

COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS RESPOND TO COVID-19: APRIL 2020 SURVEY

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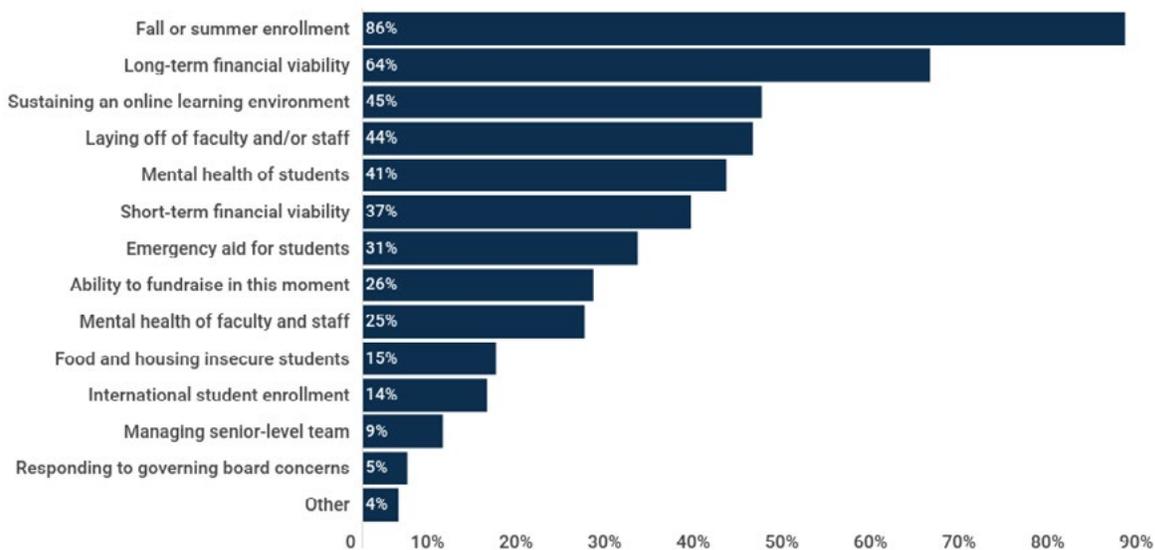
In a time of unprecedented crisis, the American Council on Education (ACE) knows that it is more valuable than ever to have an up-to-date record of the concerns and challenges faced by college and university presidents. In early April, ACE fielded the first of 12 monthly Pulse Point surveys to gather presidents’ insights and experiences with COVID-19 and its effects on their institutions and the larger higher education landscape. In this first survey, 192 presidents* shared their most pressing concerns and assessed their institution’s capacity and needs on prominent COVID-19 issues, including financial impact, remote learning, and student mental health.

MOST PRESSING ISSUES FOR PRESIDENTS

From a list of 14 issues, presidents were asked to select up to five they deem most pressing (see Figure 1).

- Overall, 86 percent of presidents selected “fall or summer enrollment numbers,” 64 percent selected “long-term financial viability,” 45 percent selected “sustaining an online learning environment,” 44 percent selected “laying off of faculty and/or staff,” and 41 percent selected “mental health of students.”
- Across all sectors, presidents most commonly selected “fall or summer enrollment numbers” and “long-term financial viability.” However, the third most selected issue differed by sector: presidents at public four-year institutions selected “emergency aid for students” (54 percent); presidents at private four-year institutions selected “laying off of faculty and/or staff” (49 percent); and presidents at public two-year institutions selected “sustaining an online learning environment” (61 percent).

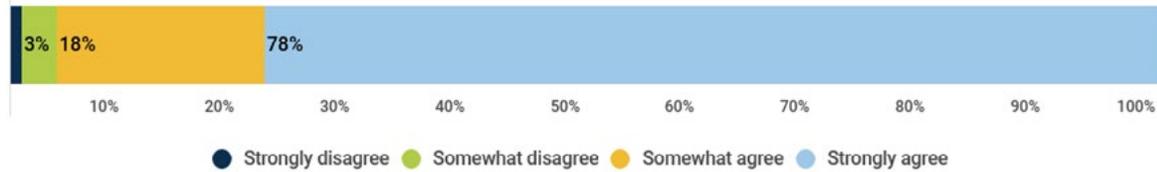
Figure 1. Most Pressing Issues Facing Presidents Due to COVID-19



*Of the 192 presidents, 41 lead public four-year institutions (21 percent), 107 lead private four-year institutions (56 percent), 33 lead public two-year institutions (17 percent), five lead private two-year institutions (3 percent), and six lead for-profit institutions (3 percent). Given sample size limitations, we caution against generalizing these findings to all colleges and universities or relying too heavily on comparisons across institutional sector.

