



PERC RESEARCH BRIEF

Health and Wellness Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Brief 9 of the *Student Engagement Practice and Planning in the COVID-19 Environment Research Series*

December 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.

Published by:

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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 health and wellness. Health and wellness engagement not only focuses on supporting students when ill or injured, but in providing resources and services for proactive health practices. While many health and wellness programs and services formerly took place in-person, professionals have worked to adapt practices to provide accessible experiences in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

1. Proactive programming and educational sessions have predominantly transitioned to hybrid and online settings.
2. Virtual services, such as telehealth, have increased to allow for students to safely connect with health professionals.
3. Campus recreation and wellness programs are adapting to balance social distancing and safety guidelines while also creating inclusive experiences for students.

The brief concludes with a “Emerging Practices” section that focuses on strategies and initiatives that present potential for creating innovative and meaningful health and wellness 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.

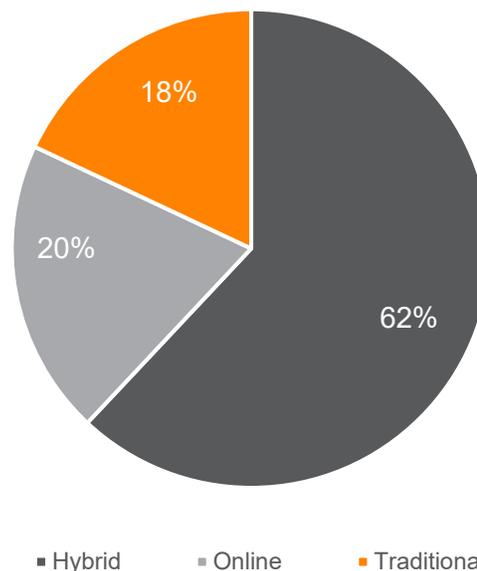
The purpose of this project is to understand and to inform student engagement planning and practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team examined institutional plans and student engagement practices from a sample of 45 institutions through three models of engagement (Appendix A):

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.”

Health & Wellness

Health and wellness programs provide important services and resources to the campus community. Some common resources within health and wellness include health and wellness education offices, recreation and fitness centers, student health centers, and counseling centers. For the purposes of this study, this brief will analyze all of the aforementioned offices when available at the sample institutions, as resources vary across each campus.

Within this study, the models of engagement are classified as “traditional,” “hybrid,” and “online.” Traditional is operationally defined as engagement that has not changed due to the pandemic and is fully in-person. Hybrid is operationally

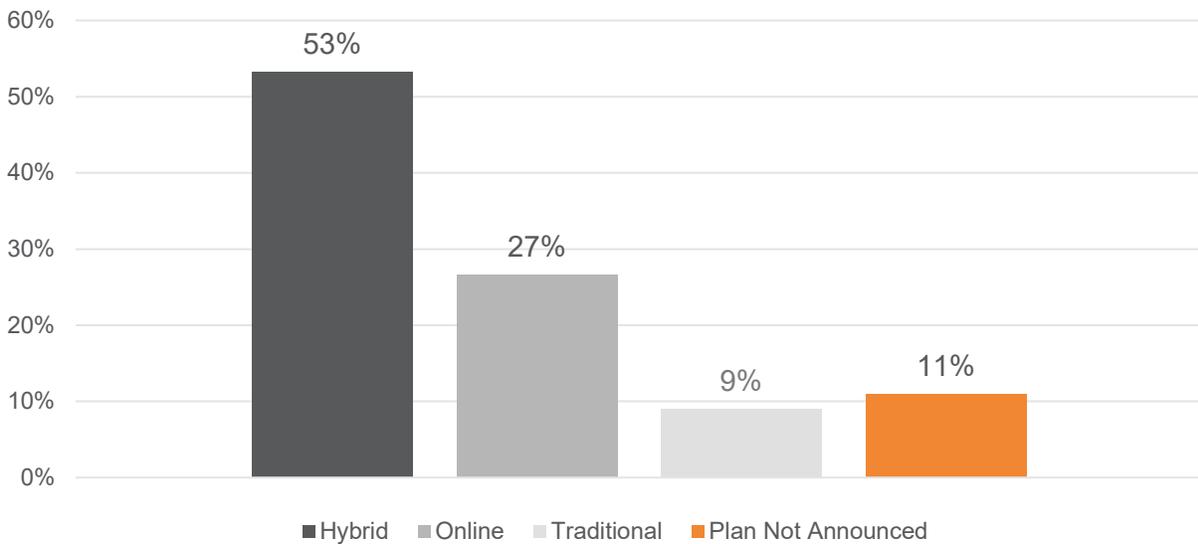
defined as utilizing in-person as well as online mediums to engage with students. An online model means that all programs and engagement experiences are facilitated in virtual settings, delivered through a variety of platforms including Zoom, Microsoft Teams, websites, or social media.

II. MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT

At the time of this study, the majority of institutions analyzed (53%) are utilizing a hybrid model (Figure 2). Hybrid models within health and wellness are typically programs and services that usually use online platforms to engage students, but

offer some opportunities to be in-person when safely possible or when necessary. A small number of institutions (9%) are using a traditional model, as most campuses studied have adapted to the pandemic and have in turn modified their engagement initiatives. Among the institutions studied, 27% are utilizing online models of engagement. At the time of data collection, 11% of institutions had not publicly announced plans for programming. However, these institutions may have been communicating through internal channels and platforms, such as listserv emails or password protected platforms on a website or mobile application.

Figure 2. Health and Wellness Engagement Models



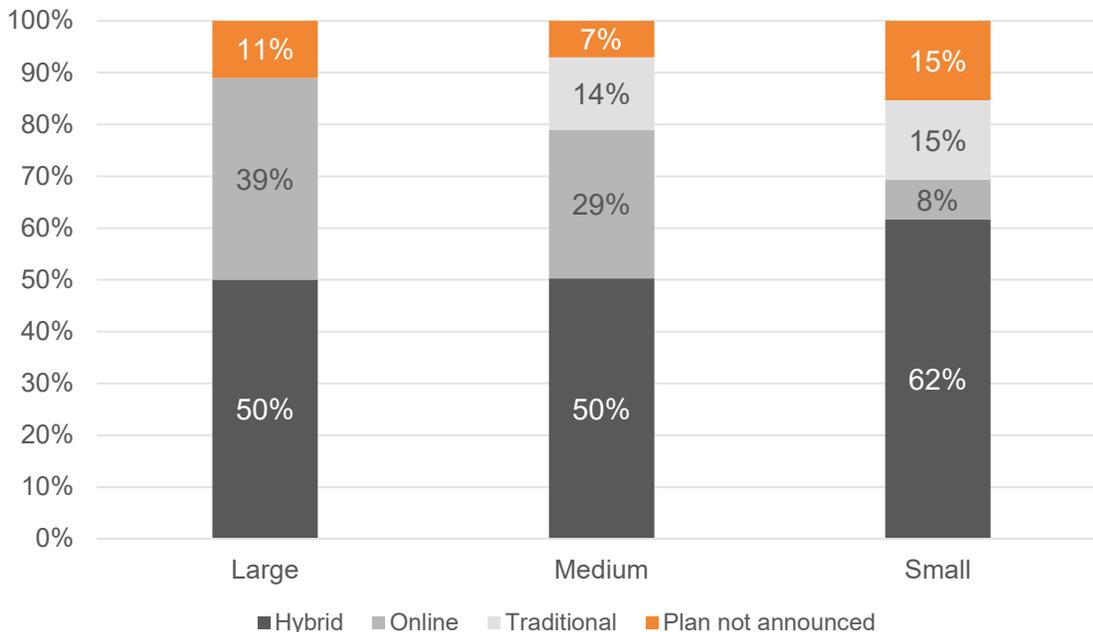
III. DIFFERENCES BY INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

This brief also examines the influences of institutional size and governance on health and wellness engagement modality for the sample institutions. Overall, the majority of institutions in the study, regardless of other characteristics, elected to engage in a hybrid format with health and wellness services and programming. Additionally, full traditional models are limited to specific institutional types discussed in the below section.

Size

While over a quarter of institutions (27%) in the sample provide health and wellness engagement through online modalities, small colleges and universities utilized this model less than large and medium (Figure 3). Instead, small institutions engage in health and wellness through hybrid (62%) and traditional (15%) models more than large and medium colleges and universities. Medium-sized institutions engage with traditional modalities at a similar level to small institutions (14%). Significant to note, no large institutions in the sample report using a traditional engagement model. Instead, those institutions plan for health and wellness programming through hybrid (50%) and online (39%) formats. Further, the portion of institutions using online models of engagement for health and wellness was largest among large institutions.

