



PERC RESEARCH BRIEF

Student Government Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Brief 7 of the *Student Engagement Practice and Planning in the COVID-19 Environment Research Series*

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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?**

Student engagement is practiced through the work of numerous departments and functional areas. One such area is student government, which provides opportunities for engagement through policy, advocacy, and educational programming. Student government allows for students to be represented in an institution's governance and provides an avenue for student voice to be heard. Especially as numerous policies and practices have adapted in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, student government practices are evolving to meet the needs of the student population.

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

1. Hybrid programming are the most prominent methods utilized to facilitate student government activities.
2. Student government entities are being utilized to communicate student voice to administration, as well as policy changes to the student population.
3. Social media is a primary platform for student government-related communications.

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 government 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.

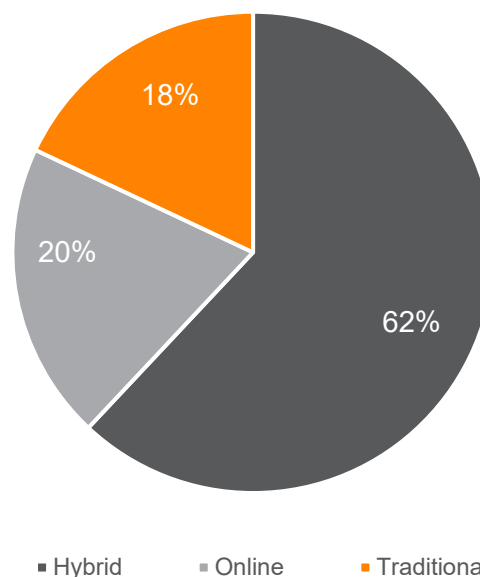
The purpose of this project is to understand and to inform student engagement planning and practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team examined institutional plans and student engagement practices from a sample of 45 institutions through three models of engagement (Appendix A):

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 Government

Student government is a student-led entity found in most institutions of higher education, in which students elect their peers to serve and represent them in university decision-making. This can include policies, funding, advocacy, and education. Student government organizations hold many different titles across institutions, but for the purposes of this brief, they will be referred to as Student Government Associations (SGAs). Beyond student advocacy, SGAs also host social and/or educational programs, as well as regularly scheduled general body meetings to keep students up-to-date on tasks and decisions the student government is working toward implementing. Candace Avalos, Coordinator of Student Government at Portland State University and Chairperson for the NASPA

Knowledge Community for Student Government shares the following:

“Students throughout history have been at the forefront of major changes in American values and attitudes, from a wide variety of areas such as relations between the sexes and races, advocacy for civil rights, and social norms (Altbach & Cohen, 1990). Student governments in particular are in a unique position to be a representative voice of students across the nation, and lead the charge in advocating for political and societal change. The power and influence of student governments varies widely across the country, and they have a significant role in higher education and shared governance, albeit somewhat complicated. These governments comprised of students elected by their peers creates their own status system, supported with official recognition from the university. These student leaders serve as a bridge for communication between the campus administration and students—the biggest stakeholders of the university—and they are called upon to advise administrators on policies and decisions that affect the student experience. Student government plays an important role in fostering the relationship between those overseeing campus functions and the students who receive them.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, student governments across the country have played a pivotal role in helping communicate what students are experiencing to inform how the university should respond to provide services and support for students. Many have continued to offer programming and create virtual space to hear from students and advocate for a university

response that prioritizes the needs of the most vulnerable communities. On campuses where the student government has control over the allocation of student fees, in many cases students have chosen to be good stewards of the fee by lowering fees to ease the financial burden and instability caused by COVID-19. Similar to many other areas of campus, student government has had to be creative and innovative to keep their members engaged, build relationships on campus, and offer similar programming on campus. Despite the many challenges though, across the country there is an incredible level of resilience demonstrated by student government leaders who have been navigating the unprecedented nature of the pandemic while centering student voices and advocating for their safety on campus.”

This brief explores how student engagement in the form of student government is being practiced during the COVID-19 pandemic. It will frame operations and implementation of student government activities using a model of engagement framework that will determine if engagement is taking place through a hybrid, online, or fully traditional model.

II. MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT

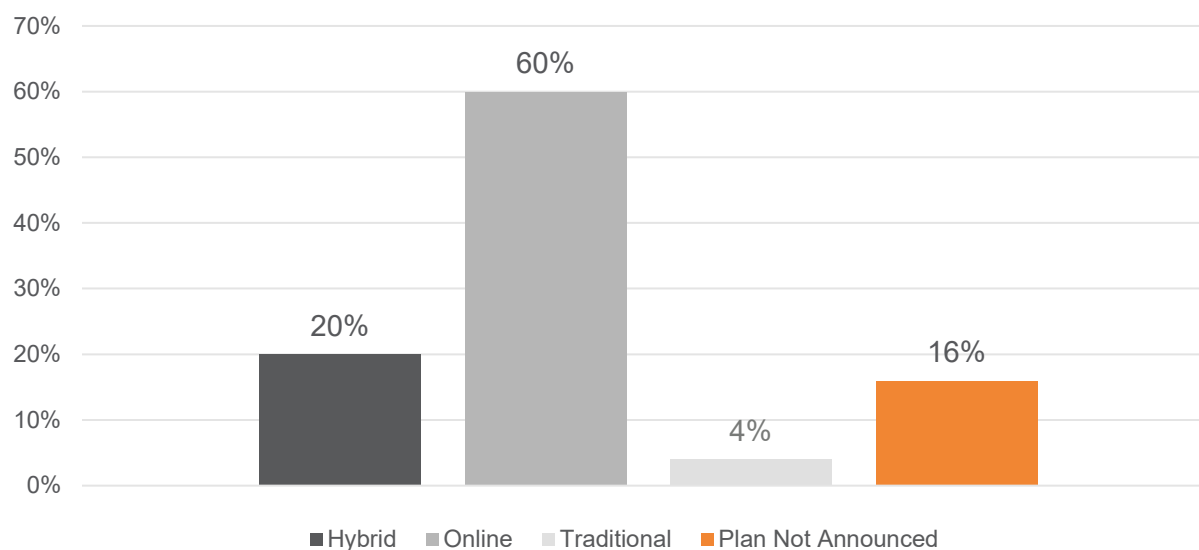
At the time of collection, institutional engagement models for student government fell into four categories of hybrid, online, plans not announced yet, and traditional models (Figure 2). While the majority of student government engagement typically occurs during academic fall/spring terms, some SGAs (e.g., Mississippi University for

Women) engage with students over the summer through virtual town halls and other orientation-related experiences.

Over half of the institutions in the study sample (60%) indicated student government operating through an online engagement platform. Online engagement consisted of social media communication, virtual general assembly meetings, virtual town halls, and webinars. Hybrid engagement, accounting for 20% of the sample, utilized similar virtual content in addition to hosting and/or supporting some in-person programming efforts. SGAs supported in-person events through communication on their social

media accounts and volunteering at events. In-person events hosted by SGAs utilized outdoor locations (e.g., Lone Star State's Loteria) and regulated indoor spaces (e.g., Xavier University of Louisiana SGA's Vice Presidential Debate Viewing). Common regulations for indoor spaces include pre-registration for events, specific seating arrangements, and facial coverings. Traditional modalities are far less common among institutions in the sample (4.44%) and are conducted through office hours and in-person general assembly meetings.

Figure 2. Student Government Engagement Models



III. DIFFERENCES BY INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

While regional differences were minimal among institutions in the sample, size and governance structures offered a diverse look at planned models of engagement.