Anticipating enrollment as a top-of-mind issue for presidents, we asked them to indicate on a four-point scale how concerned they were about COVID-19’s impact on fall enrollment (see Figure 2). Virtually all presidents (96 percent) indicated they were concerned about fall enrollment—78 percent of presidents said they “strongly agree” with the prompt, while 18 percent said they only “somewhat agree.”

Figure 2. Presidents’ Concern About Fall Enrollment

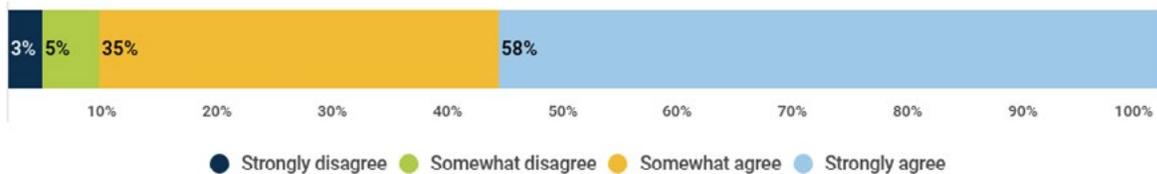


FINANCIAL ACTIONS TAKEN OR ANTICIPATED

Using a four-point scale, we asked presidents to indicate their level of agreement with the statement: *I am concerned about how my institution will weather the financial impact of COVID-19* (see Figure 3).

Again, almost all presidents (93 percent) indicated that they at least somewhat agreed with this statement (58 percent said they “strongly agree,” and 35 percent said they “somewhat agree”).

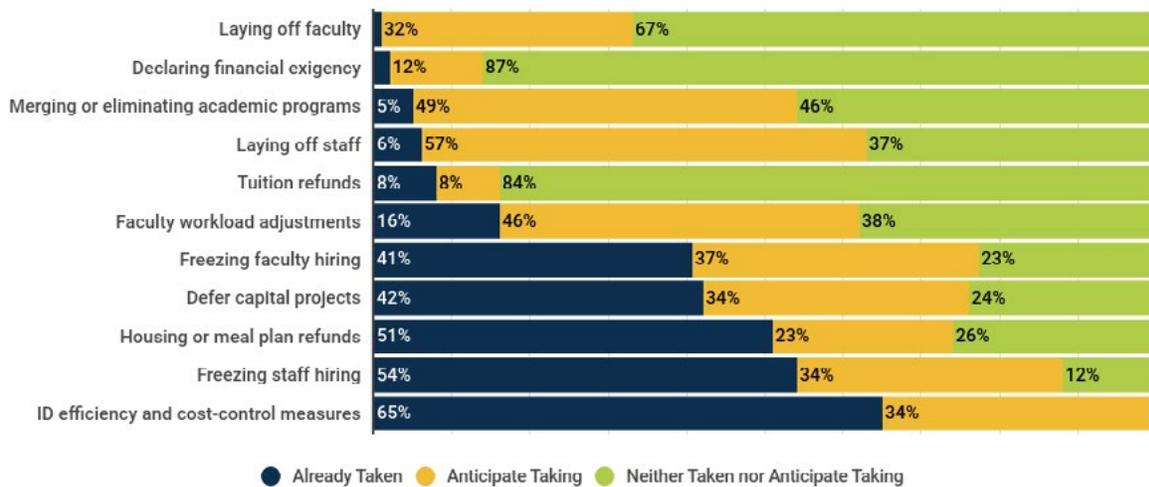
Figure 3. Presidents’ Concern About Weathering the Financial Impact of COVID-19



Presidents were asked to review 11 finance-related actions and indicate that they (1) had “already taken,” (2) “anticipate taking,” or (3) had “neither taken nor anticipate taking” each action (see Figure 4).

