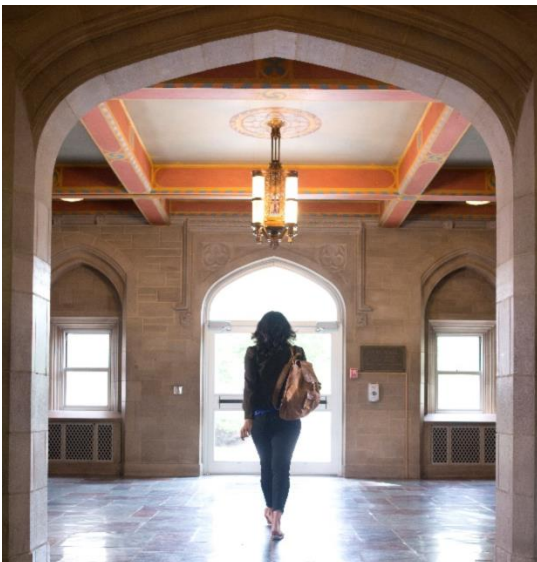# Higher Education in a Pandemic:
## Adult Learners and COVID-19

### 2020-2021
### Final Report

**Prepared by:**

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# Acknowledgements

## Participating Institutions

Administrators, faculty, staff, and adult learners from the following sixteen institutions participated in the focus groups, providing the core data from which this study draws its findings:

- Avila University
- Baker University
- Donnelly College
- Johnson County Community College
- Kansas City Art Institute
- Kansas City Kansas Community College
- Kansas State University
- Lincoln University
- Metropolitan Community College
- Park University
- Rockhurst University
- University of Central Missouri
- University of Kansas
- University of Missouri
- University of Missouri-Kansas City
- Western Governors University

## Study Team

This study was designed and conducted by the Urban Education Research Center and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. The members of the research team included:

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# Introduction

## Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education

On March 6, 2020, the University of Washington in Seattle became the first American university to shut down campus operations because of COVID-19. By the end of the spring semester, more than 1,300 colleges and universities across the Unites States canceled in-person classes or shifted to online-only instruction. According to tracking from the College Crisis Initiative, nearly two-thirds of higher education institutions had significantly altered their plans for learning and instruction by Fall 2020 with varying levels of success (College Crisis Initiatiave, 2020).

In addition to disrupting course delivery, the pandemic threatened almost every other aspect of college life. Campus visits and admissions testing were both altered during the late spring. Campus closures created new financial burdens for both institutions and learners. The move to online learning unleashed countless logistical challenges including access to internet, support services, and work-internship opportunities.

Postsecondary institutions responded to COVID-19 in ways that reflect their values, capacity, culture, and leadership. While no one could fully predict the implications and impact of this pandemic, some institutions demonstrated great creativity, authenticity, and decisiveness as they sought to support their adult learners toward their academic goals. COVID-19 brought out resiliency in faculty, staff, and adult learners. They developed new expertise in remote working and learning. Staff, faculty, and adult learners adapted to video conference using Zoom or MS Teams. Offices converted paper forms to electronic or editable PDFs. Electronic scheduling tools were incorporated into daily activities to connect staff and adult learners. Podcasts and videos were developed in place of written information. Social media tools were integrated into communication and recruitment of adult learners. In many ways, COVID-19 reshaped higher education and moved daily processes into the technological age.

## Adult Learners in Kansas City

Adult learners are not immune to the effects of the pandemic. Typically referred to as "nontraditional" students, adult learners constitute about 35% of the college population (Gross, 2018). They are financially independent, work full-time, care for dependents, and/or attend school part-time. In the United States, there are approximately 6.6 million students who fall into this category.

Regional efforts to support adult learners are led by the KC Scholars Post-secondary Network, a bi-state consortium of 17 postsecondary institutions and KC Degrees, a regional program designed to support adults with some college but no degree return to college. With institutional and foundation support, KC Scholars and KC Degrees have made serving adult learners a central focus for the region.

In 2017, the KC Scholars Postsecondary Network partnered with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) to take stock of current practice related to serving adults. CAEL administered assessments at five of the 17 partner institutions in 2017 and an additional seven institutions in 2019. These assessments asked institutional faculty, staff and adult students about how adult learner-friendly the campus is in order to create a gap analysis. This regional gap analysis identified existing areas of excellence, opportunities to improve support services across the region, and champions for subpopulations of adult students.  In Spring 2020, participating institutions were poised to set goals for their institution and the region based on the CAEL results.

## Rationale for the Study

In 2020, the KC Scholars Postsecondary Network and participating institutions were prepared to set regional goals to improve outcomes for adult learners. Unfortunately, the pandemic hit, and institutions were not prepared for prolonged campus closures and the shift to online learning. The region needed to better understand the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on learners and especially adult learners before it could move forward with regional planning. This study was commissioned to fill this gap and provide evidence of the ways institutions and learners were adjusting to learning during the pandemic.

Although this study is focused on the Kansas City region, the research team designed this study to have broad application.  The KC Scholars Postsecondary Network is comprised of public and private institutions, two- and four-year, in Kansas and Missouri. Some of these institutions have historically worked with adult students, while others are just beginning to dedicate resources toward improving adults' degree attainment in the region. Findings could easily be applied to other regions in the country.

# Research Methods

## Study Approach

This study focused on collecting and using qualitative data to provide information to institutions of higher education about the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the educational experiences of adult learners. Two research questions were the

focus: 1) How has COVID-19 specifically affected adult learners? 2) How can higher education institutions address the needs of adult learners during this unique time?

The research team conducted a series of 18 focus groups from August to October 2020 with adult learners, faculty, staff, and administrators, seeking to gain a comprehensive and multi-faceted understanding of how each of these groups navigated the initial months of the pandemic. The overall goal of the study was to provide institutions with timely, evidence-based guidance on how to effectively meet the needs of the adult learner population, both during this pandemic and as we move forward in an altered educational landscape.

# Participant Recruitment

Focus group participants were recruited from the institutions within the KC Scholars Postsecondary Network, as well as from the current group of KC Scholars adult learner scholarship recipients. The research team worked with KC Scholars to develop templates for email communication and to identify individuals from each institution to serve as liaisons between the research team and potential focus group participants.

## Recruitment of Adult Learners

KC Scholars directly contacted their current adult learner scholarship recipients. They also shared the email templates with their institutional partners to use in contacting their own adult learners. In many cases, the research team also reached out or followed up directly with institutional partners to encourage communication with adult learners about the focus groups.

Emails to adult learners included information about the purpose of the focus groups and a link to complete an online interest form, which asked for contact information and verification of adult learner status. The research team then followed up with adult learners who best met the criteria to invite them to sign up for pre-scheduled focus groups and complete the online informed consent.

## Recruitment of Faculty, Staff, and Administrators

KC Scholars sent introductory emails to institutional partners to send on to a variety of staff and faculty groups, including the link to the online focus group interest form. These potential focus group participants were asked to provide simply their name, institution, and role within the institution. The research team followed up with all interested staff and faculty and used online scheduling tools to identify dates and times that would maximize participation. Once mutually agreeable dates were set, participants were invited to sign up and complete the online informed consent.

# Data Collection

Focus groups were conducted via Zoom and lasted between 45–90 minutes (depending on group size). Discussions were facilitated using a standard protocol and a consistent pool of questions, covering the following topics:

Adult Learner Focus Group Topics:
- Current educational status and plans
- Current stress level concerning COVID-19
- Impact of COVID-19 on your personal, professional, and educational life
- Stressors concerning completing your degree given the COVID-19 pandemic
- Communication from institutions about adjustments or support in the fall semester
- Potential contacts at the institutions for support or direction
- Offices you have found helpful or not helpful during COVID-19
- What your institution could do to help you be successful in the fall

Faculty, Staff, and Administrator Focus Group Topics:

- Current stress level concerning COVID-19
- Impact of COVID-19 on your mindset, priorities, or actions related to adult learners
- Recent surveys administered to (or about) adult learners, and plans to act to address challenges or build on strengths from survey results
- Institutional lessons learned from the shifts caused by COVID-19
- Changes that may be sustained beyond the COVID-19 pandemic
- Thoughts, plans, and/or concerns regarding serving students effectively in the fall
- Support or outside assistance needed to best serve students

Each focus group was audio-recorded and automatically transcribed through Zoom. The automatically generated transcripts were compared to audio files and edited for accuracy.

# Data Analysis

Final versions of the transcripts were systematically reviewed in an iterative manner, using constant comparative analysis. All focus group data were analyzed and coded by category, then thematic analysis was conducted to determine frequency, specificity, emotion, and extensiveness.

