

2021 FALL TERM PULSE POINT SURVEY OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS

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Over the past several years, ACE has regularly surveyed college and university presidents to capture their perspectives on key issues facing higher education. Most recently, our survey series unveiled insights into the institutional response to COVID-19. In this survey, 230 presidents* identified their most pressing concerns: fall operating plans, campus mitigation strategies for COVID-19, how their institution was supporting individuals affected by the crisis in Afghanistan, and their approaches to addressing student mental health. What follows is a summary of our key findings.

* Of the 230 presidents, 102 lead private four-year institutions (44 percent), 59 lead public four-year institutions (26 percent), 52 lead public two-year institutions (23 percent), seven lead for-profit institutions (3 percent), five lead private graduate-only institutions (2 percent), three lead private two-year institutions (1 percent), and two lead public less than two-year institutions (0.9 percent).

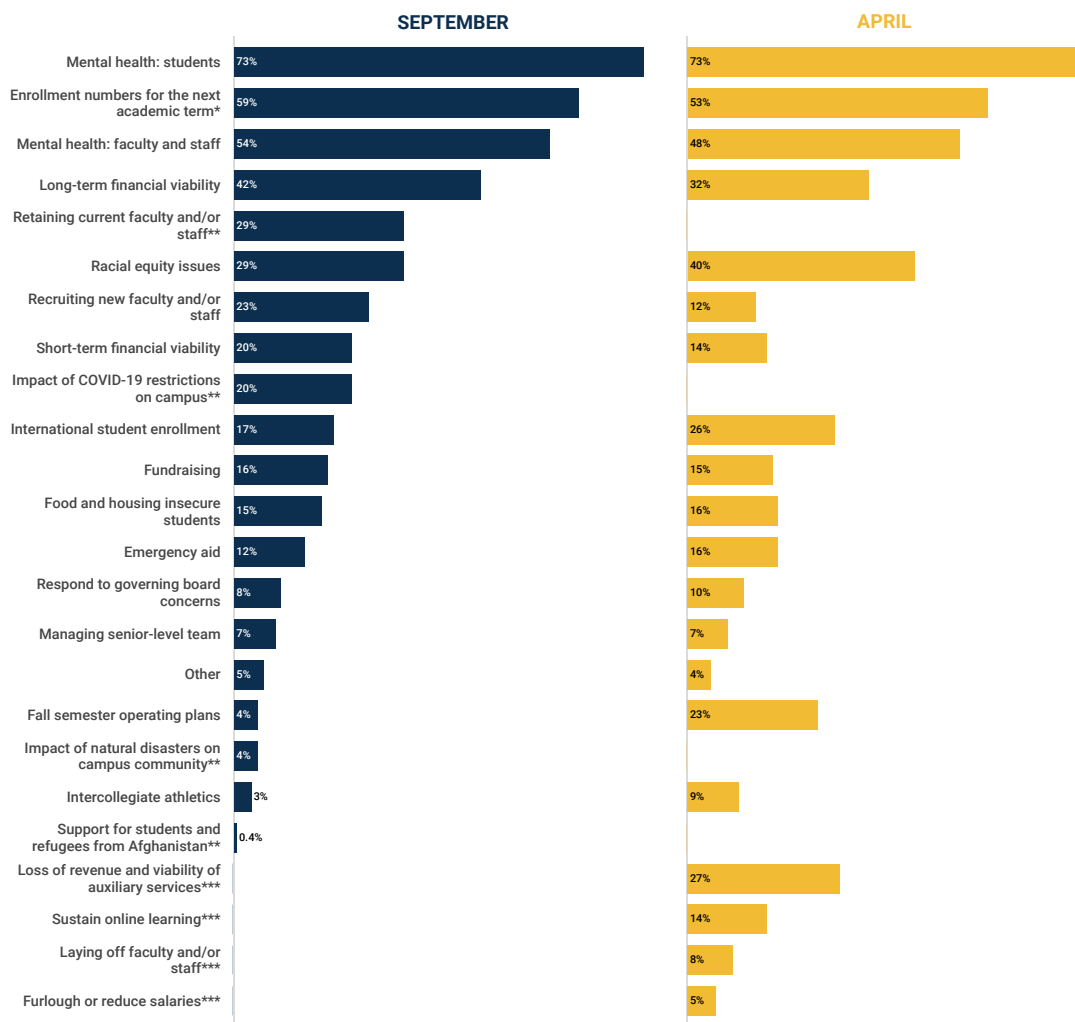
The survey was launched on September 27 and closed on October 8.

