COVID-19 Transitions: An Update on Access, Barriers, and Supports Nine Months into the Pandemic

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In spring 2020, AHEAD reported on the perspectives of higher education professionals at the onset of the pandemic. In the early days of rapid transition to remote instruction and student services, professionals who work with disabled students reported widespread barriers to access that exceeded the experiences of the general student population (Scott & Aquino, 2020). Accounts of rapid development of virtual supports and extensive work to promote accessibility in quickly emerging online courses were top priorities. Attempts to support institutional planning and contribute to inclusive policies and practices were met with mixed results. Concurrently, professionals were facing their own obstacles in the transition to working remotely (Scott & Aquino, 2021).

In January 2021, AHEAD once again surveyed the membership of higher education professionals to get an update on persisting barriers to campus access and to learn about emerging modifications and strategies that hold promise for shaping inclusive campus practices in the future. Nine months into the pandemic, questions remain related to campus accessibility and student support. What have higher education professionals observed about student experiences and challenges? What stressors and supports do higher education professionals continue to face in their own work?

At this second data collection point, it is clear that change and fluidity have remained constant requirements. Over 95% of higher education professionals indicated that their campus offered online or mixed virtual and in-person learning in fall 2020; almost half reported that the planned instructional format changed after the term began. There was more variation in how campuses adapted the administrative work format for disability resource offices. While many survey respondents reported remote service delivery, others either maintained a fully in-person work plan (13%) or were given a choice of work formats (17%). Once again, almost half of survey respondents experienced a change in the planned administrative work format after the fall term began. The findings that follow reflect the experiences and resiliency of the professionals in this challenging time.

Major Findings

- Many areas that were reported as presenting barriers to disabled students in the spring 2020 AHEAD survey have improved including access to technology equipment, software, and Wi-Fi. Some campuses are still struggling with providing access to counseling and mental health services, as well as food and housing.
- Overall, disability resource professionals report that remote operating procedures for student disability services and accommodations are effective. One area of possible concern is the provision of notetaking accommodations.
- Disability resource professionals are being asked to do more with less. Survey respondents report an increase in the number of requested accommodations as well as an increase in the number of students registered with the disability resource office when compared with 2019 pre-pandemic data. At the same time, disability resource office operating budgets have been cut on a widespread basis.

- For disability resource professionals who are working remotely, access to technology has improved since spring 2020. Communication and collaboration across campus has improved at some institutions, but not all. Challenges remain with communicating with students not previously registered with the disability resource office.
- Institutional and administrative support for the disability resource office were among the challenges that received the lowest ratings for improvement since spring 2020.
- Disability resource professionals are providing campus leadership in COVID response efforts including participation in campus structures and committees, involvement in policy development, provision of training and instruction, and collaboration with other departments.

Has Access Improved for Disabled Students?

Many areas that were reported as presenting barriers to disabled students in the spring 2020 AHEAD survey have improved, but challenges remain. Almost half of higher education professionals reported that access had improved in areas related to technology including having needed equipment and devices, assistive technology programs, and network/Wi-Fi service. This was particularly true for survey participants at two-year public institutions who reported improvement in accessing the network/Wi-Fi (70%), having needed equipment/ devices (64%), and obtaining software and assistive technology programs (57%).

Other barriers identified in spring 2020 have resulted in more mixed levels of success. Access to counseling and mental health services improved on many campuses (45%) yet other survey respondents indicated that access to these services had not improved (14%) or had worsened since spring 2020 (16%). On some campuses, access to housing and food had not improved (14%) or worsened (15%) over the course of the pandemic. Survey participants at two-year public institutions reported a worsening of access to housing and food more often than other campuses (23%). A full list of barriers can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Changes in Barriers to Access for Disabled Students During COVID-19 (Nine Months into Pandemic), By Percent

	Improvement	No Improvement	Worsening of Conditions	Never a Barrier	Not Sure
Access to Counseling/ Mental Health Services	44.8	13.7	15.7	9.4	16.3
Access to Housing and Food	27.4	13.9	14.9	14.1	29.7
Access to Software, Assistive Technology Programs	45.7	17.1	4.0	20.4	12.8
Access to Network/ Wi-Fi	45.7	17.6	8.0	9.1	19.7
Communication with Instructors	36.1	22.3	14.3	11.3	16.0

Communication/ Collaboration with Other Students	27.3	21.1	16.7	8.8	26.2
Needing Devices/ Equipment	48.7	15.6	4.0	15.6	16.0

How Effective are Remote Disability Services?