For adult learner focus group data, data from all seven focus groups were combined for analysis, with responses tagged according to characteristics of interest (e.g., students from two-year vs four-year institutions, students who were caring for dependents).

Staff, faculty, and administrator transcripts were separated by functional area (e.g., admission staff comments, faculty comments), and data within functional areas were analyzed further to identify themes unique to each area.

The final iteration of analysis involved comparing the themes generated from the adult learner data to those from staff, faculty, and administrator functional areas. This synthesis of data across focus groups guided the researchers toward the main findings of this study.

# Study Participants

Focus group participants came from 16 different institutions of higher education within the KC Scholars Postsecondary Network, eight private and 8 public institutions. Four institutions are two-year schools and 12 are four-year schools. Fourteen institutions were primarily in-person at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, while two were already delivering courses primarily online.

## *Adult Learners*

Seven adult learner focus groups were conducted and involved a total of 61 participants, all of whom were enrolled (58% full-time, 42% part-time) at an institution within the KC Scholars Postsecondary Network. Demographic information was collected through an online pre-participation survey; figures 1-3 show the distributions of gender, race/ethnicity, and age among the adult learner focus group participants.

*Fig. 1.* **Adult Learner Focus Group Participants – Gender**
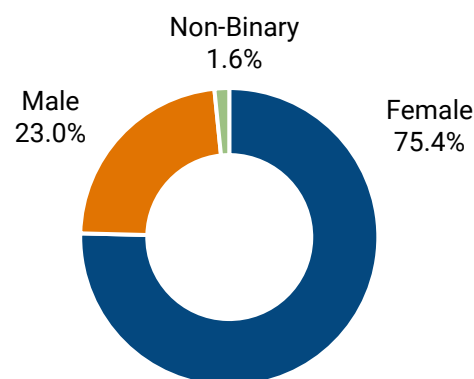
**Fig. 2.** Adult Learner Focus Group Participants – Race/Ethnicity

Other
8%

Hispanic/Latinx
10%

White
48%

Black or African American
34%
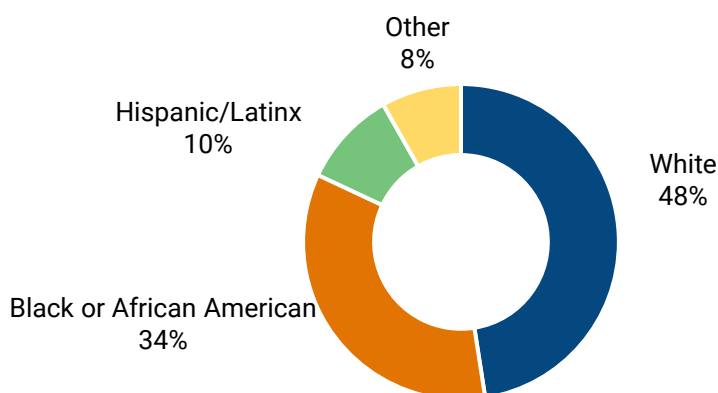
**Fig. 3.** Adult Learner Focus Group Participants – Age

28.3%   33.3%   30.0%

6.7%   1.7%

| 20-29 | 30-39 | 40-49 | 50-59 | 60+ |
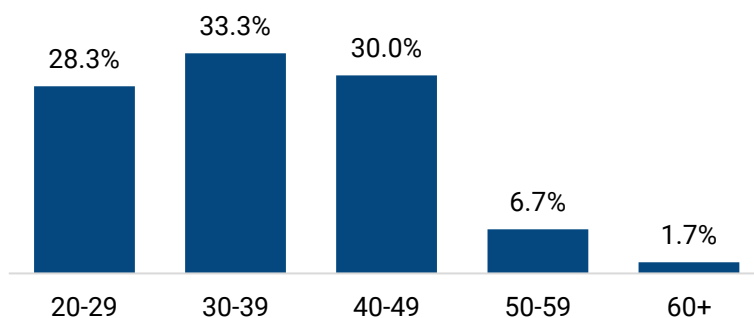
The pre-participation survey also asked participants to self-identify based on a set of characteristics that often define adult learners. Of the 61 adult learner focus group participants:

**82%** reported being financially independent from their parents

**64%** reported working full-time while in school

**57%** reported having dependents that live with them

**26%** reported being single parents

## *Faculty, Staff, and Administrators*

Eleven focus groups were conducted with a total of 82 individuals working within the institutions of the KC Scholars Postsecondary Network. Focus group participants fell into four key areas (fig. 4): Faculty (e.g., instructors and department chairs), Student-Facing

Services (e.g., advising, career services, financial aid, counseling), Admissions/Recruiting, and Administration (e.g., deans, provosts, chancellors, directors of programs/departments).

**Fig. 4. Faculty, Staff, and Administrator Focus Group Participants by Area**
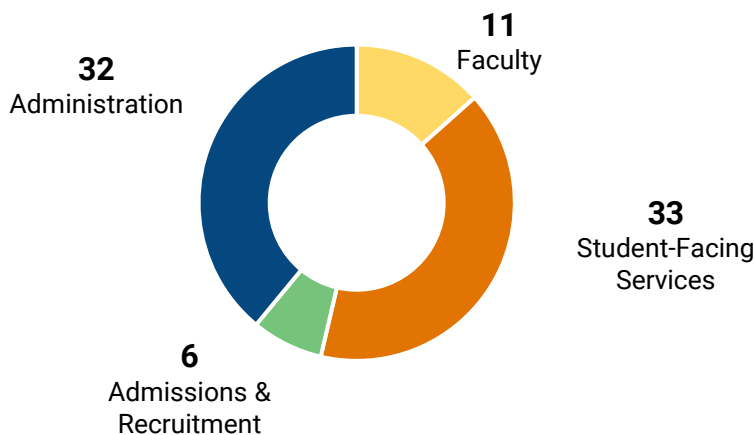


# Findings

Many of the challenges presented or illuminated by COVID-19 were common across entire institutions, while others specifically impacted certain departments and units. The findings section begins with the cross-departmental, overarching themes, and then delves into details specific to the following higher education areas: teaching and learning, information technology, student-facing services, admissions and recruitment, and administration. Information about the ways faculty, staff, administrators, and adult learners adapted and innovated during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic is provided for each area.

## Cross-Departmental Themes

Suddenly pivoting from face-to-face to virtual was the most significant challenge for faculty, staff, and students in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. This challenge cut across departments, and with the exception of institutions that were already fully online, higher education had to mount a seemingly herculean effort to shift fully online practically overnight. The learning curve was steep, and even the most adept struggled during the early months.

For faculty, the sudden shift meant learning how to deliver course content in a format that was often foreign to them, with only days to prepare and limited access to much-needed technology tools and supports. For staff in campus offices, moving online required them to close their doors to students and move their own workspaces into their homes, adapt to virtual meetings, provide online advising and counseling sessions, and determine how to maintain strong communication with other departments without being able to physically interact. For adult learners, the sudden inability to attend classes in person emerged as the most significant hardship, but they also could not participate in internships or field placements, receive in-person registration or financial aid support, attend career fairs, talk face-to-face with advisors and counselors, or access resources such as computer labs or tutoring centers.

Strategies to address the move from in-person to virtual varied by department and unit, but the common ingredient across successful departments was a willingness to embrace change (albeit grudgingly by some) and to see the pandemic as an opportunity for growth. On the ground, this meant faculty and staff had to go above and beyond to figure out how to be successful in a new online environment. They had to learn new instructional methods, new ways of collecting data, and new ways of connecting, interacting, and communicating effectively with one another and their students.

The learning curve was also steep for adult learners who had to learn new ways of connecting with faculty and accessing classes and services. In the early months, there were inconsistencies in technology requirements and course delivery. Adult learners were often frustrated by the inconsistencies and their instructors lack of technological agility. Between this and the challenges of working from home, caring for their own children, accessing reliable technology and internet connections, and navigating remote student support, many adult learners felt quite overwhelmed. Remarkably, adult learners' resiliency, which had helped them return to school, also proved to be an asset during COVID-19.

## *Stress Among Faculty, Staff, and Adult Learners*

The stress of the pandemic was felt by staff, faculty, and adult learners alike. Whether the stress was associated with work/life balance issues, social isolation, fear of contracting COVID-19, concern over job loss, or navigating the virtual world, the anxiety was real and shared.