MOST PRESSING ISSUES FOR PRESIDENTS

In the September survey, presidents were presented with a list of 19 issues and asked to select up to five that they viewed as most pressing (see Figure 1). For the sixth time since April 2020, “mental health of students” was the pressing issue cited most frequently by presidents. Almost three-quarters of all presidents (73 percent) in the September survey identified student mental health as a pressing concern, the same percentage that reported it as pressing in the [April 2021 survey](#).

- Across all sectors, “mental health of students” was the most frequently selected pressing issue; presidents at private four-year institutions (76 percent) were slightly more likely than presidents at public four-year (71 percent) and public two-year (73 percent) institutions to report this.
- More than half of all presidents (59 percent) identified “enrollment numbers for the next academic term” as a pressing issue, a slight increase from 53 percent of presidents who reported this in the April 2021 survey.
- Over half of all presidents (54 percent) selected “mental health of faculty and staff” as a pressing concern, marking a six percentage point increase from the April 2021 survey (48 percent). Presidents at public two-year institutions (65 percent) were more likely to report this than presidents at public four-year (53 percent) and private four-year (47 percent) institutions.
- The fourth most frequently selected pressing issue was “long-term financial viability” (42 percent), marking an increase of 10 percentage points from the April 2021 survey (32 percent). Presidents at private four-year institutions (47 percent) were slightly more likely than presidents at public two-year (42 percent) and public four-year (41 percent) institutions to select this as a pressing issue.
- “Retaining current faculty and/or staff” and “racial equity issues” tied to round out the top five most pressing concerns among college and university presidents, with 29 percent of leaders selecting these issues.
- Notably, “recruiting new faculty and/or staff” was selected by nearly one-quarter (23 percent) of all presidents as a pressing issue, an 11 percentage point increase from the April 2021 survey (12 percent).

Figure 1. Most Pressing Issues Facing Presidents in April and September 2021



*This item was presented as "enrollment numbers for the next academic term" in the September survey and as "enrollment numbers for the summer and/or fall" in the April survey.

**Denotes item available in the September survey only.

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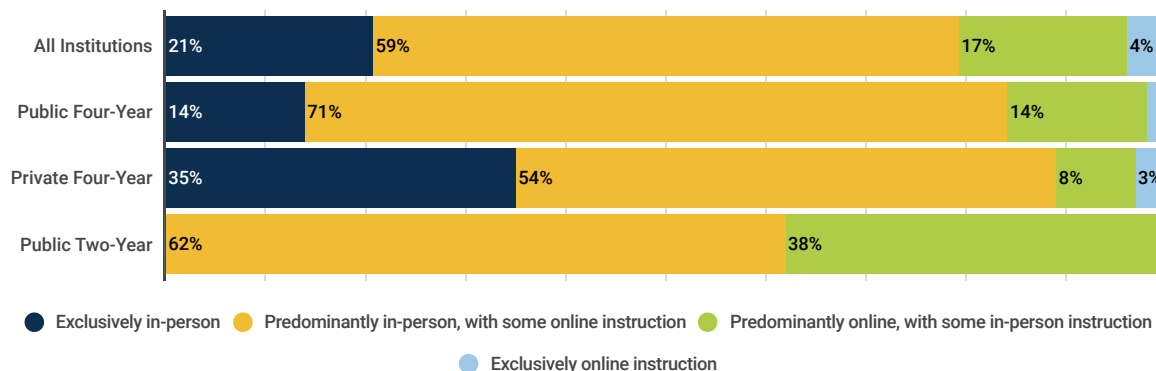
FALL OPERATING PLANS

Presidents were asked to identify the mode of instruction that best described what their institution offered at the beginning of the fall 2021 term (see Figure 2).

- More than half (59 percent) of all presidents indicated that their institutions were offering “predominantly in-person, with some online instruction” at the beginning of fall 2021. Presidents at public four-year institutions (71 percent) were the most likely to select this mode of instruction, followed by presidents at public two-year institutions (62 percent) and presidents at private four-year institutions (54 percent).
- About one in five presidents (21 percent) indicated that their institution offered “exclusively in-person” instruction at the beginning of the fall 2021 term. Presidents at private four-year institutions (35 percent) were more than twice as likely as presidents at public four-year institutions (14 percent) to indicate that their institution offered this mode of instruction. No presidents at public two-year institutions among survey respondents indicated that their institution offered this mode of instruction at the beginning of the fall 2021 term.

- Overall, 17 percent of presidents indicated “predominantly online, with some in-person instruction” as the type of instruction offered at their institution at the beginning of the fall 2021 term. Presidents at public two-year institutions (38 percent) were more than twice as likely to report their institution offered this type of instruction as presidents at public four-year (14 percent) and private four-year (8 percent) institutions.
- “Exclusively online instruction” was reported by 4 percent of presidents as the mode of instruction offered at the beginning of the fall 2021 term.