Figure 3. Health and Wellness Engagement Models, by Size

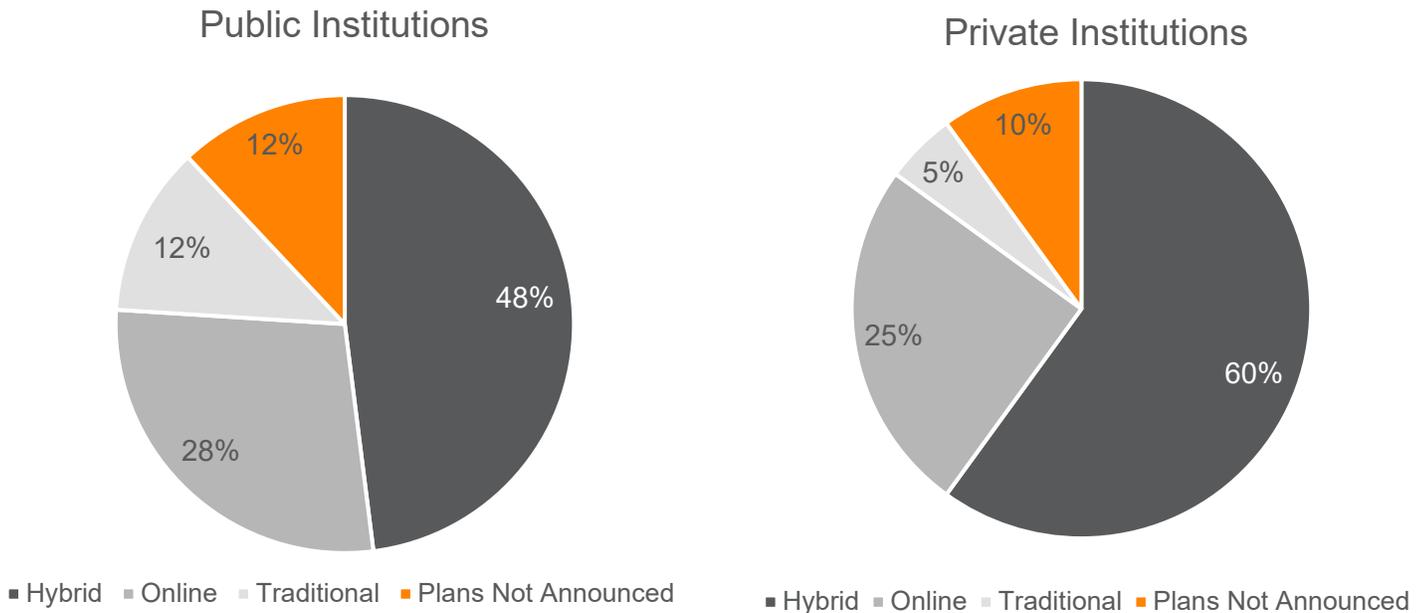


Governance

Both public and private institutional types report hybrid models as the top modality selection for health and wellness engagement at 48% and 60% (Figure 4) respectively. Additionally, both governance types experienced similar usage rates of online models with 25% for private and 28% for public institutions.

However, traditional in-person health and wellness offerings were present at public colleges and universities (12%) more than private institutions (5%). To note, the portion of institutions that have not formally or publicly announced health and wellness engagement models is relatively similar between private institutions (10%) and public institutions (12%).

Figure 4. Health and Wellness Engagement Models, by Governance Classification



IV. EMERGING PRACTICES

To maximize health and wellness programs across institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, many changes have been made to programs, engagement, and services. Several promising practices have emerged across institutions within the sample. Including fitness and recreation centers, counseling centers, student health centers, and health and wellness education offices,

the practice of health and wellness is practiced differently on each campus and with variety in resources. However, the practices that emerged in response to the pandemic aim to maximize physical spaces to effectively offer resources to students, while health education and wellness centers are focusing on inclusive wellness practices.

