PERC RESEARCH BRIEF

Community Service Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Brief 8 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. 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 midst of a global crisis?**

Student engagement is practiced through the work of numerous departments and functional areas, including the area of community service. Community service programs serve as vital experiences for students to learn about the local community, participate in civic engagement activities, and contribute their knowledge and skills to assist with social issues. While many community service programs formerly took place in-person, professionals have worked to adapt practices to provide meaningful service experiences in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

1. Hybrid programming is the most prominent method utilized to provide community service opportunities.
2. Online hubs and platforms have become a prominent source of information for service experiences that provide filters for students to identify opportunities that align with their safety preferences.
3. Virtual settings have provided important experiences to engage students in important service learning and civic conversations.

The brief concludes with a "Emerging Practices" section that focuses on strategies and initiatives that present potential for creating innovative and meaningful community service 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.
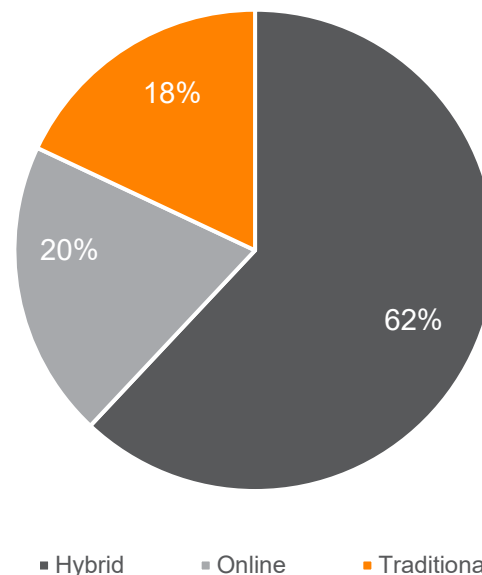
The purpose of this project is to understand and to inform student engagement planning and practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team examined institutional plans and student engagement practices from a sample of 45 institutions through three models of engagement (Appendix A):

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

- Hybrid   - Online   - Traditional

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."

Community Service

Community service and civic engagement programming provides students with experiential learning opportunities that allows for interaction with the surrounding community during and after undergraduate studies. Offices focused on community service offer various volunteer opportunities and programming that help students engage with the community while educating students about activism, civic engagement, and active citizenship. These offices provide students with engagement through service-learning classes, alternative break trips, service days, student organizations, and intergroup dialogues.

Like functional areas across campus and at institutions across the country, community service programming has had to creatively
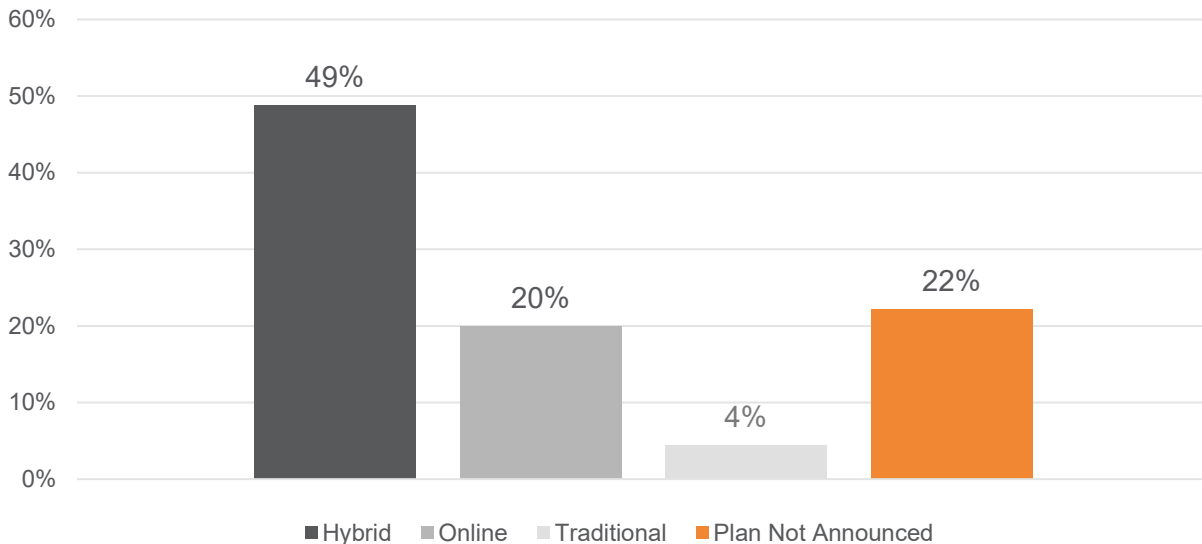
reimagine what it means to be involved in their surrounding community and engage students to become active citizens. Traditionally, volunteer opportunities have mostly been available through in-person engagement models. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for community service engagement is still prevalent, and professionals are working to create equally meaningful and impactful service experiences while keeping students and community partners safe.

II. MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT

Nearly half (48.8%) of the institutions in the study sample are offering hybrid models of engagement for community service (Figure 2). Hybrid models of engagement included a mixture of both traditional and virtual service opportunities organized through a community service office or determined by local service organizations. The majority of the institutions represented in the hybrid group previously offered a volunteer opportunity listing service, such as GivePulse, where local organizations could advertise service opportunities to students. Adapting to the challenges presented by the pandemic, local organizations can specify in their listings if the opportunity is available for virtual completion and clarify what safety measures are in place for in-person service opportunities. Most listing services utilized by institutions include a filter that allows students to search for service opportunities based on a model of engagement. Institutions offering hybrid models are influenced by the preferences of partnering organizations.

Figure 2. Community Service Engagement Models

Figure 2. Community Service Engagement Models

Hybrid: 49%
Online: 20%
Traditional: 4%
Plan Not Announced: 22%

Community service programs solely offered in a virtual format were present at 20% of institutions in the sample. Virtual community service engagement was facilitated in a variety of ways. Some institutions have chosen to identify remote volunteer opportunities to share with students, such as serving on a phone bank or writing letters to pen pals. Community service staff who have organized alternative breaks or large days of service have announced the virtual delivery of these programs, but logistics of plans could not be accessed at the time of collection. Over half (55%) of the virtual community service programs are present at institutions operating in an institution-wide virtual format, while 45% of virtual programs are offered at institutions with an institution-wide hybrid format. Community service departments offering virtual programs could be influenced by institutional priorities of offering hybrid or traditional experiences in other areas of the institution, such as classroom instruction.

Traditional, face-to-face community service programs are only being offered at two institutions in the sample (4.4%). These institutions continued to host service opportunities in-person, but plan to maintain safety regulations like wearing masks and social distancing. No opportunities for virtual volunteering or community service were published for these institutions.
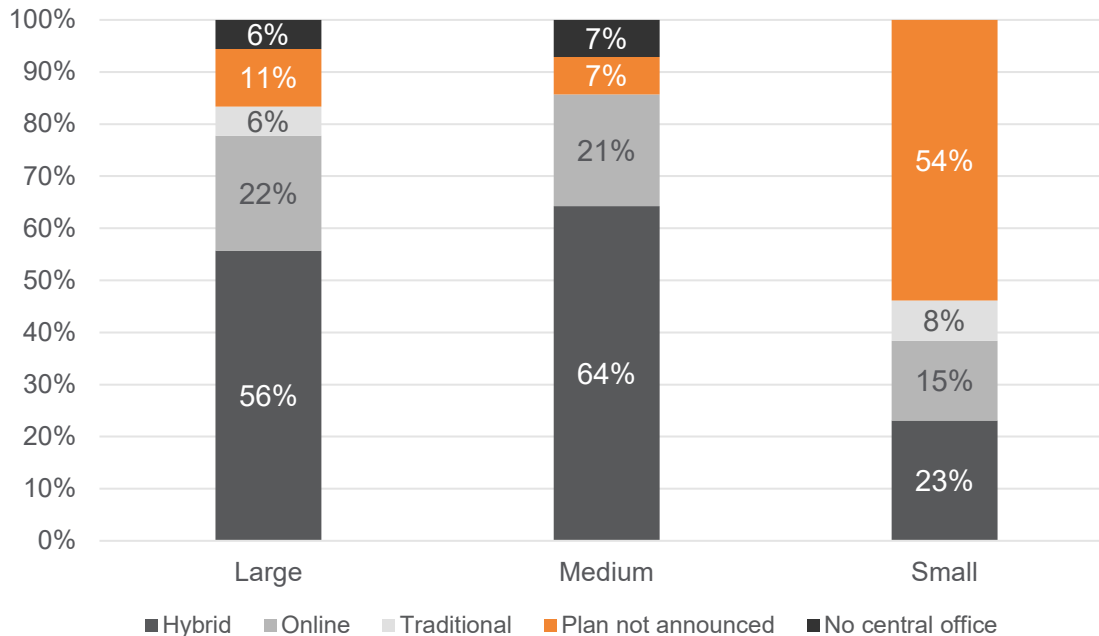
Ten institutions (22.2%) in the sample have not announced plans for community service programs at the time of collection. Such programs were not mentioned in the institutional action plan and online resources were not updated to reflect changes to programming in the fall term. It may be possible that institutions are sharing information with students and staff through internal communication methods, such as newsletters, email, or campus-specific applications.

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, plans for re-opening, CDC and state guidelines, as well as community partner modes of engagement directly influence plans for community service programming. Therefore, there are small, but notable differences in models of engagement when considering size and governance.