Figure 2. Type of Instruction Offered at the Beginning of the Fall 2021 Term

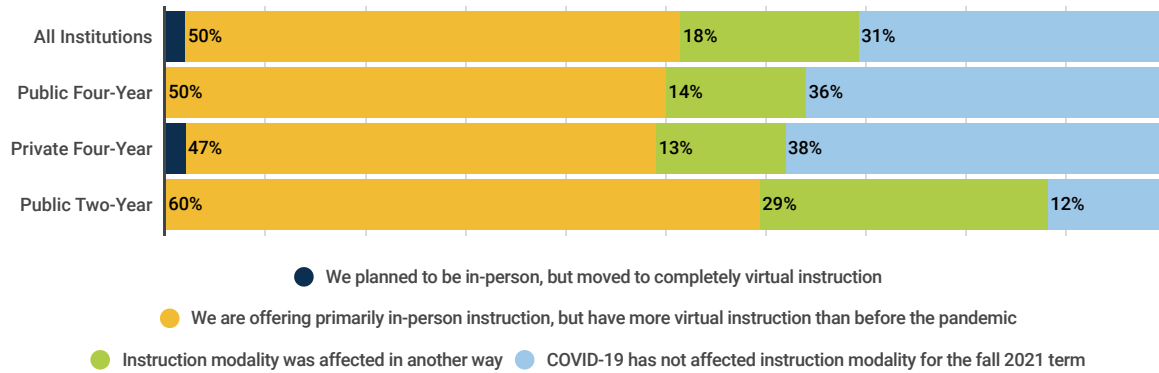


Presidents were also asked to indicate the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic affected the modality of instruction offered at the beginning of the fall 2021 term (see Figure 3). Half of all presidents (50 percent) indicated that their institutions were offering “primarily in-person instruction, but have more virtual instruction than before the pandemic,” and 2 percent indicated that their institution “planned to be in-person, but moved to completely virtual instruction.” Slightly less than one-third (31 percent) of presidents indicated that “COVID-19 has not affected instruction modality for the fall 2021 term,” and 18 percent indicated that their institution’s “instruction modality was affected in another way.”

- Presidents at public two-year institutions (60 percent) were the most likely to report that they are “offering primarily in-person instruction, but have more virtual instruction than before the pandemic,” followed by presidents at public four-year (50 percent) and private four-year (47 percent) institutions.
- Presidents at private four-year (38 percent) and public four-year (36 percent) institutions were about three times as likely as presidents at public two-year institutions (12 percent) to report that “COVID-19 has not affected instruction modality for the fall 2021 term.”
- Presidents at public two-year institutions (29 percent) were twice as likely as presidents at public four-year (14 percent) and private four-year (13 percent) institutions to report their “instruction modality was affected in another way.”

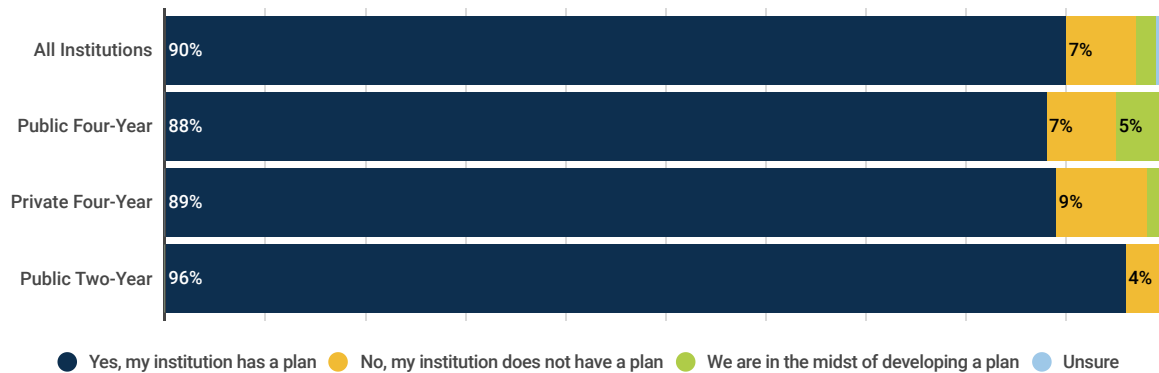
Presidents who selected “instruction modality was affected in another way” were asked to provide further explanation of these effects. Several presidents indicated that their institution was offering multi-modal instruction, including a mix of in-person, hybrid, and online courses. Some presidents reported increased enrollment in online courses, though the number of online courses offered did not change compared with previous years. A few presidents also indicated more flexibility of instruction if faculty were ill or had health conditions.