Learning remotely, in many cases while also maintaining jobs, caused significant work/life balance challenges for adult learners. Some had no dedicated workspace at home for either school or work, which meant they were often stationed at kitchen tables, living room sofas, or in bedrooms with very little quiet space. Many adult learners did not have easy access to a computer or Wi-Fi and were trying to complete assignments on their smartphones. In some cases, even when adult learners did have a computer at

home, families were sharing one computer for their children to attend virtual school and complete assignments, and adult learners to take college courses, and adults to conduct remote work.

COVID-19 also led to dramatic changes in day-to-day life for faculty and staff in higher education. Instead of going to work on a regular basis, almost everyone began working from home in the middle of the Spring 2020 term. Those with children expressed the difficulty of having to suddenly adapt to school closures, which meant sharing space and splitting attention between work responsibilities and their children's needs and online school activities.

In response to COVID-19, faculty often provided greater flexibility for students on course completion and relaxed previously rigid deadlines. Registrars offices also granted some extended deadlines for grades and made allowances for incompletes. Overall, institutions utilized professional judgement to flex and adapt policies to accommodate students' individual circumstances.

Department leaders tried to be flexible with employees and allowed for a variety of work schedules to help mitigate some of the stress caused by trying to balance everything in their own lives and still provide necessary services to students. In some cases, staff were given opportunities to work on weekends or after regular hours. Leaders began checking in on each faculty and staff person daily through a phone call or a videoconference session. The 15-minute daily Zoom coffee breaks to just see and talk to staff members helped alleviate the anxiety and feelings of being isolated.

A number of institutions expanded their counseling services through the provision of virtual counseling services. Faculty and staff in student-facing services also stepped up and provided support to students. *"I'm not a trained counselor. But still a lot of students think an advisor is a person who is a counselor. And they're just looking for a person to listen, who's not in the four walls of their apartment or house."* This type of support proved critical for adult learners feeling stressed and overwhelmed by COVID-19.

For many, simply acknowledging the reality that faculty, staff, and students were going through a difficult shared experience made a difference in how stress affected them. As one institutional staff member described it, *"It's interesting when you have these conversations (with students) and they're sharing their challenges...a lot of times I'm talking to them and I am right there with them. I'm literally trying to do the same thing working from home. Having little kids in school…and how are you going to manage that? Are they going to go back to school, or staying home? I think (it helps) just really being able to identify with a lot of what the students are going through right now. You know because we're all kind of in the same boat."*

## *Communication and Collaboration Between Departments*

The issue of siloed communication was not new to higher education when COVID-19 hit, but the challenges associated with it became particularly obvious. Departments and units within higher education institutions often function independently, only collaborating as needed or required by their institution. This loosely connected system was not well-suited for a crisis that required quick coordination and communication.

During the rapid shift to remote learning and services, changes in policies and practices were not always communicated and coordinated across departments and units. Conflicting information and lack of collaboration proved to be a significant frustration for faculty and staff. Calls for integration, especially among student-facing services personnel, were common during the spring. "*Let's get together, let's talk about how we're going to serve students,*" a Career Services staff member pleaded. "*How can we align so we are all consistent for the students. Let's make sure the message is the same from admissions to the faculty members.*"

Institutions had a variety of methods to manage inter-departmental decisions and communication related to COVID-19. Many created task forces to cover the different angles and issues focused on the fall semester. In creating these task forces, the leadership created a mechanism for faculty and staff to discuss inconsistencies across campus and set standards of practice. Having a way to identify problems and a timeline of expectations about when decisions were to be made helped create a less-siloed environment in the fall.

Collaboration between program directors during COVID-19 – mostly around technology and instructional design – also helped improve communication across departments. These types of partnerships stimulated interest in working across programs. One administrator shared, *"I found some of my most enjoyable conversations (during COVID-19) have been with the directors of other programs…to find out how could we partner together on something. What could we do that's new and different….that has been pretty soul-satisfying for me to get positive responses and also to feel like we're continuing to move forward, even though it's really difficult all around us."*

The creation of online fillable forms to replace paper was another response to COVID-19 that helped improve communication and consistency. The move from paper to online forms was implemented to help students complete required paperwork, and it also helped standardize the enrollment and registration processes across campuses. Faculty and staff could now access information online that had not been previously visible. This shift had long been in the works; staff commented that the use of online fillable forms were among the kinds of things that "*were coming down the pike, that we wanted to make happen, and the situation pushed us forward with momentum.*"

## *Communication from Institutions to Adult Learners*

Communicating with students about the adjustments and changes was another major challenge during COVID-19. While most institutions set up a centralized information site so students could get the latest information, they also, as one adult learner stated, *"flooded our emails with messages that didn't apply."* Adult learners complained that it was quite difficult to separate important from superfluous information. They were especially frustrated when they received repeated communications regarding residence halls or cafeteria protocols that clearly did not pertain to them. Many simply checked-out and stopped reading their emails. Consequently, several students missed important deadlines.

During the early months of the pandemic, adult learners were also faced with lagging, inaccurate, and/or missing communication. They were upset when classes were canceled but they were not notified. They were frustrated when, after registering for fall classes, course delivery methods were changed without their knowledge. In some cases, students had registered for online or in-person based on their scheduling needs (e.g., consolidating in-person classes to one day per week on campus), and late communication about changes caused them to have to scramble to change their schedules. They were upset when they could not access course materials or bought the wrong books because of poor communication from their professors.

In response to COVID-19, most institutions created a website landing page that provided with the most up-to-date information and sent emails to their campus communities. A few institutions did recognize the unique information needs of adult learners and began customizing their messages for their specific adult learner audience as they approached the fall. Those who received these tailored messages expressed appreciation and shared that personalized communication helped them feel more prepared for the semester.

Some of the cross-departmental task forces created were specifically focused on communication strategies for students. One administrator noted, *"Communication is so important to faculty and staff, but also to the students…just letting them know what's happening day-to-day, because this is changing on a daily basis."* Having administrators and cross-departmental groups focused on strong messaging for students helped elevate the importance of timely, accurate, and tailored communication.

At one institution, the very top administrator made it a priority to communicate directly with students. An adult learner shared that, *"over the summer, I think it was like an hour or two-hour long video chat with the president where people could ask questions. And he answered just a lot of general questions about what the school was doing moving forward."*

# Teaching & Learning

The teaching and learning experience within higher education was dramatically impacted by COVID-19, and this impact was felt by faculty and adult learners alike. Examining the focus group data from both perspectives revealed a few overarching aspects of teaching and learning that presented the biggest challenges or were most affected by COVID-19: issues with technology, the loss of field experiences, and adult learners' varied experiences with faculty. In addition, the pandemic led to several short-term changes to registration policies that impacted course delivery.

## *Issues with Technology*

In Spring 2020, faculty had to suddenly shift to online learning platforms, and many found the transition overwhelming. They were often unfamiliar with how these platforms operated and felt a great deal of anxiety. Some instructors struggled to move face-to-face courses online, partly due to technical issues, and partly due to the shift in instructional methods required for online learning.

Teaching modalities and platforms varied, as some instructors moved from in-person to synchronous online courses (e.g., via Zoom), some moved to asynchronous (e.g., recorded videos of lectures, online group discussions), and others used a combination. At some institutions, approaches varied by course or instructor, which made things difficult for adult learners trying to keep track of the various approaches and expectations. Different technological approaches also challenged IT departments and other support offices on campuses, because faculty did not always use the standard Learning Management System of an institution; in some cases this was because there wasn't a campus-wide policy established, and in other cases faculty opted to go their own way. Staff within IT departments tried to keep up and help, but they noted that when faculty went their own way, *"it was challenging to offer detailed support for that process."*

Whether due to an instructor's lack of technology skills or due to constantly shifting approaches, students were often frustrated. They were well aware when instructors struggled to get a handle on the technology, and while several of them had grace for their instructors, they still felt like their own education was negatively impacted by instructors' lack of technological agility.

Adult learners struggled with their own technology issues as well. Several discussed not having access to proper computer equipment and struggling with slow internet speeds which made videoconferencing extremely difficult. Even if they did have computers and internet access, many were trying to share technology (and the places or spaces to use it) with family members who also were working or schooling from home. Bandwidth was also a problem; internet speeds were strained by sudden increase in usage within

> *"I had just a basic laptop. I could do a little bit of surfing on it, but nothing major. And with everything going online, I actually had to go out and buy a brand-new laptop and use funds that I really didn't have to purchase (it). And then I live in a small town. We have to basically pay an arm and a leg just have the internet at the house."*
>
> *- Adult Learner*

households, and students living in outlying/rural areas lacking in infrastructure simply did not have access to reliable internet in the first place.

