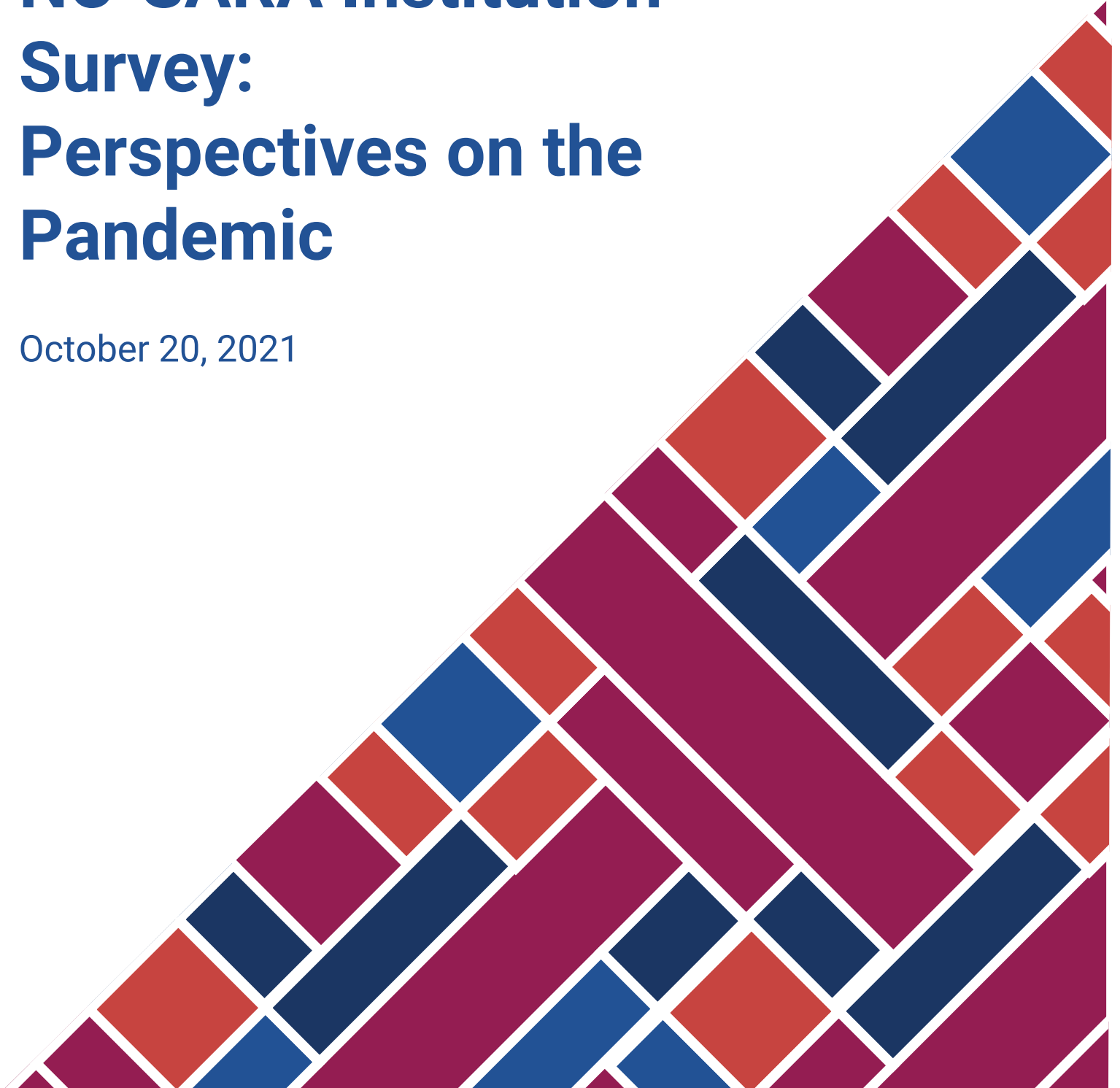NC SARA

**National Council for
State Authorization
Reciprocity Agreements**

NC-SARA Institution Survey:
Perspectives on the Pandemic

October 20, 2021

About SARA

Recognizing the growing demand for distance learning opportunities, higher education stakeholders – including state regulators and education leaders, accreditors, the U.S. Department of Education, and institutions – joined together in 2013 to establish the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (SARA). SARA helps expand students' access to educational opportunities and ensures more efficient, consistent, and effective regulation of distance learning programs.