Figure 3. Ways That COVID-19 Affected Instruction Modality Offered at Beginning of the Fall 2021 Term



Presidents were also asked whether their institution had a contingency plan for transitioning to virtual learning in the event of worsening pandemic conditions (see Figure 4). Overall, 90 percent of presidents indicated that their institution had a contingency plan, 7 percent indicated that their institution did not have a contingency plan, 2 percent reported that they were developing a contingency plan, and 1 percent were unsure. Responses showed a similar pattern across institutional sector.

Figure 4. Existence of Contingency Plan for Transitioning to Virtual Learning in Event of Worsening Pandemic Conditions

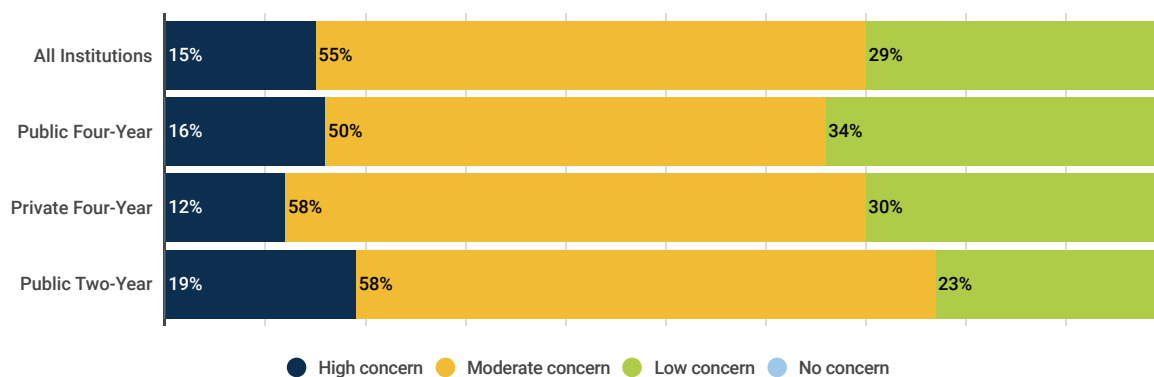


COVID-19 MITIGATION STRATEGIES ON CAMPUS

As communities across the nation continued to see spikes in COVID-19 cases, presidents were asked to indicate their current level of concern around a potential COVID-19 outbreak on their campuses (see Figure 5).

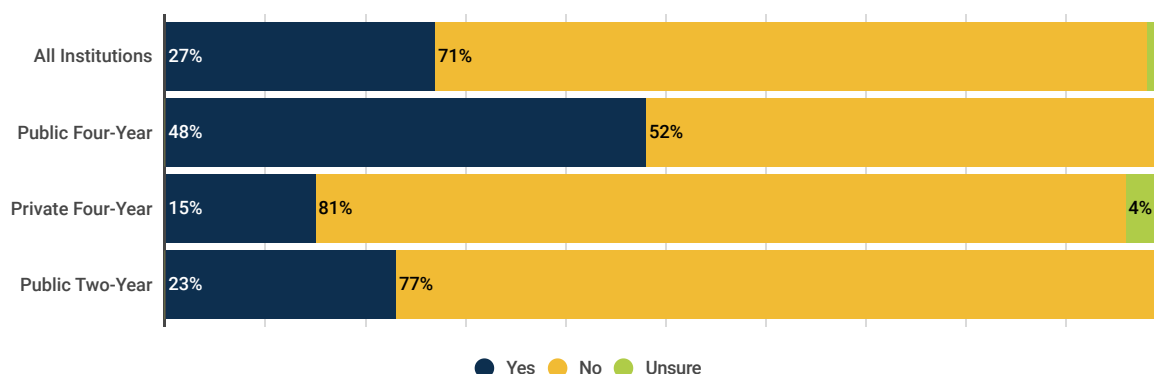
- Across all sectors, over half of all presidents (55 percent) indicated they had “moderate concern” about a potential COVID-19 outbreak on their campus, followed by “low concern” (29 percent) and “high concern” (15 percent). Only 1 percent of all presidents indicated that they had “no concern” around a potential outbreak.
- Presidents at public two-year institutions (19 percent) were the most likely to report “high concern” around a potential COVID-19 outbreak on campus, followed by presidents at public four-year (16 percent) and private four-year (12 percent) institutions.
- Presidents at public four-year (34 percent) and private four-year (30 percent) institutions were more likely than presidents at public two-year institutions (23 percent) to indicate “low concern” around a COVID-19 outbreak on campus.