In the face of all these technology-related challenges, faculty often found innovative ways to adapt and recognized long-term benefits of being forced to do so. The unavoidable push to online learning allowed faculty to grow and innovate in new ways. One faculty instructor shared, *"It's definitely caused us old dogs to learn new tricks. I used Zoom in my classroom. I was a little scared to do it, but I managed to figure it out."*

Some faculty improved their own course organization as a result of the shift to online teaching. Because they had to prepare courses in a far more detailed way, they were more likely to use the full set of resources available through their institutions (e.g., built-in tools through Canvas). They also engaged in much more intense pre-planning than ever before, with plans to continue that approach in the future regardless of teaching modality.

> *"I am going into this fall semester having to pre-map my course to the level of detail that I never had to before. This is the most intense pre-planning I've ever done in 19 years of teaching. And I absolutely will do that again. I will make sure my entire classes and assessments are mapped. Going in and preloading rubrics, going in and preloading connections between the content and the gradebook, just really having all of that set up. I think that a lot of us who teach will do chunks of like three weeks…so that you can adapt. For instance, the students decided that they need more information on this topic, and I can still adapt. It's like the difference between having somebody scratch down some directions on a napkin versus a fully demarcated roadmap. I think that it's more comfortable for the students, and it's more comfortable for me, so I will absolutely continue to do that."*
>
> *- Faculty Instructor*

Across institutions, faculty went above and beyond to figure out how to be successful. Faculty assisted each other in learning new technology skills through mentoring others one-on-one, conducting workshops to show others how to set up courses online, and creating online resources. Institutional IT staff, centers for teaching and learning, and sometimes library staff worked with faculty to help them change their course designs.

> *"I think the approach we're taking is we're all in this together and being supportive. You're helping people, comfort them, reassure them, prop them up, and help provide resources, so that they can then help the students."*
>
> *- Faculty Instructor*

Some faculty thought carefully about the needs of specific student populations. For example, an instructor of an English as a Second Language program became aware that teaching language was actually more effective through an online-only approach instead of having some students in class and others online, since masks worn by students attending in-person made it very difficult for anyone to understand them. *"There are some parts about being on Zoom that are actually better than being in a mask; we need the synchronous communication…we need the interaction in order to teach the language."*

Faculty often put in extra hours to make sure they created the best learning experiences for their students. The nature of online learning caused many to teach a single course session more than one time. Even if a course was taught in a face-to-face modality, instructors still had to make the learning content accessible to students in quarantine. They often spent hours editing footage from recorded Zoom classes and typing in additional information to ensure these students had what they needed to be successful.

> *"We've had a lot of faculty really engaging and wanting to be very prepared for fall, because they realize this is our future. Even if they start the fall semester teaching on campus, they're probably going to end up on online at some point. I'm just really impressed with how dedicated our faculty have been in terms of trying to adapt to this."*
>
> *- Administrator*

Administrators recognized the efforts faculty were putting forth to learn and grow in their technology skills, and they expressed appreciation for the willingness of so many to share their knowledge and expertise for the benefit of the entire campus community. One administrator commented, *"The number of faculty who stepped up to do seminars and panel discussions and to share their knowledge. They discussed how they were operating in the online environment. The number of faculty who stepped up and wanted to share their successes and the number who attended those sessions was also the largest groups we ever had at these trainings. We were building a community of learners."*

## *Loss of Field Experiences*

Certain types of coursework, particularly those that included field experiences or lab requirements, were either difficult or impossible to deliver in a virtual format. Healthcare courses with clinical placements were particularly affected, because access to hospitals, long-term care facilities and other healthcare settings was so restricted during the early stages of the pandemic. These types of clinical experiences could not be simulated effectively. Students in teacher preparation programs had their spring teaching placements either cut short or shifted online, which dramatically changed their experience and their sense of readiness for teaching. Students with plans for fall student teaching were unsure whether they would be able to fully experience what they expected to. Instructors of public safety struggled to reconcile the restrictions their institutions

mandated due to COVID-19 with the in-person instruction required to meet state accreditation and licensing. Within other courses, key experiential learning opportunities were missed, such as hands-on labs, field trips, and guest speakers.

In many cases, these types of hands-on experiences were simply lost in Spring 2020, and the only adaptation was postponing or outright canceling. For programs with necessary clinical placements, institutions were working with facilities for the fall to do everything they could to ensure students could fulfill those requirements; by the time of the focus groups, these conversations and negotiations were still underway.

> *"…a lot of healthcare programming requires clinical experiences. And those clinical experiences happen in either long-term care facilities or hospitals, which were immediately impacted in the spring. We did a lot of negotiating with some facilities concerning how our students would complete clinical experiences. It continued into the fall semester, and we've been able to work with some of the hospital systems."*
>
> *- Program Director*

Even as some courses returned to in-person learning in Fall 2020, there were often students in quarantine who needed to join remotely. A few faculty found ways to try to simulate hands-on components of their courses for online learners. In one specific instance, an instructor of a lab course worked with the students themselves to come up with a workable solution for students missing out on in-person experiences.

> *"I had five quarantined students attending lab via Zoom and the rest of the students face to face. I could communicate with those on Zoom through a lavaliere microphone…but they couldn't communicate with me (or) their partners. So we came up with an easy solution. The quarantined students would FaceTime one of their (in class) lab partners so they could participate in group practice and activities. I also have a ceiling mounted camera that I can move all over. It can rotate so they could watch me when I was teaching, no matter where I was. They could watch their group members, and they could contribute via FaceTime. It actually worked out pretty well."*
>
> *- Faculty Instructor*

## *Adult Learners' Varied Interactions with Faculty*

Adult learners struggled considerably when COVID-19 upended their lives, and interactions with their instructors often defined their experience as they navigated school during the pandemic. Most adult learners were working part-time or full-time; some jobs were interrupted due to the pandemic, leading to loss of income, while others moved to remote work. Many had children home from school due to the pandemic, and they needed a lot of help navigating online school. Some had sick family members, and some

experienced COVID-19 personally. The ways that adult learners' felt faculty responded to their personal struggles had powerful influence over how these students felt about school and life in general during this time.

Adult learners expressed the need to connect directly with their instructors during COVID-19 and often experienced frustration when they could not. In the absence of in-person interactions, they at least wanted to be able to meet with them over Zoom rather than just emailing back and forth. Some instructors did connect with classes as a group via Zoom, but the actual extent to which individual students and instructors actually interacted seemed to vary widely. There were many situations in which adult learners expressed that they felt like they were on their own.

Several adult learners felt like their instructors should have had more understanding of the difficulties they were facing. One adult learner shared feeling like professors expected nothing to change due to COVID-19, saying, *"There was no understanding and compassion for what's happening in my personal life, with being a single parent and dealing with all of that. It was (like) our academics are supposed to go on as they were. There was no leniency, which I get to a point. However, what I'm taking care of now takes away from the three hours every night that I was spending doing my classwork."*

> *"I just did a midterm and I emailed my professor on Monday. I explained that this was my weekend to work; I had 12-hour shifts Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. The midterm was only going to be open middle of the day Friday to middle of the day Sunday. He just said 'sorry.' So, I worked 36 hours and completed the midterm during my lunch hour and after work as best I could. It really needed two full days. I did not do as well as I would have done. I don't think that professors take into consideration that you are an adult with responsibilities. I want to do a good job in my courses. Sometimes, I think I am the only person in the course who is an adult learner."*
>
> *- Adult Learner*

In contrast to stories about faculty who seemed rigid and lacking in understanding, several students talked about experiences when instructors showed remarkable compassion and flexibility. They extended deadlines, communicated regularly, and found ways to meet individual students' needs. Faculty often came up with innovative ways to keep students engaged and were cognizant of how students' different learning styles affected the way that information should be presented. One adult learner shared an experience with a particularly thoughtful instructor who explained, *"I'm going to lecture. I'm going to also put up lectures online, so people can watch it over and over when you have the opportunity. I'm going to*

> *"I think throughout the semester my professors were very understanding. If I needed to turn in something late because I was working full-time and also trying to figure out life, that was fine."*
>
> *- Adult Learner*

*say things three times because I know three times is the way that you actually learn it. You have to hear it, touch it, feel it. I'm going to do multiple random things…it's going to look like repetitive work, but it is to cover every person's aspect of learning so nobody's left untouched."* These experiences seemed to be pivotal for students; when adult learners had positive experiences with instructors during the pandemic, it helped reduce stress and anxiety considerably.

