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COVID-19 LEARNINGS FROM THE
INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

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This report is dedicated to all team members of the Institute of International Education who have been critical to advancing our mission and programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our work would not be possible without them.

We also acknowledge and remember the family and friends of the Institute of International Education lost during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Foreword

Thanks to our global office locations and range of international programs, the Institute of International Education (IIE) led the way for international exchange programs through the COVID-19 pandemic, facilitating widespread evacuations, initiating virtual exchange, and eventually reintroducing safe in-person exchange, even as the pandemic continues. The creation of IIE's Coronavirus Task Force gave us the structure to streamline programmatic responses and share essential information and best practices at a time when circumstances were constantly in flux.

In late 2019 and early 2020, COVID-19 was identified and began having limited regional impact on various IIE-administered programs. As the virus spread and it became apparent that the regional impact was expanding rapidly, IIE initiated a Coronavirus Task Force in February 2020. The purpose of the task force is further detailed throughout this publication and ultimately led to the interviews detailed here. As we mark the third anniversary of the onset of the pandemic, it is important to look back on the unforeseen changes COVID-19 has brought to almost every aspect of our daily lives. At the beginning of the pandemic in late 2019, none of us understood how much our lives, both in a work and personal context, were about to evolve.

In this report, we take the opportunity to speak to team members across seven countries where IIE has offices in the post-lockdown phase of the pandemic to understand the impact of COVID-19 on exchanges. We examine the lessons learned in the early days of pivoting to virtual programming and explore the challenges and successes of continuing to use virtual components once in-person exchange resumed. We distill our findings into three primary categories:

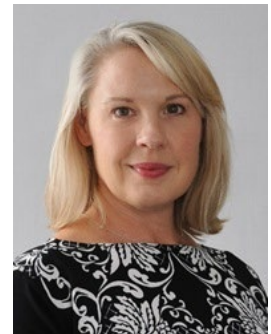
- **Initial Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic:** Team members at IIE were in an unusual position: While the news reported layoffs and furloughs daily across the globe, IIE team members worked even harder than before to safely evacuate participants and figure out next steps for exchange programs. IIE's preexisting work-from-home policy and infrastructure allowed a fairly seamless move to full-time remote work, and staff felt supported by the organization. Communication volume increased dramatically, both internally and with sponsors.
- **Program Learnings:** Learning how to deliver valuable, high-quality, virtual content was essential across all aspects of program management, from recruitment and outreach to the exchange and return home. Program staff had to revise communication techniques and reconsider synchronous and asynchronous content delivery. Many programs plan to keep some of these elements moving forward.
- **Organizational Perspectives:** IIE's Coronavirus Task Force has evolved into a permanent Emergency Task Force, reinforcing IIE's priority to remain prepared for all kinds of future emergencies. This group is focused on building valuable resources for program teams and increasing information and best practice exchanges across the organization. This group was not the only emergency team working on pandemic responses. IIE also placed emphasis on

- supporting team members. It became very clear to us that, to support programs and sponsors we had to take care of team members first. Cross-training to allow much-needed breaks for team members was a priority, as was identifying team members who could pivot in crisis. These priorities continue to inform hiring practices today.

As the world increasingly returns to pre-pandemic levels of travel and exchange, IIE's core work and aims remain the same. The essentiality of international exchange and cultural diplomacy has been reaffirmed. It is clear that virtual components are incredibly valuable but will never replace in-person exchanges.

Although the nature of the work remains, the experience of living and working through the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed us to modify many parts of our work, particularly encouraging us to recognize that we can be flexible and nimble in areas where it did not seem possible before.

A. Sarah Ilchman
Co-President
Chair, IIE Emergency Task Force
Institute of International Education



Introduction

Thanks to our administration of programs across the globe, the Institute of International Education (IIE) saw the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic from its very earliest days, assisting participants in Asia with evacuation and general guidance at the onset of the pandemic. Because of this early understanding of the potential impact of COVID-19, IIE was ahead of the curve in creating the Coronavirus Task Force in February 2020. Before the COVID-19 pandemic was declared a global emergency, we were already considering the widespread impact on our programs and participants.

IIE originated in 1919 and has faced numerous social and political realities that have influenced our work throughout our history. Although IIE has persevered through 12 pandemics, there was no one emergency scenario to replicate when it came to COVID-19. We wanted to conduct these interviews and write this report about this historic time because of the considerable impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and with the hope that it will provide guidance in the future should we face something like this again. The COVID-19 pandemic that originated in late 2019 is unique because it affected all aspects of the organization, from IIE's team members and their health and safety to the work we all do and how we carry it out. It is possible to say that, as a result, this event and its consequences were unlike other events the organization has faced in the past. This report provides a living history of IIE's reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic as an organization, the effects of the health crisis on its team members and work, as well as lessons learned for IIE and other organizations that can be shared with the field of international education and beyond.

In reflecting on IIE's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we sought to address three key research questions:

- How did IIE as an organization react to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What were the adaptations and learnings throughout COVID-19 regarding how we do our work?
- What can we learn as an organization about preparing for other emergencies or crises?