Figure 5. Current Level of Concern Around a Potential COVID-19 Outbreak on Campus



Presidents were asked to report whether their state and/or local governments took actions that restrict the COVID-19 mitigation steps and strategies their institution can implement (see Figure 6). The majority of all presidents (71 percent) indicated that their state and/or local government had not restricted COVID-19 mitigation strategies, 27 percent reported that their state and/or local government had restricted COVID-19 mitigation strategies, and 2 percent reported that they were unsure. Presidents at public four-year institutions (48 percent) were more likely to report that their state and/or local government had restricted COVID-19 mitigation strategies than presidents at public two-year (23 percent) and private four-year (15 percent) institutions.

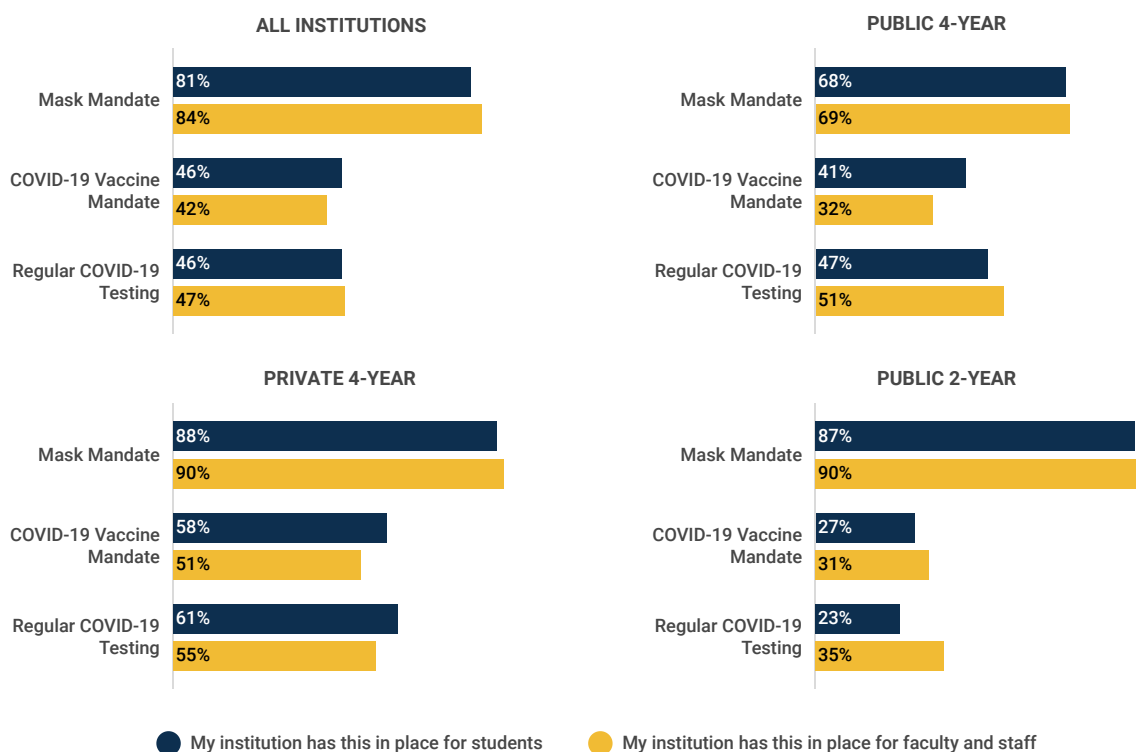
Figure 6. State and/or Local Government Has Taken Actions to Restrict COVID-19 Mitigation Steps Institution Can Take



Presidents were also asked to indicate whether their institution had established COVID-19-related mandates for students, faculty, and staff returning to campus this fall (see Figure 7). It is important to note that individual public and private institutions sometimes have different abilities to establish or impose COVID-19 mitigation mandates.

- Overall, the majority of presidents reported that their institution had a mask mandate in place for students (81 percent) and for faculty and staff (84 percent). Fewer presidents at public four-year institutions reported that their institution had a mask mandate in place for students (68 percent) and for faculty and staff (69 percent) than presidents at public two-year and private four-year institutions.
- Less than half of all presidents reported that their institution had established a “COVID-19 vaccine mandate” for students (46 percent) and faculty and staff (42 percent). By sector, presidents at private four-year institutions were the most likely to indicate vaccine mandates for students (58 percent) and faculty and staff (51 percent).
- Less than half of all presidents reported that their institution had “regular COVID-19 testing” in place for students (46 percent) and for faculty and staff (47 percent). Presidents at private four-year institutions were the most likely to report regular COVID-19 testing was in place for students (61 percent) and faculty and staff (55 percent). Presidents at public two-year institutions were the least likely to report regular COVID-19 testing was in place for students (23 percent) and faculty and staff (35 percent).

