



Virtual
Innovation
Awards



SPOTLIGHTING VIRTUAL INNOVATION

Award-Winning Strategies for
Leveraging Technology to Support Students
During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

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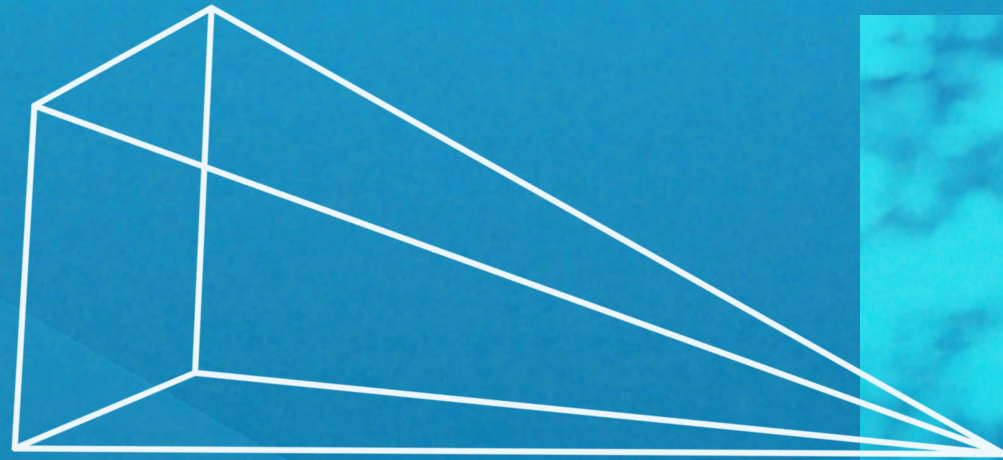


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PROJECT OVERVIEW

The need to more equitably serve the ever-growing population of students who take a blend of online and in-person courses (or who are entirely remote) is not new. However, the massive pivot of place-based student services to online—as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic—has amplified the necessity to focus on equitable experiences regardless of learning modality. Although the pandemic underscored the disparities in quality of support and services available to students online, it has also presented long overdue levels of flexibility and access for students who face barriers to in-person engagement.

With in-person learning no longer the only option, institutions have been rethinking ways to build community and provide student supports. Even under crisis conditions, many colleges and universities have gone beyond stopgap measures that aim to replicate online many in-person services; these institutions have leveraged technologies to engage, support, and reach students online in transformative ways.

Award-Winning Strategies for Leveraging Technology to Support Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

To elevate emerging uses of technologies and practices in this context, NASPA launched the [Virtual Innovation Awards](#) (VIAs) in fall 2020. The following questions helped guide the direction and scope of exploration efforts.

- ▶ How are institutions leveraging technology to improve the delivery of support services in a virtual environment?
- ▶ How are institutions ensuring that, through virtual support services, priority populations are remaining connected to the campus and each other?
- ▶ How are institutions navigating various financial, logistical, procedural, and other challenges that could impede or slow the delivery of virtual support services?

More than 100 submissions by colleges and universities highlighted the breadth and depth of virtual supports and programs being delivered to students across the United States. Submissions detailed institutional approaches to student support areas ranging from virtual orientation to online career fairs, telemental health counseling, mobile apps for online engagement, live artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots, and more. NASPA presented an award to 10 institutions that prioritized equitable delivery of services, offered multifaceted approaches to address multiple areas of student need, and adopted innovative mindsets for managing change during a crisis.



NASPA's team of advisors (see Appendix B) judged VIA applications based on how well each institution addressed the following eight categories:

- 1. Connection Building:** Leverages technology to foster a virtual community where students interact with peers and administrators and have multiple points of asynchronous and synchronous engagement.
- 2. Holistic Approach:** Takes a comprehensive approach to delivering virtual programs and services that support and respond to students' financial, academic, social, and mental well-being as well as career needs and goals.
- 3. Ingenuity:** Demonstrates an original or inventive approach to virtual programs and services that maximizes the capabilities and opportunities that come with being in a virtual environment.
- 4. Equity Focus:** Designs, delivers, and adapts virtual programs and services to meet the unique needs of diverse and/or underrepresented populations, which include, but are not limited to, Black, Latinx/a/o, Indigenous, first-generation, low-income, and other prioritized student populations.
- 5. Scalability and Sustainability:** Maximizes resources to adequately address student needs over the short and long term, and support services can be expanded on and sustained in the future.
- 6. Strategic Technology Use:** Selects and uses new or existing technologies to deliver programs and services that address student needs and maximize staff/human resource time, availability, and expertise.
- 7. Collaboration:** Coordinates information across divisions and functions, and student concerns, questions, requests, and feedback are resolved with minimal delays.
- 8. Data Utilization:** Uses multiple sources of data to monitor the progress of programs and services and evaluate their effectiveness.

This report synthesizes key themes common among the 10 award recipients, highlights each institution's approach in more detail, and concludes with recommendations about the future of virtual support offerings.

Common Strategic Elements

Applications as well as conversations with college professionals revealed several themes on how institutions should provide support services to students in virtual environments. The following themes were relevant to most of the institutions reviewed, which represented various sectors, sizes, and student populations served.



Student feedback is central to virtual support design and validation processes.

Institutions emphasized the importance of engaging a broad range of student perspectives throughout the virtual support design and implementation process. Strategic recruitment and outreach ensure that student voices reflect the diversity of the institution and student experiences. Establishing robust feedback systems has been especially critical during the shift to online learning. As institutions have transitioned in-person supports online or piloted new ideas for virtual engagement, student input—proactively sought—helped validate approaches or brought attention to misguided assumptions for correction. Colleges and universities have amplified student voices through focus groups, microsurveys, feedback forms, and other forms of student response data such as replies to text-messaging campaigns and chatbots. Moreover, student insights can inform institutional approaches to delivering supports to students when they need them and in ways that align with their different experiences and preferences.



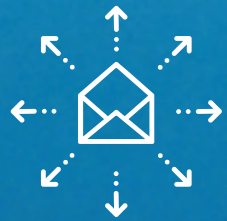
Collaboration is key to maximizing virtual programs' reach.

Award recipients agreed that cross-institutional collaboration was essential to program delivery. Virtual environments offered institutions the flexibility needed for ongoing and responsive communication. Multiple departments and offices had to collaborate and share resources and expertise to meet student needs during crisis conditions. Having several institutional stakeholders involved in decision-making processes allowed for rapid ideation and subsequent implementation. Faculty and staff members previously reticent to adopt new tools were now eager to try new approaches that would maximize efficiency. Although buy-in from multiple offices and departments is needed to deliver virtual support efforts, award recipients commonly cited information technology, executive leadership, and institutional research as critical to success.



Information is intentionally centralized and easily accessible to students.

Institutions deliberately streamlined processes and information about virtual supports to provide students with convenient points of entry to access resources and have questions and concerns addressed. When students cannot visit on-campus offices to ask questions, they need quick and easy access to information and supports with minimal wait time. All award recipients underscored the importance of providing technologies needed for students to even access virtual support services or programs. Some of these technologies included wireless routers to act as mobile Wi-Fi hotspots, laptops, and touchscreen tablets. Institutions also offered trainings and other awareness-building campaigns to ensure that students, faculty, and staff had a level of digital fluency and knew what questions to ask and where to go to have them answered. Such efforts also helped ensure greater consistency in how tools and virtual supports were delivered and utilized.



Integrated and coordinated data systems inform proactive and nimble outreach efforts.

Award recipients used many sources of institutional data to understand the whole student experience. Institutions that already had strong data-enabled approaches prior to the pandemic were able to deliver personalized student supports more quickly, but regardless of data readiness, all institutions were prompted to engage in assessment efforts and identify opportunities for improvement. Several institutions created cross-functional teams to swiftly analyze and respond to student data. The fast-paced nature of operations during COVID-19 forced institutions to break down data silos that often impede timely delivery of personalized interventions.



Existing technology is leveraged to maximize efficiency and effectiveness of staff and faculty time with students.

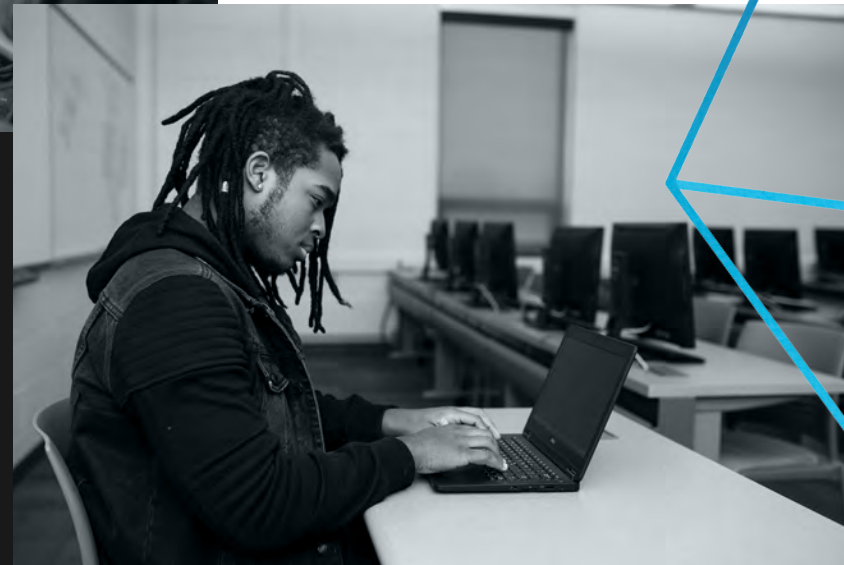
Most award recipients relied on technologies or platforms already in place; when new investments in technologies were made to support scaling efforts, institutions used them to supplement existing approaches. Exemplar delivery of virtual supports involves strategically using technology in a way that maximizes staff time, availability, and expertise. Technology allowed institutions to share information, gather student assessment data, and facilitate a mix of live or asynchronous engagement between students and administrators, staff, faculty, or other students. Award recipients demonstrated the importance of leveraging technology to balance self-guided engagement with real-time communication.



Virtual supports are delivered equitably and with the whole student experience in mind.

For many institutions, especially highly residential colleges and universities, the pandemic emphasized disparities in access to resources and engagement opportunities—and in the overall quality of experience—for students who learn online. Ensuring equitable student experiences means accounting for ways that students interact with institutions both virtually and in person; it also involves considering how to tend to student needs holistically, regardless of engagement modality. Virtual environments offer flexibility and other benefits, but they also pose challenges that award recipients had to address. Award recipients did far more than move in-person courses online—they also moved into virtual spaces many supports for other areas of student needs. Institutions had to consider how processes, needs, and student preferences translated into virtual environments and then come up with ways to offer holistic support services in response.