SARA is a voluntary agreement among 49 member states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The agreement establishes comparable national standards for interstate offerings of postsecondary distance education; participating colleges and universities must adhere to stringent requirements, including accreditation and remaining in good financial standing. To learn more, please visit NC-SARA's website.

As of October 2021, more than 2,300 institutions in 49 member states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands all voluntarily participate in SARA.

About NC-SARA

The National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) is a non-profit organization that provides national leadership, in partnership with four regional compacts, of the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (SARA) for distance education regulation across the member states and territories.

NC-SARA helps ensure consistent compliance with distance education rules for state authorization among member states and participating institutions. NC-SARA also works with states, institutions, policymakers, and students to understand the purpose, benefits, and value of SARA.

NC-SARA's mission is:

- To provide broad access to postsecondary education opportunities to students across the country;
- To increase the quality and value of higher learning credentials earned via distance education; and
- To assure students are well served in a rapidly changing education landscape.

To learn more, please visit NC-SARA's website.

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Introduction

The National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) requires SARA-participating institutions to report exclusively distance education (EDE) enrollment and out-of-state learning placements (OOSLP) annually. These data provide an important understanding of the interstate distance education enrollment and learning placement landscape.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, most higher education institutions rapidly pivoted to emergency remote instruction for most of their in-person instructional activities. Research conducted by the [Chronicle of Higher Education and Davidson College](#) tells us that more than 60% of institutions offered courses primarily in an online or hybrid format in Fall 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We believed that this likely had a significant impact on the number of EDE enrollment and OOSLP reported to NC-SARA.

In order to better understand the scale of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these data, NC-SARA conducted a survey of its participating institutions about their Fall 2020 remote learning activities and calendar year 2020 placement activities. The survey was distributed to 2,162 individuals representing the 2,201 SARA participating institutions that submitted data during the Spring 2021 data collection window (some individuals submitted data for more than one institution). A link was sent to these individuals on July 8, 2021 with a follow-up reminder on July 19, 2021. The survey was closed on July 30, 2021. Responses were submitted from 698 institutions, for a response rate of 31.8%.

Key Takeaways

The majority of institutions moved courses online during Fall 2020 due to COVID-19.

- Of the institutions that responded, 593, or 85%, indicated that they moved courses to emergency remote learning that would otherwise have been delivered in person during the Fall 2020 term.
- Only 15% of respondents did not move any classes online, the majority of which were small private non-profit institutions or were those whose offerings were already all online.
- More than 30% of institutions (219) increased the percentage of their enrollment that were exclusively in distance education (EDE) courses by greater than 25%.
- The percent of institutions that had 100% EDE enrollment went from 5% in Fall 2019 to 14% in Fall 2020.
- Large institutions showed a greater increase in the percentage of EDE enrollment, as did public institutions.

Institutions report that distance education is likely to continue post-pandemic.

- Nearly two-thirds (59%) of respondents plan to continue offering some or all their emergency remote learning offerings via distance education after the pandemic is over.
- 77% of large institutions plan to continue some or all of their online offerings, compared to 57% of medium sized institutions and 56% of small institutions.
- Less than half (49%) of private non-profit institutions plan to continue some or all of their emergency remote learning options, compared to 69% of public institutions and 67% of private for-profit.

Some students were able to participate in virtual learning placements.

- 53% of those who are able to track these data indicated that at least a portion of their out-of-state learning placements took place virtually.
- Many institutions reported that virtual learning placements provided new opportunities for students and prepared students for changes happening in the workforce due to COVID-19, particularly in the field of telemedicine.

## Clarifying Language Used in Data Reporting

NC-SARA uses the term "Exclusively Distance Education enrollment" (EDE enrollment) to describe student enrollment reported exclusively in distance education courses. The data collected has remained consistent since SARA data collection began in 2015; the clarification is to ensure that stakeholders understand that these data are the same that IPEDS refers to as "Enrolled exclusively in distance education courses." The term "out-of-state learning placements" is abbreviated as OOSLP for SARA data reporting purposes, as it has been since OOSLP reporting began in 2018. For the purposes of this report, "state" is defined as a state, commonwealth, organized territory, or district (District of Columbia) of the United States. Additionally, "Non-SARA" states refer to California and the U.S. territories that do not participate in SARA.