Overall, survey respondents reported that remote disability services and accommodations were effective. Across a full range of access services, including for example testing accommodations, interpreter services, and alternate formats, less than 3% of survey respondents rated the modified remote procedures as not effective. Essential interactions with students including requesting previously approved accommodations, discussing new access barriers, and participating in the interactive process were strongly endorsed as effective under the modified remote operating procedures. A full list of services and accommodations can be found in Table 2. One exception to this positive picture was the area of notetaking accommodations. Nearly 10% of participants expressed concern that the remote accommodation procedures were not effective.

Table 2. Perceived Effectiveness of Support Services and Accommodations for Disabled Students (Nine Month into Pandemic), By Percent

	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not Effective	Do Not Know
Discussing New Access Barriers and Solutions	59.1	34.4	0.4	6.1
Providing Documentation of Disability	49.2	41.5	2.7	6.5
Receiving CART/ Typewell Services	41.2	22.3	2.1	34.5
Receiving Interpreter Services	43.5	23.5	2.1	30.8
Receiving Materials in Alternate Formats	54.1	34.1	1.3	10.5
Receiving Note Taking Accommodations	31.8	42.5	9.9	15.8
Receiving Testing Accommodations	49.5	40.5	2.2	8.0
Requesting Previously Approved Accommodations	83.8	10.2	0.2	5.8
Using Assistive Technology	32.7	53.2	2.9	11.2
Participating in Interactive Process	68.9	24.2	0.9	6.0

What are the Trends in Student Numbers and Use of the Disability Resource Office?

Disability resource professionals reported an increase in the number of requested accommodations as well as an increase in the number of students registering with the disability resource office when compared with 2019 pre-pandemic data. Forty-two percent (42%) of survey respondents reported that in fall 2020, the disability resource office experienced an increase in the number of requests for accommodations and services. Forty-five percent (45%) of disability resource offices observed an

increase in the number of students registered with the office when compared with 2019 office data. Many survey respondents reported the disability resource office had experienced greater numbers of students who disclosed with psychiatric and mental health disabilities when compared with 2019 data. Survey respondents at master's degree granting institutions (67%) and bachelor's degree granting institutions (64%) reported this more frequently than survey respondents at other types of institutions. As detailed in Table 3, over one-third of survey respondents reported an increase in students identifying with chronic illness or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Table 3. Reported Increase in Students Registered with the Disability Resource Office by Disability Category (Fall 2020 Compared to Fall 2019), By Percent

	Yes	No	Don't Know	Office Does Not Track	Not Applicable
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	38.4	23.9	26.0	7.8	3.9
Autism, autism spectrum disorder	22.3	36.5	29.3	7.8	4.1
Difficulty seeing (includes visual impairment and blindness)	12.8	47.3	27.6	7.9	4.4
Chronic illnesses (examples: diabetes, arthritis, epilepsy, HIV/AIDS, cancer)	35.0	26.7	26.3	8.2	3.9
Difficulty hearing (includes Deafness and hearing loss)	23.4	39.9	24.6	7.9	4.4
Intellectual disabilities (example: Down syndrome)	4.2	47.0	25.6	8.1	15.2
Specific learning disabilities	22.3	38.9	27.4	7.9	3.6
Physical, orthopedic, and mobility-related disabilities	7.7	52.3	28.1	7.9	4.0
Psychiatric and disabilities related to mental and emotional health	59.6	9.2	19.9	7.7	3.7
Speech and language disabilities	3.6	54.3	30.0	8.2	4.0
Traumatic brain injuries	8.5	49.8	29.8	7.9	4.0

How are Disability Resource Professionals Faring with Remote Work Operations?

Access to technology has improved for disability resource professionals who are working remotely. Nearly two-thirds of respondents reported that access to equipment, software, training, and technology support were either never a difficulty or had improved since initial campus shut down in spring 2020.

Communication and collaboration across campus has improved for some institutions, but not all. Seventy percent (70%) of survey respondents reported that communication with students who were registered with the disability resource office prior to the pandemic had improved or was never a

problem. Greater challenges are reported in communicating with students who may need support but are not registered with the disability resource office. This includes a variety of students including for example, those who may be new to campus, may have chosen not to disclose in the past, or may be experiencing a disability for the first time due to the recent environmental barriers. Nearly 10% of survey respondents indicated that communication with new students had worsened since spring 2020.

The most frequently noted area of improvement since the onset of the initial transition to remote learning environment was collaboration with other departments and offices to promote accessibility across campus. Yet nearly one in three survey respondents indicated that this communication had not improved or had gotten worse since spring 2020. Similarly, a majority of survey respondents reported improvement in their communication with faculty but nearly one third indicated that communication with faculty related to classroom accommodations (29%) and inclusive course design (37%) had not improved or had worsened.