Our role in producing this report was to evidence IIE's ability to continue its work throughout an emergency. We focused on what we learned from this time, as not all aspects of our work continued without challenges. To this end, we aimed to make conclusions about the lessons that IIE and other organizations can carry forward.

Methodology

The research team consisted of members of the IIE Coronavirus Task Force, whose structure and purpose is detailed further in the section on Organizational Perspectives. The task force provided a springboard for us to discuss the idea behind this report and its initial structure. We also reviewed preliminary data about IIE's response to COVID-19, including research by IIE's communications team and some program teams. In summer 2021, we designed an interview protocol and a list of IIE team members to interview for research purposes. Our focus was to interview team members across the

organization, including staff who had joined IIE during the COVID-19 pandemic and those who had been with the organization for more than 20 years. We also wanted to hear from IIE team members across various job profiles, from program analysts to IIE's executive leadership team. Finally, we spoke to team members across a range of IIE-administered programs and locations.

Between August 1 and September 1, 2021, the research team conducted 28 interviews with 58 IIE team members. All departments across IIE were represented, and the total number of respondents covered approximately 10% of IIE's workforce at the time, spanning locations in China, Egypt, Hungary, India, Mexico, Thailand, and the United States. Most interviews lasted one hour and were recorded. The research team prepared preliminary outcomes and met at a research workshop to identify common themes, followed by collaborative writing.

The three main sections of the report map to the research questions: Initial Responses, Program Learnings, and Organizational Perspectives. The conclusion presents our learnings. We include quotes from IIE team members throughout each chapter for further context, and some quotes have been edited and shortened for clarity.

Findings: Initial Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The first chapter of our report delves into IIE's initial reactions and reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout this analysis, we focus on team members' reactions as the pandemic progressed in late 2019 and early 2020, and the subsequent reactions of IIE-administered programs. This was a necessary entry point to our analysis, as it allowed team members to reflect on a time when their professional and personal lives were initially affected by COVID-19.

Team Member Perspectives

As we heard in our interviews, the COVID-19 pandemic was primarily a humanizing experience; nearly everyone interviewed talked about their home (non-work) life. We often heard that team members were worried about grantees who were scared, but they also were scared themselves. Many opened up about the emotional ride they were a part of, both at work and home.

"We have gotten to know one another on a very different level. I feel that I have true relationships and partnerships with these individuals now because we talk so often and have these conversations and figured out how to do our work together."

"One of the things that I find so interesting about this time is that we were not only understanding how our work was changing tremendously but also how our own lives were changing. This wasn't some issue that was happening across the globe, that we were getting people home to get them safe. We also needed to figure out how to keep ourselves safe, and to be in that mode is exhausting, to say the least. You're not only trying to save the people out there; you're trying to save yourself."

There was variance in IIE team members' understanding of the pandemic's scope as events unfolded. Some team members knew about COVID-19 well before others, specifically if their programs operated in China or had participants in China. Although the shutdown in the United States did not begin until March 2020, some teams were aware of the unfolding situation as early as December 2019. For example, IIE's office in Beijing responded rapidly as events unfolded in November and December of 2019. The office worked with a Fulbright Scholar who was placed in Wuhan, China, and needed to be evacuated as soon as possible before being locked down. A team member in China also shared that the unfolding events were similar to the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) situation years before.

"It reminded me of a time when [our] country was dealing with SARS. Although it was 20 years ago, many people do have very fresh memories."

That said, even these team members were taken aback by the sheer size of the lockdown effort in China.

"I still remember the day when [we] locked down. It was January 23, 2020. ... Lots of people around the world were shocked, it was totally unprecedented in the country's history. And there's no way that they can lock down the entire city with over 10 million residents..."

Team members in China, both in Beijing and Hong Kong, felt that IIE and the program sponsors carefully managed the evolving situation and were in close communication during the first months of 2020. They also felt that many of the sponsors were sensitive in their communication and understood the realities of IIE's work and how it was affected in China, specifically those who also had offices in China.

“They [the program sponsor] understood the situation because they also have an office in China, and their headquarters in China is in Shanghai.”

IIE team members in other locations expressed their view that the issue initially felt “isolated” in China, so they did not feel that actions would be taken immediately. Many team members shared that, while they understood the seriousness of the situation, they felt this would be a temporary shift to remote work. As some had already experienced this in other contexts due to health or natural emergencies, teams felt this would be a similar situation that would last a few weeks or at most a few months. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic to Italy was seen by many team members as a turning point, where the view of the crisis being tied to one location or country could not be ignored.

“I remember in December having lots of communication with... Beijing and the team there and what this meant for team members in Beijing, and for Fulbrighters and other IIE program participants who were either there or hoping to come from there to here, and feeling like at least in the beginning it was isolated, right? It was Wuhan. It was China. ... And sort of feeling like OK, this is hard, but it's just there and we can work around it.”

“So once it left one region and Italy became the hotspot... [then] we're looking at multiple regions ... once you have two dots now you're thinking, three and four, [so for those] countries that hadn't even started their grants or had just started their grants... how do we maneuver.”