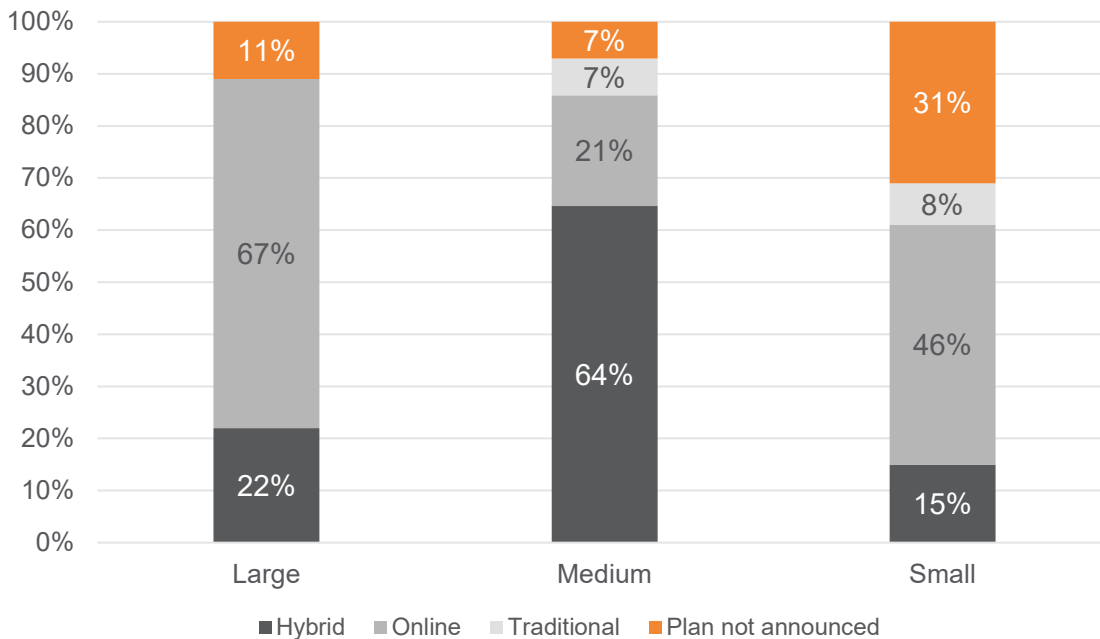
Overall, the majority of institutions in our study, regardless of size or governance, have elected to pursue online engagement models for their SGA. However, differences in prevalence vary when considering institutional characteristics.

Size

When considering the role of size, large and medium schools report relatively similar distributions of planned engagement models for student government (Figure 3). The majority of large and medium schools are utilizing online models for student government activities, and a little more than a fifth of the institutions are operating in a hybrid manner. Smaller institutions appear

to be more dispersed in their models of engagement, but online engagement models still rank as the most frequently used. It is interesting to note that 31% of the smaller institutions in this study have not publicized, either via their university website or their student government social media accounts, how they plan to carry out their student government activities this semester.