CAMPUS SPOTLIGHTS



BAY PATH UNIVERSITY

LOCATION

Longmeadow, MA

Bay Path University (BPU) is a private 4-year institution that serves a diverse student body of 1,817 undergraduate students—40% women of color, 45% first generation, 54% Pell eligible—via its traditional undergraduate residential college and online degree programs; the latter are part of The American Women's College (TAWC).

AT A GLANCE

- ▶ Built a high-touch, high-tech virtual program that integrates data streams and spans across the student journey.
- ▶ Applied existing practices and frameworks for online students to its traditionally in-person student population.

APPROACH OVERVIEW

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, TAWC, BPU's online division, developed a [Social Online Universal Learning \(SOUL\)](#) framework, which reimagines online learning through a student-centered lens. Using data analytics and personalized supports, the SOUL model includes onboarding for new students; wrap-around supports including a variety of interventions and proactive outreach; and peer-to-peer social engagement and mentoring. When students from BPU's residential college moved completely online, the institution was well positioned to scale data-informed practices from the SOUL model to all students.

BPU adapted approaches from TAWC and transformed traditionally in-person supports from the residential college to provide virtual supports that span the student journey. BPU swiftly moved its orientation programs and activities online and designed student experiences around the SOUL model. Upon acceptance to the institution, students engaged in a virtual advising experience in the learning management system, which introduced them to advising resources, academic requirements, and the wider net of student supports. Students then engaged in virtual advising appointments and [WELLcome week](#) in the lead-up to their first semester. Peer mentors and advisors communicated and met with students regularly via tools like chat, SMS, and Zoom.

BPU's Office of Multicultural Affairs also transitioned campus-based events into the virtual environment and created a new online initiative to celebrate students' diverse experiences and offer a platform for cultural contributions. Students collaborated with the

office to design, coordinate, and implement cultural, diversity and inclusion, and social programs to support and engage peers. Based on student feedback, academic and career services also worked together to sustain discipline-specific virtual learning communities. First established based on student feedback, these communities now include forums where faculty and industry experts mentor students, students learn about hot topics in their desired field, and students get professional networking and membership opportunities that may benefit them as they enter or advance their careers.

In response to all students learning online, BPU expanded its engagement with Tutor.com to provide 24/7 virtual tutoring and partnered with [UWill](#) to offer virtual mental health counseling. To integrate these new data streams,

BPU's residential division adopted TAWC's customer relationship management system. This system centralized formerly siloed data streams and helped empower faculty and staff to understand student needs holistically. BPU anticipated student needs through engagement and performance data dashboards, which administrators used to design personalized outreach interventions. High-touch, data-enabled approaches became the backbone of virtual (and in-person) student services at BPU.



CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

Collaboration was woven into the fabric of BPU. Bringing together various perspectives was critical to professionals' understanding students' holistic needs. With support and investment from institutional leadership, staff had time and capacity to focus on developing collaborative workflows, processes, and interventions. BPU's Student Intervention and Success Team—a multidisciplinary group of staff from advising, financial aid, student/residential life, registrar's office, and faculty—met biweekly to review and respond to data on student performance, financial aid,

mental health, wellness, and engagement in virtual programming. BPU's analytics team partnered with this team to assess and continuously improve interventions over time. With strong data-sharing partnerships in place for both its online and residential colleges, BPU quickly identified student needs and adapted supports.

The importance of partnerships is also clear in how BPU selects technologies. Having an open data architecture is a guiding principle behind any new platform adoption, so that staff can access multiple streams of student data and approach supports from a common place of holistic understanding. One reason BPU's residential college worked to quickly adopt TAWC's customer resource management system was due to that system's ability to facilitate collaboration and communication across teams.



University professionals described their work in the following ways:

"I think a big part of making [our efforts] successful was not working in silos. You have to put in those bridges from different offices—using technology and data—to make it work."

"You have to intentionally let go and be willing to let others in and to work across divisions and silos. That, for me, would be my best advice to get the work and is in the best interest of the students."

"How do you know where your students are in an online environment? How are you measuring online student attendance and engagement? It sounds so basic, but I think it's actually a challenge at a lot of institutions."



STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

The large-scale shift into virtual learning for all students has given BPU the opportunity to identify areas for sustained attention. For example, students in TAWC's online programs had limited access to mental health counseling; now they can receive virtual support via UWill. And with more events now offered virtually, BPU has found that even more students are engaging with the institution online than they did in the past. The pandemic has emphasized the need to consider ways that institutions support online student populations. Additionally, advisors found that being virtual enabled them to have more meaningful one-on-one discussions with new students during the onboarding process than they had when offering large in-person orientation events on campus. Being virtual also gave students the flexibility to choose when to receive information from advisors—for example, soon after acceptance rather than at later, in-person campus events. Institutions may consider adopting more hybrid approaches that maximize the benefits from engaging in virtual environments.



BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

LOCATION

New York, NY

Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) serves more than 24,000 students and is part of the City University of New York System. BMCC is a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) and a minority-serving institution (MSI), and 70% of students come from households with annual incomes of \$30,000 or less.

AT A GLANCE

- ▶ Leveraged existing technology and resources to address multiple dimensions of student wellness (financial, technology, mental health, and career development needs) in a virtual environment.
- ▶ Developed centralized systems for students to apply for expanded emergency aid and necessary devices (e.g., laptops, tablets).



APPROACH OVERVIEW

BMCC effectively leverages technology and resources to address multiple dimensions of student wellness—financial, technology, mental health, and career development.

Given the disproportionate economic and health impacts of COVID-19 on Black and Latinx/a/o students at BMCC, the college quickly responded by expanding emergency aid and developing new virtual workshop programs about grief and loss. To ensure that all personal information was kept private and secure, the college utilized Microsoft Forms for its emergency aid applications. This platform allowed BMCC's trained social workers to develop a plan for wraparound services and to loan laptops, internet hotspots, or other technologies when needed. BMCC also created an in-house reservation system for students and their families to access packaged and hot meals from the college's food pantry.

To centralize communications, the college set flexible virtual office areas for when students could join a meeting room (camera on or off) to ask questions. BMCC's student affairs division streamlined processes, creating a single email address to answer student questions; having this single point of contact reduced student confusion about whom to contact, improved response times, and ensured consistent responses to common questions from students. To be certain that resources were reaching all students, BMCC analyzed email engagement data to identify which students were not opening or replying to messages. The college then conducted a phone call campaign to reach out to those

nonresponsive students. Additionally, BMCC's library website now prominently displays invitations to connect with a librarian by chat, text, or phone.

The Learning Resource Center has also created virtual workshops for online student success, and it offers real-time tutoring sessions online. BMCC held its first ever Virtual Career Fair, where employers connected with students via live chat, group video chat, or one-on-one video interviews on Zoom, WebEx, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet. The college also made specifically tailored virtual career service supports to help students find employment during this moment of financial hardship.





sharing concerns, questions, and suggestions with her about the college's approach to virtual supports. She also emails students on their birthdays, allowing replies to go directly to her inbox. At the end of every semester, the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Analytics creates a survey, sent by her office, which asks students about what the college is doing well and what could be improved.

Having leaders who model the value of listening sets a collegewide tone about the importance of connecting with students, as the following quotes make clear:

"Where there is a chasm, we made sure to shrink that chasm to a gap, and then we tried to take the gap down to a little crack. When we couldn't change the chasm in student affairs, we tried to build a bridge to get over."

"Most of what we have in place is an extension of the relationships we've had and built. Let the crisis be a learning experience."

"While we can ask, 'How are you doing?' it's not good enough if you do not have a systemic response to how to help [students] handle the bad or sad news that they're providing. It's not good enough to just say, 'I'm sorry to hear that.' You ask what you can do—and be prepared to respond to them."

CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

BMCC's unique history with disasters has positioned the college to effectively anticipate and adapt to the needs of the moment. One of the college's buildings was damaged from the collapse of 7 World Trade Center on 9/11. In 2012, the college had to grapple with the destruction caused by Superstorm Sandy and the impact on the campus community. During the pandemic BMCC built upon such lessons learned about crisis management and communication. Its culture of care and

its emphasis on anticipating and meeting students' basic needs helped ensure quick decisions about delivery of laptops, hotspots, and food.

This culture is fostered and maintained by leadership at all levels. In addition to regularly engaging with support staff and administrators, students became accustomed to communicating with BMCC's vice president for student affairs, who joined the student government association's meetings every week. There, students were comfortable

STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

Operating under crisis conditions has prompted BMCC to think differently about its in-house expertise and capabilities. Staff (including student employees) had the opportunity to reveal and strengthen skills that otherwise they may not have had the chance

to demonstrate. With an all-hands-on-deck approach, some staff and administrators were called upon to assist with responsibilities outside their usual functional area—and they have excelled in these new roles.

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY CHANNEL ISLANDS

LOCATION

Camarillo, CA

Opened in 2002, California State University Channel Islands (CSUCI) is a midsize (7,112 undergraduates) public HSI and is part of the California State University system.

AT A GLANCE

- ▶ Expanded the reach of an AI chatbot, Ekhhobot, to deliver 24/7 support to multiple student groups.
- ▶ Developed a microcourse (Learning Online 101) to ensure students had the tools, skills, and support needed for online courses.

APPROACH OVERVIEW

CSUCI launched two significant innovation efforts focused on supporting student success in the virtual environment. These efforts highlight CSUCI's commitment to student success through innovation. Initiatives were planned prior to the move to virtual instruction in 2020 but have had a significant impact on the successful transition and continued virtual operations.

Powered by Admithub, CSUCI's AI chatbot [Ekhhobot](#) was launched as a pilot with first-time and transfer students in fall 2019 to improve retention. When the COVID-19 pandemic started in March 2020, CSUCI began expanding the bot's reach to additional student groups. The chatbot is now available to the entire undergraduate student population, with this focus of retention extending to all undergraduates, to support them in virtual learning. Through its topics communicated, tone, language, and availability, Ekhhobot fosters a relationship with students and is a trusted resource accessible any time. CSUCI has proactively engaged students and provided a unique pathway to get their questions answered 24/7; receive helpful information and encouragement; and create a sense of community despite distance learning. With Ekhhobot, CSUCI can design microcampaigns specifically tailored to certain students. These microcampaigns allow for personalized messaging to the

students who need it, when they need it—in a style that is easily received—along with rapid responses to follow-up questions.