Throughout our interviews, team members were very candid in offering personal reflections on their work and lives in the beginning months of the COVID-19 pandemic. This opportunity to reflect on their experience was welcome, even if some of the memories were challenging to discuss, as they included emotional topics like the urgent emergency evacuation of students or scholars, the unique situational factors of their home lives, physical and mental health, and other factors like the Black Lives Matter movement.

“We saw... Black Lives Matter, and that certainly had also sort of implications for our staff, but also for the student populations that we were working with in terms of what they were looking to organizations to present and speak out about and comment on publicly.”

IIE's Initial Response to Team Members

In thinking about their programmatic work at the time, and as the COVID-19 pandemic was emerging, team members reflected and shared how their work was affected. They noted that it was difficult to reflect on their work at the time because the focus was on getting through each day. In addition, this was also the period when IIE team members across the world left offices and moved to virtual work. The

combination of these two factors led many team members to feel that they were in a state of constant transition or change.

It was interesting to hear about IIE team members’ perspectives in terms of the changes, or lack of changes, in their work as the COVID-19 pandemic moved further along. From IIE leadership, for example, the dual effort was to protect and ensure the safety of team members while staying abreast of changes that affected IIE’s programs. For some team members, such as advisors of grantees, the focus became a round-the-clock effort around emergency management.

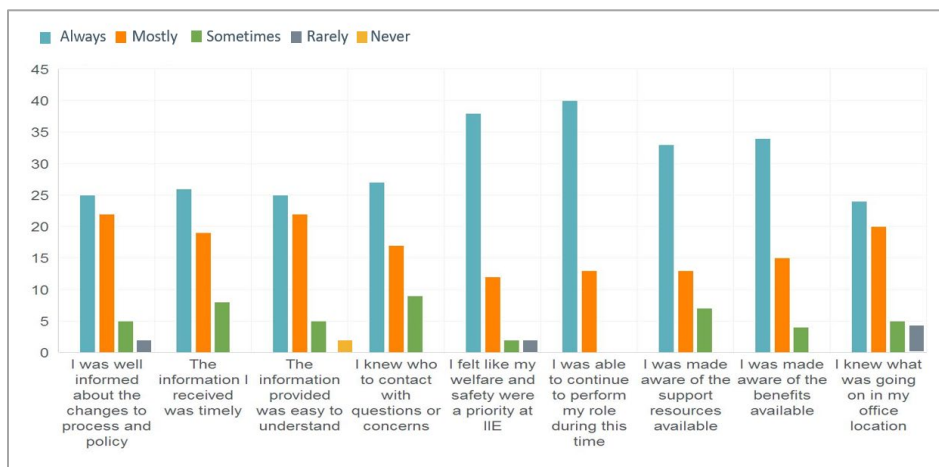
“I think that ability to know that we can reach [grantees] at any hour ... knowing that we are on at all hours. [If a grantee was] calling me at 3 a.m. from Morocco and taking that call ... You’re getting the students home and whatever needs to happen. ... There’s the big picture tracker [of grantee] numbers ... and then there’s all those individual scenarios.”

For others, the day-to-day work did not necessarily change. But for all, *how* that work was being done did change. IIE’s transition into remote work was fairly smooth. Flexible tools for telework, such as laptops, were already in place, and most employees had already worked from home for at least some days before the pandemic began. This made the transition’s first few weeks or even months seamless, rather than having to install new systems or learn new meeting cadences.

“Interestingly ... it didn’t actually change much as to what we had been working on. In fact, if anything, it accelerated a few of the remaining technology initiatives we had underway. We had been migrating fairly rapidly towards a much more ... remote-favorable model. So, when it came time, or became apparent, rather, that we were going to be going home and probably staying home for a while, if anything, it kind of finished up a little bit of work we had been focusing on.”

Communication across IIE was necessary to understand the nature of the unraveling events. A survey conducted by IIE’s communications team noted that most team members were pleased with the volume and cadence of emergency-related information regarding COVID-19 in the first months after the organization went virtual.

IIE Team Member Reflections on COVID-19 Communications, Summer 2020



Many interviewees also cited an appreciation for the flexibility and communicative nature of updates related to emergency leave, flexed schedules, and the like. Although some team members felt their workload was such that they could not access all these supportive benefits, a theme of appreciation existed and was continuously communicated to all.

“There was a deliberate decision to support our employee population past the minimum of what we needed to do to be compliant, and really focus on what do we do or how do we institute in order to support. That, quite honestly, was the biggest plus.”

IIE’s Initial Communications with Key Programmatic Stakeholders

IIE’s work spans many key stakeholders, including U.S. and foreign governments, corporations and foundations, and donors and sponsors. In the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was critical to have continuous communication with all key stakeholders to understand how IIE-administered programs would be affected. As noted in our interviews, IIE-administered program sponsors had different reactions to the start of the pandemic and took various actions for their programs. While some sponsors wanted to hold their usual program activities, others wanted to pivot to online activities immediately or suspend program activities completely. This was a finding that we saw across the organization — that there was a variety of reactions and risk aversion across our sponsor field. Due to the unprecedented nature of these few months, IIE was in close communication with all participants and used the Coronavirus Task Force to coordinate priorities and actions across stakeholders. It was also a way to stay informed as events were developing.