Figure 7. Established COVID-19 Mandates for Students, Faculty, and Staff Returning to Campus This Fall

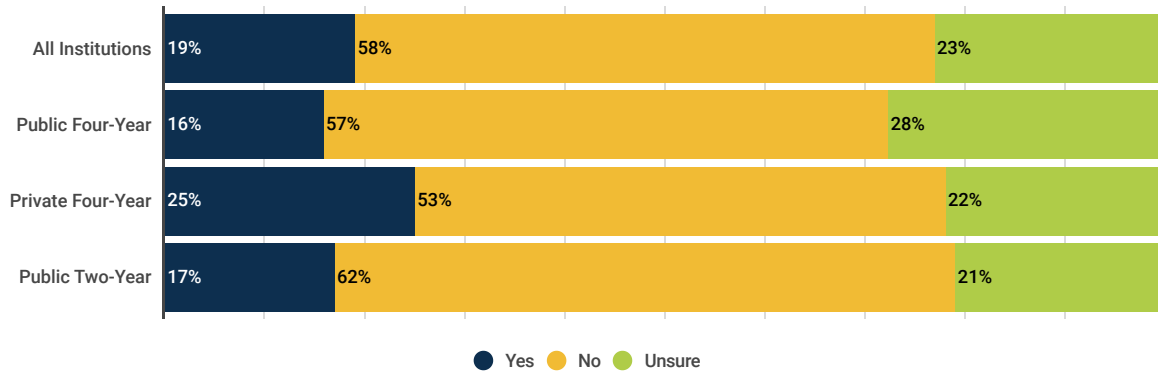


SUPPORT FOR INDIVIDUALS AFFECTED BY THE CRISIS IN AFGHANISTAN

Many higher education leaders expressed their support for Afghan students and faculty following the crisis in Afghanistan in summer 2021. We sought to better understand how institutions were supporting or planning to support individuals affected by the crisis in Afghanistan.

About one in five (19 percent) presidents reported that their institution was currently providing or planning to provide support to individuals affected by the crisis in Afghanistan (see Figure 8). By sector, one-quarter (25 percent) of presidents at private four-year institutions reported that their institution was currently providing or was planning to provide support, as did 17 percent of presidents at public two-year institutions and 16 percent of presidents at public four-year institutions.

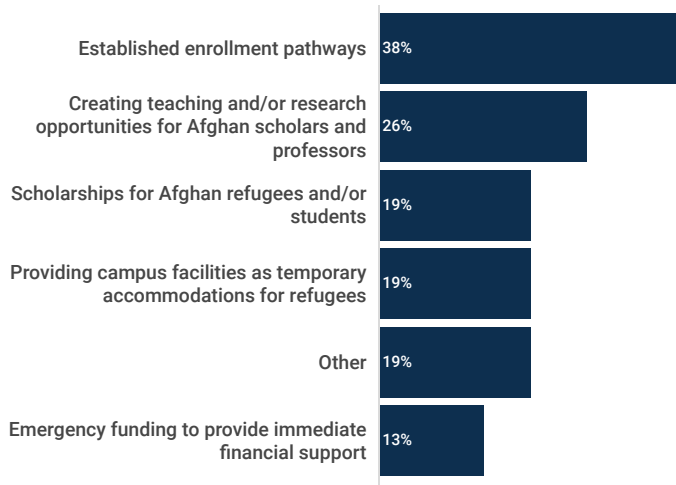
Figure 8. Institution Is Currently Providing or Planning to Provide Support to Individuals Affected by the Crisis in Afghanistan



Presidents who reported that their institution was currently providing or planning to provide support to individuals affected by the crisis in Afghanistan were presented with a list of five support services and asked to indicate those that their institution was providing or planning to provide (see Figure 9).

- The most commonly selected item from the list of support services for individuals affected by the crisis in Afghanistan was “established enrollment pathways for Afghan refugees and/or students” (38 percent), followed by “creating teaching and/or research opportunities for Afghan scholars and professors” (26 percent).
- Nearly one in five presidents selected “scholarships for Afghan refugees and/or students” and “providing campus facilities as temporary accommodations for refugees” (19 percent each).
- Thirteen percent of presidents stated that their institution was currently offering or planning to offer “emergency funding to provide immediate financial support” to those affected by the crisis in Afghanistan.