Launched in fall 2018, [Learning Online 101](#) (LO101) is a short online course meant to familiarize students with taking online courses. Built in Canvas, LO101 reduces technological barriers so faculty and students can focus their energy on teaching and learning, not learning technology. It gives students the essential skills, tools, and support needed to have engaging online learning experiences. LO101 specifically teaches students the technological and study skills necessary for academic success, including strategies for self-motivation, time management, and navigating and interacting with online content. When students complete LO101 they receive a digital badge certifying course completion. CSUCI utilizes Badgr.io in tandem with Canvas to issue and manage badges. The LO101 badge does not expire and serves as evidence of completion (if required in future university courses).

LO101 eases the time and pressure faculty experience when fielding students' technical questions. CSUCI has found it most effective to include LO101 in faculty professional development offerings about best practices for online teaching. This includes any faculty development program specific to developing and facilitating online courses. Additionally, LO101 does not require synchronous community engagement; rather, it offers opportunities to interact asynchronously with peers. Students can post to a digital bulletin board, listen to advice from students and faculty, and share their "why" for going to college.





CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

Through its Teaching and Learning Innovations (TLI) unit within academic affairs, CSUCI benefits from having a dedicated space for piloting innovations. TLI works collaboratively with other functions across the institution and has three core branches: Academic Technology, Learning Design, and Academic Media. Upon the transition online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, CSUCI had already piloted Ekahobot and LO101 through the TLI unit and was ready to swiftly scale these offerings and adapt them to meet the needs of the moment. Having staff create opportunities to listen to students and respond to faculty helped CSUCI better personalize and maximize the effectiveness of virtual supports.

CSUCI also benefited from having student feedback and cross-functional area collaboration embedded in the development processes. Not only did the TLI unit work closely with faculty on a regular basis, but relationships with student affairs and students themselves were also critical to understanding all aspects of student experiences across the institution. Collaborative environments also helped CSUCI recognize the need for differentiated communication for both students and staff within different departments, who have various perceptions and levels of comfort with the virtual supports. Finally, project staff also emphasize the benefits of having multiple skill sets within a team and points of contact with diverse experiences. For example, one

person previously worked in the K-12 space, and another had a previous role managing the help desk for shared services at the institution; this background allowed for outgoing student communications that were empathetic and informed by a wide base of staff knowledge.

Having partnerships in place helped the team develop tailored communications campaigns and continuously improve the delivery of both Ekahobot and LO101:

“It’s not just having structures in place, but it’s the right people at the right time.”

“Being able to really understand that explaining technology to users is going to be different for every single person is important, because we each have our own lexicon of terms that we understand. Being able to translate that into terms that your user understands, that doesn’t make it scary, is really important.”

“It’s the humans behind the technology that make the difference. You have technology, but it’s the people that are the voice behind that who are so important.”

STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

The widespread use of and positive feedback about LO101 and Ekahobot attest to the importance of leveraging technology to proactively support and communicate with students. Both virtual supports can serve as models upon which to build future innovations at CSUCI. Equipping students with skills needed to navigate virtual learning and community-building spaces can better the student experience—online and in person.



GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

LOCATION

Atlanta, GA

Georgia State University (GSU) is a public 4-year university serving more than 54,000 highly diverse students across six campuses around the metro Atlanta area.

AT A GLANCE

- ▶ Launched a new financial hardship and emergency assistance program, 24/7 access to online mental health services, and online orientation and event modules.
- ▶ Adapted a coordinated case management approach for engaging all elements of the student experience into an online environment.

APPROACH OVERVIEW

The Division of Student Success quickly pivoted core services to virtual delivery in March 2020, when all courses shifted online. GSU introduced an array of virtual programs and services related to financial assistance, health and wellness, academic support and advising, and building peer connections.

GSU created a new [Financial Hardship and Emergency Assistance](#) program with a single comprehensive online application for students to identify a host of potential needs, even beyond financial need. Submissions are auto-routed to key university partners, who immediately begin assessing the student's needs and determine available resources to meet immediate needs and provide case-managed follow-up, wrap-around services (both university and community based), and long-term solutions.

To specifically address students' wellness needs, GSU offered an array of Be Well programs and services. The Student Health Clinic and Counseling Center shifted to telehealth in-person services, including same-day consultation and assessment, group counseling, psychiatric assessment, and medication monitoring. A new layer of continuous access with 24/7 online mental health was added through a free online community called [Togetherall](#). Integrated virtual health programs expanded access to populations historically unable to participate in person, offering timely topics such as stress management, meditation to build resilience, food insecurity, art as a stress reliever, cooking healthy on a budget, red flags of an unhealthy relationship, sexual health, and mindfulness.

More than 100 staff members are dedicated to offering virtual advising, and GSU deployed the Navigate app to offer virtual appointment scheduling, academic planning, and resource connections. The Student Success Team monitors daily student engagement data, which helps advisors proactively reach out to students who aren't participating in their online courses.

Launched in summer 2020 to all new students, the Panther Connect program looks at high school involvement data from the admissions application as well as intended academic field of study, and all new students are automatically enrolled in a cocurricular cluster—through the [Panther Involvement Network](#)—that allows them to quickly connect with student leaders and advisors in the organizations that may be of most interest to them. The Panther Connect program helps lessen the overwhelming information overload of more than 500 student organizations, offering a select handful that may be more directly relevant.

GSU also utilizes chatbot technology to deliver key messages to and solicit timely feedback from students. Chatbot campaigns are tailored to specific student populations and gather real-time student input, which is then immediately used to adjust or enhance programs and services as needed. Students also have multiple venues for communicating their concerns and questions, some of which are focused on specific services, programs, and offices. PantherAnswer is a premiere online virtual tool powered by Salesforce that utilizes AI to answer questions, schedule appointments, or connect with various offices such as admissions, registrar, and student financial management.

CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

At the onset of the pandemic GSU was already equipped with the technological infrastructure and culture of innovation needed to creatively scale up virtual supports. For example, through Maxient, GSU leveraged an existing conduct database to offer the new Financial Hardship and Emergency Assistance application, which was then auto-connected to the existing Salesforce system that supports student financial services. Connecting these platforms helped ensure timely evaluation of student need and distribution of funds. GSU was able to find a series of creative solutions to new challenges using systems it already had in place.

GSU likewise has a commitment to trying new strategies when needed. In the area of counseling, not all students were comfortable engaging in virtual counseling services and preferred peer-to-peer opportunities instead. The addition of Togetherall addressed this gap in support, allowing students to find support from each other in virtual spaces and to asynchronously view videos about managing stress, anxiety, and depression. Coordinated communication across GSU's teams helped ensure an institutionwide understanding of the multiple dimensions and nuances of student need as well as which options and solutions were (or were not) available. With every new virtual support offered, offices worked closely with the marketing team to think through how best to communicate to different audiences, including students.



GSU's dynamic team emphasized the following elements as important pieces of their approach:

"We did have a lot of these wonderful systems in place, but I would say that in many cases we were not maximizing all of the capabilities of those systems previously. It's important to ask, Are you really using everything you already have available through your existing systems? What can you do with what you already have versus trying to go out and buy something that costs even more money to add on?"

"The more we asked why, the better we were able to get to a solution that worked for our students and make it better. I would tell other institutions, keep asking . . . why."

"We made the commitment that we would do the hard work on the back end to figure out how we share information and engage the right parties, but not put the burden on the student to have to figure out how to run around a rather large university to get the solutions they need."

STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

The challenges of the pandemic have forced GSU to think about new and different ways to leverage technology and best serve students online. For new student orientation, being virtual allowed GSU to offer more personalized and differentiated sets of information for new students. Recognizing which parts of this approach worked well can help inspire

new ways to use platforms to communicate with different subgroups at GSU. Additionally, virtual innovations also prompt institutions to think through ways to streamline process efficiencies and rely less on students being physically on campus to fill out forms and sign documents for emergency withdrawals, certifications, and more.

HOUSTON COMMUNITY COLLEGE

LOCATION

Houston, TX

Houston Community College (HCC) is a multi-campus, open admissions community college that serves a diverse population of more than 56,000 undergraduate students in the greater Houston area.

AT A GLANCE

- ▶ Launched a Live Virtual Lobby to sort students into different breakout rooms based on support-need areas and provide streamlined, one-on-one, real-time services and support.
- ▶ Scaled the system across all colleges and 21 campuses in the district.

APPROACH OVERVIEW

The [Live Virtual Lobby](#) was created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As students shifted into online environments, HCC experienced high volumes of demand from students who needed quick answers to questions and who had no means of communicating with the college other than email or phone. Students were not always able to schedule future appointments or wait for hours to meet with an advisor. In response, HCC created a Live Virtual Lobby through Zoom, where students could either call in by phone or log in via smartphone/computer/tablet, go through an initial screening to identify services needed, and then be sent to an individual breakout room to have a one-on-one service experience with student services personnel. Student wait times for services and number of student complaints were significantly reduced as a result.

HCC initially piloted the Live Virtual Lobby for student advising services through one college, to determine the Virtual Lobby's efficacy and to confirm if the offering met institutional student services standards. Once the tool was determined to be effective in

servicing both institutional and student needs, six of HCC's student services deans agreed to pool resources to implement the Live Virtual Lobby across the district. A second Virtual Lobby was developed, but for the other student services departments at HCC (e.g., testing, enrollment services, business services, financial aid, counseling, veteran and international student services). HCC labeled Zoom rooms according to student need: enrollment services, admissions, advisors, testing, counseling, and more.

To reduce information overload for students, HCC started routing all their questions and concerns through a single link found on the main HCC landing page. HCC used many communication methods to increase awareness of the service. For example, advisors have their HCC email set up to autoreply with the direct link to the Virtual Lobby, and their HCC voicemail likewise directs callers there. For students who call in to one of HCC's call centers or who phone one of HCC's campuses directly, staff have the contact information to the Virtual Lobbies. HCC Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts also raise awareness about the Virtual Lobby.



CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

By starting with a pilot, HCC was able to refine processes, operational procedures, and a staffing model—and garner an early base of champions for the service. When HCC scaled efforts across the district, the pilot’s foundational elements and the Zoom platform were flexible enough for other colleges to make context-specific modifications. Another

strategy critical to service buy-in was that the project team invited members of senior-level leadership into the Zoom lobby so that they could experience how the process felt for students. This process-mapping exercise helped leadership better understand how the Live Virtual Lobby was being used; it also gave leaders a frame of reference when considering student feedback about the service.

