

## COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS RESPOND TO COVID-19: 2021 SPRING TERM SURVEY, PART II

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Over the course of the past year, ACE has surveyed college and university presidents to capture how they are responding to the challenges of COVID-19. In February 2021, presidents reported on how the pandemic affected their spring enrollment and financial health, as well as adaptations made to their student services. In this second survey of the spring 2021 term, developed in partnership with our colleagues at the TIAA Institute, 244 presidents\* identified their most pressing concerns; changes in admissions processes and application numbers for fall 2021; long-term adaptations made to institutional operations; institutional practices to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion; and mental health and well-being. What follows is a summary of our key findings. This is the last survey in our Pulse Point series on COVID-19.

\* Of the 244 presidents, 98 lead private four-year institutions (40 percent), 69 lead public four-year institutions (28 percent), 53 lead public two-year institutions (22 percent), nine lead for-profit institutions (4 percent), eight lead private graduate-only institutions (3 percent), six lead private two-year institutions (2 percent), and one leads a less than two-year institution (0.4 percent).

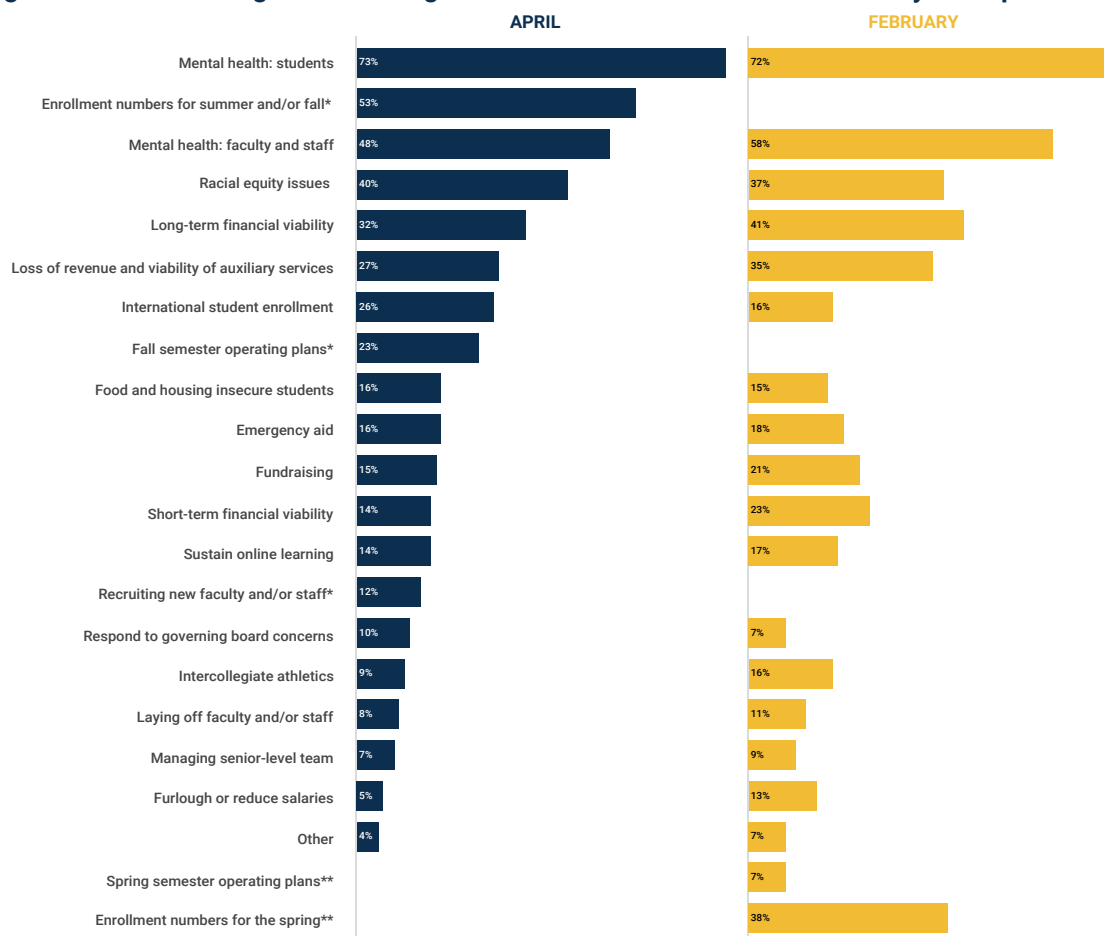
The survey was launched on April 19 and closed on April 30.

## MOST PRESSING ISSUES FOR PRESIDENTS

In the February survey, presidents were given a list of 19 issues and asked to select up to five they viewed as most pressing. In the April survey, presidents were given a list of 20 issues and asked to select up to five they currently view as most pressing (see Figure 1). For the fifth time in our survey series, the pressing issue most commonly selected by presidents was “mental health of students.” Almost three-quarters of all presidents (73 percent) identified student mental health as a pressing issue, up slightly from 72 percent in February.

- Across all sectors, “mental health of students” was the most commonly selected pressing issue; however, presidents at public two-year (79 percent) and public four-year (78 percent) institutions were slightly more likely than presidents at private four-year institutions (70 percent) to report this.
- Over half of all presidents reported “enrollment numbers for the summer and/or fall” (53 percent) as a pressing issue.
- While nearly half of all presidents selected “mental health of faculty and staff” (48 percent) as a pressing concern, this was a large decrease from the 58 percent of presidents who indicated this in the February survey. Despite this decline, mental health of faculty and staff remained the third most commonly selected pressing issue among presidents.
- “Racial equity issues” was among the top five most pressing concerns among college and university presidents, with 40 percent of leaders selecting this as a pressing issue, up from 37 percent in the February survey.
- The fifth most commonly selected pressing issue was “long-term financial viability of the institution,” with 32 percent of college and university presidents selecting this issue, down from 41 percent in the February survey.

**Figure 1. Most Pressing Issues Facing Presidents Due to COVID-19 in February and April 2021**



\* Denotes item available in the April survey only.

\*\*Denotes item available in the February survey only.

# UNDERGRADUATE APPLICATIONS AND ADMISSIONS

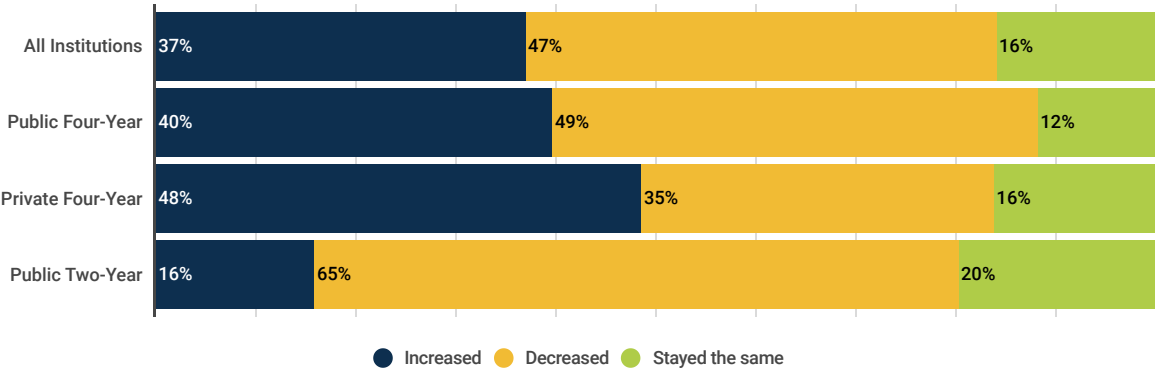
The pandemic has undoubtedly changed which students access higher education, as well as their path to enrolling. Many families continue to face higher financial burdens and uncertainty about the future as a direct result of COVID-19. As the pandemic has continued into college application and admissions season, we asked presidents whose institutions enroll undergraduate students (96 percent of our sample) about the effects of COVID-19 on undergraduate applications and admissions processes for fall 2021 relative to fall 2019 (prior to the pandemic).