Figure 9. Support Services Institution Is Currently Providing or Planning to Provide to Individuals Affected by the Crisis in Afghanistan



ACE, in collaboration with the Institute of International Education, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, and the Association of American Universities, created a [resource kit](#) to help colleges and universities ensure that necessary structures and support networks are in place to welcome Afghan students and scholars.

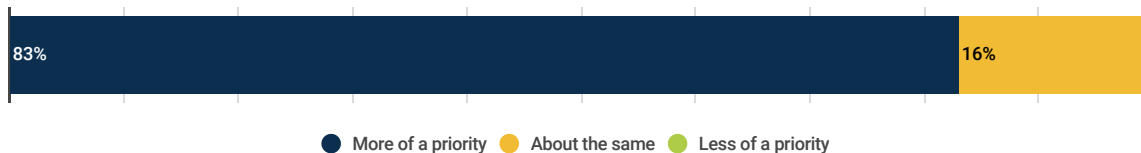
STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

Over the past year and a half, we surveyed presidents to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the mental health and well-being of students, faculty, and staff on their campuses, as well as how their institutions are supporting mental health and well-being in their campus community. In this survey, we sought to understand how presidents perceive the overall mental health of their student body and how their institution is supporting student mental health.

We asked presidents how the priority level of student mental health has changed at their institution, compared with years prior to the pandemic (see Figure 10). Overall, 83 percent of respondents reported that student mental health was more of a priority, 16 percent reported that it was about the same priority level, and 1 percent reported that it was less of a priority compared with years prior to the pandemic.

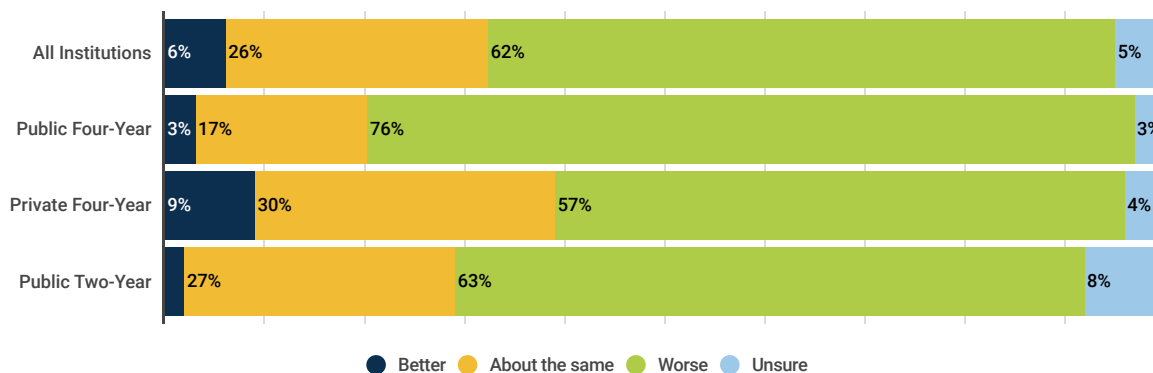
In 2019, ACE asked presidents a similar question in a [Pulse Point survey](#) around student mental health and well-being. We found that 81 percent of presidents reported student mental health was more of a priority than three years prior. The slight increase to 83 percent in this latest survey is not surprising due to the unique challenges students are facing in the midst of a pandemic.

Figure 10. Reported Change in Priority Level of Student Mental Health on Campus



Presidents were asked to rate the mental health of their student body this year compared with previous years (see Figure 11). The majority (62 percent) of respondents rated the mental health of their student body as “worse” this year compared with previous years, 26 percent rated student mental health as “about the same,” 6 percent rated it as “better,” and 5 percent reported that they were “unsure.” Over three-quarters (76 percent) of presidents at public four-year institutions rated the mental health of their student body as “worse” this year, as did 63 percent of presidents at public two-year institutions and 57 percent of presidents at private four-year institutions.

Figure 11. Reported Rating of Student Mental Health This Year Compared with Previous Years