- Nearly two-thirds of presidents indicated that they had already begun identifying efficiency and cost-control measures. Virtually all of the rest of presidents said they anticipate taking such action in the future.
- Slightly more than half of presidents have already implemented a staff-hiring freeze (54 percent) or issued housing and/or meal plan refunds (51 percent), the next most common actions taken.
- While few presidents reported laying off staff (6 percent), merging or eliminating academic programs (5 percent), or laying off faculty (1 percent), these were among the top actions presidents anticipated taking in the future. In fact, 57 percent of presidents said they anticipate laying off staff, 49 percent anticipate merging or eliminating academic programs, and 32 percent anticipate laying off faculty.

Figure 4. Financial Actions Taken or Considered by Presidents



Some of the most interesting differences by sector occurred around the actions of (1) laying off faculty, (2) tuition refunds, (3) deferring capital projects, and (4) merging or eliminating academic programs.

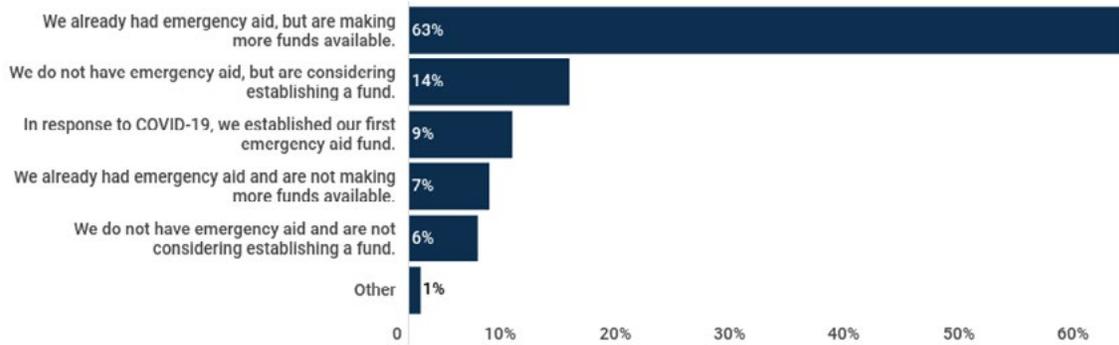
- Presidents at public four-year institutions were the most likely (76 percent) to indicate that they do not anticipate laying off faculty, compared with 68 percent of presidents at private four-year institutions and only 52 percent of presidents at public two-year institutions.
- Roughly 90 percent of presidents at public and private four-year institutions said they do not anticipate issuing tuition refunds. However, only 56 percent of presidents at public two-year institutions said the same.
- Half of presidents at private four-year institutions have already deferred capital projects, while this was true for only around 30 percent of presidents at public four-year and two-year institutions.
- Finally, 50 percent of presidents at public four-year institutions said they do not anticipate merging or eliminating academic programs. This was also true for 44 percent of presidents at private four-year institutions, but only 31 percent of presidents at public two-year institutions.

EMERGENCY AID FOR STUDENTS

We know that before the COVID-19 crisis, a growing number of colleges and universities were establishing emergency aid funds to assist students. To better understand the pandemic’s impact on this practice, we asked presidents to select the statement that best described their institutions from a list of five (see Figure 5).

- Overall, 63 percent of presidents indicated that their institutions had already established emergency aid, but are now making more funds available; 14 percent said their institutions currently do not have an emergency aid fund, but that they are considering establishing a fund; 9 percent said that in direct response to COVID-19, they created their first emergency aid fund; 7 percent said they had already established emergency aid and are not making additional funds available; and 6 percent said that their institutions currently do not have emergency aid and are not considering establishing a fund.
- More than half of presidents within each sector reported that their institutions had already established emergency student aid programs prior to the pandemic, but are now making more funds available. This was the case for 83 percent of presidents at public four-year institutions, 75 percent of presidents at public two-year institutions, and 54 percent of presidents at private four-year institutions.