Institutional and administrative support were among the challenges that received the lowest ratings for improvement since spring 2020. Requests of administrators related to individual students were seen as supported by survey respondents. Institutional support for involvement in accessibility planning (35%) and administrative requests related to the disability resource office needs (32%) is reported to have not improved or worsened. See Table 4 for a complete list of changes in difficulties.

Table 4. Changes in Difficulties Faced by Professionals When Working Remotely (Nine Months into Pandemic), By Percent

	Improvement	No Improvement	Never a Difficulty	Worsening of Conditions	Not Applicable
Having needed technology equipment/devices	37.2	18.9	33.7	2.2	8.1
Access to software, assistive technology programs	31.9	19.5	35.7	2.6	10.5
Access to network/Wi-Fi access	28.2	20.5	38.8	3.7	8.9
Access to needed technology support and/or training.	35.0	20.7	32.3	3.9	8.1
Communicating with students currently registered with the DR office.	34.9	15.7	35.5	4.9	9.0
Communicating with students not currently registered with the DR office who MAY need additional support.	27.8	23.1	27.5	9.7	12.0

Communicating with faculty related to classroom accommodations.	36.2	21.9	27.2	6.8	7.9
Collaborating with other departments and offices to promote accessibility.	40.3	23.0	21.7	7.2	8.0
Communicating with faculty related to inclusive course design.	36.5	29.2	14.9	7.4	12.1
Communicating with DR office colleagues to coordinate and document work with students.	32.5	11.9	34.6	3.7	17.2
Receiving institutional support for accessibility planning and services.	28.7	27.0	26.6	8.1	9.7
Receiving administrative support for requests related to individual student needs.	28.1	19.2	34.5	6.9	11.4
Receiving administrative support for requests related to DR office or administrative needs	25.6	22.5	31.2	9.4	11.3

What Has Been the Financial Impact on Professionals and Disability Resource Offices?

Many institutions of higher education have experienced a financial impact brought on by COVID-19 conditions. It is not surprising that these pandemic-related institutional budget cuts have also been experienced by survey respondents and the campus disability resource office.

Some higher education professionals have experienced a personal financial impact of the pandemic. Approximately one in six survey respondents reported a cut in salary and a reduction in benefits since spring 2020. Other survey participants reported being furloughed or being required to work reduced hours. A full list of areas of financial impact is included in Table 5. Professionals at master's degree granting institutions appear particularly hard hit with 22% reporting a reduction in salary and 30% indicating a reduction of benefits.

Disability resource office operating budgets have been cut on a widespread basis. The majority of disability resource professionals (63%) reported reduction in the operating budget for the disability resource office. Many survey respondents (61%) also indicated that professional development funds had been reduced. To a lesser extent, offices have experienced reduced support for administrative tasks.

Once again, professionals at master's degree granting institutions report more widespread financial impact. Seventy percent (70%) reported a reduction in the disability resource office operating budget and 68% reported reduced professional development funds.

Table 5. Areas of Financial Impact Experienced by Higher Education Professionals and Disability Resource Office Budgets (Nine Months into the Pandemic), By Percent*

	Percent Responding Yes
Reduced work hours	7.4
Reduced salary	16.9
Reduced benefits	17.4
Laid off	0.7
Furloughed (temporary layoff)	15.4
Reductions in your overall operating budget	63.3
Reduced access to resources necessary for administrative tasks	30.8
Reduction in professional development funds	61.3

*Note: Respondents could select more than one area.

Leadership in the Institutional Response to COVID-19

Nine months into the pandemic, survey participants reflected on the role they had played in their institutions' transitions and response to COVID-19. Their experiences supporting institutional planning and participating in transitions to remote learning environments varied widely. Comments reflected participation that ranged from playing a "major/primary role of participation and consult at every level across multiple committees since Day 1" to a respondent who noted "we have been squeezed out and ignored." The strategies for providing campus leadership described by survey respondents are summarized and organized in four broad categories: participation in campus structures and committees, involvement in policy development, provision of training and instruction, and collaboration with other departments.

Participation in Campus Structures and Committees

With the abrupt changes to instruction and student services brought on by the pandemic in spring 2020, and continuing to impact higher education into 2021, campuses responded with a host of pandemic response teams, re-entry planning groups and ongoing task forces. Survey respondents reported involvement in a variety of campus planning groups and committees. Many respondents reported inclusion in multiple campus structures as reflected in these comments:

- o "We are a member of all upper administration task forces including Keep Teaching (for faculty development), Keep Learning (for student development), attendance task force, and Protocols & Parameters task force."
- o "We are significantly involved in meetings at all levels to collaborate with offices and departments to ensure accessibility for all students, staff and faculty in remote, hybrid, and in-person learning/teaching/working."