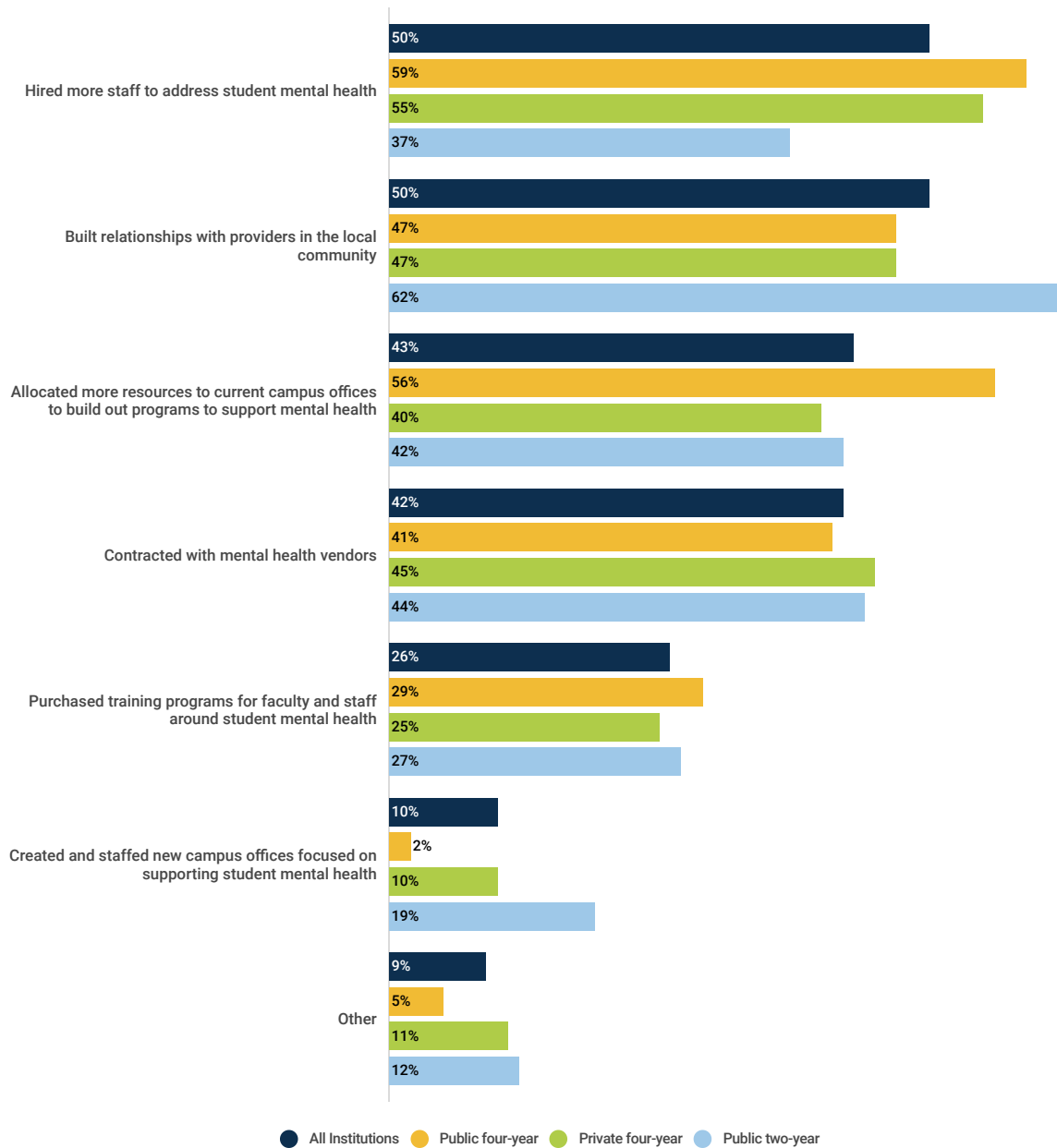


Presidents were given a set of six commonly utilized supports for student mental health and asked to select which supports their institutions utilized in preparation for the current academic year (see Figure 12). The most commonly selected supports were “hired more staff to address student mental health” (50 percent) and “built relationships with providers in the local community” (50 percent).

- About four in 10 presidents indicated that their institution “allocated more resources to current campus offices to build out programs to support mental health” (43 percent) and “contracted with mental health vendors” (42 percent).

- Roughly one-quarter (26 percent) of presidents indicated that their institution “purchased training programs for faculty and staff around student mental health,” 10 percent indicated that they “created and staffed new campus offices focused on supporting mental health,” and 9 percent indicated that they established some other support.
- Over half of presidents at public four-year (59 percent) and private four-year (55 percent) institutions reported that their institution had “hired more staff to address student mental health,” compared with 37 percent of presidents at public two-year institutions.
- Presidents at public two-year institutions (62 percent) were more likely than presidents at public four-year and private four-year institutions (47 percent each) to indicate that their institution “built relationships with providers in the local community.”

Figure 12. Steps Taken to Support Student Mental Health for Current Academic Year



The brief was prepared by Danielle Melidona, Morgan Taylor, and Ty C. McNamee. Melidona contributed to the design and distribution of the instrument, data cleaning and analysis, and development of the written brief. Taylor contributed to the design and distribution of the instrument, the development of the written brief, and data cleaning; prepared the figures; and supervised the project. McNamee contributed to data review and the development of the written brief.

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