Figure 5. Emergency Aid Funds for Students

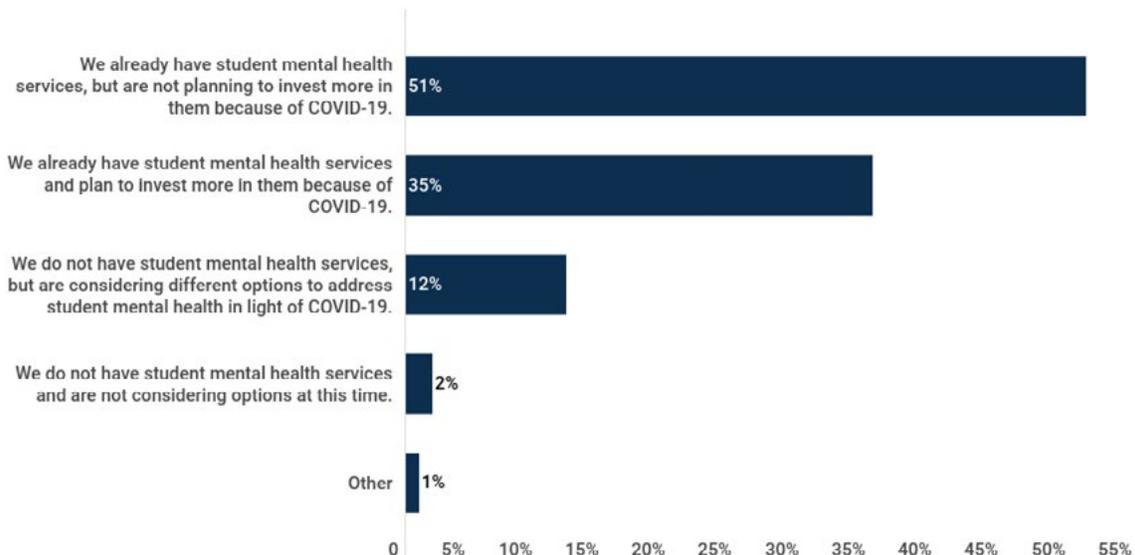


STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

We also know that student mental health is a major concern of presidents. To better understand COVID-19’s impact on institutional responses to student mental health, we asked presidents to select the statement that best described their institutions from a list of five (see Figure 6).

- Just over half (51 percent) of presidents indicated that their institutions already offer student mental health services, but they are not making more funds available; 35 percent of presidents said their institutions already offer student mental health services, and they plan to invest more in them because of COVID-19; 12 percent of presidents said they do not have student mental health services, but are considering different options to address student mental health in light of COVID-19; and 2 percent of presidents said their institutions do not have student mental health services and are not considering options at this time.
- Presidents at public two-year institutions were the most likely (24 percent) to report that their institutions do not have student mental health services, but are considering different options to address students’ needs. Only 5 percent of presidents at public four-year institutions and 8 percent of presidents at private four-year institutions said the same.
- Over half (54 percent) of presidents at public four-year institutions indicated that their institutions already have student mental health services and that they plan to invest more in them because of the pandemic. Approximately 30 percent of presidents at private four-year institutions and public two-year institutions said the same.

Figure 6. Student Mental Health Services

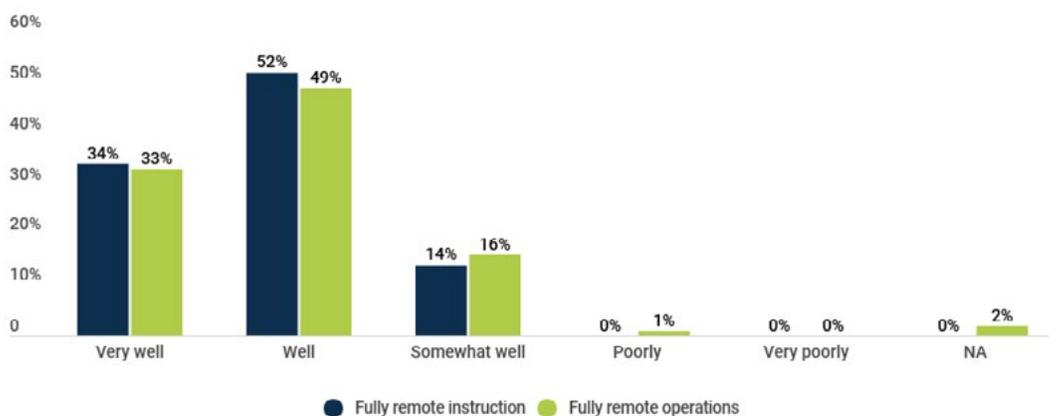


REMOTE LEARNING AND OPERATIONS

Using a five-point scale, presidents were asked to rate how well their institutions had transitioned to fully remote instruction and operations (see Figure 7).