### *Registration Policies*

Registrar's offices are often known for being fairly strict in how policies are implemented and enforced. In Spring 2020, the massive disruption caused by COVID-19 created a sudden challenge for these offices. As instructors struggled to move courses fully online, many faculty and adult learners were balancing the demands of coursework and the needs of their own families. Adult learners were often suffering financially, and the stress and anxiety caused by the pandemic exacerbated all of these concerns. Many students were simply unable to manage their coursework. In some cases, the nature of the instruction they received was so different than what they were used to that students simply could not keep up.

Registrar's offices relaxed some of their normally strict guidelines. Due to the pandemic, students were allowed flexibility on what had previously been very rigid deadlines. All institutions granted some form of extended deadlines for grades and made allowances for incompletes. Most institutions relaxed other types of deadlines as well, such as for new enrollments and changes to existing enrollments. In terms of grading policies, for the Spring 2020 semester, many institutions allowed students to opt for pass/fail grading due to the acknowledged difficulties of transition to online courses, and some continued this practice into the summer. In some cases, institutions made specific concessions for students who were directly impacted by COVID-19. Overall, institutions utilized professional judgement to flex and adapt policies to students' individual circumstances.

## Information Technology

Technology issues were highlighted by everyone, including staff, faculty, and adult learners. The pandemic exposed a broad variety of vulnerabilities in this area, and it became clear that technology was (and may continue to be) among the most significant challenges to the operations of institutions and the lives of adult learners.

The move to remote working revealed that many faculty and staff did not have adequate computer equipment at home. Work computers and other technology equipment had to be physically moved from campus offices and set up in home workspaces. The hours that IT staff spent helping accomplish and troubleshoot these tasks in Spring 2020 was enormous. In addition, many classrooms were not technologically equipped to deliver

remote education, so over the summer of 2020, classrooms had to be equipped with the necessary hardware in preparation for the fall.

Supervisors and IT departments also felt strained due to a sudden influx of instructors flocking to participate in trainings related to teaching online. Department leaders held practice sessions to teach staff how to use videoconferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom). Personnel in IT had to respond quickly to the increase in need for support. One IT staff person explained that there were several things they suddenly needed to help with, such as *"making sure that people understand how to use VPN. There were so many different tools that people had never used. It was difficult to talk them through it over the phone."* In addition to helping faculty and staff get up to speed, campus IT personnel were also scrambling to increase security to ensure that privacy and confidentiality of identifiable student information was safe and secure to meet the needs of all offices. With so many people accessing and sharing information virtually, security needs became urgent.

Campus IT departments also had to make a flurry of purchases of different classroom technology and equipment (e.g., webcams, OWLs, hotspots). *"We were buying technology as fast as we could scoop it up: webcams, OWLs, laptops, software and hotspots. Everything that we could get our hands on."* They also had to quickly purchase additional licenses for software such as for Zoom. "*We spent a lot of time making sure that we had licenses to all the software that people needed to be able to run at home.*"

Adult learners were also suddenly trying to find computer equipment and better internet service, and IT staff were involved in helping with this process. For students who lacked technology equipment or strong internet access, some institutions used CARES Act funds to purchase laptops and/or hotspots and loan them out to students. In other cases, campuses had to figure out creative ways to allow students to connect, such as inviting students to set up in campus parking lots so they could access campus Wi-Fi networks.

Not all adult learners were able to obtain equipment or services from their institutions. Many adult learners had to spend their own money to purchase laptops or upgrade their internet connections. Some discussed how they simply could not afford to pay to increase their internet speed and were hampered in courses that relied on videoconferencing. Students in rural areas especially struggled to connect, because regardless of cost, they simply had limited access to internet providers with sufficient bandwidth. Regardless of location, many adult learners expressed that between remote learning for their own children, remote working for themselves and other adults in their household, and the need to connect for their college courses, Wi-Fi use in the household had to be scheduled so that only one person was on at a time.

As noted above, many institutions responded swiftly to the high demand for access to technology. Wi-Fi hotspot cards were purchased and distributed to students in need. Laptops were loaned out to adult learners to ensure that they could attend classes

remotely and access distance-learning content. Whenever possible, institutions tried to offer negotiated pricing or grant funds to help students buy computers. Funding through the CARES Act was frequently referenced as a primary reason that institutions were able to step in and assist students.

> *"Adult learners had different needs than traditional students during the pandemic. We were able to provide adults with laptops for maximum participation in distance learning."*
>
> *- Administrator*

In terms of adapting to the overall expansion of technology use, adult learners began to embrace videoconferencing appointments for academic advising, financial questions, and meetings with instructors. While they may have been hesitant at first, it appears most of them adapted out of necessity. *"You had some people that were uncomfortable with getting on Zoom and things of that nature. Right now, it's working fairly well for our students."*

Staff and faculty also recognized the necessity and benefits of adapting to new technologies that they may have previously avoided. They readily and frequently attended trainings to improve their understanding and skills. As noted within the teaching and learning area of this report, many faculty became excited about possibilities for how technology could truly advance their teaching.

> *"For the first time, the Assistant Director of Online Teaching and Learning was being listened to. Years ago, he tried to do trainings, and nobody attended. Now instructors are going. I hope that that continues as faculty get more excited about how technology can advance their classroom and not necessarily be scared of it."*
>
> *- Administrator*

## Student-Facing Services

During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, student-facing offices were forced to close their doors, impacting traditional students and adult learners alike. Students had limited access to the campus personnel and physical spaces they frequently relied upon, including academic advising, career services, financial aid, and counseling services. Most of these functions moved from in-person to virtual, but the transitions were difficult and often left both students and staff frustrated. Due to their unique needs and life circumstances, adult learners may have been particularly impacted by closures and the sudden shift to online services.

## *Academic Advising*

In postsecondary institutions, academic advisors play multiple roles. They are listeners, coaches, mentors, friends, advocates, information bearers, resource managers, and retention specialists. During COVID-19, the intensity of these roles was exacerbated by the uncertainty and gravity of their students' life circumstances. Simultaneously, advisors were grappling with their own personal and professional issues related to the pandemic while having to be present and proactive for their advisees.

For advisors, COVID-19 brought episodic cycles of stress and activity. Academic advisors often had to go beyond the call of duty during the early stages of the pandemic, acting more like personal counselors than academic advisors. At the outset of COVID-19, many institutions tasked their academic advisors with the responsibility of reaching out to students and reporting back on students' needs and intentions. Some advisors felt personally responsible for trying to retain students even if circumstances suggested that it would be appropriate for students to take time away from their academic pursuits. Advisors reported being stressed by the duality of their role in this process. *"I've been under stress because of the pressure (the institution is) putting on the shoulders of advisors to keep students retained. I even remember an email went out to all employees that said, 'Now more than ever enrollment numbers equal employee retention.' And that's hard to hear. I know it's real… but it's also very scary because we're also not used car salesmen. You know, we want what's best for the students. And sometimes that's not staying enrolled."*

Students were grateful for advisors who reached out proactively and empathetically to check in with them. On the other hand, students expressed disappointment with advisors that did not respond to them and seemed indifferent to their situation. For these students, unresponsive advising was often seen as a sign that their institution did not care about them and did not see students as anything more than a number.

> *"I was going to quit in the spring, but the adult learner coach reached out to me and encouraged me, and I thought, maybe I can."*
>
> *- Adult Learner*

In response to COVID-19, many advisors retooled the way they reached out to students, the strategies they used for scheduling advising meetings, and the nature and length of advising sessions. In order to better understand student needs, several institutions engaged in calling campaigns to reach out and check on students to see how they were functioning while they took classes, worked from home, and juggled children. Surveys were also used by institutions to gauge needs and make

> *"Advising appointments are not what they used to be…the first 15 to 20 minutes is just at the very bottom Maslow's hierarchy. How are you doing? How is your job? How is your family? Before you can even get to anything about coursework."*
>
> *- Academic Advisor*

adjustments related to advising. Advisors at one institution found that longer meetings (e.g., 45 minutes) were just too long, and *"We started doing these 20-minute meetings. It drove some significant efficiencies and we got to see more students and maintained the same student satisfaction level with the time they got with their advisor."* However, other advisors had different experiences, and found that they actually needed longer appointments to cover all the issues students needed to discuss.

## *Career Services*

The primary role of career services is to assist students with developing job search and networking skills and help them explore and refine career goals. Career services staff had a particularly difficult time trying to help students find jobs and keep them optimistic about their futures, as the challenge of exploring career opportunities in the midst of the pandemic was significant.