Hybrid Campus Recreation

Campus recreation centers are maximizing physical spaces with most having indoor centers open with social distancing practices in place. However, some are working to provide a hybrid campus recreation experience. Several institutions in the sample are utilizing virtual formats for group fitness classes. [Massachusetts Institute of Technology's RecSports](#) is offering virtual and outdoor workout sessions, allowing students to work out and stay active, but doing so where they feel most comfortable. The recreation center at [Wake Forest University](#) has socially distanced in-person group fitness classes outdoors with a mask required, along with virtual streaming of classes. Some recreation centers have followed a model similar to that of the [University of Idaho's Recreation and Wellbeing](#), which has moved workout equipment and machinery to maintain social distance, along with enforcing a mask protocol. In addition to these adjustments, there has been increased cleaning of equipment and a limited capacity mandate has been enacted. Campus recreation centers are often the home of intramural sports offerings, but some institutions have made adaptations to allow for group gaming without in-person gathering. For example, [UCLA Rec](#) started to offer group video games, which are played remotely, as a safe alternative to their intramural offerings. The institutions in the sample have worked to create engagement experiences within campus recreation that emulate and achieve similar outcomes, such as physical fitness or team sport camaraderie, through hybrid practices.

Virtual Support Groups

With the modifications of academic courses to virtual settings, support groups and affinity groups have followed suit to facilitate community while maintaining healthy and safe practices. Having virtual

support groups allows the continuation of social well-being in an online setting. East Los Angeles College's Student Health Center offers a [virtual LGBTQ+ Support Group](#) that meets weekly to allow students to talk about life, relationship concerns related to sexual orientation, gender, and identity. Along with the LGBTQ+ Support Group, the institution also offers a virtual [Women's Support Group](#) to gain coping skills to process and begin the healing of past/present trauma. Additionally, the University of Arizona shifted some meetings of [Wildcats Anonymous](#), a support group for students processing substance or alcohol abuse, to a virtual format. These support groups allow for the students to create their own community amongst themselves, along with creating a method of sharing information and educational resources to students who need them.

Applications and Curated Resources

As most institutions within the sample have to transition their programs and resources to a virtual or hybrid setting, offices and functional areas are designing innovative and creative digital resources and applications to provide essential information and health topics to students. Telehealth has been a popular response to providing health and wellness support in a virtual setting. Within the study sample, a majority of institutions are offering telehealth, prioritizing mental health counseling and psychology through an online modality. Northwestern's [Counseling and Psychological Services](#), along with the University of Texas at Austin's [Mental Health and Counseling Center](#), are utilizing technology to offer previously in-person appointments and services through phone calls or video calls. Wake Forest University's [Office of Wellbeing](#) offers an online service, and an in-person experience, called Aromatherapy, where students can order premixed aromatherapy sprays online and practice the ways of healing the body, mind, and spirit. At Ohio

State University, the wellness center has created a [daily blog](#) with writings focused on holistic wellness. The University of Texas created a free app called [Thrive](#), which was designed to enhance UT student wellbeing and help busy students live their best lives. The creation of these unique and creative resources in an easily accessible format allows students to maximize their experience and utilize these offerings.

Inclusive Wellness Activities

Institutions of higher education have long promoted the eight dimensions of wellness: physical, social, occupational, financial, environmental, spiritual, intellectual, and emotional. The University of Tennessee, Knoxville's [Center for Health Education and Wellness](#)) is just one of several institutions that highlight these wellness dimensions. While sample institutions focus on holistic wellness and the dimensions of health and wellness, some institutions have also focused on creating inclusive wellness activities. These inclusive wellness activities have been designed to focus on the health and stress around social identities and create a safe environment for students to participate in these activities. This intentional intersectionality of health and social identities creates an environment that focuses on the whole student. [Howard University Student Health Center](#) has focused events for social wellness; for example, on National Coming Out Day, the center had a virtual viewing of "Todrick Hall's Behind the Curtain". The focus on social wellness for individuals

within the LGBTQ+ community on National Coming Out Day provides an atmosphere and an environment where they can feel safe, ultimately fostering social wellness among students. At the University of Arizona, the Campus Health center has created [Peace in the Pandemic](#). This workshop helps students learn about distress caused by the pandemic and neuropsychological responses to threat, mindfulness, and self-care. By coaching students and equipping them with strategies on how to move forward with their areas of wellness directly reflects the university's commitment to inclusive wellness. Texas Tech University hosted [Suicide Prevention Week](#) through Risk Intervention and Safety Education, combining virtual and online programming, to help bring awareness of suicide in a pandemic. These inclusive wellness programs allow for engaging and meaningful programming that connects a student to their community and the world.

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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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