## Changes in Undergraduate Applications for Fall 2021

Slightly less than half of all presidents (47 percent) reported a decrease in undergraduate applications for fall 2021 relative to fall 2019. A little more than one-third of all presidents (37 percent) reported an increase in undergraduate applications, and 16 percent reported applications stayed about the same.

- Nearly two-thirds of presidents at public two-year institutions (65 percent) noted a decrease in undergraduate applications for fall 2021, compared with fall 2019. This was much higher than the share of presidents at public four-year (49 percent) and private four-year (35 percent) institutions who reported a decrease.
- About half of presidents at private four-year institutions (48 percent) reported an increase in their undergraduate applications for fall 2021 relative to fall 2019, a much higher share than that of presidents at public four-year (40 percent) and presidents at public two-year (16 percent) institutions.

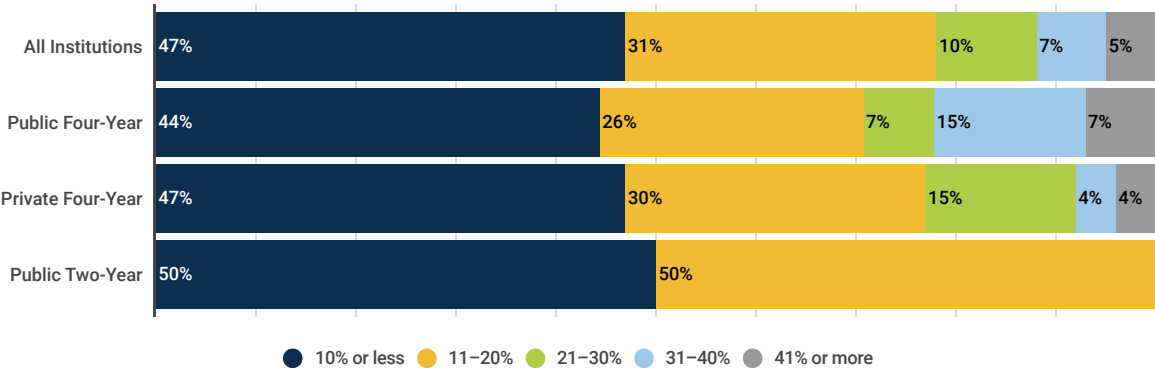
**Figure 2. Reported Change in Undergraduate Applications for Fall 2021 Relative to Fall 2019**



## Reported Increase in Applications

Among presidents who reported an increase in undergraduate applications, nearly half (47 percent) noted an increase of “10 percent or less,” 31 percent noted an increase of “11 to 20 percent,” 10 percent noted an increase of “21 to 30 percent,” 7 percent noted an increase of “31 to 40 percent,” and 5 percent noted an increase of “41 percent or more.”

**Figure 3. Reported Percent Increase in Fall 2021 Undergraduate Applications Relative to Fall 2019**



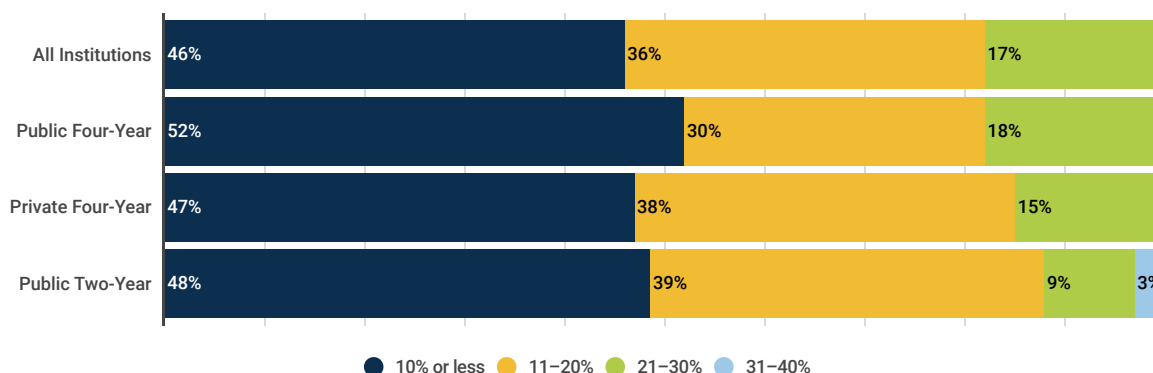
Presidents at public and private four-year institutions who observed an increase in applications largely attributed this shift to their marketing and outreach efforts, as well as changes to their admissions requirements. These efforts included increased advertising, hiring of enrollment management firms, and improved communication with applicants, often alongside waived fees and optional standardized testing. A smaller share of respondents leading four-year institutions also attributed application increases to financial aid access and affordability more broadly. In addition, some respondents from private four-year institutions noted that they benefited from in-person operations, with one college leader explaining, “We have increased marketing efforts and have continued on-campus recruitment with a number of health and safety restrictions.”

Presidents from both private four-year and public two-year institutions also attributed higher application numbers to their programmatic offerings, including career-focused majors and STEM education. Respondents from public four-year institutions were more inclined to report that they benefited from applicants who wanted to enroll in an institution closer to home.

### Reported Decrease in Applications

Among presidents who reported a decrease in undergraduate applications for fall 2021 relative to fall 2019, 46 percent noted a decrease of “10 percent or less,” 36 percent noted a decrease of “11 to 20 percent,” 17 percent noted a decrease of “21 to 30 percent,” and 1 percent noted a decrease of “31 to 40 percent.”

**Figure 4. Reported Percent Decrease in Fall 2021 Undergraduate Applications Relative to Fall 2019**



Institutional leaders who observed a decrease in applications for fall 2021 most often cited students’ pandemic-related personal challenges, financial difficulties, and perceptions of online learning as important factors in the decrease. Presidents at public four-year and public two-year institutions were particularly inclined to note the hardships experienced by prospective applicants, including health and safety concerns, childcare challenges, and uncertainty over the future. Similarly, several respondents noted that the pandemic posed serious financial challenges for students. One community college president shared:

“Our students were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Many had to leave school to find work to support their families. Many had to care for their children with schools shutdown. And many lost their employment, making college even more of a hurdle. Despite the additional resources we were able to provide to students through state and federal assistance, we could not address every need.”