“Communication was a huge part of the COVID-19 crisis. Adding communication with sponsors, making virtual communication the norm, figuring out how to communicate across programs and share knowledge through the task force, etc. Comms was an essential part of our survival.”

One important trend was that communication between sponsors and IIE team members increased in frequency and duration during this period to attend to changes in public health guidance, country-by-country operating statuses, and the like. This probably helped build the level of trust between IIE and sponsors, which was already strong before the pandemic but rapidly increased during this time. This level of trust continued as stakeholders turned to IIE to direct program execution and suggested program modifications, particularly with the pivot to virtual programs. IIE’s expertise was requested and valued as the leader in this area.

“I thought it was interesting that multiple people pointed to the change in communication (more casual, seeing inside colleagues’ homes, meeting their families and pets) as a positive in their relationships with sponsors, clients, and even colleagues.”

Findings: Program Learnings

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, IIE's program teams implemented thoughtful innovations in program design to respond to changing circumstances worldwide. The next section shares some of the innovations described by IIE team members, including pivoting programming to a virtual space, scaling up data collection and emergency contingency plans, expanding the types of content offered to program participants, and conducting outreach virtually.

Virtual Programming

While not extensively employed prior to the pandemic, virtual programming in international exchange allowed programs to expand offerings to participants and access a wider audience. IIE leveraged the COVID-19 pandemic to become experts in virtual activities, including training, programming, events, and outreach.

In one of IIE's Corporate and Foundation Programs, IIE team members completely changed how content was delivered to participants when moving the program online. Program staff worked to create an inclusive environment in online meetings by using Zoom's simultaneous interpretation feature, where participants could receive content in their language in real time. English is often a program prerequisite, so removing this barrier to participation increased equity in communication and allowed people to participate in their first language.

“Normally, there are some language barriers, there are some understanding capabilities that are lost, but when people can participate in their own language without any break in the experience, it's a game changer.”

A graphic scribe was also brought in to listen and capture the thoughts of the discussion in a visual way so participants would have a tangible illustration of the conversation at the end of a session. The graphic scribe kept participants engaged and following the discussion, even when multiple languages were spoken within a single meeting.

Other programs decided relatively early in the pandemic to commit to virtual programming for summer 2020 and worked rapidly to maintain the learning objectives of their programming while overhauling the delivery methods. With participants from around the world, there was a concern about internet connectivity and the ability to access synchronous content virtually. This was overcome by surveying the participants ahead of the program to identify any potential technology pain points from the beginning and testing the content among small groups of participants before launching. When connectivity issues prevented a participant from accessing a program's Learning Management System (LMS), IIE team members sent them the content directly in various ways to ensure every participant had equal access to the information.

Upon pivoting to virtual programming, IIE's Leadership and Enrichment Programs in Cairo kept participants engaged by introducing variety in all aspects — content and activities were offered with a range of topics, speakers, and delivery modes. Programming included external presenters so that the

participants were not always receiving the content from the same voices. Collaborative group work was simulated in a virtual setting in Zoom breakout rooms, with specific assigned tasks for each group. In some cases, participants were offered sessions with an employer, where the presenter would introduce their company and then conduct training on a particular topic, such as personal branding or communication in the workplace. Leadership and Enrichment Programs also implemented individual virtual sessions, where participants could schedule a one-on-one time and voluntary group language learning sessions.

Team members indicated that virtual programming allowed for a wider audience and accessibility. It was clear across programs that some virtual content will continue after the pandemic, especially for asynchronous activities carried out independently before the program's start.

“Every in-person project will have virtual elements in the future. [We will be] incorporating all the lessons and best practices of virtual programming, including how to plan, support the sessions, and how to share materials with the participants outside of the United States through different platforms.”

“I think what we've learned in terms of virtual programming has made quite a difference. Moving forward, we have options in terms of hosting events that might not be quite as equitable.”

However, the pandemic and a shift to virtual programming also reaffirmed that there is no direct substitute for person-to-person international exchange. Programs and participants alike were eager to resume international travel. Many team members also reflected that, while some virtual components were very successful, the emotional toll on program teams to implement these changes — all while responding to participant disappointment in not being able to meet in person — was high.

Data Collection and Emergency Contingency Plans

While most programs had emergency management protocols in place before the pandemic, these were made much more robust in response to the pandemic. To do this, IIE team members referenced existing emergency plans developed in response to localized crises, such as natural disasters, political uprisings, Ebola, or SARS. However, these needed to be completely overhauled during and after March 2020 to include contingency planning for a large-scale global emergency that impacted every aspect of a program's administration. The pandemic intensified the need for up-to-the-minute participant contact information so that IIE team members could reach participants immediately in an emergency. Programs worked to meet participant needs by communicating not just via email but via the participants' preferred platform. The platform varied greatly depending on the program and type of participants, but IIE team members used all contact methods to disseminate information.