Characteristics of Institutional Respondents

Institutions that responded to the survey were representative of SARA-participating institutions as a whole by location, size, and sector. All but one of the SARA member states / territories were represented; no institutions from the U.S. Virgin Islands responded to the survey. NC-SARA works in partnership with the country's four regional compacts to implement uniform standards and procedures for accepting and monitoring states' membership in each of their respective regions: New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE), Midwestern Higher Education Compact (MHEC), Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), and Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). The majority of

respondents to this survey were from the MHEC and SREB regions, reflective of all SARA participants. Figure 1 includes the percent of respondents from each region compared to the total number of SARA-participating institutions who completed their data submission in the spring of 2021.

Figure 1. Survey respondents and SARA participants by regional compact affiliation
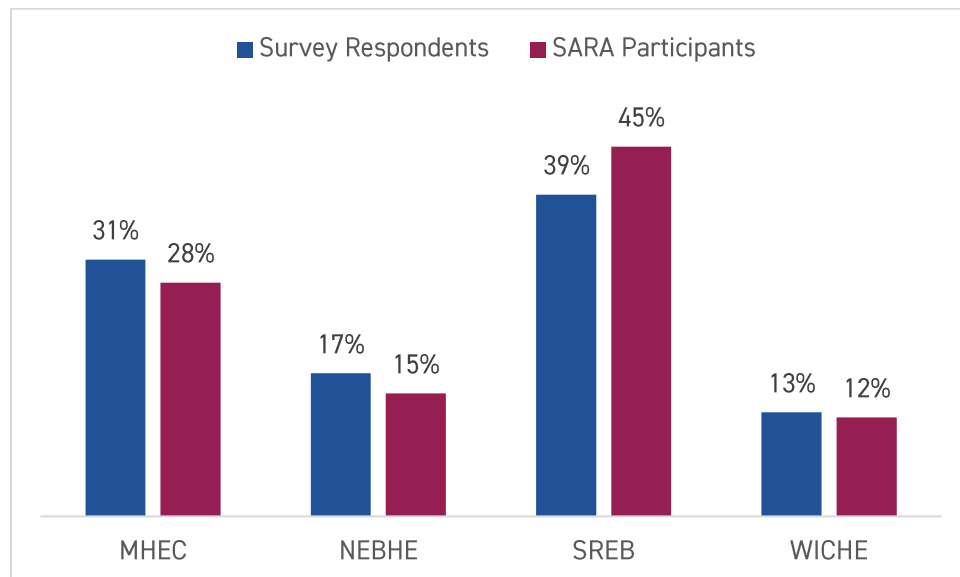
Respondents were asked for the size of their institution based on their full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment, grouped into the three categories NC-SARA uses to determine annual participation fees. Those groups are Small (under 2,500 FTE); Medium (2,500-9,999 FTE), and Large (10,000 or more). Figure 2 includes the percent of respondents from each group compared to the total number of SARA-participating institutions who completed their data submission in the spring of 2021.

Figure 2 Survey respondents and SARA participants by institution size
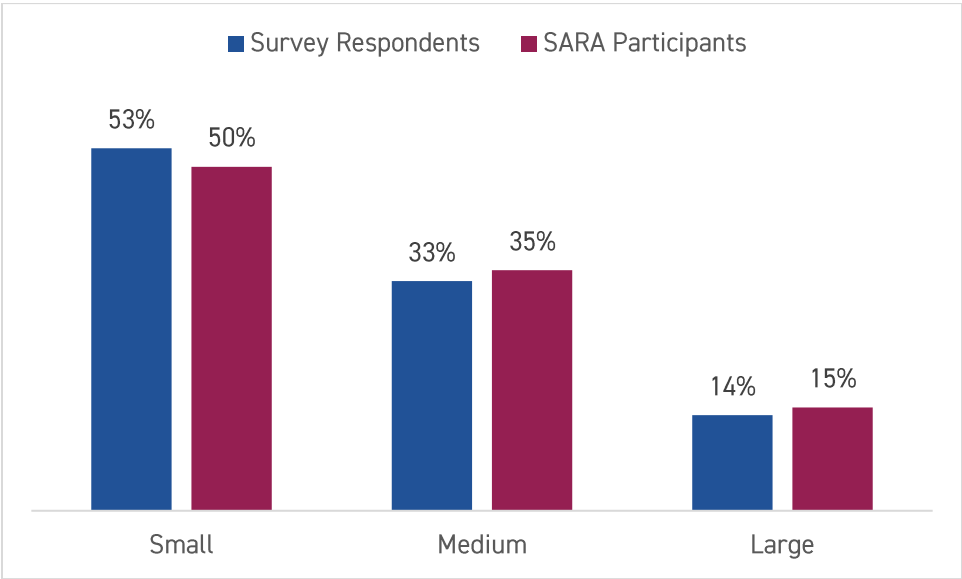
Those institutions that participated in the survey also reflect the total SARA participant population by sector, though there were slightly more respondents from the private non-profit sector than expected, and slightly fewer from the public sector. Figure 3 includes the percent of respondents from each sector compared to the total number of SARA-participating institutions that completed their data submission in Spring 2021.