- Nearly 86 percent of all presidents said their institutions transitioned either “well” or “very well.” The remaining 14 percent reported that the transition to fully remote instruction went only “somewhat well.”
- No presidents surveyed reported their instruction transition going “poorly” or “very poorly.”
- Presidents of private four-year institutions were the most likely to report the instruction transition as having gone “well or very well” (88 percent), followed by presidents of public four-year institutions (83 percent) and those at public two-year institutions (79 percent).
- Overall, presidents also described their institutions’ transition to fully remote operations as having gone “well” or “very well” (82 percent).
- Presidents of public two-year institutions were the most likely to report the operations transition as going either “well” or “very well” (91 percent), with presidents of public four-year institutions being the least likely to report this (78 percent).

Figure 7. How Well My Institution Has Transitioned to Fully Remote Instruction and Operations

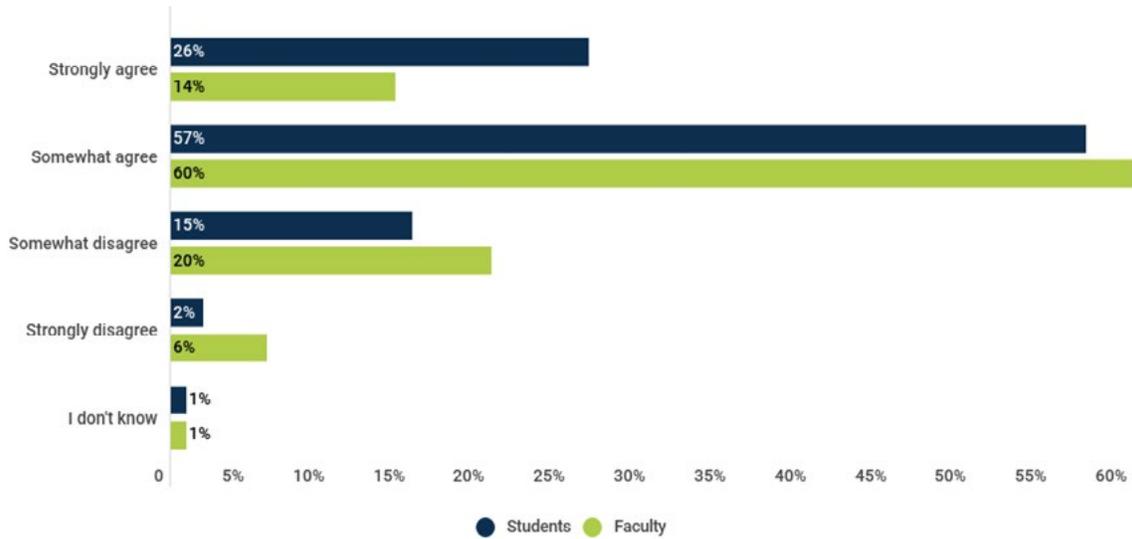


Using a four-point scale, presidents rated their level of agreement with two statements:

- (1) *Students at my institution were already familiar with the technologies required for transitioning to fully remote learning* and
- (2) *Faculty at my institution were already familiar with the technologies required for the transition to fully remote teaching* (see Figure 8).

- Nearly 83 percent of presidents rated that they “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” that students were already familiar with the necessary technologies.
- Seventy-four percent of presidents rated that they “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” that faculty were already familiar with the necessary technologies.
- By sector, presidents of private four-year institutions were the most likely to say their students were already familiar with these technologies (86 percent), while presidents of public two-year institutions were the most likely to say their faculty were already familiar with these technologies (81 percent).

Figure 8. Level of Agreement with Statements on Students and Faculty Familiarity with Remote Teaching and Learning Technologies



Finally, using the same four-point scale, presidents rated their level of agreement with the following statement: *My institution had made previous investments in information technology (IT) that positioned us well to respond to COVID-19* (see Figure 9).

- Nearly 90 percent of presidents said they “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree.”
- Presidents of private four-year institutions (92 percent) were the most likely to “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” with this statement, while 85 percent of presidents of both public four-year institutions and public two-year institutions said the same.

Figure 9. Level of Agreement with Statement on Previous Investments in Information Technology