Programs increased the amount of participant data collected to enhance their emergency management capabilities. Data points that previously may not have been relevant but were now necessary to make program decisions included vaccination status, COVID-19 positivity status, university operating status, student housing availability, exposure to COVID-19, or quarantine status, as well as independent student travel plans. Adaptations were also required in how programs collected and reported data. Systems and

documentation were updated to account for virtual participants or participants beginning programs at different times depending on their ability to travel.

“We developed a new reporting tool ... on university classroom instruction modality, student location, student testing status, and student vaccination status. ... So, a lot of tracking and report tools that we didn’t use pre-pandemic that I think will probably carry over in some form for future emergencies.”

Increased Content for Participants

In pre-departure content and orientation activities, there was an increased focus on preparing participants for anything that could happen while on the program. Many IIE teams recorded and posted more program content online to be viewed asynchronously by program participants. The need to support participants’ mental health increased dramatically and was addressed in forums ranging from expert-led wellness webinars to individual counseling.

Due to the pace of developments during the pandemic and its global nature, one program began producing daily news bulletins, which included updates related to COVID-19 and remote learning. These daily messages allowed the program to ensure that all students received the most relevant guidance from governmental and health organizations in relevant countries and updates on program recommendations for staying safe during the emergency. Advisors increased the amount of communication with participants and checked in more frequently to provide academic and well-being support.

Several programs also increased the number of reentry resources available to participants to help minimize the disappointment of those who had to leave their programs early. For example, one U.S. government program provided returnees with a toolkit of reflection activities and resources for coping with this disappointment and stress. In addition, IIE team members on this program hosted debrief sessions where recent returnees could reflect on their experiences, share their frustrations and concerns with peers, and offer feedback on how IIE handled repatriation efforts at the start of the pandemic. These reentry resources allowed participants a space to connect with others who had been through the similar trauma of an international emergency evacuation and begin to process some of their complex emotions about the situation.

Many IIE programs employed an LMS to deliver content virtually. These systems prioritized networking and collaboration among participants, so content on the LMS was supplemented by additional virtual opportunities for relationship building. For programs that had an internship or host component, programs had to think creatively about making a virtual or hybrid work experience useful for their participants. For at least one program, this resulted in a new model for professional mentorship.

The need for flexibility and empathetic advising in IIE’s response to the pandemic was a common theme across programs. Programs that had well-established policies and protocols needed to incorporate flexibility not previously required. Existing policies and procedures were revised to account for changing

circumstances worldwide and participant needs. Grant terms and conditions, program eligibility requirements, and program design were altered. Participants were allowed to defer on many programs, including for the first time in the 75-year history of the Fulbright program. Many programs updated their budgets to allow emergency funding, both at the outset of the pandemic to repatriate participants and once international travel resumed, to prepare for unexpected circumstances like a border closure, quarantine costs, or the inability of a participant to return to their home country.

Programs also took the opportunity to respond to what was happening in the world. Discussions around identity, movements like Black Lives Matter, and other social and racial justice issues were incorporated into programming and available more broadly because of its virtual delivery.

“We opened up and had an alum series that was identity-based, rather than just talking about application components or community engagement. We were talking about being black abroad. We were talking about military affiliated and being a parent, being LGBTQ. It started to open up spaces, and ... that served as well in a lot of the social justice conversations that were happening about removing barriers for populations that have been historically excluded from programs.”

Virtual Outreach

Programs and initiatives that relied on partnership building with institutions successfully continued this work virtually. Programs could lay the groundwork for building online relationships more cost-effectively than meeting in person. Then, when delegations did meet in person, these conversations were deeper and more fruitful because of all the work that had been done in advance. Virtual outreach allowed teams to cast a wide net and engage a broader audience.

“Virtual recruitment is going to be a permanent fixture in the industry, and it’s something where we’ve really demonstrated that it can be done and it can be done effectively. I think it really creates the opportunity for a lot more breadth of market coverage across all the regions. But at the same time, when having that in-person interaction and meeting with the family is so critical to our success, we do have to figure out a way to find a balance of the two.”

“We’ve bolstered what resources we offer on the website — there’s the new search option for awards, which has made life a lot easier for advising, but also for students when it comes down to narrowing their options and really finding a program that’s a good match for who they are and what they want to do.”

Moving forward, in-person visits can be reserved for strategic targets or specific populations the program is trying to engage. In the future, face-to-face outreach may not be the norm but a deliberate tool to meet program or organizational goals.

Connecting to students proved more of a challenge during the pandemic than connecting with institutions and organizations. There was not much existing pedagogy for interacting with students in a virtual space, especially when students were feeling unmotivated or listless. As higher education

institutions were also facing challenges, working entirely online or with reduced staff, they were sometimes limited in the support they could provide to students. To support our Higher Education Initiative partners, the responsibilities of IIE advisors expanded temporarily in many cases to include support that students could not get from a study-abroad advisor or admissions counselor at their institution.