Figure 3. Survey respondents and SARA participants by institution type/sector
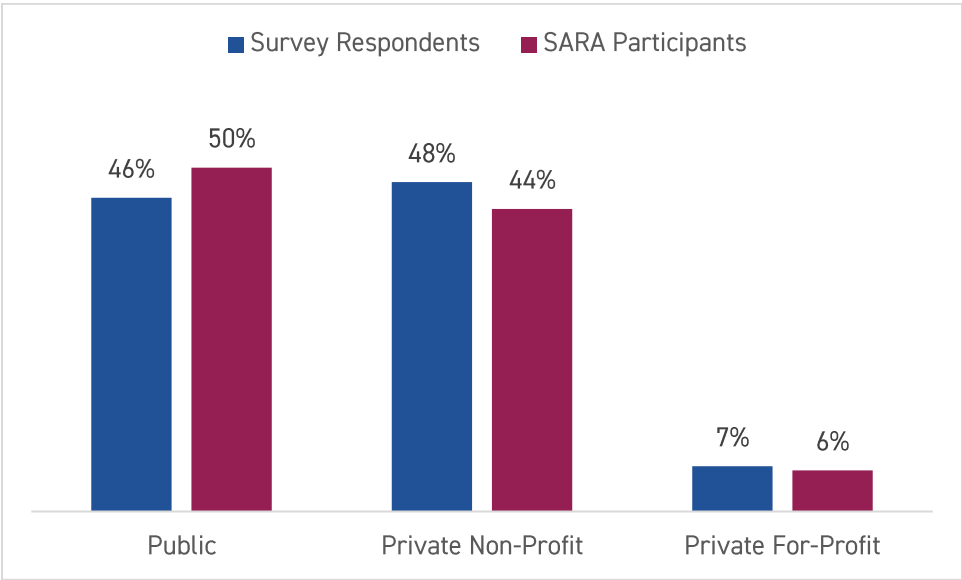
Exclusively Distance Education Enrollment

The survey asked seven questions related to exclusively distance education (EDE) enrollment, including whether an institution moved courses to emergency remote learning during the Fall 2020 term; the percent of total enrollment in Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 that was exclusively distance education; the percent of EDE enrollment that was due to emergency remote learning; whether institutions plan on continuing their remote learning offerings post COVID-19 pandemic; and two open ended questions related to Fall 2020 and future terms. The exact survey questions can be found in the Appendix.

- Of the institutions that responded, 593, or 85%, indicated that they moved courses to emergency remote learning that would otherwise have been delivered in person during the Fall 2020 term.

- Of the 101 institutions that said they did not move courses to emergency remote learning, 26 responded that 100% of their total Fall 2019 enrollment was exclusively distance education, indicating that these are entirely online institutions to begin with. The remaining institutions were predominantly small, private non-profit institutions (41), though a handful of medium- and small-sized public institutions (23) also indicated they did not move any courses to emergency remote learning.

- Among those that did not move to emergency remote learning and were not exclusively online, more institutions were in the MHEC region than expected given the percentage of survey respondents in the region (39%, compared to 31% of all survey respondents), while NEBHE was underrepresented (7% compared to 17% of all survey respondents).

When asked about the percentage of total enrollment in Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 that was exclusively distance education (including emergency remote learning for Fall 2020), over 50% of institutions showed an increase in the percentage.

- More than 30% of institutions (219) increased the percentage of their enrollment that were exclusively in distance education courses by greater than 25%.

- The percent of institutions that had 100% EDE enrollment went from 5% in Fall 2019 to 14% in Fall 2020.