Prior to COVID-19, career services were offered in multiple ways to accommodate the needs of students. *"…we're kind of split 50-50. Some students want to come in person. Some of them want to do more virtual or phone depending on their situation."* Those who preferred face-to-face services were particularly impacted by the loss of this option during the early stages of the pandemic.

Due to COVID-19, career expos were canceled or moved to virtual formats, and many corporations canceled job shadowing and internships. Staff and students both expressed significant concern about decreased opportunities for career exploration as well as students' potential career success. Many Career Services staff tried to help students fill these gaps with other experiences, but due to COVID-19, opportunities were limited and some students were hesitant to participate.

> *"This spring into summer, it was really depressing to see all the students lose internships. The students were frantically like…now what? We were just (thinking), How can we help? How can we best assist them? How can we best connect them?"*
>
> *- Career Services*

In addition to cancelations, technology-related changes may have disadvantaged adult learners who were trying to apply for jobs during the pandemic. One career advisor shared that, *"If the student doesn't have the technology required to look successful and polished and professional in an interview, then they're not going to be selected. And that's really tough to tell a student who doesn't have a job (and) has a ton of loans taken out."*

As with many campus departments, an agility and willingness to adapt proved to be key for Career Services in meeting student needs. One institution's primary adaptation to help students with career readiness was the creation of a new online career course. This was something this institution had wanted to do prior to the pandemic, but they had never

found time to implement it. This adaptation was positive for students but resulted in additional work and stress for staff.

Career Services also adapted to the virtual environment by introducing new mediums for sharing information and helping students make career connections. The addition of podcasts, YouTube videos, and pre-recorded webinars for career development and exploration had long been discussed but were placed on back burners; however, due to COVID-19, these methods came to fruition. The use of videoconferencing platforms for linking employers to students also expanded during this time.

> *"We did create a career readiness course on campus, and we created an online section to help accommodate students who would maybe prefer to take it online. I've never taught the class online. So that's definitely impacted my role quite a bit."*
>
> *- Career Services*

## *Financial Aid and Assistance*

Financial aid offices faced significant initial challenges with transitioning their processes and services from in-person to virtual. These offices are heavily guided by federal guidelines and procedures, particularly related to federal financial aid, and making a quick and smooth transition to serving students in a virtual way was no small task. One financial aid officer explained, *"I am over financial aid, student financial debt, and collections, and I am most nervous about compliance as we are working remotely. We are venturing into a new virtual online learning environment and so (I'm concerned about) compliance and doing financial aid correctly."* Despite the difficulty associated with doing so, many institutions were indeed able to adapt their financial aid forms to allow for electronic completion.

For adult learners, personal financial concerns were top of mind. Students experienced job losses, furloughs and/or reduction of household incomes due to job loss among other family members. Staff noted that unemployment and increased financial stress from dependents and children were impacting adult learners' ability to meet basic needs for their families. Many institutions were very sensitive to these struggles; one administrator commented on difficulties faced by adult learners, noting that COVID-19 created hardships, *"because…people were primarily focused on food, shelter…maybe they lost their job serving, or they lost their job in retail, so a lot of people were focused on those more immediate needs."* Institutions saw increased need for tangible assistance during COVID-19. Many noted that campus food pantries were quickly depleted. *"The food pantry usage shot through the roof."* Institutions worked hard to try to address the tangible needs of students through additional food vouchers and connections to community supports.

Communication about financial aid and relief opportunities varied across institutions. For example, some adult learners explained that they were given direct information about how to access CARES Act funds, while others said they heard nothing at all about the

CARES Act. A few were concerned that they missed communication from their institutions because they were so inundated with emails. In reference specifically to the CARES Act funding opportunity, one adult learner said, *"I didn't know anything about it. I was told they sent the email, but I cannot find it and now I cannot apply."*

Some students became worried about their financial aid funds. One adult learner was frustrated by what they believed was a lack of coordination between faculty and the financial aid office, explaining, *"I took a class, and the instructor dropped the ball and did not get our grades entered in the system. Even though I had all my work completed. Then I get a notification from financial aid telling me that I had an academic suspension for not making satisfactory progress. But I did all the work, and it was the instructor who was late. Why is it my fault?"*

Financial aid staff recognized the importance of being available to current as well as prospective students without interruption during COVID-19. Institutions creatively adapted to meet needs, such as providing "walk-in" virtual appointments for financial aid advising. One institution in particular, *"increased engagement of Financial Aid in the New Student Orientation and added automated communication to all new applicants, allowing them to auto-schedule a one-on-one with a financial aid advisor."*

## Counseling Services

During the early months of the pandemic, students were experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. When asked to rate their stress level between 1 (lowest) and 10 (highest), one adult learner commented, *"my stress level is a 20…so I'm maxed out right now."*

> *"A bigger issue across the board for most people is mental health."*
>
> *- Administrator*

Campus staff were often well-aware of these issues, and providing emotional support and personal counseling for students was a high priority. However, the gap between need and capacity was often significant. Some campuses simply did not have counseling services available. Staff at institutions with these services noted that counseling staff were frequently full and stretched to their limits. Often, the ability of counseling services to fully meet all students' needs was very stretched, and many acknowledged the need for increased resources to fully meet growing needs. *"I know we have Counseling and Psychological Services, but ideally I would like a resource (where) licensed professionals are assigned to (a certain) number of students… so every single student gets contacted by a licensed professional counselor or therapist."*

Many institutions reached out to students to ask what they needed, rather than making assumptions or providing services that missed the mark on the most critical needs. To

meet emerging mental health needs, a number of institutions transitioned quickly to virtual counseling services.

> *"Just make sure you're reaching out and you're talking to someone…virtual counseling makes sure that you're not just constantly letting your mind be idle in a negative way. Always make sure that you let off some of your frustrations, because they can be overwhelming, and that can consume you."*
>
> *- Adult Learner*

## Admissions & Recruitment

COVID-19 suddenly caused a massive drop in the opportunity to recruit students in traditional ways that admissions staff were used to and knew to be effective. Across campuses, the normal rhythm of an admissions office was derailed. Campus visits were extremely low, and admissions offices stopped having foot traffic. *"We have less than five people a week, and typically we would have at least five or more in one campus visit with several (visits) in a week."*

The typical pace for a higher education admission's office is for staff to travel, attend events, meet people, and discuss degree programs and the institution. The same way prospective students were not able to come to campuses, admissions officers could not travel and recruit through college fairs. Virtual fairs were held, but the results were not the same. Admission staff explained that at an in-person college fair, people typically walk around in a big room and stop to talk to representatives at each table and pick up materials. In a virtual fair, breakout rooms are set up for colleges, and participants have to request to visit a room. One admissions and recruitment professional shared, *"The biggest hit was our very first virtual fair…they made these little mini meeting rooms in Zoom and nobody came to ours. We weren't alone, literally nobody came to a lot of people's area. We've never gone to a fair and had nobody come to our booth. That was a big surprise to all of us."*

Instead of face-to-face recruiting meetings, admissions staff had to conduct virtual information sessions for prospective students. Staff shared the difficulties they faced making connections with people virtually, noting that people were less engaged, and *"didn't ask questions on Zoom like they did in person."* Relationship building is paramount for admissions staff as they try to connect prospective students, and COVID-19 made this so much more difficult.

Admissions and recruitment staff also had to turn their efforts to virtual methods (e.g., social media and videos) to market and advertise programs to broader audiences. As with many other higher education departments, this move to virtual formats was a learning curve for admissions staff. Being reliant on videos was difficult, because they had to learn new skill sets and invest money to produce quality recruiting material. This was particularly difficult for small institutions with limited funds, but even larger institutions' admissions staff were hampered in their ability to create quality videos by lack of time and support from information technology departments, which were heavily focused on assisting faculty instructors with online teaching.

At every institution, staff were nervous about the future. One admissions professional expressed it this way: "*… the admissions funnel is weak in terms of inquiries and prospects. We get those typically in the fall when we go travel. For Fall 2021 already, I'm nervous about our numbers, because we're not able to have the same activity that we once did. I plan to be anxious all year.*"

Due to all of these sudden and substantial changes, admissions and recruiting professionals had to pivot quickly and come up with innovative ways to reach students. They stressed the importance of continuing to connect personally with prospective students despite missing out on opportunities to meet them face-to-face.

> "*Just make sure the word 'service' is always at the forefront, and…providing that service (using) a multichannel approach and being able to support each individual in a unique way. We just can't lose the (prospective) student in that mix. Even using technology, we are going to need to continue to stay connected with the student.*"
>
> *- Admissions Director*

While they were challenged to find ways to contact future students, recruitment and admissions staff shifted their focus to the student retention. Efforts were focused on retaining new students who were scheduled to start in the fall, as well as answering questions from current students who were deciding whether to take classes in the fall or stop out for a year. Many new students were overwhelmed with the prospect of online course delivery; admissions staff talked them through the process and reassured these incoming students that it would still be a good year to stay focused on their education.