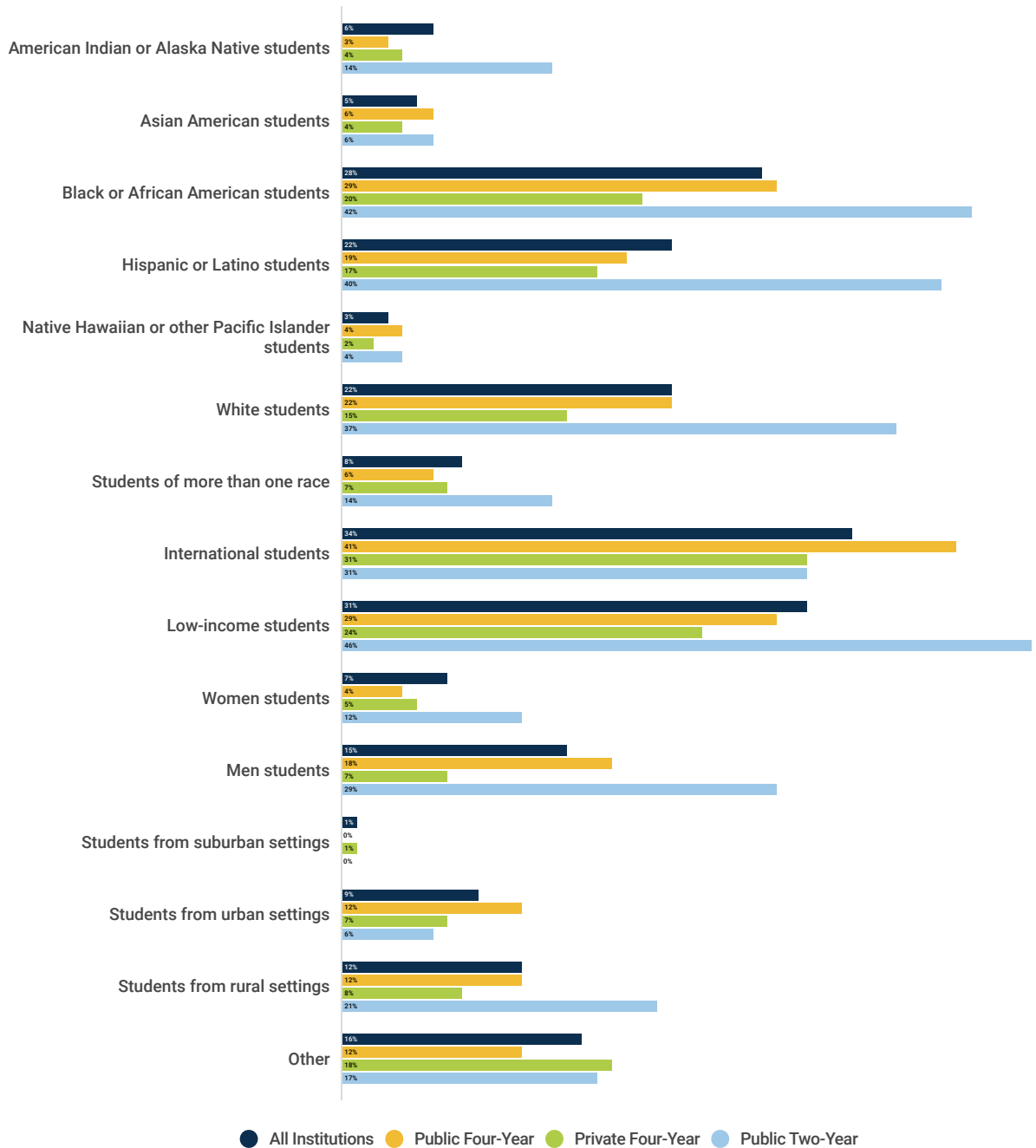
Presidents at public four-year institutions noted that students’ perceptions of online learning, competition for applicants, and adjusted admissions requirements in other sectors were factors driving in the decrease of fall 2021 applicants. Presidents at private four-year institutions disproportionately cited the pandemic’s negative impact on their outreach efforts (e.g., college fairs) and prospective students’ limited remote access to guidance counselors during the application process as factors in the decrease in applicants for the fall.

## Decrease in Applications for Specific Populations

We sought to better understand how the pandemic may be affecting application numbers for different student populations. Presidents were given a list of 15 student demographic groups and asked to indicate those for which their institution had a noticeable decline in applications for fall 2021. It is important to note that interpretation around what would be a “noticeable decline” was not provided. The findings below report the share of presidents who reported seeing declines in application numbers for particular demographic groups.

- The three most commonly chosen groups for which presidents reported a noticeable decline in applications were international students (34 percent), low-income students (31 percent), and Black or African American students (28 percent).
- International students were among the most commonly selected population among presidents at public four-year (41 percent) and private four-year (31 percent) institutions. However, presidents at public two-year institutions most frequently selected low-income students (46 percent).
- Presidents at public two-year institutions were much more likely to report a noticeable decline in applications among low-income students, Black or African American students, and Hispanic or Latino students than presidents at public and private four-year institutions.

**Figure 5. Student Populations with a Reported Noticeable Decline in Undergraduate Applications for Fall 2021**



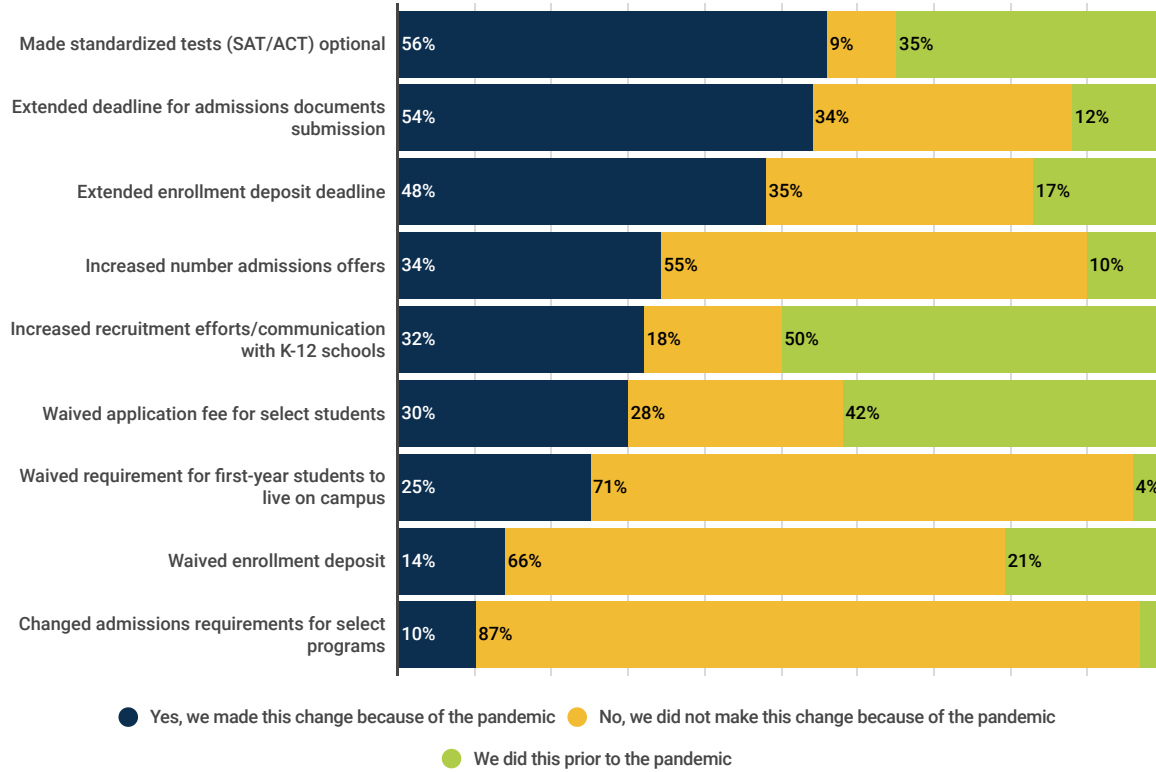
### Changes in Admissions Policies for Fall 2021

Many institutions have reported changes in their admissions process as a result of the pandemic. To get a better understanding of the pandemic’s effects on the admissions process, we provided presidents with a list of nine common policy changes and asked them to indicate whether their institution made the change because of the pandemic, made the change prior to the pandemic, or have not made the change.

- Over half of all presidents indicated that their institution made standardized tests like the SAT and ACT optional (56 percent) and extended deadlines for submitting admissions documents (54 percent) because of the pandemic.