The project team also emphasizes the institution’s strong willingness to adapt when scaling out to other divisions and colleges as a critical element to the Live Virtual Lobby’s success:

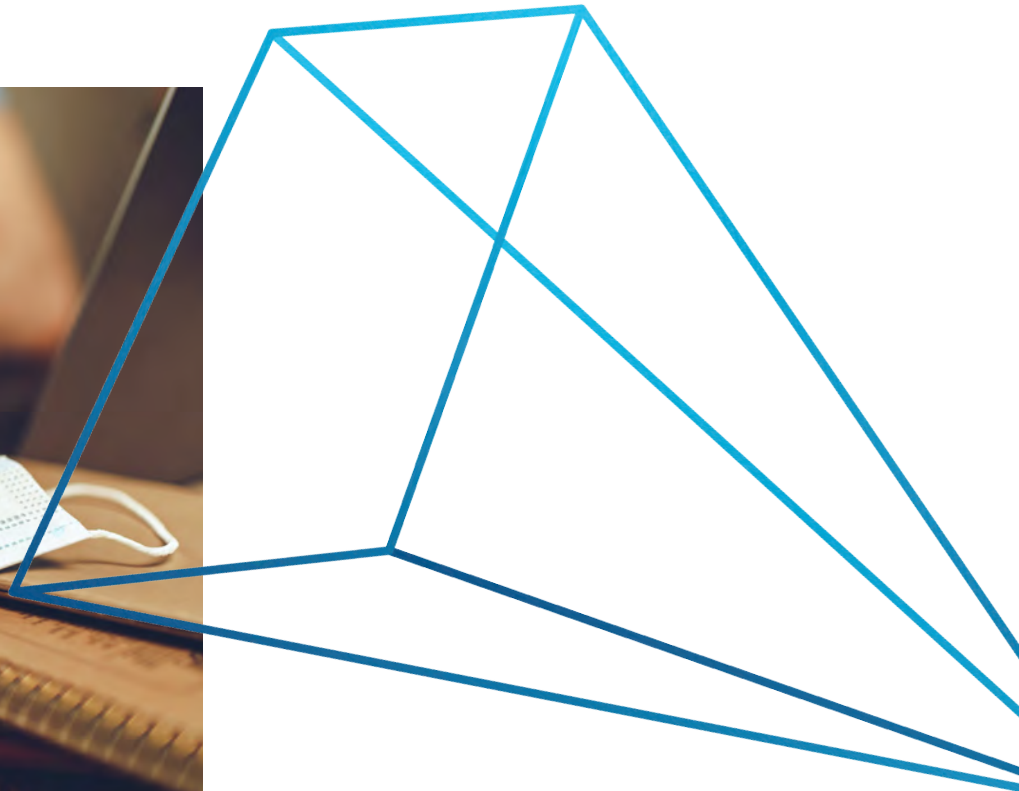
“Our magic formula was all in the flow: how the students will flow once they enter and in the naming conventions that we followed.”

“I think what really helped us was getting upper-level leadership to actually see our system in action, see how it helped students out, and how we got feedback from students. Then they understood how we were helping students get the services they wanted and needed.”

“We’ve modified our delivery model based on our needs, what we’ve seen work, and how we thought an approach would best suit our students. You can start out with one platform and see what’s working, what’s not working, and make those adaptations.”

STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

The Live Virtual Lobby has reinforced the understanding that students should receive consistently high-quality supports and access to resources no matter which engagement modality they choose. They should not have to go through a burdensome number of steps to access necessary information. Looking to the future, HCC will continue to focus on efforts to increase awareness of available student supports and to deliver services in convenient and flexible ways.



MONTGOMERY COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

LOCATION

Blue Bell, PA

Montgomery County Community College (MCCC) is a public community college and commuter institution with two primary campuses and a culinary arts institution. Located outside of Philadelphia in southeast Pennsylvania, MCCC serves 10,561 undergraduate students, 73% of whom are enrolled part-time.

AT A GLANCE

- ▶ Developed Montco Connect, a centralized communications portal for students and employees to receive personalized content, resources, and virtual engagement opportunities in social feed view.
- ▶ Created a student usability board to continuously receive feedback; members are compensated with a one-credit stipend.

APPROACH OVERVIEW

MCCC introduced [Montco Connect](#), a new web portal with companion mobile app, during the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in July 2020. At the same time as the Montco Connect launch, MCCC implemented a laptop loaner program to ensure that all students had access to necessary technologies at home. Unlike traditional portals, Montco Connect is built on the Campus.App platform and offers a private social media experience for users. As a multicampus commuter institution, MCCC sought out a flexible platform that could quickly adapt to the individualized needs of different student populations. Recognizing that everyone in the MCCC community must log in to the portal to access any online system, the platform addresses concerns about whether students are accessing critical information and communications. Montco Connect offers a space for engaging and communicating with remote students in a convenient, simplified, and centralized way.

Montco Connect's web interface is very similar to that of Facebook or other modern social media platforms, placing all new content and communications in a centralized and personalized "feed" view. This bespoke

view contains recent communications targeted to the groups to which the user belongs, to all students, and to the individual user. No additional navigation is necessary. Although the web portal is 100% mobile responsive in design, the companion app has additional benefits such as the ability to use the device alarm or camera.

A comprehensive content calendar helps departments schedule current and relevant content. Often, this content is announcing (or reminding) students of a support or service offered by MCCC. Many of these posts include links, videos, or other material to effectively inform the student and permit immediate action. Montco Connect also includes widgets, which, in implementation, have direct links to Blackboard courses, an events calendar, and a custom-developed academic profile that includes such pertinent information as academic advisor contact, program of study, and GPA.

All student support organizations across the organization have groups on the Montco Connect platform. With the ability to seek and join groups (e.g., student clubs or affinity groups), students can find peers with similar interests and elevate their sense of belonging.



MONTGOMERY
COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

MCCC selected and implemented the Montco Connect platform with input and collaboration from multiple stakeholders. Internally, the Montco Connect project was conceived and managed in partnership with the marketing and communications, student life, and student services (e.g., enrollment management; financial aid; admissions; records and registration) departments. This team intentionally had multiple opportunities and ongoing processes for stakeholder input, feedback, and collaboration, before selecting a technology to address the institution's need. Responding to feedback and creating space for experimentation are core components of MCCC's culture of innovation.

Before starting new initiatives or investments, MCCC ensures that students, staff, and faculty are engaged early and then continuously involved in improvement efforts after program implementation. One way MCCC gathers student input is through its Student Usability Board of 12 students, which the IT team coordinates. Board members meet weekly and receive one college credit for each semester they participate. To gather a more holistic perspective of lived student experiences, MCCC recruits students who are demographically diverse and have varying levels of involvement. Students have been involved at all phases of the project, including naming the system and directing the implementation of specific features. MCCC's IT team also had many meetings with staff and faculty to answer questions, communicate platform functionality, and gather feedback.

MCCC employees said the following about their MontcoConnect efforts:

"You have to be willing to go through some trial and error. Something that works for somebody else may not work for you. I know we've definitely tried things and learned from them, and we're doing things to improve upon that. I don't think there's really an out-of-the-box solution for every institution."

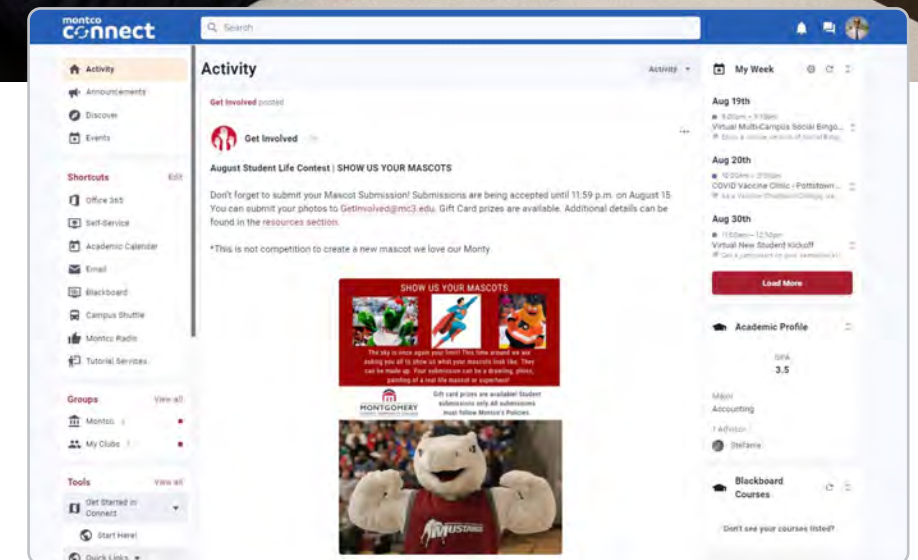
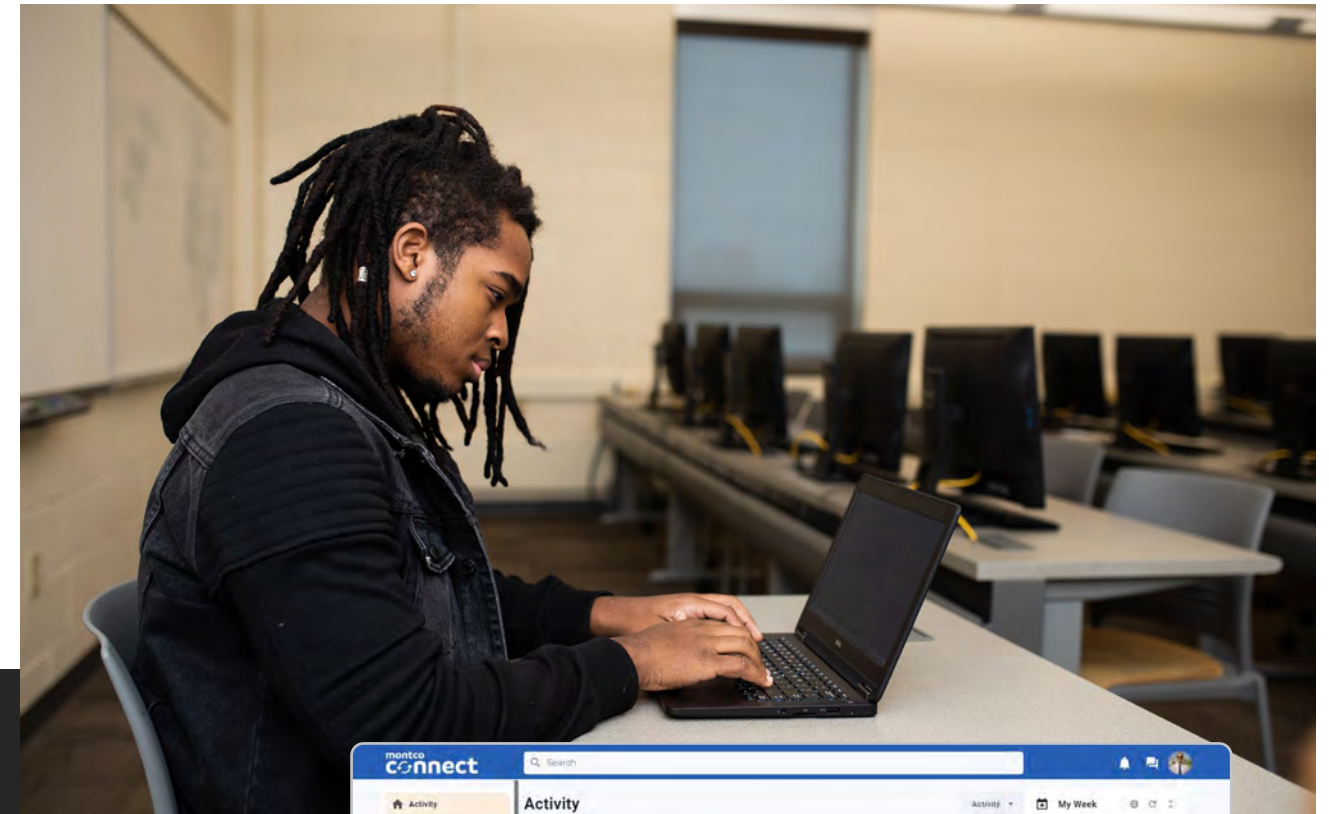
"It doesn't stop when the launch happens; this is a continued effort."