Size

While less than a quarter of the institutions (22.2%) have not announced a planned engagement model, small institutions make up the largest portion of institutions that have not announced plans for community service engagement yet (Figure 3). Of the small-sized institutions sampled, some institutions' community service-based programming is facilitated within student leadership offices or academic programs, which could mean communication about the model of engagement is being disseminated internally. Large and medium institutions predominantly favor hybrid engagement models for community service offices. Further, at large and medium institutions, it was more difficult to find a central office or department responsible for community service engagement, indicating that community service programming may be planned and facilitated through multiple offices, student organizations, or academic departments.

Figure 3. Community Service Engagement Models, by Size

Legend: ■ Hybrid ■ Online ■ Traditional ■ Plan not announced ■ No central office

Large: No central office 6%, Plan not announced 11%, Traditional 6%, Online 22%, Hybrid 56%
Medium: No central office 7%, Plan not announced 7%, Traditional 21%, Hybrid 64%
Small: Plan not announced 54%, Traditional 8%, Online 15%, Hybrid 23%
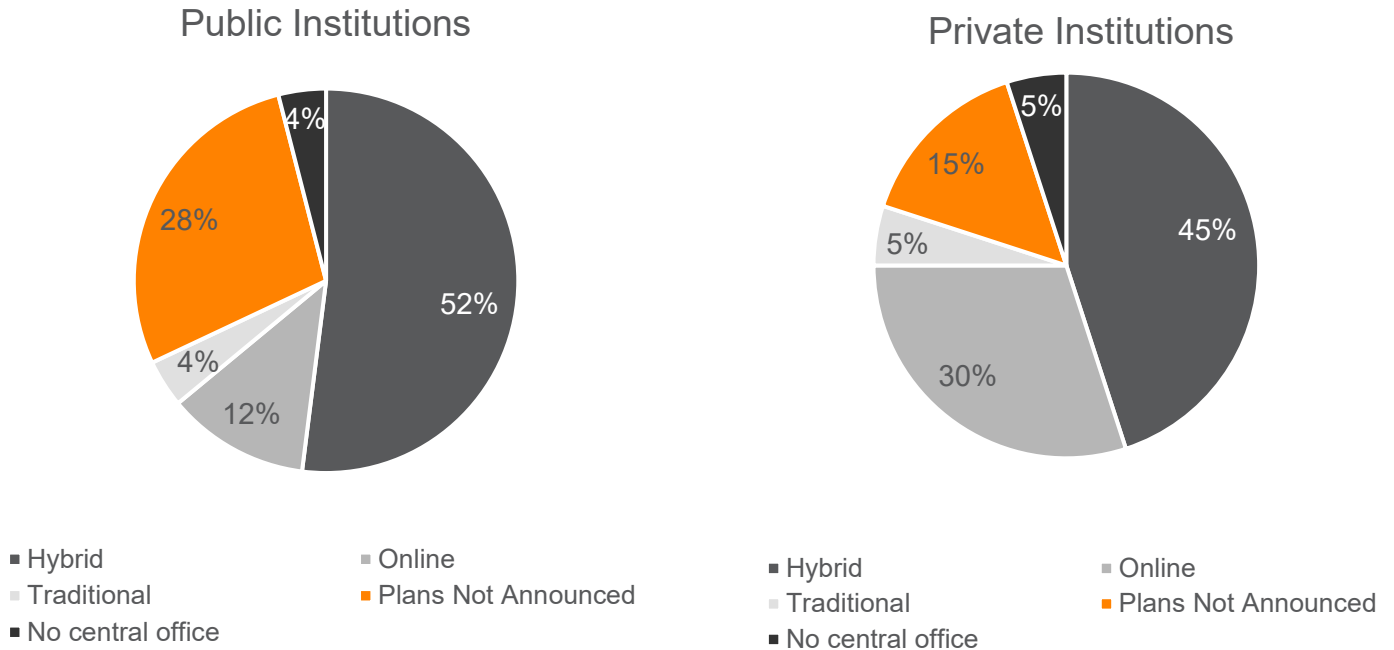
Governance

Of the private institutions in the sample, nearly half (45%) have announced plans for a hybrid engagement model for community service programs (Figure 4). A little under a third (30%) of private institutions in the sample announced a virtual engagement model for community service programs. Compared to public institutions, private institutions rely more on online modes of engagement for community service programs.

Of the public institutions in the sample, more than half (52%) have announced plans for hybrid models for community service programs (Figure 4). As noted, fewer public

institutions are opting for fully online community service programming than private institutions, but relatively similar portions of public and private institutions are using traditional, in-person engagement models. A little over a fourth (28%) of public institutions in the sample have not publicly announced plans for community service programs. These institutions may be sharing information internally through volunteer service newsletters or completely deferring modes of engagement to the community partners with whom they work to provide service experiences.