- The majority of presidents reported that their institutions did not change admissions requirements for select programs (87 percent), waive on-campus housing requirements for first-year students (71 percent), nor waive enrollment deposits (66 percent) because of the pandemic.

**Figure 6. Changes to Admissions Process Implemented as a Direct Result of the Pandemic**



## OPERATIONAL ADAPTATIONS DUE TO COVID-19

The February survey asked presidents about adaptations made to student services as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The April survey asked presidents questions about operational changes their institution made because of the pandemic.

### Strategic Plans

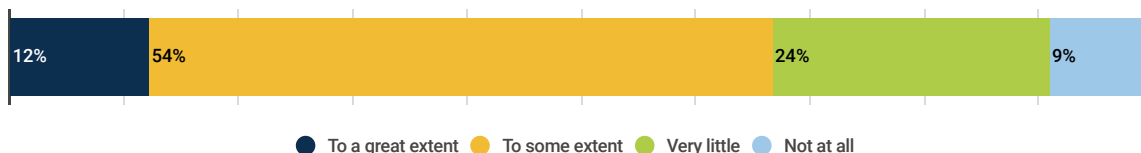
Presidents were asked if the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the implementation of their institution’s strategic plan. The majority of presidents indicated that the pandemic had disrupted the implementation of their strategic plan, with 9 percent of presidents reporting that it disrupted implementation “to a great extent,” 51 percent reporting a disruption “to some extent,” 26 percent reporting “very little” disruption. Twelve percent of presidents reported no disruption in the implementation of their institution’s strategic plan, and 2 percent of presidents reported that their institution did not have a strategic plan.

**Figure 7. Reported Level of Disruption in the Implementation of the Institution’s Strategic Plan Due to COVID-19**



Presidents who reported some level of disruption in the implementation of their institution's strategic plan were asked if their strategic plan would be modified to take the effect of the pandemic into account. Twelve percent of presidents reported that their strategic plan would be modified "to a great extent," 54 percent reported that their strategic plan would be modified "to some extent," 24 percent reported that their strategic plan would be modified "very little," and 9 percent reported that their strategic plan would not be modified at all.

**Figure 8. Reported Degree to Which the Institution's Strategic Plan Will Be Modified as a Result of the Pandemic**



Presidents who noted that their strategic plan would be modified to account for the effect of the pandemic were asked to elaborate on how their plans might be modified. Several presidents noted that their institutions were in the process of reevaluating and gathering stakeholder feedback on their strategic plans, hoping to have a clearer shift in direction by the summer or fall. Respondents most commonly cited goals of adjusting institutional priorities in response to demand for online learning and telework—a priority among presidents at private four-year and public two-year institutions, in particular. Those with more definitive understandings of their refined strategic plan commonly anticipate delayed timelines for accomplishing goals, with many also relaying interest in shorter-term strategic plans to account for continued changes in college resources and markets.

Reevaluations of enrollment targets and financial health were additional priorities, most notably for leaders of private four-year and public two-year institutions. For many respondents, these interests relate to plans of increased diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts and resources for underserved students. As one private four-year institution president respondent shared:

“Our trajectory was to become a more adult serving, adult friendly institution[—] this will remain. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion efforts have been more pronounced. Shaping our business model to be more affordable, while building better systems that enable us to reduce costs are important.”

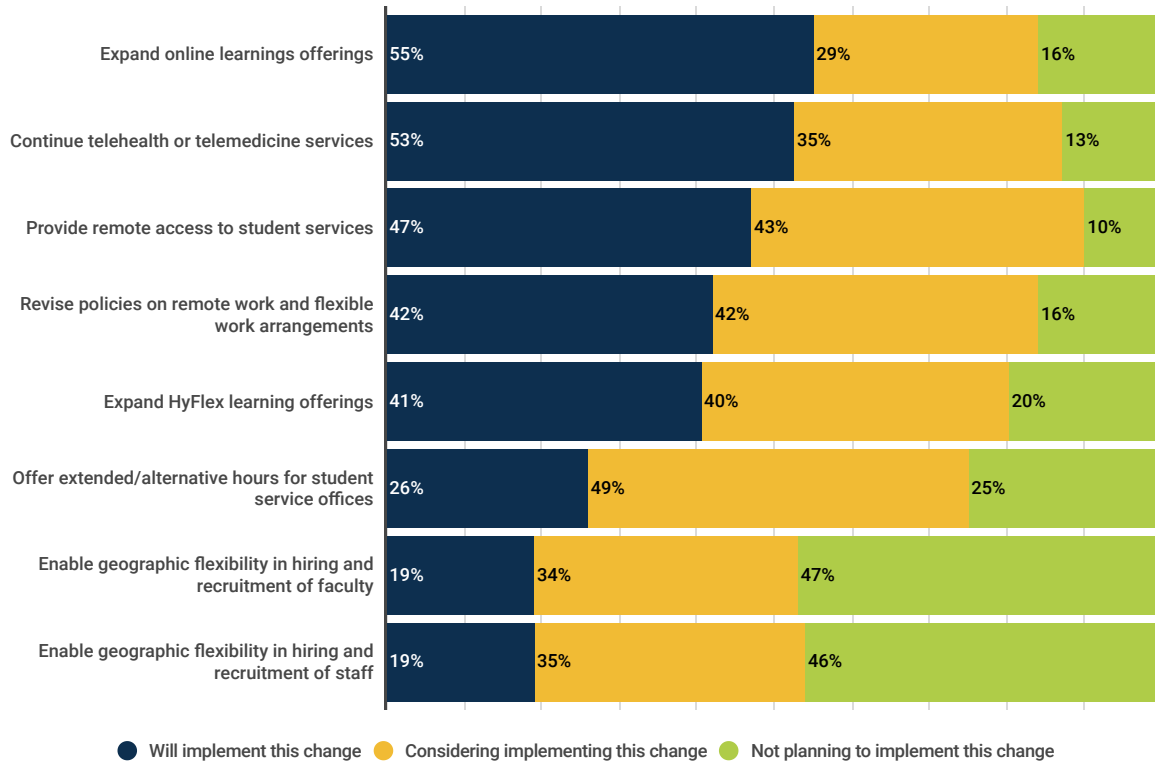
## Institutional Operations

We wanted to capture how institutions will adapt their operations in a post-pandemic world. Presidents were given a list of eight adaptations related to institutional operations and asked to indicate if their institution will implement the change, is considering implementing the change, or is not planning to implement the change.

- Over half of all presidents reported that their institution will implement changes to expand online learning offerings (55 percent) and continue telehealth or telemedicine services (53 percent). Slightly less than half of all presidents reported that they will implement changes to provide remote access to student services (47 percent).
- The areas in which presidents at public four-year institutions were more likely to indicate their institution will implement changes include expanding online learning offerings (54 percent), continuing telehealth or telemedicine services (53 percent), and providing remote access to student services (45 percent).
- Over two-thirds of presidents at public two-year institutions reported their institution will implement changes to expand online learning offerings (71 percent), provide remote access to student services (69 percent), and expand HyFlex learning offerings (67 percent).
- The areas in which presidents at private four-year institutions were more likely to indicate their institution will implement changes include continuing telehealth or telemedicine services (49 percent), followed by expanding online learning offerings (45 percent), and revising policies related to remote work and flexible work arrangements (45 percent).