"You get to understand how stressed students are with other challenges and how important it is to have information right there when they need it."

STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

Montco Connect's widespread adoption is one piece of MCCC's efforts to change the culture of student engagement. As a commuter school, MCCC will continue to explore new opportunities to better reach and

support students virtually and refine digital communication efforts. Although Montco Connect is still in the early adoption phase, continued data collection and improvement efforts will help inform its future evolution and maximize its capabilities to meet student needs.



NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

LOCATION

Flagstaff, AZ

Northern Arizona University (NAU) is a public 4-year institution that serves more than 29,000 undergraduate and graduate students on the main Flagstaff campus, across 20 statewide campus sites, and in online educational modalities.

AT A GLANCE

- ▶ Initiated new online supports including peer mentoring, connection-building activities, a wellness mobile app, self-paced online career modules, and other academic support programs.
- ▶ Connected with cross-campus and external partners to increase the impact

APPROACH OVERVIEW

As part of NAU's strategic efforts to serve such a diverse student population and with an awareness that all students, regardless of modality, deserve an engaging, supportive student experience, the Division of Student Affairs developed a wide range of new initiatives that were underway before the pandemic.

In fall 2019, the Division of Student Affairs partnered with the College of Business to pilot the expanded use of a student engagement mobile app called [YourPath@NAU](#). The tool was previously focused only on business students, but NAU negotiated the existing software agreement with the Sutable platform so that the division could employ the platform more broadly for student engagement. The app gamifies and incentivizes multiple points of engagement with students. The division has created "badges" that students can earn by attending multiple activities within a theme or focus area. Students who complete three, five, or eight badges can earn incentives (raffle drawings, stress relief toys, t-shirts, water bottles, and more). The Office of First-Generation Programs created

a specific set of milestones and [badges for first-generation students](#) in the mobile app, where points can be earned by participating in self-guided activities focused on the unique needs of first-generation students.

NAU leveraged its existing learning management system—Blackboard Learn with Collaborate Ultra, Bblearn, and SoftChalk add-ons—to deliver academic, tutoring, and career development supports virtually to students. The career development team used this technology to distribute its self-paced online career modules, called [Career Steps](#), which focus on professional skills, application materials, networking, internships, and interview skills. Prior to the pandemic, NAU also offered online peer mentoring services and utilized NAU's mobile app—[NAUgo](#), powered by Modo Labs—to highlight featured events and send personalized push notifications to students.



Under crisis conditions that required shifting all in-person supports to virtual environments, the Division of Student Affairs worked to continue existing supports and address all aspects of student need. A few examples of this effort include:



- ▶ Leadership, Engagement, Activities, and Peer mentoring (LEAP) created a virtual expo—with video-recorded introductions and virtual meeting rooms—to introduce new students to clubs. LEAP also launched an entirely virtual Welcome Week for new students.
- ▶ Campus Recreation made virtual recreational experiences, including virtual group fitness classes, an e-sports intramural league, and an interactive YouTube library.
- ▶ The Health Promotion (HP) branch of Campus Health Services has worked with several campus partners, including faculty and the Division of Student Affairs, to launch the Live Well NAU framework and offer virtual wellness workshops and live-streamed meditation events. HP also integrated virtual wellness programming and competencies from its online toolkit—the [NAU Resilience Project](#)—into the YourPath@NAU app.
- ◊ HP has worked closely with NAU's Office of Residential Life to create COVID education and wellness information that can be pushed out on social media channels. HP has also partnered with LEAP and the campus recreation team to offer virtual pro-social, substance-free opportunities for students to connect during typically high-risk drinking times.
- ▶ The student counseling services team shifted to video-based telecounseling, reaching students across the state and online.
- ▶ The Office of Career Development offered a virtual Alumni Summer Workshop, added a virtual Résumé Dropbox, and facilitated virtual career fairs with online prep sessions.
- ▶ The Veteran and Military Services Student Center moved veteran orientation online and developed new virtual outreach processes for military dependents.
- ▶ The Division of Student Affairs collaborated with the Division of Academic Affairs to scale out technology used for the undergraduate research symposium in spring 2020 (OpenWater) for a virtual club expo to promote student engagement in summer 2020.
- ▶ During the pandemic, the Division of Student Affairs addressed students' basic needs by providing COVID-19 micro-grants (funded from philanthropic giving, student government fundraising, and a Course Hero Grant), course material vouchers, childcare vouchers, and long-term laptop loans.

CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

NAU's existing online student support offerings and strong culture of collaboration helped the institution quickly deliver a wide breadth of supports into virtual environments. Given these existing tools and strategies for engaging students online, NAU was able to leverage lessons learned from early efforts to share out effective practices and provide virtual supports at scale. Without a good partnership with the information technology services team, however, NAU would have been unable to transition its services at such a fast pace. The Division of Student Affairs and ITS teams regularly communicate through NAU's Student Experience Taskforce, a cross-functional and cross-divisional working group chaired by the chief information officer. The team regularly discusses predictive analytics data from NAU's Civitas and Salesforce tools to document and assess online student engagement.

The Division of Student Affairs also had implemented a Program Planning Group prior to the pandemic; this group of directors and assistant directors meets regularly to measure progress and identify opportunities to improve student learning outcomes, engagement metrics, and annually set outcomes. Many divisions at NAU also have their own business analyst team, which helps ensure coordination across different initiatives. To help effectively communicate technology needs and capabilities, each division's dedicated business analyst serves as translator between ITS and other divisions.

NAU's approach to student success included thinking holistically about students, engaging in partnerships, and building on existing resources and expertise:

"We really have touched on every part of the student experience, and I think that's what makes this unique."

"Being able to implement at scale and quickly really was also a testament to our partnership with our information technology services team. We have such good working relationships already. They were ready and able—and wanted to help us be successful."

"We leveraged what we were already doing well, and that helped us scale more broadly. Use resources that already exist on your campus instead of trying to implement new platforms."

STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

As NAU thinks about what the future will look like, it will continue to examine which areas of virtual student engagement worked well and could be implemented more broadly. For example, delivering counseling and mental health supports virtually allowed the institution to serve more students across the state with minimal wait times than when all services were in person. Continued data assessment efforts and cross-institutional collaboration are critical to ensuring that future student engagement opportunities are interesting, accessible, and valuable.

SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

LOCATION

San Diego, CA

San Diego State University (SDSU) is a public 4-year institution and member of the California State University system, with 30,848 undergraduate students. Approximately one third of undergraduates receive Pell grants, and 32% identify as Latinx/Hispanic, thus qualifying SDSU as an HSI.

AT A GLANCE

- ▶ Designed a multifaceted virtual admission and orientation program focused on building a sense of belonging.
- ▶ Utilized a network of existing systems to administer proactive, high-touch interventions with specific initiatives for priority student populations.



APPROACH OVERVIEW

SDSU takes a multifaceted approach to serving the institution's diverse first-year students in a virtual environment. SDSU utilizes a network of systems to administer proactive, high-touch, and student-centric interventions. The institution's admitted student program—[Virtual Explore SDSU](#)—is open to all prospective and admitted students, alumni, and members of the SDSU community. Each event includes a combination of live and recorded sessions.

The interactive virtual events let admitted students begin to network with faculty in their area of interest and start making connections with other SDSU students. SDSU offers tailored supports for first-year students through virtual orientation activities and advising appointments through the institution's Educational Opportunity Program, Compact for Success, and @CORE initiatives.

In spring 2020, SDSU also initiated a new [Campus Assistance, Response, Engagement and Support \(CARES\) Team](#), a cross-functional group of 170 staff and peer mentors. CARES Team members coordinated a series of outreach campaigns (i.e., calls, text messages, emails) for underrepresented students, students with financial holds, and students who had not advance registered for the following semester. These outreach campaigns identified lack of access to computers and stable internet connectivity as common challenges faced by students. CARES Team staff worked with SDSU's [Economic Crisis Response Team](#) to circulate hundreds of laptop computers and internet signal boosters.

Virtual programs are delivered primarily through three systems: (a) EAB Navigate, used to identify, communicate with, and engage students through campaigns; (b) Canvas, used as SDSU's primary learning management system and to generate engagement analytics; and (c) Zoom, used for both workshops and individual appointments. Although Navigate is the primary system for frequent student check-ins, the three systems work together, enabling staff to optimize use of data. For instance, a student's lack of engagement in Canvas will result in an early alert flag from an instructor on a progress report in Navigate. That action then prompts the student's advisor to run a campaign in Navigate, encouraging the student to make a virtual appointment (which is scheduled in Navigate and administered in Zoom). Students also receive text messages, including links to short, encouraging YouTube videos from faculty who had themselves been first-generation students. Supplementing these systems, SDSU uses ivy.ai for live chat during business hours and an automated chatbot for after hours, the latter leveraging AI to help students quickly find answers and resources in an always-on virtual environment.