Figure 3. Student Government Engagement Models, by Size

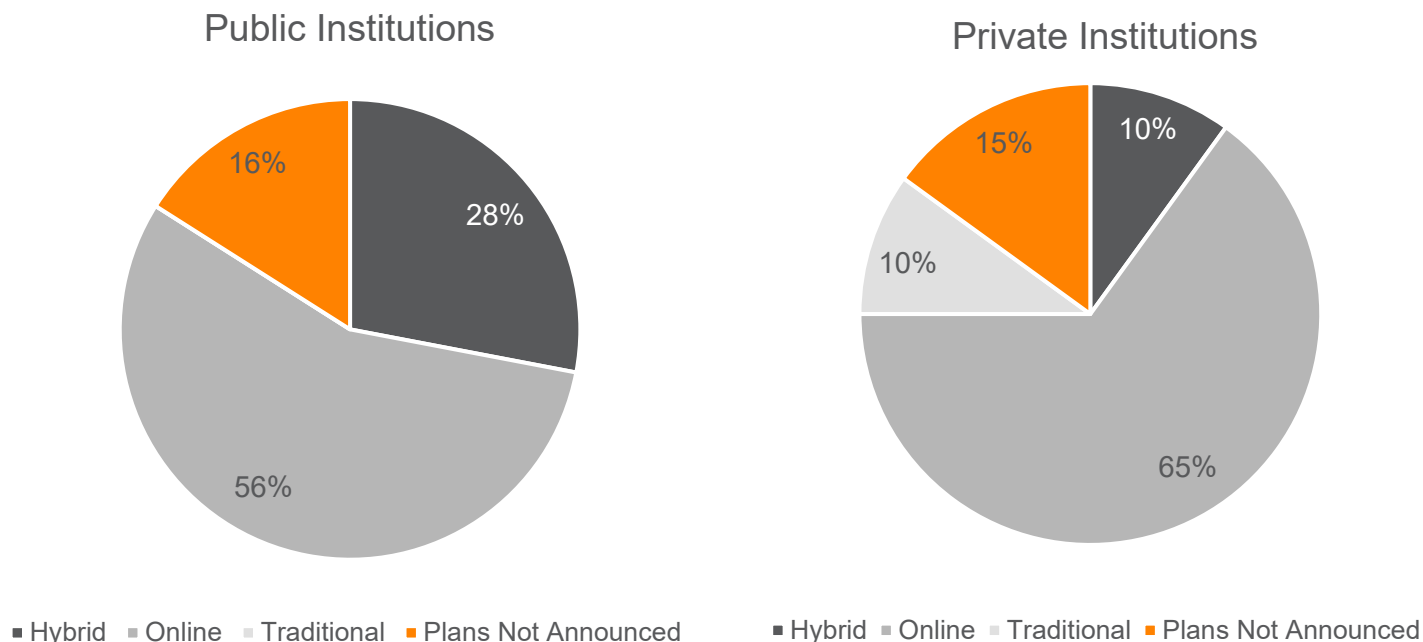


Governance

While the majority of both public and private institutions have announced that they will be operating student government via online formats (Figure 4), there is a greater percentage of public institutions that plan to move forward utilizing a hybrid model. And, while small, a portion of private institutions in the sample plan to operate with traditional engagement methods for student

government activities, meaning that meetings and events will be hosted in-person. Within the study sample, there are no public institutions at this time with intentions of utilizing traditional, in-person methods for student government activities. However, the portion of public and private institutions that have not formally and publicly announced student government engagement models is relatively similar at 16% and 15% respectively.

Figure 4. Student Government Engagement Models, by Governance Classification



IV. EMERGING PRACTICES

With a notable amount of student government associations relying on technology and the online environments to supplement the transition to virtual or hybrid engagement models, this functional area had some promising practices and notable findings. First, although many SGAs opted to hold official meetings online through Zoom or another video conferencing platform, some student governments implemented a unique hybrid model with key SGA leadership physically in virtually viewable meetings. Second, these associations utilized social media in their communication plans with a heavy reliance on Instagram. Last, student government associations filtered COVID-19 specific communications through a student lens for their institutions.

Hybrid Model for Official Meetings

Many SGAs have decided to move general assembly meetings and other engagement opportunities to an online format. Specifically, large institutions are primarily using an online format for student government activities. However, some institutions' SGAs have attempted to implement a hybrid model for official meetings and election events.

Xavier University of Louisiana used a hybrid model for their student government [Fall 2020 Elections Forum](#). Candidates for Freshman Class Council spoke at a podium alone in the center of a room while the event was livestreamed. The speakers all wore masks and practiced social distancing protocol such as maintaining a distance of six feet. The general student body was urged to view the event on YouTube through [a post](#) shared on the Xavier University of Louisiana student government Twitter account. Xavier University of Louisiana SGA also advertised a similarly

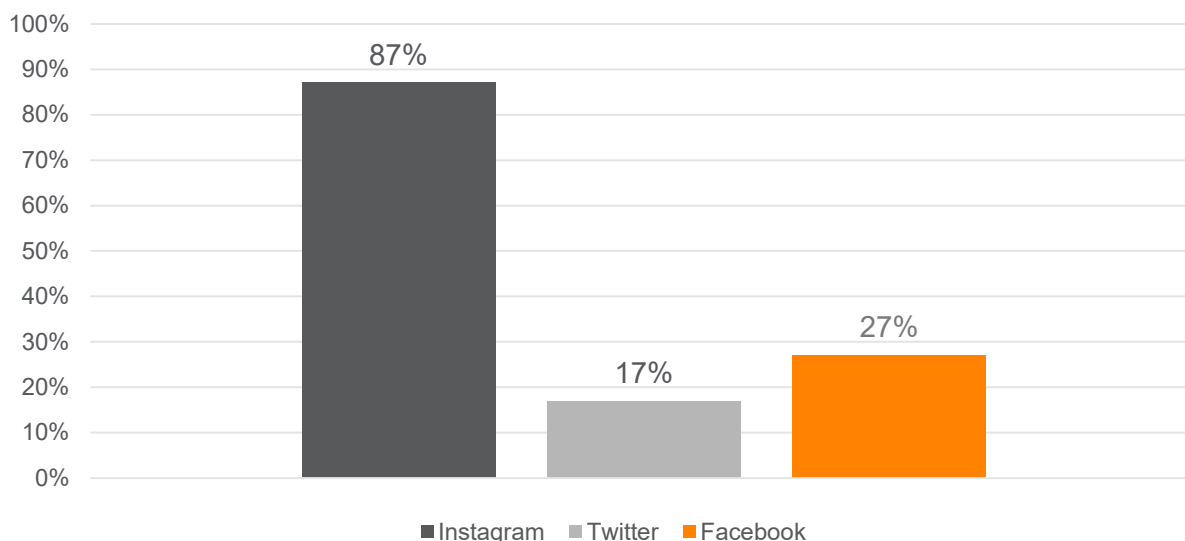
formatted event for the Results Night for Freshman Class Council Elections with a virtual option on Instagram Live and an in-person option. Student senate meetings at Xavier University of Louisiana are advertised to also take place on Zoom.