Learnings in Program Administration

An important lesson from the pivot to virtual programming was that in-person programming would not be successful when moved online without significant changes to content and engagement. Program teams needed to consider how to make the content interactive, offer asynchronous versus live content, and break up a virtual event to make it palatable for the participants. This required creative thinking about redesigning content delivery when participants were sitting in front of a screen rather than in a classroom. There were also misconceptions to overcome in the pivot to virtual. When setting up virtual programming and events, “virtual” did not necessarily mean lower cost or a lower level of effort.

Given the breadth of programs that IIE administers, there is a great degree of nuance in the extent to which virtual content will feature in future programming. Virtual or asynchronous content will continue to feature prominently in the design of some programs but not for all. For some, virtual programming was very successful, and the mode of content delivery has been permanently altered. For others, pivoting to virtual reinforced that face-to-face interaction is essential to accomplishing program goals.

One challenge highlighted by multiple programs was developing policies without realizing the long-term implications of a policy change. Decisions were made efficiently in response to the changing situation, but programs did not have a way to predict the impact that a policy change might have for years to come. The scale of the pandemic was completely unknown at the outset, so policies related to deferrals, and reapplication, for example, have reverberated for years following the initial emergency. This also resulted in a particularly large administrative burden to enforce these new policies and track differences between policies enacted for a particular cohort or application cycle. In cases where participants were expecting to travel in person but could not ultimately do so, this was frustrating and decreased their motivation for virtual participation. Eventually, programs shifted the priority from quickly reacting to the ever-changing situation in the early pandemic to proactively anticipating the longer-term impact on each program’s implementation.

Similarly, programs expressed that a challenge of communicating with participants was the goal of making updated guidance exactly perfect before implementation. However, things were constantly evolving and participants were eager to receive any news. An important lesson learned was that, in a state of emergency, participants wanted to hear from the program even if there were no major updates to report or the guidance had not been finalized.

The evolving nature of the pandemic presented another challenge: Many programs delayed decision-making while monitoring developments. Often, programs decided to wait for a few weeks or pushed the

decision back by a few months to allow for the situation to improve. Without a clear end to the pandemic, programs were constantly recalculating when in-person programming would resume. In some cases, programs had to send out conflicting information to participants based on new developments. Before anyone realized the scale of the crisis early on, programs made decisions based on the assumption that participants would be able to participate as usual later in 2020. When the situation deteriorated later in the year, programs had to walk back these policies. Finally, the effects of the pandemic were also important to capture in ongoing monitoring and evaluation efforts. Program teams worked with IIE's Research, Evaluation & Learning team to learn more about the effects that COVID-19 was having on participants, setting up additional surveys to understand their realities and adding content to ongoing monitoring and evaluation tools to understand the effects of COVID-19 on their program experiences. These additional tools helped IIE program teams understand how COVID-19 impacted the grantees' program experiences and outcomes well beyond their program.

Serving as a Resource for the International Higher Education Community

IIE is a leader in the field of international education, and that became clear in our efforts to share data and learnings with the international higher education community. We found ways to continue to engage the IIE Network, our membership network of over 1,400 higher education institutions, organizations, corporations, and foundations around the world. IIE successfully launched the IIE Network COVID-19 Engagement Series and the IIE Network Briefing Papers, which included information on COVID-19 realities on U.S. higher education campuses, the reopening status of various host destination countries, and the emergency efforts post-COVID. For the most part, sponsors and other organizations in the field were all navigating uncertainties, so knowledge sharing across the network was crucial. IIE also dedicated a portion of its website on the COVID-19 pandemic, sharing insights and an Emergency Student Fund specifically to support international students affected by COVID-19.

Early on, it also became clear that the U.S. higher education community needed more data on what was happening on campuses and how that was affecting future international student mobility. For over 70 years, IIE has implemented the *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*, which maps international mobility flows to and from the United States. In addition to COVID-19 related additions to the *Open Doors* surveys, in February 2020 IIE began the *COVID-19 Snapshot Survey Series*, a series of surveys administered four times during the first two years of the pandemic. These surveys became a critical resource for the U.S. higher education community to understand COVID-19 realities on U.S. campuses, the effects of COVID-19 on current and prospective international students, and the status of U.S. study abroad programs. The longitudinal nature of this series also provides a historical understanding of how the U.S. higher education community pivoted amid COVID-19 and the effects of the pandemic on inbound and outbound student mobility.

Findings: Organizational Perspectives

The final section presents findings related to IIE's organizational adaptations due to COVID-19, including creating a Coronavirus Task Force, supporting team members, and assessing adaptations for IIE to learn from this experience.

IIE Coronavirus Task Force

The purpose of IIE's Coronavirus Task Force, created in February 2020, was to gather program staff from across IIE to provide direction and resources for all IIE-administered programs, addressing any impact that COVID-19 would have on participants, sponsors, and stakeholders. The group was tasked with developing options, guidance, and subsequent programmatic and process recommendations to help program teams respond to the evolving situation.

The task force, led by IIE Co-President Sarah Ilchman, consisted of staff from program teams across IIE. We strategically selected representatives from various programs, including government- and corporate-funded and the Beijing office, to take full advantage of their unique position in experiencing the earliest days of the pandemic. We also found it important to include some representatives from our infrastructure teams, including IT and Grants and Contracts, to help support and inform our decision-making. It was a priority to balance representation with a limited group of members, allowing nimble reactions that were not bogged down by too many participants.