**Figure 9. Plans for Adaptations to Institutional Policies and Practices After the Pandemic**

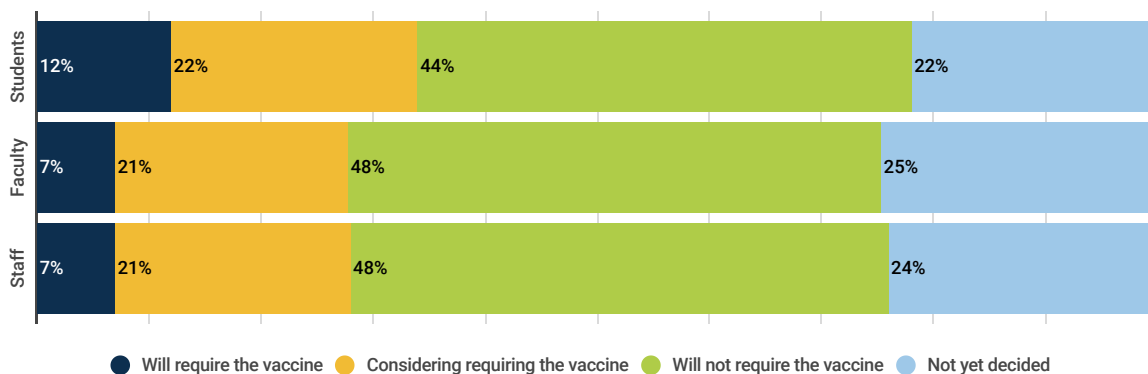


### Fall Vaccine Requirements

With expanded eligibility and supply of the COVID-19 vaccine across the country, some institutions have indicated they will require students, faculty, and staff coming to campus in the fall to be vaccinated prior to the start of the term. We asked presidents if they are planning to require the vaccine, are considering requiring the vaccine, are not planning to require the vaccine, or have not yet decided about requiring the vaccine for students, faculty, and staff prior to coming to campus this fall.

- Slightly less than half of all presidents reported that they will not require the vaccine for faculty and staff prior to coming to campus in the fall (48 percent each). A lower share of presidents reported that they will not require the vaccine for students prior to coming to campus (44 percent).
- A higher share of presidents reported that they will require the vaccine for students (12 percent) than the share who reported that it will be required for faculty and staff (7 percent each).

**Figure 10. Institutional Decisions on Requiring COVID-19 Vaccines for Fall**



## INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES TO PROMOTE DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

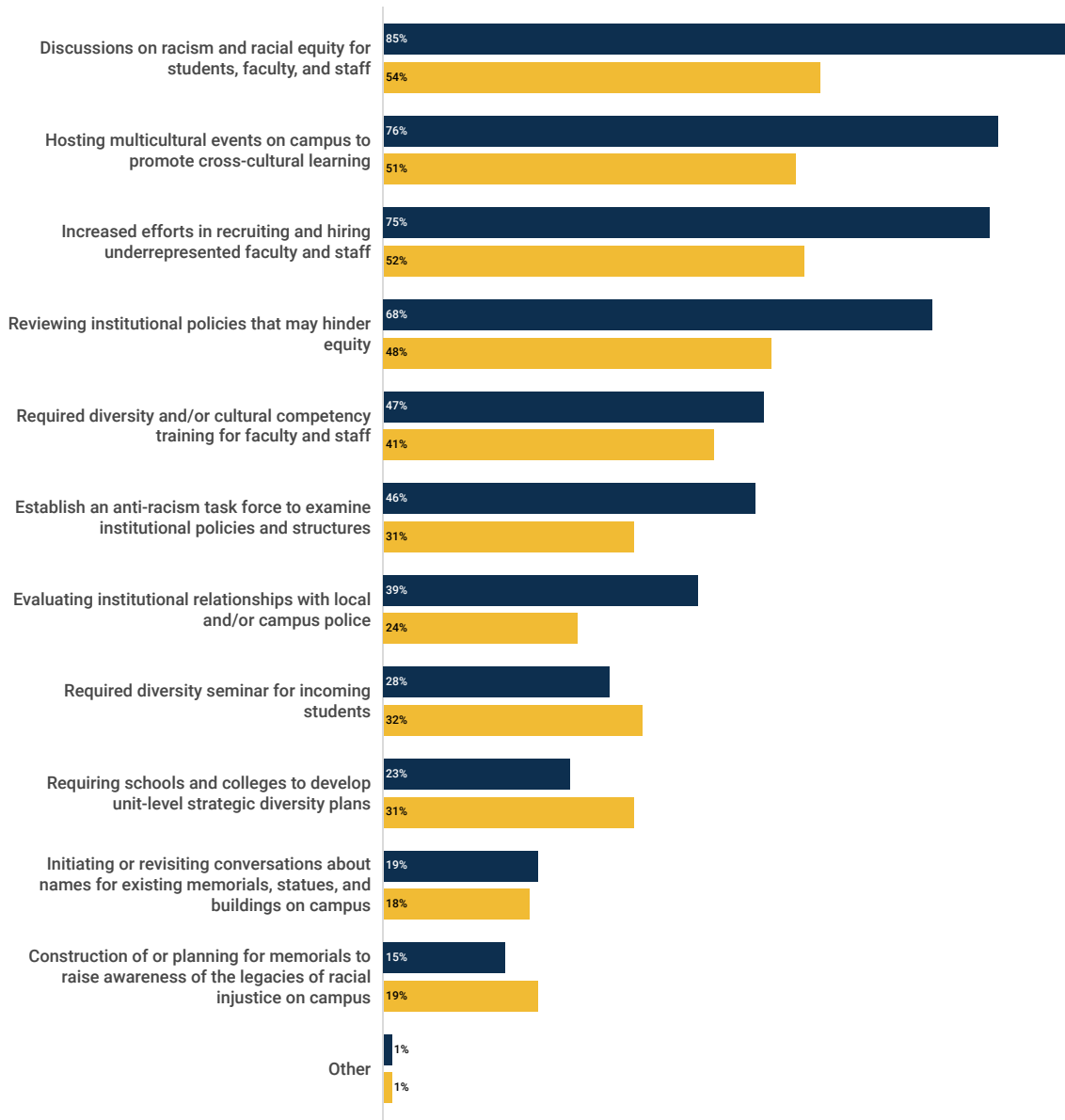
The COVID-19 pandemic shed light on the vast inequities our nation's communities of color face in all areas of American society, including healthcare and higher education. Coupled with an ongoing reckoning with racism in our nation, this has led many institutional leaders to reinforce or expand their efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion on their campus. Presidents were asked a series of questions around what their institutions are doing to promote racial equity and inclusion on campus.

### Promoting an Anti-Racist Campus Climate

Presidents were provided with a list of 12 anti-racist initiatives and asked to select whether each initiative was in place for the current academic year and would be in place for the upcoming academic year. Overall, presidents indicated greater implementation of these initiatives in the current year than in the upcoming 2021–22 academic year.

- The most commonly selected anti-racist initiatives that presidents marked as underway on their campus in the current 2020–21 academic year were “discussions on racism and racial equity for students, faculty, and staff” (85 percent), “hosting multicultural events on campus to promote cross-cultural learning” (76 percent), “increased efforts in recruiting and hiring underrepresented faculty and staff” (75 percent), and “reviewing institutional policies that may hinder equity” (68 percent).
- For the 2021–22 academic year, the majority of presidents indicated that several anti-racist initiatives will be in place, including “discussions on racism and racial equity for students, faculty, and staff” (54 percent), “increased efforts in recruiting and hiring underrepresented faculty and staff” (52 percent), and “hosting multicultural events on campus to promote cross-cultural learning” (51 percent).