> "*Over the summer we did check in calls. Admissions called the new students just to check in with them. 'How are you feeling about starting school? What questions do you have,' and then I called the returning students with the same questions.*"
>
> *- Administrator*

Testing barriers were a hurdle that admissions staff at all the institutions faced. They worked with academic departments to waive testing requirements, as testing centers were closed during COVID. At one institution, this change appeared to be long-lasting, if not permanent. *"We went test-optional for our students for this fall. We've kept that policy for Fall 2021 and beyond. So that was a big, big change for us."*

Admissions staff considered ways to break down barriers for students during COVID-19. In an effort to increase retention, one institution with multiple campuses worked to make accessing classes easier for students by allowing them to take different courses at different campuses. A student could take one course at one campus close to home, take an online or virtual course from another campus, and then still yet participate in another face-to-face course offered at a third campus close to work.

## Administrator Perspectives

The voices of administrators have been shared throughout this report, as many commented on the various areas presented in prior sections. In addition, there were a few themes expressed by administrators that provided a sense of how they processed and responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. This section provides insights into the role of institutional leadership during this crisis.

In the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, college and university leaders first and foremost sought to understand how their students and staff were being personally impacted. Most institutions were guided by leaders to develop a process for reaching out and checking in with their campus community. This outreach took several forms. Several institutions utilized surveys and most implemented some method of calling or emailing students to check in on their health and well-being and ask them how the institution could assist them. Administrators overall expressed a deep commitment to making sure their students felt cared for.

> *"…communicate, communicate, communicate with your students. Make sure that you are updating them, that you are emailing them more than you need to until the message comes across clearly. We want them to hear that we care about them and that we understand it's difficult."*
>
> *- Administrator*

Effective oversight and management of employees was another key concern of department and unit leaders during COVID-19. On most campuses, most employees were working remotely. Departments tried to be flexible by adjusting work schedules to help accommodate employees who needed to monitor children's home activities while keeping up with their own work responsibilities. The balance of maintaining high quality services while also being sensitive to the need of their employees continually weighed on administrators. Leaders were focused on *"…trying to make sure that we offer the same*

*services at the same quality to our students virtually*" while also recognizing that their staff *"are working from home, trying to balance work and their children….that has really impacted our employees."*

Leaders acknowledged that many institutional practices had previously been slow to change, but through the challenges of COVID-19, they recognized the value and necessity of being open to new ways of doing things. In some cases, these "new ways" had been out on the horizon for years, and the pandemic brought them suddenly and undeniably to the forefront. As one administrator stated, *"I think we realized that we can do some things when we have to do them. We were kind of forced to be able to do some things that we had talked about for years."*

All institutions had to quickly make critical decisions that impacted their constituents in profound ways. There was no roadmap for college and university leaders to help navigate the unprecedented challenges that COVID-19 presented, and institutions had a variety of methods to manage high-level decisions in response to the pandemic.

> *"We're learning that this is a very fluid process…I think we have to be fluid because there's so many unknowns in terms of how the virus is going to impact. What your students are dealing with…and even how students are coping with different family life issues right now. We're kind of learning how to turn on a dime, depending on the issue of the day."*
>
> *- Administrator*

Many institutions created task forces with separate charges (technology, communication, finance, housing, etc.) to cover all the different angles and issues the institutions would need to face. As they created these task forces, institutional leadership established a feedback loop and a timeline of expectations for when decisions had to be made. Administrators often expressed the critical need to be agile and continually adapt to new and changing circumstances. Decisions were not one-and-done; rather, leaders had to flex and adapt on an almost daily basis.

> *"I think the biggest challenge is that everyone has so many different competing expectations and they're all on different timetables, and decisions have to be made. The COVID-19 management is ongoing. It's not like you make one decision here and you just set it and let it run like a top. You've got to constantly be engaged with the ongoing work, learning new things and then tending to areas that that need refinement."*
>
> *- Administrator*

# Key Learnings and Recommendations

During each focus group, faculty, staff, administrators, and adult learners were asked to reflect on the early stages of the pandemic, the biggest challenges they faced, and the lessons they learned. They were also asked to provide advice that might help others in higher education navigate the rest of the current COVID-19 crisis and address the issues that have been illuminated during this time.

The following section highlights the key learnings across all focus group and provides several recommendations for moving through and beyond the pandemic.

## 1. Faculty, staff, and adult learners need access to proper technology tools and the training to fully utilize them.

Except for those that were already immersed in online higher education, the pandemic forced institutions into an emergency distance instruction and service delivery mode. Online instruction was often inconsistently executed and left many adult learners with a far less than ideal learning experience. Instructors struggled to transition quickly to virtual teaching, as many of them had been resistant to it prior to COVID-19. Campus services that had previously relied on face-to-face interactions were challenged to transition quickly to unfamiliar virtual platforms while maintaining high quality. Gaps in access to computer equipment and internet access exacerbated all of these issues, particular for adult learners, and cost was often a complicating factor in closing those gaps.

- **Adopt a standard Learning Management System (LMS), and make sure all faculty are fully trained on how to use it.** Institutions with a standard approach to online course organization and delivery are able to provide consistency and predictability for both faculty and students. Institutions should host orientations and periodic refresher courses to ensure that everyone is prepared to quickly pivot to virtual teaching and learning, and keep faculty updated on new features of the LMS. Departmental leaders should expect a high level of proficiency from their faculty.

- **Orient students (especially adult learners) to the LMS before classes start.** When COVID-19 shifted everything online, most adult learners were confused by the LMS. Many institutions assumed that students (including adult learners) would just naturally understand the LMS and how to engage within an online course, but this was not always the case. Adult learners may not have much experience using these types of online tools for course organization, and lack of familiarity with the platform should not become a barrier to success. Some programs have onboarding courses for online learners, while others do not; these programs have

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demonstrated that students are more successful and are less likely to drop out if they at least understand the organization of the LMS. Every institution needs to ensure that students in all stages of education are onboarded and supported in using these tools.

> *"I think we need to develop some support for, especially, our nontraditional learners to give them preemptive support for online learning and distance learning. Let's get you online. Let's get you learning how to use the system and comfortable with these systems before you have to use it."*
>
> *– Administrator*

- **Provide faculty with ongoing professional development specifically focused on how to teach virtually, and how to do it well.** This need goes beyond simply understanding the LMS and knowing how to navigate its features; faculty must know how to teach online. The pandemic revealed that many instructors were far less comfortable and/or effective when teaching virtually. Faculty need training and ongoing support in online pedagogy and teaching techniques.

> *"Don't wait for a global pandemic to encourage you to learn how to teach online. Every campus has one faculty member who is violently opposed to online learning. I am that person. Like if there was a single force resisting having online courses, it's been me for the nine years that I've been here.  But I was wrong. We needed to know how to do it, and we needed to be prepared to be able to do it. Obviously, there was no way of predicting that this would be why.  However, pedagogical flexibility is beneficial. It's better to know how to do more things right in connection with your job. You need to teach faculty how to use all of the amazing apps and do-hickies that can make it a better experience for them and their students."*
>
> *– Faculty Instructor*

- **Support admissions and student-facing staff on the use of virtual methods of outreach.** Recruiting and admissions staff became very aware of the importance of professionally produced virtual content and impactful social media messaging. Many of them previously leaned heavily on face-to-face relationship building to

> *"We were really reliant on video (during COVID-19)…making sure that our presentations were top notch. We need everything to really sing, and that costs money. That's an investment that you have to make in order to stand out in the market right now. The competition has already done it and done it better. So, we just have to keep going and pushing really hard to make it."*
>
> *– Admissions Director*

recruit students, but the pandemic forced them behind computer screens. They need training, as well as ongoing access to technology and media experts, to ensure they have the necessary expertise to effectively reach their audiences. Career services staff also emphasized the importance of upgrading their use of technology, as they continue to need to help students and potential employers connect virtually, even long after COVID-19 fades into the background.

- **Fund technology training by building in into all future budgets.** Institutions must include the necessary funds to deliver comprehensive technology training for faculty, staff, and students. The Covid-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for institutions of higher education to prioritize funding that can ensure they are technologically equipped and savvy for the future.

