERGING PRACTICES

Student activities offices across several institutions have made several changes to the ways they engage with students. Since these offices are tasked with ensuring students feel a sense of community and belonging regardless of the delivery (i.e. in-person programs or Zoom programs). Some offices have clearly defined "gatherings" and have made a point to have social distancing/program guidelines posted on their websites that must be met in order to host a program. Safety plans that aim to ensure registered student organization compliance with social distancing guidelines and a prioritization of academic classes/events are also being utilized by some institutions. Other promising practices included having virtual involvement fairs

and promoting accessibility/promising practices in reaching students.

Defining Guidelines and Terms

Several institutions have provided guidelines for gatherings on campus, often deferring to CDC guidelines for social distancing and hygiene practices. Within these guidelines, the CDC states that universities that enforce policies that promote "small in-person classes, activities, and events with individuals [who] remain spaced at least 6 feet apart and do not share objects" for gatherings and activities are considered less at-risk for potentially spreading COVID-19. Another CDC guideline many institutions are following to reduce risk during student activities includes limiting participation to current students or other members of the campus community (i.e. staff, faculty, or administration). Clearly defining what a "gathering" is has also been a promising practice to support student activities and

campus events. Gonzaga University's return to campus plan explicitly states that large gatherings would not occur this semester and further spelled out that this includes "concerts, large assembly speakers, student organization fairs, picnics, movie nights, banquets, dances, and sporting events." The College of William & Mary University has defined Registered Student Organizations (RSOs) Events, RSO Meetings, and RSO Activities in their Student Organization Guidelines. By intentionally defining these terms, William & Mary is able to explicitly communicate the differences between events, meetings, and activities- all of which have varied requirements and guidelines based upon the gathering type. William & Mary has covered the full spectrum of student activity gatherings which would allow for the university to enforce policies accordingly. With clear guidelines and terms, student activities are able to function within parameters that allow for students to engage in a safe manner.

Safety Plans and Prioritization of Events

Another promising practice is ensuring student-led events have adequately prepared and planned events and activities while ensuring guidelines are followed through establishing standards for the use of safety plans. According to the University of Central Florida's guidelines, all RSOs are required to submit safety plans for their activities including organization meetings, events, recruitment activities, and programming. At UCF, university and student government-sponsored programs will adhere to university standards, including physical distancing and face coverings. William & Mary University is similarly requiring students to fill out a Student Organization COVID-19 Response Plan that requires members to think about ways of engaging with one another in a socially-distant manner and asks questions such as: "what planning does your organization need to do to adjust for operation under pandemic conditions?" and

"what new risks might be associated with the way you typically conduct your operations?" By allowing students a space to ensure they have planned for the logistics of gatherings during a pandemic, campus activities offices have given students the ability to have events while promoting and complying with social distancing guidelines.

Due to competing needs for space, many institutions have developed a prioritization and hierarchy of gatherings with academics typically being first priority. In Seton Hill University's guidelines, the size of campus events and gatherings will be limited and priority access to space and meeting locations will be given for academic events. The university is also recommending student activities entities seek to plan for alternate meeting formats such as using online platforms. In the event that a student organization or event must meet in-person, all guidelines set by the university must be met and the event must be approved by Student Life. Similarly, Valparaiso University stated in their Event Policy a designated order for the prioritization of events/spaces. As stated in their policy, academic instruction/classes are the first priority followed by university-level events/events put on by the President's Office, enrollment/admissions meetings, and then student life/student organization activities, followed by other events and activities on campus. By allowing for a prioritization of events, limited spaces are able to be best utilized and represent the university's commitment to learning while prioritizing safety.

Virtual Involvement Fairs

Involvement and organization fairs are a common practice to introduce incoming students to engagement opportunities. While a physical fair with numerous tables and organization members might not be possible, many institutions are holding virtual organization fairs to encourage campus involvement. Student activities departments have expanded their use of

existing technologies such as Campus Labs and Zoom to adapt to facilitate a successful organization fair. Vanderbilt University is one institution in the sample that has created an event through Campus Labs that connects participants to organization pages, which would include a way to connect with the organization through a Zoom meeting. The University of Tennessee, Knoxville sent virtual involvement fair participants a spreadsheet of individual Zoom links for participating organizations to allow access for incoming students awaiting access to Campus Labs. Some institutions, such as the University of Texas, hosted virtual involvement fairs over summer, offering students and organizations an opportunity to connect with one another from a distance. The use of virtual platforms for involvement fairs not only promotes safety through physical distancing, but also allows distance learners or students unable to travel to campus to consider ways to get involved and get connected to other students.

Supporting Student Organizations in Facilitating Accessible, Effective Engagement

A majority of institutions operating in an online or hybrid engagement model have published guidance encouraging student organizations to be creative in the ways they host meetings and social events. Suggestions included hosting creative social events using video conferencing or social media, and maintaining

communication virtually as if organization members were still able to meet in person. Notably, Mississippi University for Women provided "Tips for Remote Engagement", a webpage outlining success strategies for student organizations to maximize student engagement in a remote setting. The page also asks student organizations to acknowledge the various needs of students who may not feel comfortable with in-person meetings or may not have reliable Wi-Fi to enjoy a virtual event. Wake Forest University has similarly published a Virtual Resource page for student organizations to navigate virtual engagement events, elections, and meeting scheduling. Wake Forest is one of six institutions identified in the sample that has outlined how the student activities staff can assist organizations in being successful in a virtual environment. Defining terms, providing accessible information and engagement opportunities, and advising student organizations add to the existing responsibilities of student activities staff in their pursuit to provide effective, engaging programming at their institutions.

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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.
  - o *Small*: Institutions serving less than 3,000 students
  - o *Medium*: Institutions serving between 3,000 and 9,999 students
  - o *Large*: Institutions serving 10,000 or more students
- Geographic Region: Classification based on regions comprised of the following states:
  - o *Northeast:* MA, MD, ME, NJ, NY, PA, VA, and Washington, D.C.
  - o *Southeast:* GA, FL, KY, LA, MS, NC, TN
  - o *Midwest:* IA, IL, IN, MN, OH
  - o *Southwest:* AZ, TX
  - o *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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