At the inaugural meeting, the task force evaluated what actions many programs had already taken and identified the most pressing needs for the administrators of those programs. It was determined that the first responsibility of the task force would be to develop several resources, including a rubric to guide decision-making, a library of communication templates, a page with links to valuable resources, and an IIE program status dashboard. As resources were finalized, they were made available to all IIE team members through a central intranet page, which served as the primary source for information about task force activities and access to resources. These resources were updated at least once a week.

Another early objective of the task force was to produce a mission statement:

Our mandate is to provide direction and resources for all IIE-administered programs resulting from any impact the coronavirus may have on our participants, sponsors, and stakeholders. The task force will develop options, guidance, and subsequent programmatic and process recommendations to respond to the evolving situation.

Our sponsors, participants, and stakeholders count on IIE in times of crisis. Building on lessons and best practices from previous emergencies, we will focus on how to adjust, realign, and communicate for its duration. The task force will create templates and build a database of queries and answers and a library

of resources for communication. We will brainstorm alternatives to normal program delivery and formulate contingency plans for the different scales and scope of the pandemic.

It became apparent that, at its core, the task force needed to exhibit flexibility across the board, from allowing team members to rotate off when work or personal matters required, to periodically reevaluating the meeting cadence. In its earliest days, the task force met multiple times a week, but as the urgency from the beginning of the pandemic waned it moved to once a week, and now it meets biweekly.

The task force has had to evaluate its mandate several times over the past three years, always striving to center the needs of program teams in their work. They identified skilled team members who were not part of the task force and engaged them to work on specific projects and deliverables, allowing the task force to produce high-quality, informed resources while maintaining the streamlined group composition. The cadence and purpose of the task force still focus on recurring agenda items, providing an opportunity for task force members to evaluate their work and needs, then adjust as necessary.

The task force also offered an opportunity for program teams that did not have standing meetings with each other to connect and learn about how other programs and sponsors were responding to the crisis. This has created an important avenue of cross-program relationships that continues to exist and thrive beyond IIE's COVID-19 response.

After the onset of the pandemic globally and the beginning of countrywide lockdowns, the task force focused on providing information about U.S. institutions and their rapidly changing policies, guidance for evacuating participants, and communication with sponsors. It worked to develop a library of resources culled from program teams. Once the initial wave of evacuations had settled, the task force turned its attention to delivering programs in a virtual world, learning from the events and outreach teams to understand how they were changing their approach to delivering programming, reaching applicants, and adding to the library of guidance and best practices. And as institutions started allowing in-person participation and travel became available again, the task force made another pivot, looking to the future of hybrid environments to deliver safe and successful programming.

As many places have resumed a new level of normalcy, allowing for mostly in-person activities with additional safety precautions, the task force has continued monitoring how program teams respond and updating the resources that teams may find helpful. Throughout the pandemic, it became clear that the task force was an essential institutional resource. It offered a way to break down programmatic silos that can easily develop when teams are focused on responding to an emergency. This highlighted the importance of maintaining an emergency task force that can offer support to programmatic teams across IIE in a proactive manner. Thus, the Coronavirus Task Force was renamed the IIE Emergency Task Force and will continue to exist at IIE in perpetuity.

In its new iteration, the task force is working to increase the institutional knowledge of emergency management by identifying activities, training, and resources that can be prepared and made available to team members who may deal with a variety of emergencies in the future. The task force is also

practicing ways to anticipate upcoming emergencies by learning to scan the environment and proactively identify possible areas of concern.

Supporting Team Members through the Pandemic

While the task force was not focused on supporting team members personally (in fact, there was a separate HR task force dedicated to just that), it was clear that supporting team members during a global emergency goes hand in hand with supporting programs. Some of the resources that the task force developed included best practices for team coverage and communication, which were essential as team members dealt with the pandemic at work and personally.

In the interviews conducted for this paper, it was often highlighted that the existing pre-pandemic infrastructure, which had allowed IIE team members to work from home one to three days a week, resulted in a seamless transition into full-time remote work. IIE's flexibility around hours and emergency leave allowed team members to feel that they were able to manage their own pandemic-related concerns. This support allowed team members to be more engaged in their day-to-day work.

Team members also noted the increased contact across programs and highlighted the value of ongoing communication in times of crisis. Teams across IIE are continuing to identify how they can be better prepared to provide coverage and cross-train so that team members can step away if they need to. When communication is open, bringing in help becomes much easier.

Team members found other benefits to full-time remote work, noting changes in their sponsor and colleague relationships, often humanizing work relationships at a different level. The shared experience of figuring out how to work through a pandemic created a camaraderie for many with their colleagues, sponsors, and even participants. At the same time, increased communication could be fatiguing. After some trial and error, teams found a good balance. Continuous evaluation of factors like meeting cadence, content value, and communication methods was key to ensuring that sponsors and participants felt informed, heard, and connected.