**Figure 11. Availability of Anti-Racist Initiatives on Campus**



● My institution is doing this in the current academic year (2020–21) ● We are planning to do this for the 2021–22 academic year

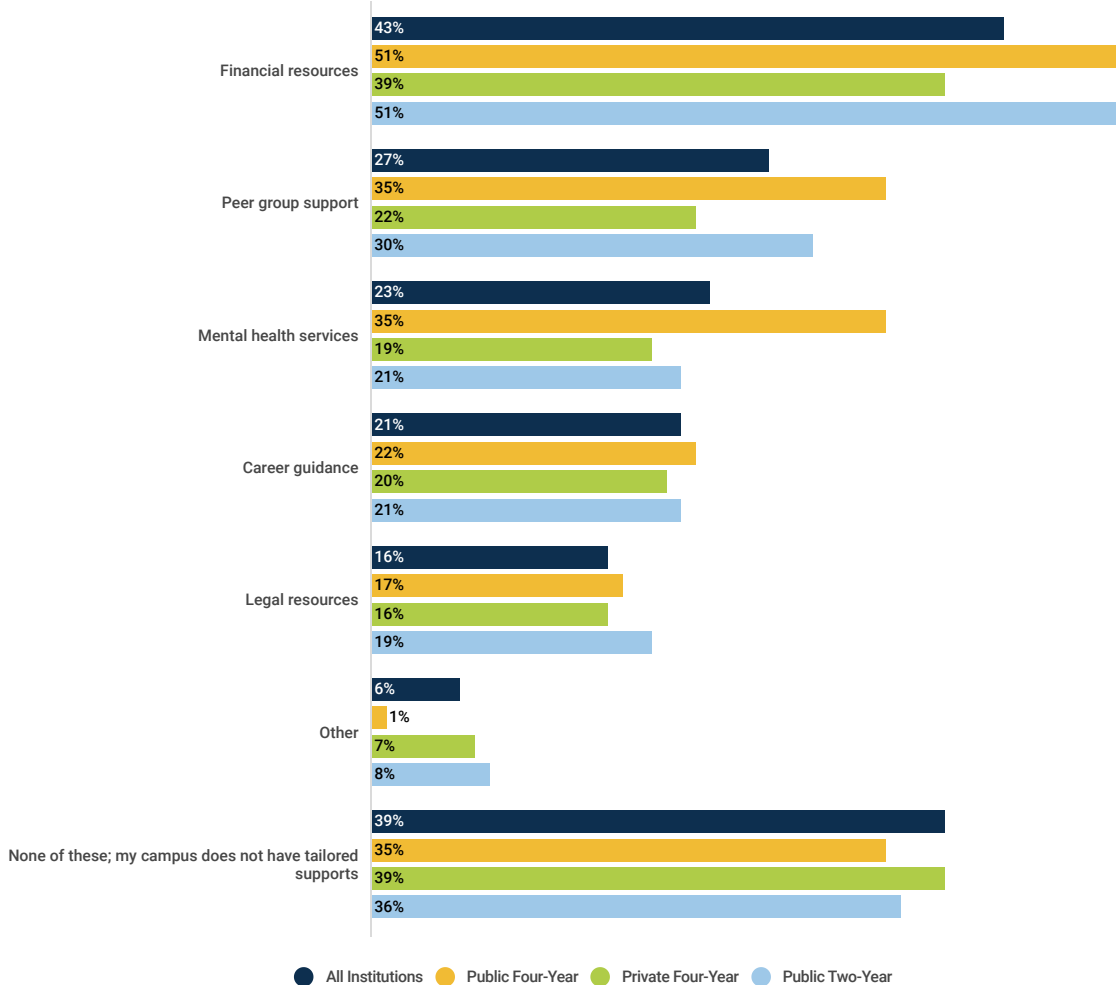
The pandemic has resulted in heightened visibility around anti-Asian racism in our country. Presidents were asked what actions their institution has taken in response to increased incidents and heightened awareness of anti-Asian racism. Colleges most commonly responded by issuing statements denouncing violence against Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities. These messages often promoted campus resources supporting students, faculty, and staff. Leaders also reported “creating space for AAPI employees to speak and be in community” and “reaching out to AAPI students to provide [a] support network” in their institutional responses. These efforts took various forms, including campus forums, rallies, vigils, and remote conferences. Some presidents reported new mandated DEI training for campus community members and/or modified campus programming. A smaller number of respondents noted that their institution has created councils or task forces.

## DACA and Undocumented Students

Given the challenges faced by DACA and undocumented students, we sought to better understand how institutions meet the unique needs of this population. Presidents were presented with a list of six student supports and asked to select those that their institution tailored specifically for DACA and undocumented students. It is important to note that institutions may provide support for DACA and undocumented students, but may not have tailored institutional support specifically for this population.

- Overall, 43 percent of all presidents indicated they had tailored financial resources for their DACA and undocumented students. Over half of all presidents at public four-year (51 percent) and public two-year (51 percent) institutions indicated their institution had tailored financial resources, as did 39 percent of presidents at private four-year institutions.
- Presidents at public four-year institutions (35 percent) were much more likely than presidents at public two-year (21 percent) and private four-year (19 percent) institutions to indicate they had tailored mental health services for DACA and undocumented students.
- Presidents at public four-year institutions (35 percent) and public two-year institutions (30 percent) were more likely than presidents at private four-year institutions (22 percent) to indicate their institution had peer group support specifically for DACA and undocumented students.
- About four in 10 presidents (39 percent) indicated their institution did not have tailored student supports specifically for DACA and undocumented students.

**Figure 12. Tailored Institutional Supports for DACA and Undocumented Students**



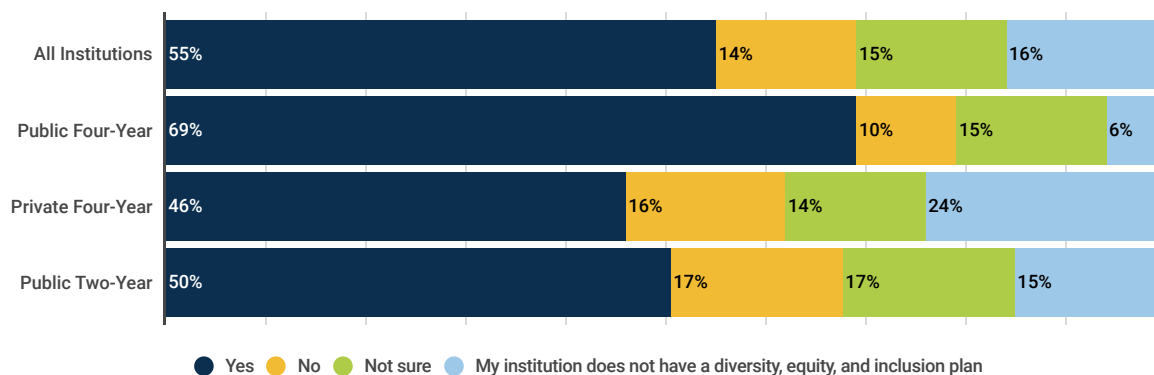
## MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

### Mental Health Initiatives and the DEI Plan

Many institutions are creating and implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion plans to dismantle systemic racism and create welcoming communities for their historically underrepresented students, faculty, and staff. To gain a better understanding of how these DEI plans may more actively support the mental health of marginalized communities, presidents were asked whether their DEI plans included initiatives that support the mental health of historically underrepresented students.

- More than half of all presidents (55 percent) indicated their campus diversity, equity, and inclusion plan includes initiatives that support the mental health of historically underrepresented students.
- Public four-year institution presidents (69 percent) were much more likely to indicate their DEI plans included mental health initiatives for historically underrepresented students than presidents of public two-year (50 percent) and private four-year (46 percent) institutions.