Comments from survey participants also revealed that they played different roles in their involvement. Examples included:

- o "We use a team approach, so I am consulted prior to messaging going out about resource and supports. Our COVID-19 page includes a link to DS for students who might not have needed services in the past. "
- o "I serve on the COVID Response Team at my college and provide accessibility reminders to the team regarding communication going out to the entire campus community."
- o "I was responsible for creating a white paper regarding accessibility for enrolled students and relaunch planning to support work groups and administration in their efforts. I've also been asked by general counsel's office to review or create wording associated with various pieces of COVID protocols, exception processes, and procedures at the campus wide level."
- o "I chair a committee on disability and inclusion. We have held spaces for folks to share ideas and we're currently creating an accessibility barrier form for the community."

Involvement in Policy Development

As institutions moved to implement policies and procedures to guide remote learning as well as the safe return to campus, disability resource professionals reported involvement with the development and implementation of these policies. Survey respondents reported consultation and involvement on institutional policies related to masks, social distancing, dining accommodations, and campus quarantine and isolation, among others. Some professionals also reported direct involvement with decision-making related to exceptions to campus policy as reflected in this comment, "our office designed and implemented the University-wide multi-campus COVID accommodation request process."

The shift to remote learning led to new urgency regarding digital accessibility and online instruction. Survey respondents reported new opportunities for input on academic and instruction related policies such as COVID-related absences, captioning of online video content, and purchases through the instructional technology department.

Provision of Training and Instruction

With a heightened focus on online instruction, many institutions became acutely aware that faculty needed support in making their online classrooms accessible to all students. Survey respondents reported providing a variety of training materials, webinars, and workshops on digital accessibility, universal design for instruction and learning (UD-IL), and newly modified disability resource office procedures.

- o "We played a huge role. Lots of emails going to faculty/staff in regards to accessibility and providing training."

- "Created a presentation about services in the COVID world and presented to more than 500 faculty/staff. Work closely with our Teaching and Learning Excellence Division, assisted in creating an FAQ for accessibility in the COVID world. Created presentation on accommodation in the virtual environment, remote testing, creating documents regarding Blackboard accessibility Kurzweil Read the Web technology and accessibility to share with faculty."

Collaboration with Other Departments

As offices and departments across campus grappled with designing remote services to meet student needs, survey respondents reported expanded collaboration with departments across campus. In addition to the frequently mentioned Teaching and Learning Center collaborations, and the ITS partnerships, respondents reported collaboration with the diversity office, facilities, human resources, financial aid services, counseling, health, library services, tutoring services registrar/enrollment, police, and emergency health services, among others. Comments included:

- "Our office has worked closely with other offices on campus to ensure that accessibility (especially as it related to technology) is considered as part of everything we do. We are also on the committee to purchase a new LMS and have given a number of presentations on accessibility over the summer."
- "Part of the team consulting with faculty, registrar's office, testing center, dean of students, counseling and health services."
- "Worked more closely with IT to develop things that could be used by all students not just students receiving services through my office."
- "Created a virtual orientation page and drop-in options for summer orientation."

Methodological Notes

Solicitation and data collection for the online survey occurred in December 2020. COVID-19 survey questions were included within the Biennial AHEAD Survey of Professionals. Specific to the second data collection, survey invitation was shared through the AHEAD member distribution list. Following the data collection period, 645 responses were recorded, with 631 participants noting active AHEAD membership status. Of the AHEAD members participating in the survey, 97.6% of respondents currently work in the higher education environment, with over 42% noting they served as the director of their institution's disability resource office. Survey participants ranged in their years engaged in work supporting disabled individuals, with 20.9% working 1-5 years and 30.0% working over 20 years in the field. Three-quarters of survey participants (75.0%) possessed a master's degree. 77.3% of the sample identified as female and 84.3% identified as White.

Question generation for the survey instrument was informed by the EDUCAUSE COVID-19 QuickPoll. The survey instrument also included questions on the transition to remote education, changes of operations for disability resource offices, and challenges and solutions identified throughout the pandemic. Permission to create an adapted survey instrument that used EDUCAUSE questions in part or in whole for non-commercial purposes was granted in April 2020. All questions included in the online survey were designated as optional, creating data missingness if a participant chose not to respond to one or more included questions in the logic-based survey. Before the instrument was utilized for the data collection, the authors piloted survey use and shared the instrument for expert review to ensure appropriate question development as well as accessibility of survey format design. As with any survey, data was self-

reported and participant responses, including their perceptions of disabled students as well as their professional experiences during the remote transition, were taken at face value. Descriptive statistics were utilized to organize the closed-ended survey question responses and open-ended survey response questions were organized by themes.

References

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