Ensuring that team members felt personal support from IIE became a priority, and IIE leadership made a deliberate decision to support employees beyond what was required for compliance. IIE made quick changes, such as adjusting the minimum required daily hours, embracing flexible schedules, providing access to an Employee Assistance Program, and implementing an emergency paid sick leave policy. HR highlighted and provided access to various physical, emotional, and financial wellness resources. The leadership team at IIE also committed to providing team members with two months' notice before asking them to return to in-person work.

In a period when the pandemic cast a bright light on many existing social justice issues, IIE worked extensively to ensure that their team members felt heard and supported, sharing information about existing and expanding diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) initiatives and establishing affinity groups for employees. While there remains work to do in this area, IIE has continued to show its employees that we are more committed than ever to our DEIA goals. Finally, IIE encouraged the use of the intranet platform for staff to communicate with each other, encouraging team members to establish

forums for everything from DEIA interest groups and program best practices to wellness topics, recommendations for successful teleworking, and sharing pictures of pets or pandemic projects.

Growing as an Organization

One of the essential lessons for IIE as an organization is that we need to embrace agility. An organization that prides itself on delivering ultra-high-quality programming and thoughtful work, IIE has not necessarily been a model in the past for flexibility and fast decision-making. Realizing that it was still possible to deliver quality while in the midst of the pandemic's chaos has profoundly affected many team members at IIE. In many instances, the pandemic highlighted how much trust sponsors put in the IIE teams delivering their programs, as they looked to IIE for recommendations and guidance in a rapidly changing environment.

Lessons had to be learned quickly, and they were hard won. For example, in-person content could not be immediately translated one-to-one to virtual programming. A quickly established policy may make sense for a week or two, but as the pandemic evolved, such a policy might not work as a long-term solution. Many team members reflected that these hard-won lessons have resulted in better program delivery and new approaches that they might not have bothered to try in the past because the existing process worked well enough.

Managers at IIE have noted that the pandemic has also changed how they think about new hires. Filling roles with staff members who have the required job skills and will integrate well into the team remains important. However, managers are now also looking for creative thinkers who are flexible and can pivot in moments of crisis.

Conclusion

As an institution and as individuals, we have learned many lessons over the past three years. Some of the most important takeaways include:

- An Emergency Task Force bridging program and infrastructure teams is an effective tool for sharing information rapidly, establishing best practices, and creating tools to support ongoing program work.
 - The task force needs to be able to evolve in a variety of ways (mandate, cadence, members, and focus) to continue to meet current needs as the situation changes.
 - It should exist permanently, addressing emergency management on an ongoing basis. This also eliminates the lead time of establishing a task force should a wide-scale situation arise.
- Flexibility and frequent communication are essential to crisis management.
- In a crisis it is important to act quickly and decisively. This may result in occasional mistakes or decisions that are not appropriate long-term solutions, but with strong communication with stakeholders and participants, the impacts can be managed and resolved effectively.
- Cross-training for team members should be a standard practice and will allow professional support during a crisis in which employees may also be experiencing personal impacts.
- To provide the best program management to participants and sponsors during a crisis, team members must be supported professionally and personally.
- New and ongoing employee resources should emphasize competencies that lead to strong crisis response, including flexibility, the ability to pivot, and creative problem-solving. It is not uncommon for roles to change or adapt in extraordinary circumstances.
- Virtual content and activities have a role to play, even in in-person exchange. Identifying ways to continue to use virtual tools can strengthen in-person programs.
- Recording the experiences of team members and collecting data about programs and participants allows documentation of the crisis that is invaluable to future team members who may go through a similar situation.

Communication norms have adjusted internally and with participants and sponsors. More frequent communication is an expectation at all levels, and increased flexibility and empathy at the programmatic and team member levels are also important tenets in operating educational programs in a post-pandemic world. Embracing the necessity for team members to think creatively about how they do their jobs every day has allowed IIE to come out of the pandemic as a stronger and more agile organization.

Across IIE, there were large differences in the extent to which team members' roles changed. As an organization that deals mostly with cyclical, seasonal workload ebbs and flows, we saw how the pandemic exacerbated the disparity between those overwhelmed with work and those whose work had temporarily halted. To overcome this disparity in the future, the need for cross-training and creating a bench of knowledge became apparent. IIE team members must be able to do their jobs and should have knowledge of other relevant roles to step in and assist where needed.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have raised concerns across IIE-administered programs about the socioeconomic impact on future participants of international educational exchange. In this regard, the role of virtual programming may continue to be useful in expanding access and accomplishing DEIA goals. While there is no replacement for in-person exchange, virtual programs can reach a wider audience and open a door for participants into future educational opportunities. The pandemic has expanded the potential for innovation, which will be considered at all levels of IIE in the future in terms of hiring practices and program implementation. To be successful, IIE and its team members must identify innovative and creative solutions to meet the demands of a changing global environment.

This report reflects a moment in time, and IIE expects that we will continue to learn from the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, but this vantage point has already allowed us to identify lasting changes and implement many of the lessons learned for future sustainability and resilience as an organization.

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