**Figure 13. Campus Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan Includes Initiatives to Support Mental Health of Historically Underrepresented Students**



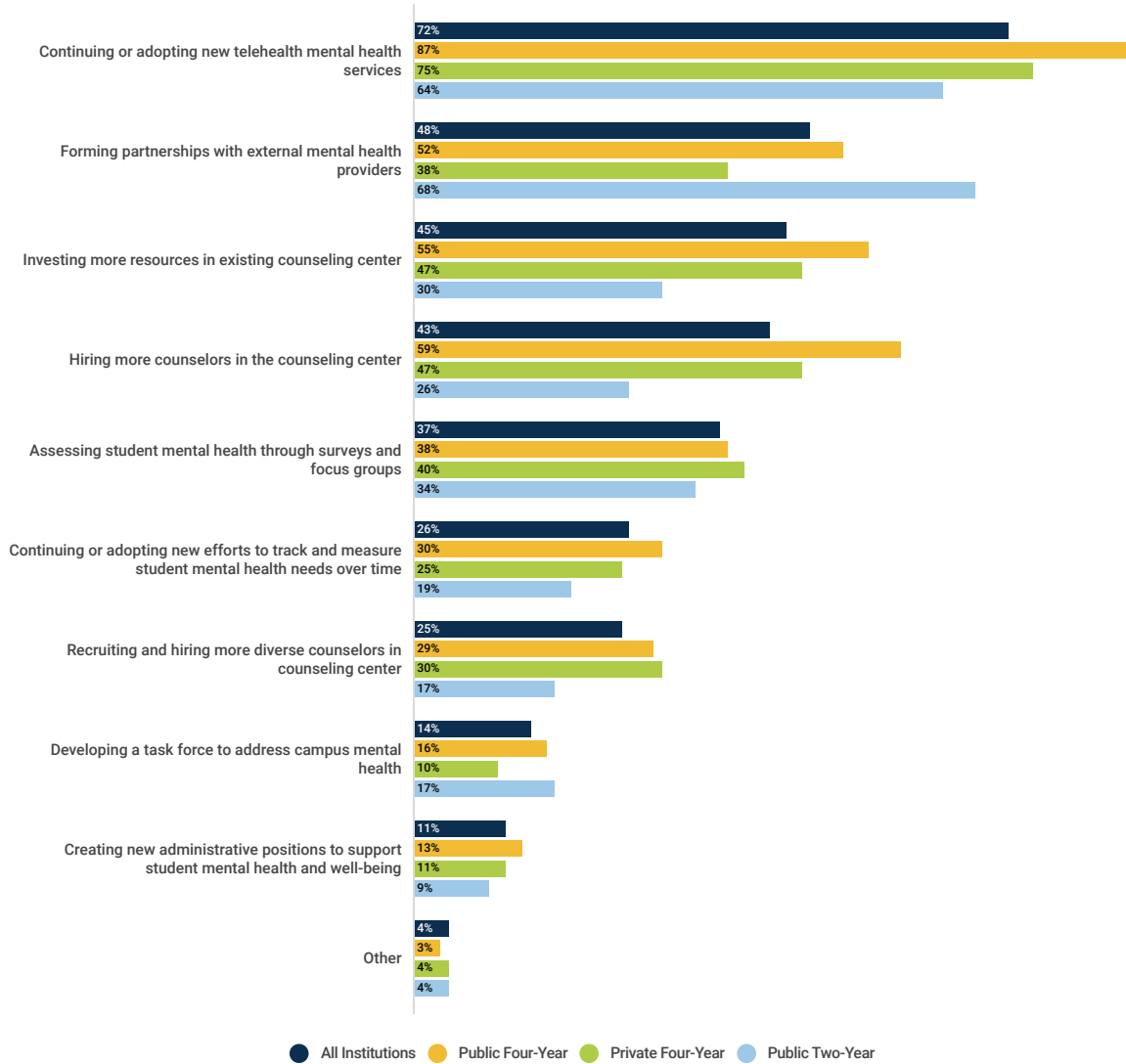
### New Practices and Broader Efforts to Address Mental Health

Student mental health has been one of the most pressing issues for college and university presidents across all of our COVID-19 surveys. In this survey, we sought to better understand how institutional leaders were addressing this issue on their own campuses. Presidents were given a list of 10 practices and efforts that support mental health and were asked to select those that were new on their campus, relative to those in place prior to the pandemic.

- The most commonly selected new practice to support mental health was “continuing or adopting new telehealth mental health services” (72 percent), followed by “forming partnerships with external mental health providers” (48 percent), “investing more resources in the existing counseling center” (45 percent), and “hiring more counselors in the counseling center” (43 percent).
- Presidents at public four-year institutions (87 percent) were much more likely to indicate that they were “continuing or adopting new telehealth mental health services” than presidents of private four-year (75 percent) and public two-year (64 percent) institutions.
- The most commonly selected new practice among presidents at public two-year institutions was “forming partnerships with external mental health providers” (68 percent). Presidents of public two-year institutions were also more likely than presidents of four-year institutions to indicate this was a new practice or effort to support mental health.

- Public four-year institution presidents (59 percent) were much more likely to indicate “hiring more counselors in the counseling center” as a new practice than presidents of private four-year (47 percent) and public two-year (26 percent) institutions.

**Figure 14. New Practices and Efforts to Support Mental Health as a Result of the Pandemic**

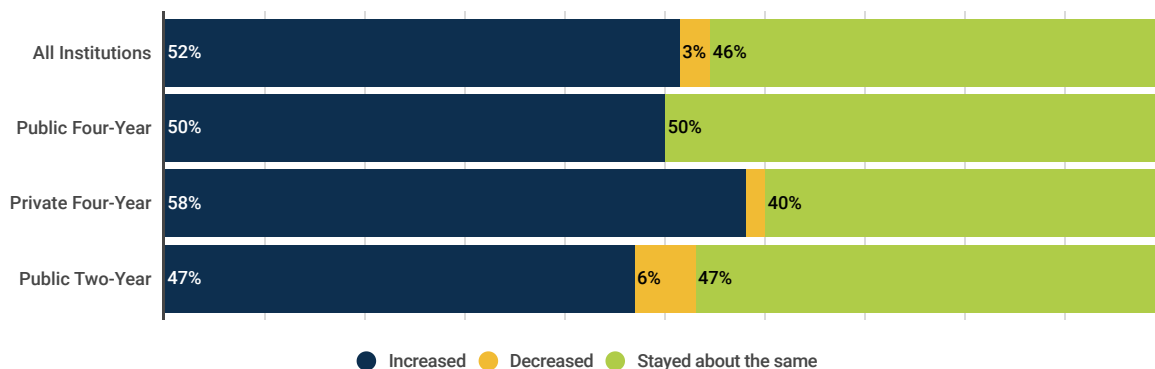


### Allocation of Mental Health Resources in the New Academic Year

COVID-19 has brought budget challenges alongside rising concerns about student mental health and well-being. Presidents were asked how their budget had changed to support the mental health of students, faculty, and staff for the 2021–22 academic year.