Figure 4. Community Service Engagement Models, by Governance Classification

Public Institutions

52%
28%
4%
4%
12%

- Hybrid
- Online
- Traditional
- Plans Not Announced
- No central office

Private Institutions

5%
15%
5%
30%
45%

- Hybrid
- Online
- Traditional
- Plans Not Announced
- No central office

IV. EMERGING PRACTICES

Community service programs quickly adapted to overcome the challenges presented by the pandemic as many campuses pivoted to offer remote engagement and volunteering through virtual, socially-distant in-person, and other innovative ways to provide service to communities. A few emerging practices became apparent from this study. First, some universities plan to host virtual alternative breaks. Second, encouraging the usage of a virtual community engagement and service "hubs" clearly allowed students to easily seek volunteer opportunities. Lastly, institutions who had service learning or volunteer requirements have adjusted acceptable modality and requirements to reflect institutional decisions and the engagement model utilized.

Virtual Alternative Breaks

While many institutions utilize winter break, fall breaks, and other extended breaks for immersive service-learning trips, colleges and universities have had to reimagine those alternative breaks given the constraints presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, through its Jones Center for Leadership and Service, has utilized a hybrid model of underline engaging students over the weekend in a socially-distant manner as opposed to over extended breaks by offering service opportunities within the Knoxville area. By being in proximity to one another for shorter durations of time and by engaging with social distancing, these weekend opportunities allow students to still engage in-person. Additionally, the

Jones Center for Leadership and Service is using virtual "launch pad" sessions intended to inspire new passions for volunteering in specific passion areas. Via these launch pad sessions, students are able to engage with volunteering in shorter weekend or online sessions as opposed to longer in-person alternative break trips. These launch pad sessions serve as a "launching pad" for students to explore service opportunities they might be passionate about. The University of Southern California cancelled all alternative break trips, but will be offering a Virtual Alternative Spring Break Conference "to continue to address important social justice issues." With reimagined alternative breaks, universities have managed to still engage their students via immersive service-learning by hosting opportunities that intend on inspiring a passion for and continuing to commit to community service.

Virtual Hubs and Modified Event Calendars

While online community engagement by colleges and universities has been on a rise since before COVID-19, there has been a significant increase in the usage of virtual hubs and online communities for community engagement. Tennessee State University has utilized its website to promote a plethora of virtual engagement opportunities given the university requires service hours for graduation. These opportunities include The Corporation for National & Community Service, which suggests donating money and other needed supplies, such as food for food pantry programs or coats to Operation Warm. Additionally, Virginia Commonwealth University is utilizing a Canvas page to host "student-led discussion boards, leadership workshops, social events, community service opportunities, and more." VCU's method of connecting students in discussions and workshops related to service is an

important component of effective service-learning that encourages students to think deeply and synthesize the impact of their service contributions in the local community. Clearly promoting virtual opportunities and safety precautions for the few in-person opportunities, students have a clear sense of what is available to them and how to properly engage with community service in the COVID-19 environment. Virtual engagement opportunities have been listed with calendars that specifically list virtual opportunities. The University of Idaho and The Center for Volunteerism & Social Action (CVSA) has utilized an engagement website that allows students to filter events for virtual/online service opportunities. While service opportunities in-person have historically been the norm, engagement virtually has become an accessible alternative and aid for the challenges of holding safe and traditional, in-person service-related activities.

Adaptability in Modality and Requirements

While volunteering in person and attaining service hours during the school year are typically not a problem, many universities have had to adjust their service opportunities and service requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lone Star College operates a Leadership College that offers students an opportunity to develop their leadership through giving back to their community in-person, but the College has since moved all instruction online and has worked closely with local community partners to create safe in-person volunteer opportunities. Spelman College and the Bonner Office for Civic Engagements previously required students complete 24 community service hours. Due to COVID-19, the Bonner Office for Civic Engagement released a statement on their website stating in-person community service is not allowed for the safety of the campus community; however, opportunities with on-campus departments and local campus partners have allowed for the creation of

online volunteering opportunities such as working with digital design or in research studies. Azusa Pacific University requires students meet a certain number of service credit hours for graduation. This semester, Azusa Pacific has decreased its service credit requirement for graduation to account for the difficulty of engaging with service opportunities during COVID-19. The institution has also provided all full-time students with 15 service credits toward their requirements for fall 2020. Additionally, Azusa Pacific's service credit FAQ page states, "online service options will be created that enable students to receive service credits by completing online learning modules on a variety of topics." By giving ample opportunities for students to engage with adapted modalities and requirements, institutions have demonstrated their commitment to community service while keeping in mind student and community safety. Further, the

ability for institutions to adapt to meet the challenges presented by the pandemic has illuminated the need for multiple modalities and offerings for students to encourage seeking out service experiences that align with an individual's interests, schedules, and skills.

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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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