Though many of the systems SDSU uses to support students are not unique in higher education, the institution's deployment of them through a campuswide program—breaking down organizational barriers—can serve as a model for other institutions.



CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

Central to the effectiveness of virtual programs is the institution's coordinated care network approach. With support from leadership, SDSU operates from a framework of shared responsibilities and accountability for student success across different divisions. Having leadership build student success initiatives into the institution's strategic plan helped promote awareness about priorities and drive the direction of virtual programming from the beginning. There is a single point of contact and a team with dedicated oversight over multiple stages of the enrollment-to-graduation cycle of

each student; however, student success is a shared institutional commitment. Challenges a student may face in one area can have downstream impacts on and implications for other areas, which requires institutional offices to communicate and coordinate with each other seamlessly.

Technology permits SDSU to connect with students at appropriate times and with timely and responsive resources. The pandemic also created a greater sense of urgency to use existing technologies and platforms at higher and more productive levels than before, so a more networked tactic was needed.



SDSU employs a coordinated approach to virtual support efforts and proactively identifies ways that systems can work in tandem to maximize outreach efforts:

"There needs to be articulated accountability and responsibility, but you can still have that joined across different divisions. It doesn't have to have just one centralized person."

"We're not able to do what we need to do, based on the size of our student body, if we don't have systems that can help us along the way. Those systems and those technologies are not about replacing people. It's actually the opposite. They're about creating closer ties between people."



STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

The ideal state for delivering virtual student supports involves an approach that considers the entire student lifecycle and where engagement happens. Considerations for what student learning and community looks like in different stages and spaces at an institution can reveal opportunities for improvement. Thinking how to better prepare students for success in virtual

environments, SDSU added different modules about learning online into its orientation program and developed social media materials about differences between synchronous and asynchronous courses. Looking forward, SDSU will continue to utilize data to empower faculty, staff, and administrators to offer differentiated supports for students and provide resources to them when needed most.

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

LOCATION

Tucson, AZ

University of Arizona (UA) is an HSI, land-grant, and Research 1 university with nearly 35,000 undergraduates. It focuses on racially minoritized students and on first-generation students, those from low-income households, and transfer students.

AT A GLANCE

- ▶ Adapted the [Student Success and Retention Innovation](#) (SSRI) Unit, a hub of eight distinct departments and a strategy team, to virtually support student learning.
- ▶ Used technology to offer a suite of virtual supports, including microaffirmation messages, chat services, an interactive major exploration fair, and a summer bridge program.

APPROACH OVERVIEW

UA's SSRI is a hub of eight distinct departments and a strategy team that works to support undergraduates' success. During the pandemic, SSRI moved swiftly to a 100% virtual format, using technology to replicate, assist, and augment all the activity previously performed in person. UA's innovative responses to the demand for virtual support led to the highest-ever increase in first-to-second-year retention at the institution. SSRI's virtual support services include:

- ▶ Launch Pad: a learning management space for the transition to virtual learning
- ▶ SOS: an email, chat, and text service available to answer any question, any time
- ▶ Virtual drop-in advising and a major exploration fair: moving the tried-and-true, in-person major fair to an interactive, engaging, and informative virtual experience
- ▶ New Start: successfully moving online a summer bridge program that has been a hallmark of student success at UA for 50+ years
- ▶ Microaffirmation messages: reaching out through social media
- ▶ Pulse surveys: quickly gathering feedback on students' experiences
- ▶ OfficeVibe surveys: monitoring student success staff morale and engagement

SSRI worked with campus partners to create the cross-functional Student Data Insights Strategy Team to monitor student access of services and identify actionable insights.

This team became essential to ensuring that support services were delivered equitably to students online. Group members meet weekly to assess data, identify emerging needs, and pinpoint opportunities to deliver exemplary virtual support. Examining the demographics of the students accessing services gives the institution insight into who is accessing SSRI virtually and who exhibits changed behaviors since the virtual switch.

Working with campus partners, SSRI helped to distribute emergency aid, laptops, wireless routers for mobile Wi-Fi hotspots, and even hubs across the state, so students in rural areas could drive to a safe location to access classes and virtual student support services.

SSRI employs multiple platforms, including Zoom and Microsoft Teams, for virtual one-on-one appointments, meetings, peer mentoring, workshops, and social events; Salesforce for mass communications and texting; Desire to Learn for learning management; various gaming platforms, including Discord, Jackbox, and Kahoot, for advising and social events; TutorTrac and AdvisorTrac for course tutoring and academic advising; and Qualtrics for surveying. For math support, UA uses Desmos, an online graphing calculator and activity builder. Learning specialists use Panopto, a video and quiz platform, as well as Jamboard, a shared space for brainstorming and collaborating online. SSRI also uses OfficeVibe for student success staff morale, team building, and support.



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA



a student's sense of isolation. SSRI has worked closely with human resources to identify tools and strategies for teaching and measuring compassion. The office has also examined ways to better assess for programs' behavioral outcomes on staff and students.

CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

UA's delivery of virtual supports relied heavily on a network of teams and an institutional culture of care. SSRI includes nine subteams that have specific scopes of responsibilities related to student success but that all work in constant communication with each other. One core subteam, the SSRI Strategy Team, had worked on microaffirmations and nudging initiatives prior to the pandemic and leveraged these built-in systems for gathering quick data bites to inform strategies for virtual supports. SSRI also launched a new Student Data Insights Strategy Team—with four members from across campus—as a small and nimble group to turn around

answers to key data questions, identify student needs, and help the institution adapt in a new online environment.

Recognizing the importance of flexibility and compassion for both students and staff early on was also critical to UA's efforts. Operating with a culture of care mindset involved explicit communications from leadership about the need to acknowledge socioemotional impacts of the pandemic and to prioritize staff care and wellness. If staff and administrators are not well, then students are not going to be served as effectively. This culture of care translates to administrator relationships with students, as this relationship is critical to combatting

UA's approach is further illustrated through the following quotes:

" We've thought very intentionally about the virtual supports and services to provide, but also about the mindsets, perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs that are critical to creating a community with a strong sense of belonging."

" When we went online, we found that a typical academic advising appointment that would take 45 minutes was now taking an hour and 15 minutes and that students were asking about everything. It was because they just had someone's attention, so the conversation very quickly went from, 'I need help dropping this class,' to, 'What about if I don't have a Wi-Fi connection?' and 'What about . . .' all of these other things. Everything just started taking a lot longer, so time was even more of a premium."

" Tech is a big part of this story, but really I think the reason why we stayed together and survived was all of this other work and the care that we were able to extend to our staff."

STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

UA's virtual programs have changed student success approaches—and what it means to be connected to a campus. Even when health conditions ensure a safe return to campus, SSRI will continue a robust virtual program for all support services. In some areas, institutions can reach more students through virtual supports than they did previously, when those same supports

were exclusively offered in person. Student expectations about institutions have changed, and institutions must adapt if they are to continue providing access to flexible, high-quality supports and resources via multiple formats. Moreover, the pandemic has forced many students to experience delays in access to education at the K-12 and college levels; institutions will need to respond to this challenge in the future.

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

LOCATION

Gainesville, FL

The University of Florida (UF) is one of the largest institutions in the nation, with 35,405 undergraduate students. Black, Latinx/Hispanic, and Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) students make up less than 30% of the population. At colleges where racial diversity is low, students may feel unsupported, which makes UF's online delivery of Multicultural and Diversity Affairs' early arrival programs (EAPs) even more critical.

AT A GLANCE

- ▶ Moved online EAPs that focus on supporting first-year Black, Latinx/Hispanic, and APIDA students.
- ▶ Supported peer leaders to engage in curriculum improvement and idea generation for virtual community building and social media activities.

APPROACH OVERVIEW

UF's Office of Multicultural and Diversity Affairs delivers virtual EAPs that build community, provide opportunities for holistic development, and teach students to navigate institutional barriers and recognize their cultural wealth. These virtual programs provide meaningful opportunities for students to find community and build a sense of belonging. [Pledging to Advance Academic Capacity Together](#) (PAACT), [ADELANTE](#), and [Finding Our Identities through Networking and Development](#) (FiND) focus on transitioning and supporting first-year Black, Latinx/Hispanic, and APIDA students, respectively. These programs recognize the power of peer interaction and of distinguishing the experiences of collegians of color from those of White students. Although traditionally delivered in person, these (now virtual) programs provide meaningful opportunities for students to build community with other students, staff, faculty, and the institution.

Each virtual EAP hosts specific workshops designed to help students build community cultural wealth to persist through challenges specific to UF. FiND includes topics such as academic success, cultural identity, and a virtual escape room of campus resources. ADELANTE uses a virtual scavenger hunt to teach students the campus layout. PAACT connects students with academic advising and faculty members, and it creates opportunities for peer-to-peer engagement. UF stressed that without a virtual option, programs would have been unable to reach international students, who were unable to enter the United States due to pandemic-related visa challenges.

In PAACT, ADELANTE, and FiND, peer leaders, along with a team of administrators, engage in experiential learning throughout the year. The peer leaders are supervised and coached by professionals in the field. Peer leaders get feedback and the chance to levy their academic and professional knowledge to determine the curriculum and execution of their programming efforts. For example, peer leaders for the PAACT program created a dance slide video on [Instagram](#) (see the [@ufpact August 26, 2020 post](#)), and students would vote on their favorite slide, learn the dance, and record themselves doing it.

PAACT, ADELANTE, and FiND strategically employ existing virtual structures and platforms to deliver programming in new contexts. The virtual EAPs have mostly used Zoom to deliver their services. EAPs also utilized free polling services, such as [pollseverywhere.com](#), to obtain quick engagement responses or to have students participate in rapid-response surveys; tools such as [Skribbl](#) and [Kahoot](#) to increase student engagement; social media platforms to create video skits, dance challenges, scavenger hunts, and informational updates; and [Qualtrics](#) to conduct surveys and assessments. Additionally, one previously underutilized platform highlighted during the pandemic was [Microsoft Teams](#), which allows subtitles in up to six languages during live virtual events.



CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

UF's Office of Multicultural and Diversity Affairs had a strong foundation of programmatic history, evidence-based research, cross-institutional partnerships, resources, and content on which to build the virtual EAPs. In addition to these foundational elements, leadership of virtual PAACT, ADELANTE, and FiND programs could identify existing technology tools available and coordinate with IT to ensure accessibility for all students, in terms of timing, closed captioning, and type of platform used.

Student coordinators were a critical asset to virtual program development. Students offered trusted insights and feedback through the planning and implementation of activities, and they engaged in thoughtful conversations

about how to best serve student groups in an intentionally intersectional way. These coordinators also collaborated with each other and with staff to consider new ways to maximize the potential of virtual platforms; this effort served as a professional development experience for them.

Additionally, UF's student affairs marketing team helped the Office of Multicultural and Diversity Affairs create a streamlined registration website and make connections with other relevant supports across the institutions to inform content creation. Having an in-house marketing team give communications expertise and serve as a cross-campus connector ensured that virtual community-building activities didn't conflict with other events and that they were delivered with students' holistic experiences in mind.



STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

UF emphasizes the ongoing nature of its EAPs and the importance of early engagement in multiple spaces. Delivering identity-based EAPs virtually has also reinforced the need for UF to be thoughtful about how to build community with distance learners, international students, transfer students, and students who are not typically on campus. Insights gathered from virtual EAPs will be used to inform future strategies about how to use existing technologies to continue to engage students who were being overlooked before the pandemic. UF will keep thinking through different spaces and opportunities for building cultural community, and it will consider ways to leverage technologies to accommodate differences in student preferences and needs.

The project team highlighted the following as key considerations driving delivery of virtual supports:

" We wanted to be mindful of whether all of our programs occurred at the same time or in similar time periods. We had to be mindful of not exhausting our students or exhausting the same resources and pooling folks into the same spaces."

" How can we be a little bit more innovative? How are we really pulling on the rest of the campus community to support some of our initiatives, especially with a lot of campus partners making bold statements that these are the populations of students that we should be putting a lot of energy toward? How do we leverage that?"

" People follow people. If somebody key in the community is doing something, other people will follow and want to get engaged. Our students who were the peer coordinators were the ones who were really hyping it up—and then also recruiting the peer leaders who then gave us a bigger team and more connections. It truly was like a web of cultural wealth, social wealth."



HONORABLE MENTIONS

Five additional institutions also provided timely virtual supports and resources to students. Though these did not receive an official award, their approaches were especially noteworthy.

MIAMI DADE COLLEGE

The [virtual onboarding program](#) at Miami Dade College (MDC) offers new college students a holistic experience that connects them to their success team; team members include representatives from recruitment, advisement/career services, financial aid, admissions, and faculty. Due to the pandemic, the college quickly adopted the virtual program as a viable replacement to its in-person experience.

As part of the virtual onboarding program, students are required to carry out the following prior to course enrollment:

- ▶ **Complete an academic planning support intake:** This inventory allows advisors to learn more about incoming students and connect them to the appropriate campus resources. It includes questions on course time preference, prior dual enrollment credits, employment status, confirmation of program of study, and more.
- ▶ **Complete holistic support intake in MDC Navigate:** MDC [Navigate](#) supports students throughout their first year and beyond. When students initially log in to Navigate, they find three intake questions that help their assigned advisor identify their unique needs. Based on their responses, students receive customized to-do events and additional information on helpful resources on campus. Students are encouraged to explore the Navigate platform and opt in to receiving messages from their advisors, track critical to-do

items, complete a career assessment, learn about campus resources, and get familiar with the system that hosts their My Academic Planner.

- ▶ **Complete the online Shark Prep:** The online presentation offers students comprehensive information on a multitude of topics, such as MDC's academic programs, paying for college, learning resources, support services, and more.
- ▶ **Attend orientation:** In-person orientation was transitioned to a virtual event. At the [Virtual Shark Start Orientation](#), students connect with peers, faculty, and staff. Students are also assigned an academic advisor and introduced to their Sharks Support Team. The following topics are covered:
 - ◇ Student technology and communications
 - ◇ Campus and community engagement
 - ◇ Single Stop (community/campus network and resources)
 - ◇ ACCESS (disability) resources
 - ◇ Meta major overview
 - ◇ Establishing residency and applying for financial aid and scholarships
 - ◇ Virtual campus tours

With a strong commitment to and comfort with the tools and practices for virtual learning, services, and engagement, SUNY Empire State College has a deep history of serving adult learners. In response to pandemic, in March 2020 the institution expanded its virtual student support offerings and transitioned existing onsite services online.

Recognizing the competing priorities of adult students, SUNY Empire State College intentionally weaves academic support throughout the student experience, with standalone resources and tutors integrated within courses. A centralized scheduling model and a transition to virtual services seven days a week resulted in a 46% increase in participation and increased access for students. To address gaps between students' formal academic experiences, the institution delivers more than 80 workshops devoted to online skills each term and offers 24/7 interactive tools ([assignment calculator](#), [thesis generator](#), etc.).

JumpStart—a preterm multiday event previously offered in person at multiple locations—is now online with academic support, drop-in hours with key offices, and student affairs engagement sessions. The event provides academic support tools, and activities and tutors are placed within high-need online courses. In these roles, tutors work collaboratively with faculty to provide targeted virtual support.

The institution also launched a student engagement series called [SUNY Empire Connects](#), with easy access points in a time of isolation. It offers live virtual programs, including employment searches and today's economy strategies; family-friendly study skills workshops; health and wellness activities for all ages; arts and culture explorations; student-to-student connections; and drop-in hours with college offices. Connects has helped to spur the development of the SUNY Empire's first student governance association.

The University of Illinois's Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Relations (OIIR)—a subdivision of the Office of Student Affairs, comprising eight identity-based Culture and Resource Centers—responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with a suite of new virtual programs and services. OIIR's virtual events are a space to support students' health and well-being, campus engagement, and social justice awareness.

GroupMe, Mailchimp, Survey Monkey, Qualtrics, Spotify, Kahoot, Adobe Suite, Canva, and Media Space support coordination, content creation, and captioning. Zoom, Skype, Slack, Whova, and Microsoft Teams are used for daily operations and conferences. OIIR relies on these technologies to advance mentoring, cross-cultural engagement and learning spaces, orientation cohorts, and wellness efforts. The virtual orientation series was created to familiarize students with spaces geared toward subverting racism, heteronormativity, sexism, and other forms of bias, while acknowledging the lived experiences of minoritized communities.

Other recent initiatives include Lunch on Us, Relatable Relationships Week, [Indigenous People's Day panel discussions](#), We Rise Abolition Series, Global Engagement Lounge, Sankofa Black Student Outreach Team meetings, Conéctate early move-in program, and the Latinx Resilience Network. The institution's International Education Center also sponsored weekly virtual programs with adjusted hours to accommodate international students currently enrolled in online courses.

Zoom was also implemented to service two flagship first-year student trainings—including I-Connect Diversity and Inclusion Workshop and the sexual assault prevention focused on [First Year Campus Acquaintance Rape Education](#)—as well as four courses offered in partnership with the Colleges of Education and Applied Health Sciences. In response to Zoom fatigue, OIIR expanded its use of social media to share educational campaigns and hold short events like the Social Distancing Film Club and the intergenerational What Womxn Taught Me series.

ITHACA COLLEGE

Ithaca College (IC), a residential campus of 4,900 undergraduates, shifted to fully remote operations in March 2020. Since then, the Division of Student Affairs and Campus Life has presented the campus community with a broad spectrum of offerings comprising mental health resources, academics, leadership development, diversity and inclusion, and community building.

The division launched an entirely virtual new student orientation, whose success showed how eager students were to connect. Students also have multiple entry points for accessing mental health supports virtually, as individual counseling and support groups are now online. Other wellness-related virtual supports include:

- ▶ Individual counseling and support groups, like [Belonging \(While Apart\): Process Group for BIPOC Students](#), are now offered online.
- ▶ The Office of Religious and Spiritual Life hosted midweek IC Soul gatherings to enable the community to pause and reflect.
- ▶ The Case Management Office produced a weekly wellness series on self-care during the pandemic.
- ▶ The LGBT Center equipped students with resources to cope with living back at home.

[Ithaca Summer Seminars](#) allow incoming students to connect with each other and IC faculty. Students take up to three one-credit, online courses delivered synchronously or in an asynchronous blend to foster community.

The division also engaged students, faculty, and staff in virtual diversity and inclusion education opportunities, such as online panel discussions and guided readings. A photojournalist made a virtual studio and coached students on creating portraits that answer the question: [What does community look like for you in this time of pandemic and protests?](#)

Finally, the Student Leadership Institute instituted a virtual platform for professional development training, resulting in more than 20 campus departments developing 80 individual workshops on entrepreneurship, communication, equity and inclusion, and wellness.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS HEALTH SCIENCE CENTER

The University of North Texas Health Science Center (UNTHSC) is spearheading a national effort to diversify the Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine (STEMM) research workforce through the [National Research Mentoring Network-Resource Center](#) (NRMN-RC). NRMN-RC offers an online platform that provides career stage-specific resources that support every end user from undergraduates to faculty and academic administrators in STEMM.

NRMN-RC virtual resources consist of culturally responsive mentoring, networking with peers and mentors, and professional development. The platform and resources

were developed in collaboration with Vanderbilt University. The NRMN-RC focuses on cultivating diverse leaders within the STEMM workforce and on the use of technology to enable greater access to mentoring and networking opportunities. These efforts complement UNTHSC's strategic goals of advancing the health of its community through diversification of the STEMM workforce. The NRMN-RC program builds on UNTHSC's commitment to ongoing academic affiliations with MSIs and outreach activities with the racial and ethnic minority populations in Texas and surrounding states.



Looking Ahead

BUILDING AND STRENGTHENING VIRTUAL STUDENT SUPPORTS

The institutions presented in this report effectively utilized staff and faculty time and expertise, strategic processes and practices, and a blend of new and existing technology to ensure an optimal virtual experience for students. Institutions had to be very intentional in their efforts by identifying the most critical need areas, bringing together the appropriate stakeholders, strategically leveraging resources (e.g., staff, technology, funding), and thinking creatively about how to serve students.

This intentionality is something to which many institutions strive; however, competing priorities, capacity constraints, and traditional modes of operating often get in the way. Regardless of the challenges institutions may face, student needs continue to expand and evolve, and this forces colleges and universities to consider how virtual supports can serve as a critical element in future student success efforts.

As institutions look toward the future, as it relates to their virtual support offerings, the following steps can be helpful.