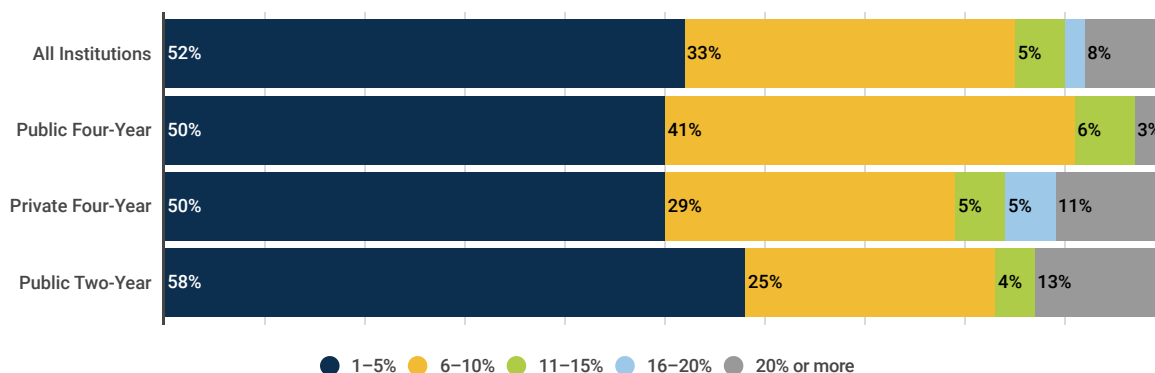
- Over half of all presidents (52 percent) indicated that their budget to support the mental health of students, faculty, and staff had increased for the upcoming academic year.
- Presidents at private four-year institutions (58 percent) were more likely than presidents at public institutions to report that their budget had increased to support the mental health of students, faculty, and staff for next academic year.

**Figure 15. Reported Change in Budget to Support Mental Health for 2021–22 Academic Year**



Presidents who indicated that their budget had increased to support the mental health of students, faculty, and staff were then asked to indicate the respective percent increase in their budget for the 2021–22 academic year. Over half of all presidents (52 percent) indicated a budget increase of “1 to 5 percent,” 33 percent indicated a budget increase of “6 to 10 percent,” 5 percent indicated an increase of “11 to 15 percent,” 2 percent indicated an increase of “16 to 20 percent,” and 8 percent indicated an increase of “more than 20 percent.”

**Figure 16. Reported Percent Increase in Budget to Support Mental Health for 2021–22 Academic Year**



## Resources and Policies for Addressing the Mental Health and Well-Being of Faculty and Staff

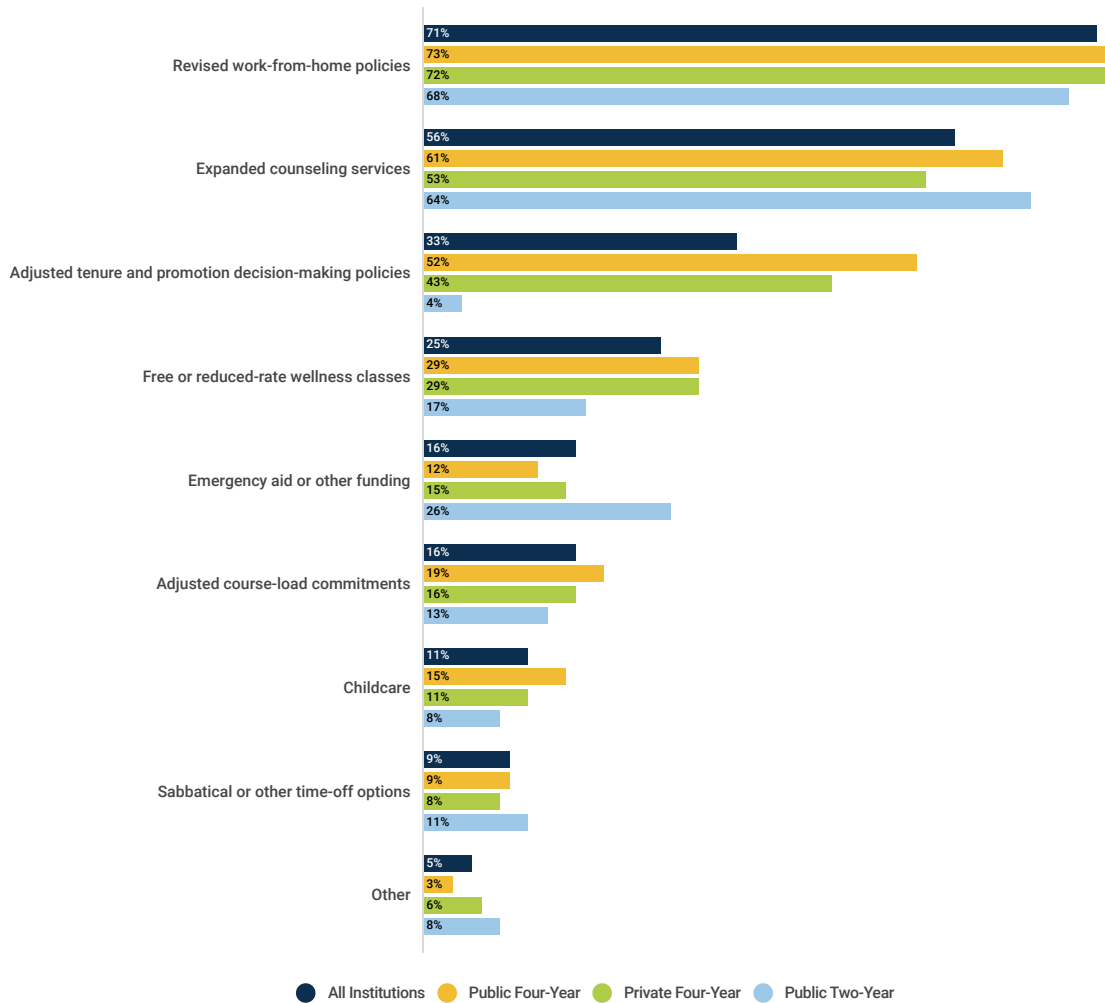
The mental health and well-being of faculty and staff has also been a top-of-mind issue for college and university presidents, especially as the pandemic continues to impact the personal and professional lives of those who teach, research, guide, and support students in classrooms and labs. In order to better understand how institutions are supporting faculty mental health and well-being, we provided presidents with a list of eight common resources and policies and asked them to select those that their institution was extending to faculty.

- Nearly three-quarters of all presidents (71 percent) indicated that they had “revised their work-from-home policies” for faculty, followed by “expanded counseling services” (56 percent) and “adjusted tenure and promotion decision-making policies” (33 percent).
- “Revised work-from-home policies” was the most commonly selected policy to support faculty mental health and well-being across presidents of all sectors, with 73 percent of presidents at public four-year institutions, 72 percent of presidents at private four-year institutions, and 68 percent of presidents at public two-year institutions selecting this policy.
- Presidents at public four-year institutions (52 percent) were more likely to indicate their institution had “adjusted tenure and promotion decision-making policies” than presidents at private four-year institutions (43 percent).

Four percent of presidents at public two-year institutions indicated that they adjusted tenure policies; however, it is important to note that public two-year institutions are less likely to have these policies.

- Presidents at public two-year institutions (26 percent) were more likely to indicate their institution was extending “emergency aid or other funding” for faculty than presidents at public four-year (12 percent) and private four-year (15 percent) institutions.

**Figure 17. Resources or Policies Extended to Support Faculty Mental Health and Well-Being**



We asked presidents a similar question about what resources or policies they had extended to support staff mental health and well-being, as the pandemic has impacted the lives of these individuals who guide and support students, as well as ensuring ongoing operations of the institution. Presidents were provided a list of common resources and policies that support the mental health and well-being of staff, and were asked to select all that apply.

- Three out of four presidents (75 percent) indicated that they had “revised their work-from-home policies” to support the mental health and well-being of staff, followed by 66 percent of presidents who indicated that they had implemented “flexible schedule and/or hours” and 55 percent who indicated that they had “expanded counseling services.”
- Presidents at private four-year institutions (74 percent) were more likely to indicate that they expanded “flexible schedule and/or hours” to support staff mental health and well-being than presidents at public four-year (67 percent) and public two-year (53 percent) institutions.



**Figure 18. Resources or Policies Extended to Support Staff Mental Health and Well-Being**