- **Invest in upgrades to campus technology to support virtual learning and service delivery.** Classrooms may need further upgrades to ensure a seamless learning experience for students joining remotely. Campus units need the latest technology for high quality video and sound production to ensure they can stay relevant and competitive as they seek to recruit and retain students. Student-facing services need the capability to continually upgrade secure online forms and engage in videoconferencing with students and one another. During COVID-19, most institutions scrambled to make these upgrades. As technology is constantly evolving, higher education must continually invest in newer and better tools.

- **Support adult learners with access to laptops and hotspots.** Adult learners may have additional challenges with technology for online learning, including actual hardware and/or access to high-speed internet. Many adult learners lacked computer equipment, and had previously relied on the on-campus computer labs. Even if they had their own computers, many were sharing them with family members who were working and learning remotely. Struggles with sufficient bandwidth made remote learning frustrating. The costs of upgrading equipment and internet access were prohibitive for many adult learners. Providing students with low- or no-cost laptops and hotspots, regardless of the immediate needs associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, will help ensure that they can fully engage in courses and maximize their education.

## 2. Faculty and staff need professional development focused on how to understand and adapt to the unique needs of adult learners.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought into sharp relief the need for higher education to acknowledge and prioritize adult learners. These non-traditional students are an essential part of the campus community, and while faculty and staff recognize adult learners' presence at their institutions, they have not always been cognizant of the

differences between adult learners and traditional students. This study provides institutions with an opportunity to examine and refine their approaches to serving to adult learners.

- **Raise faculty awareness of the unique needs and challenges adult learners face all the time.** At any institution serving adult learners, instructors need to be clearly informed and regularly reminded of the ways in which adult learners differ from traditional students. This message may be most effective if it comes from the adult learners themselves; institutions may consider compiling results of adult learner surveys or focus groups to share with faculty, or hosting an online panel of adult learners who can speak directly to faculty about their unique needs and strengths.

- **Encourage and recognize faculty who demonstrate innovative approaches to serving adult learners.** Faculty often went above and beyond to provide support to all students based on the unique circumstances presented by COVID-19. Adult learners have unique needs all the time, and the creative ways in which some instructors adapted during the pandemic can teach all faculty about the types of accommodations that can help adult learners be successful well beyond this time. Recognizing the challenges faced by adult learners who are living off-campus, working full-time, and caring for dependents while pursuing higher education should be a focus long after the pandemic resolves.

- **Ensure student-facing staff are properly trained to meet the needs of adult learners.** Faculty are not alone in their need to better understand adult learners. While some institutions have departments or staff members dedicated to adult learners, most spend the bulk of their time and energy attending to the needs of traditional students. Academic advising, career planning, financial aid, and personal counseling all need to be tailored for different groups of learners, and adult learners specifically need people who understand their life and will work to break down barriers for them at their institutions.

- **Examine and refine the nature and quality of communication with adult learners.** All departments and units were trying to find the best way to communicate quickly changing information and guidelines during the early stages of COVID-19. It took everyone time to find their stride and strike a balance between ensuring messages were shared broadly and overcommunicating to the point of exhaustion. One important recommendation emerging from this study is to be intentional about messaging to adult learners. These non-traditional students need targeted communication, less clutter from irrelevant information, consistent messaging, and a high level of compassion and acknowledgement of their situations. This deliberate and personalized approach may seem daunting to many institutions, because it goes far beyond a campus-wide email blast. Tailoring communication

might mean segmenting email lists so adult learners receive the information that is relevant to them. It also could mean taking extra steps to identify which subgroups of adult learners are most likely to need direct and personal support from advisors and counselors.

- **Encourage advisors, faculty, and staff to reach out to their adult learners.** Open lines of communication, regardless of platform, are critical for adult learners. Academic advisors are often the first go-to for adult learners to ask their questions, discuss their concerns or complaints, and share their personal circumstances. During COVID-19, when an advising relationship was well-established and involved responsive two-way communication, adult learners felt cared for and heard, and they had a stronger sense of control during a very erratic and unpredictable time. The impacts of COVID-19 are likely to be felt for a long time to come; continuing to be proactive in reaching out to adult learners will help institutions ensure that these students continue to feel supported.

## 3. Higher education institutions need to pay close attention to the mental health and stress of faculty, staff, and students.

The toll of COVID-19 affected everyone working in higher education, including adult learners, faculty, staff, and administrators. In addition to work-related stress, almost everyone reported some level of increased anxiety due to financial strain, fear about personally becoming ill with COVID-19, and concern over the health of family and friends. Some shared personal stories of loss due to COVID-19. Given the timing of the focus groups (August through October 2020, before the large fall/winter wave of viral spread), it seems likely that further losses continued beyond the time of the study. Institutions must grapple with how this difficult time has impacted their campus communities from both an educational and personal perspective.

- **Ensure that counseling services are available and easily accessible to adult learners.** Counseling can play an important role for adult learners, who are often working through stressors that are unrelated to their academic lives. Institutions can take proactive steps to ensure that adult learners are aware of available counseling and know exactly how to quickly access it. To be sure counseling is beneficial for adult learners, institutions need to have counselors who specialize in (or at least understand) the kinds of issues facing this group of students. As the COVID-19 pandemic abates, it is still highly likely that many adult learners will benefit from flexible times and virtual counseling, as their day-to-day lives often make it difficult to be physically on campus during office hours.

- **Help alleviate adult learners' stress by providing flexibility as well as direct, tangible support.** Extended deadlines, technology loans, food from campus food pantries, and financial assistance all helped adult learners make ends meet during COVID-19. Many of these needs were not specific to COVID-19, and having these forms of support available on an ongoing basis may help reduce burdens and barriers to learning for adult learners well beyond the pandemic.

- **Support staff who are working in particularly stressful roles.** The COVID-19 pandemic revealed how stressful certain roles within higher education can be during times of upheaval. For example, academic advisors were among those with the most direct student contact, and they often felt the stress faced by students very acutely. In addition, advisors were charged (whether explicitly or implicitly) with retaining their students during the pandemic, and they often felt pressure to balance the best interests of their students with the best interests of the institution. Supervisors need to recognize that these roles can be quite stressful, and their employees often need social-emotional and mental health support.

> *"I would hope that everyone has a support. And I know that's not the case, but support (means) supervisors saying it's okay to take time for yourself, like we're living through a pandemic. You don't have to hit the 40 hours, because you're having a breakdown…and that's okay. Because we're all going through different things at different times. So, I think that has maybe been a positive in a negative world, hopefully."*
>
> *– Academic Advisor*

## 4. Higher education institutions need to plan for continued remote working and learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced things that been discussed as possibilities to become immediately realities. Institutions learned that they were able to shift many things online that had previously been delivered in person. As a result, employees learned how to work remotely using videoconferencing and other collaborative work tools (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Google Drive). Students and faculty became much more familiar with various forms of online instruction. Even as campuses transition back to on-campus instruction and services, there may be benefits to maintaining remote work and instruction in some form. Remote options can provide flexibility to employees and students balancing family and work responsibilities, as well as provide institutions the opportunity to hire or retain employees, or recruit and retain students, who live beyond the distance of a reasonable daily commute.

- **Within each department, consider which positions can be done at least partially remotely.** Expanding opportunities for remote work may increase employee satisfaction or help departments attract and retain the best talent. Conduct a careful review of policies, productivity, and employee satisfaction to assess if remote working aligns with the mission and goals of the unit.

> *"Our employees would all have the technology that they need to work from home. Positions need to be evaluated to see if this person really needs to be in the office a full forty hours a week or is there an opportunity for them to have some work from home and on campus."*
>
> *- Administrator*

- **Move forms online and make them fillable.** This change was implemented at a number of institutions during the early stages of the pandemic, and campus units that had been planning to convert to electronic fillable forms eventually were given an immediate reason to do so. The benefits to this transition were particularly appreciated by adult learners, who generally do not live on campus and for whom filling out forms in person means making plans to take off work during the day, driving to campus, and finding a (sometimes paid) parking space. No longer requiring students to physically come to a campus office to complete and submit forms is a simple fix to what can be a major inconvenience, regardless of the pandemic.

- **Continue to offer virtual course delivery for students who need it and faculty who prefer it.** Even as most students, including adult learners, are eager to return to the classroom in-person, there are those for whom virtual learning has become a valuable and even preferred way to engage in higher education. Institutions that previously offered very few, if any, online courses have adopted strategies and technology necessary to make them work more broadly. Instructors who never imagined they would teach online have realized that not only are they capable of doing so, but there are reasons to continue. In the overall landscape of higher education, there is very likely to be a place for online learning for the foreseeable future.

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