Create a cross-functional team.

Regardless of the type(s) of virtual support being implemented, multiple perspectives and voices must be represented to ensure the project's success. A cross-functional team—composed of stakeholders and a mix of individuals with different content knowledge and technical expertise—can be an asset for providing virtual student supports. An ideal cross-functional team would include:

- ▶ **Information Technology Professional:** One who can effectively gather technology requirements, identify best technology options to support the work, coordinate with other available platforms when relevant, and serve as a project manager to ensure successful implementation and operation of the technology.
- ▶ **Subject Matter Expert:** One who has relevant content knowledge to ensure that a virtual offering is leveraging effective practices and follows any relevant regulations and policies. For example, a virtual mental health mobile app should have design input from a certified health professional who can guarantee that policies are following the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act's regulations.
- ▶ **Student Support Professional:** One who has a predominately student-facing role and can provide useful insights on student and staff experiences with technology systems at the institution, ensure seamless transitions from in-person to virtual spaces, and liaise with students. Such a professional should have a deep understanding of the variety of student

experiences at the institution and can play a vital role in supporting feedback loops to regularly hear student input about needs and preferences.

- ▶ **Institutional Research Professional:** One who can quickly gather and present data insights about the impact of a virtual support—including a specific focus on disaggregating student data across demographic characteristics—and guide the team through the limitations and caveats of findings during action-oriented discussions.
- ▶ **Business Analyst:** One who understands relevant processes and requirements and has a level of tech-savviness. This person is responsible for helping to translate technology jargon to non-IT stakeholders when discussing requirements and technology capacities; reviewing assessment metrics and identifying opportunities for improved efficiencies; communicating programmatic needs and goals to IT specialists; and reviewing assessment metrics to improve efficiencies and sometimes offering recommendations to leadership.
- ▶ **Decision Maker:** One who is empowered to make final determinations when they are needed to ensure uninterrupted workflow, has the authority to allocate resources to virtual support services or programs, and leads and promotes buy-in about the strategic direction for the approach.

Gather and review relevant data to aid in selecting technology and needed functions.

One potential responsibility of the cross-functional team is to review data to better understand the current state of student support and assess emerging approaches. The team may also be responsible for helping to identify the metrics for routine review, to understand the impact of a suite of virtual support services. Institutions should create key objectives for their virtual supports, which can be tied to relevant metrics. Collecting, analyzing, and sharing a range of data points in a consistent and integrated manner can provide insights about opportunities to improve a virtual support offering or identify aspects that should be scaled. For example, robust data assessment may help administrators better understand whether certain technologies are helping them reach intended goals and better inform strategic responses. It can also reveal areas of inefficiency or where inequities are being exacerbated. Ensuring widespread collaboration and sharing of data can help professionals tell more complete student stories and design tailored interventions.

Data may be collected in a variety of different ways. Students may actively participate in focus groups, student satisfaction surveys, and student advisory boards. Technology platforms and systems can also house a wide range of data points. Depending on the type of virtual support, some metrics might include student click or open rates, application sign-ons, support service tickets requested, academic performance, average student wait times, virtual event sign-ups and

attendance rates, and more. Such data points can help show the extent to which a program is meeting its intended outcome(s) and help teams determine the best ways to create or strengthen a virtual support.

Take inventory of existing technologies and functionalities.

Institutions that intend to execute a robust assessment strategy should first audit any existing technologies and systems in place. Several institutions explained that the pandemic prompted them to take stock of technologies and determine areas of redundancy, inefficiency, and underutilization. Taking stock of what is working well and what is not can reveal new ways to leverage existing platforms—and it can also expose technologies that are no longer serving the institution's evolving needs and systems. A cross-functional team can be instrumental in this continuous monitoring process, helping to ensure widespread awareness and coordination of existing technologies. Limitations identified can inform where gaps need to be filled, and strengths found can provide opportunities for sharing promising practices to build upon.

Plan and prioritize actions.

Once an institution has a better understanding of what is needed to strengthen a virtual offering, leadership should create a comprehensive project plan that highlights the critical actions needed to improve. Cross-functional teams can use the following considerations when determining areas for strategic planning and priority:

- ▶ **Responsiveness and flexibility:** COVID-19 forced many institutions to adapt and quickly respond to students. Outside of crisis conditions, institutions should have in place foundational elements that allow administrators to rapidly address (using new or existing tools) emerging student needs and preferences. Such elements may include having in place a strong data assessments strategy, cross-functional teams, and leadership buy-in.
- ▶ **Student communication and outreach:** Information should be communicated with students in clear, timely, and actionable ways. Recognizing various student preferences and circumstances in virtual environments can help inform communications strategies. Messaging plans should consider how each available technology platform fits together to address each student's overall goals for the experience.
- ▶ **Technology selection:** A technology audit may reveal the need to adopt a new platform. In addition to looking at functionalities, leaders selecting a new technology should consider such factors as cost, ease of use, and ability to integrate with other systems.
- ▶ **Consistent policies and processes:** Strengthening a virtual support may involve adopting policies and processes to ensure consistent experiences for students and staff. This effort may include establishing clearly defined staff roles and responsibilities, or it may involve streamlining and centralizing student inquiries so that students know exactly where to go with questions about a certain topic or technology.
- ▶ **Staff and student technology training:** Optimizing the impact of technologies goes beyond ensuring widespread access; staff, faculty, and other stakeholders must know how to use—and maximize the benefits of—these supports.

Teach staff and students how to fully maximize technology.

Lastly, as institutions roll out new platforms, software, and tools (or take a different approach to utilizing existing systems), faculty, staff, and students should know how to access and effectively use the technology. A critical time that is often overlooked is when onboarding students. Further, institutions must ensure that staff members have strong digital fluency; it can help them better answer student questions. Institutions may need to develop audience-specific training modules, videos, and/or written guidance on how to use the technology. Additionally, institutions should have a help desk or designated support person(s) to address any technology-related questions or issues.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual student supports proved to be instrumental in staying connected during the rapid move to remote learning. Institutions had the difficult task of designing new and enhancing existing virtual support offerings in a time of extreme uncertainty and limited resources. The desire institutions had to make sure that their students had access to basic needs, the resources to continue their studies, and a meaningful connection to the overall campus community was seen in all VIA applicants. As colleges and universities that were not previously online-only institutions grapple with the eventual return to some in-person activities, they should take time to celebrate making it through the past year; reflect on some of the lessons learned; and consider how virtual supports can continue to be integrated and scaled.

SELECTION PROCESS AND DATA ANALYSIS

ADVISORY BOARD

NASPA partnered with Sova Solutions and consulted with 21 project advisors (see Appendix B) who hold expertise across a range of areas relevant to student supports. The advisors represented a mix of perspectives from institution, systemwide, and national organization levels. Engagement with project advisors included four primary activities:

- ▶ **Activity 1:** Participate in semistructured interviews to identify key characteristics of exceptional virtual student supports, to inform guiding principles for the application.
- ▶ **Activity 2:** Provide feedback for proposed guiding principles and application questions for the VIAs.
- ▶ **Activity 3:** Review and score submitted VIA applications based on a set of criteria provided.
- ▶ **Activity 4:** Participate in a final selection call to deliberate about the scoring process and the 10 institutions considered for an award.

REVIEW OF APPLICATIONS

NASPA, Sova, and the project advisors vetted and scored more than 100 submissions. Eligible institutions included nonprofit accredited colleges and universities that primarily serve students located in the United States. Applications about virtual programs and student services covered a range of functional areas, including:

- ▶ **Academic Supports** (e.g., mentoring, tutoring)
- ▶ **Advising** (e.g., coaching, course selection, career development plans, degree auditing)
- ▶ **Basic Needs** (e.g., housing, emergency aid funds, childcare supports, food support)
- ▶ **Health and Well-Being** (e.g., mental health, counseling, intramural and club activities)
- ▶ **Community** (e.g., orientation, community service, clubs, activities)
- ▶ **Career Exploration** (e.g., internships, student employment, career placement)
- ▶ **Diversity and Inclusion** (e.g., multicultural services, disability support services, LGBTQIA student services)

Each application was reviewed by two different advisors, with the top applications receiving a total of three rounds of review. Advisors assessed the applications using a range of criteria related to these eight categories:

- 1. Connection Building:** To what extent does the institution demonstrate how it leverages technology to foster a virtual community in which students interact with peers and administrators?
- 2. Collaboration:** To what extent does the institution describe how professionals across divisions and functions work together to deliver its program(s) and/or service(s)? (Note: Collaboration can also include work with third-party vendors that provide technology platforms.)
- 3. Data Utilization:** To what extent does the institution use data to monitor progress of its program(s) and/or service(s) and evaluate effectiveness for students?
- 4. Equity Focus:** To what extent do program(s) and/or service(s) meet the unique needs of diverse and/or underrepresented populations, which include, but are not limited to, Black, Latinx/a/o, Indigenous, first-generation, low-income, and other prioritized student populations?
- 5. Holistic Approach:** To what extent does the institution demonstrate how it is offering responsive virtual services and programs to support multiple aspects of students' well-being?
- 6. Ingenuity:** To what extent is the institution's approach to its virtual program(s) and/or service(s) original or inventive, either within higher education or in terms of what the institution has done so far?
- 7. Scalability and Sustainability:** To what extent does the institution describe how its program(s) and/or service(s) is/are replicable and supported by resources that can be expanded on and sustained in the future?
- 8. Strategic Technology Use:** To what extent does the institution select and use technology to deliver the program(s) and/or service(s) described and address needs?

PROJECT ADVISORS

Scores were based only on the information provided in the application, and reviewers were instructed not to seek additional information from other sources. In addition to advisor scores, NASPA project staff also weighted applications based on certain institutional characteristics:

- ▶ Graduation Rate (–1 point if less than 25% 6-year graduation rate for 4-year institutions and 4-year graduation rate for 2-year institutions)
- ▶ Community College (+2 points)
- ▶ MSI (+1 point)
- ▶ Percent Pell Eligible (+1 point if 30%–65% and +2 points if over 65%)

INTERVIEWS

NASPA and Sova Solutions conducted semistructured interviews with representatives from each of the 10 institutions that received a VIA to better understand institutional approaches. Some quotes included in this report have been edited for clarity and grammar. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed to identify major themes and focus areas.

LIMITATIONS

Eligibility for awards was limited to nonprofit, accredited institutions of higher education with enrolled student populations that primarily live in the United States. Information in this report is based on insights shared between fall 2020 and late spring 2021.

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