Valparaiso University Student Senate is also utilizing YouTube livestream to connect with students in a hybrid format. General assembly meetings are advertised to allow for in-person attendance and remote attendance through YouTube Live. Similar to Xavier University of Louisiana, speakers for the Valparaiso University General Assembly meetings are wearing masks and speaking from a podium alone to practice social distancing. Additionally, some student government meetings at Valparaiso are solely being offered in an online (e.g., Townhall Meeting) or in-person (e.g., Election Meeting) modality. These types of engagement show some innovative implementation of the hybrid model for larger student organization meetings and official gatherings. Based on the institutions in the sample, a common practice of hybrid operations includes holding smaller committee meetings in-person while providing virtual access on video conferencing software to maintain safety and promote face-to-face engagement between students.

Social Media as Primary Communication Method

Many communication plans involving student government engagement were shared on social media platforms. As part of this sample analysis of SGAs, three social media sites were examined for recent activity: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Recent posts are defined as any post activity made since August 2020. At the time of collection, only three institutions did not have social media platforms or recent activity on their student government-related accounts.

Of the other 42 sample institutions, Instagram is the most popular social media platform with 87% of institutions in the sample recently utilizing the platform to communicate about student government engagement plans for the fall semester (Figure 5). Just over a quarter (27%) use Facebook, and less than a fifth (17%) use Twitter. Although these organizations own website domains, they do not appear to be maintained frequently, and lack timely information when comparing the more recent and up to date information shared through their social media accounts. As SGA engagement is predominantly student-led, their communication efforts appeal directly to the student population and signify trends in platform usage. With more communication being through virtual mediums as a result of COVID-19 changes, an understanding of where students obtain their information benefits communication planning and delivery.

Figure 5. Social Media Platforms Used for Student Engagement

COVID-19-Specific Communication

Several institutions have utilized student government as a platform to communicate specific COVID-19 information to the campus community, mainly through social media posts and website updates. The Texas Tech Student Government Association crafted two specific videos: [a commitment video](#) and [a welcome back video](#), that featured executive members of SGA to encourage safety and practice social distancing. The messaging includes information about several changes on campus and how students can help mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The welcome video not only serves as a way to introduce student government to incoming students but highlights the ways in which SGA at Texas Tech advocates for students with the new challenges of the pandemic as a lens.

The University of Texas SGA engaged with students on social media about COVID-19 through an Instagram post highlighting social distancing recommendations and

requirements for move-in that occurred earlier in the fall. [Another post](#) shared by the University of Texas SGA communicated ways to stay connected during COVID-19 and mitigate Zoom fatigue. The University of Texas SGA also created a highlight reel on their Instagram profile page to archive important COVID-19 related posts and stories. SGAs at various institutions (e.g., the [University of Texas](#) and [Wake Forest University](#)) also utilize Linktree, a free tool that allows accounts to include multiple links in their bio to share information, to provide additional access points for policy change information and student health screening forms. As SGAs serve a dual-role as part of institutional governance and representing students, student government activities can also help communicate university-wide messaging through a student voice. Peer messaging, especially when promoting new social norms like facial coverings, may increase the likelihood of receiving, understanding, and implementing actionable items in future communications.

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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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