- Large institutions showed a greater increase in the percentage of EDE enrollment from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020 than medium- or small-sized institutions, as did public institutions compared to private non-profit or private for-profit institutions.

Figure 4 includes the percentage of total enrollment that was exclusively distance education in both Fall 2019 and Fall 2020.

Figure 4. Percentage of total enrollment Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 exclusively in distance education
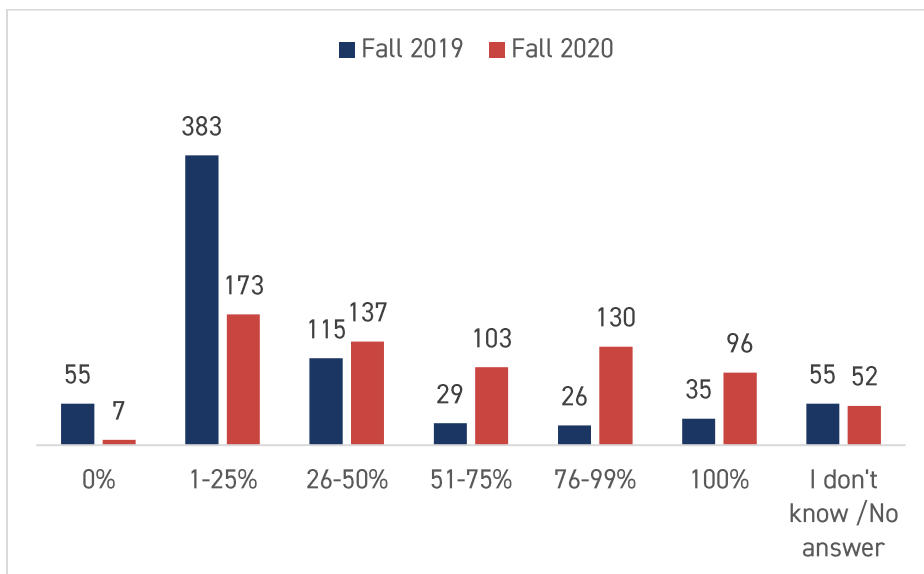
Institutions were also asked what percentage of their EDE enrollment in Fall 2020 (as reported to IPEDS and NC-SARA) was because of emergency remote learning.

- 63% of institutions responded that at least some of their EDE enrollment was due to emergency remote learning.
- For 192 institutions, or 28%, more than half of their EDE enrollment was due to emergency remote learning.
- Large and medium size institutions on average reported that 26-50% of their EDE enrollment was because of emergency remote learning, compared to 1-25% for small institutions.
- Public institutions reported on average 26-50% of students enrolled exclusively in distance education because of emergency remote learning, followed by private non-profit at 1-25%. The majority of private for-profit institutions who were able to respond indicated that 0% of their Fall 2020 EDE enrollment was due to emergency remote learning.

For the courses offered by emergency remote learning in the Fall 2020 term, 59% indicated that they plan to continue all or some of their offerings online post COVID-19 pandemic. Another 21% are considering the option.

- 77% of large institutions plan to continue some or all of their online offerings, compared to 57% of medium sized institutions and 56% of small institutions.
- Less than half (49%) of private non-profit institutions plan to continue some or all of their emergency remote learning options, compared to 69% of public institutions and 67% of private for-profit.

Additional Information & Context

The survey also asked institutions for any additional information that would provide context about emergency remote learning that took place in Fall 2020. Several themes emerged from the comments, as exemplified by the responses below:

- While traditional coursework switched to a virtual setting, many institutions reported they still had a need for in-person courses for healthcare courses / clinicals, labs, and certain types of hands-on instruction (usually vocational in nature).
    - "Due to the training and education offered by this institution, fully remote was not an option during the pandemic. Most courses still required on-ground attendance in order to complete labs and skills competency check-offs."

- Many institutions made a switch to hybrid / hyflex options versus transitioning to 100% online courses. These options usually included some in-person or synchronous instruction and some online work.
    - "For Fall 2020, faculty were given the option to teach courses remotely online, blended, hybrid, or face-to-face. Similarly, students were given the option to attend courses online or face-to-face as both general education and major coursework were offered in both modalities."

- Several institutions reported switching modalities during the term, often several times.
    - "We did not switch to fully remote learning. It was based on a daily class-by-class analysis of COVID positivity rates and a minimum threshold of 10% positivity that necessitated a move to take that class fully online until the student(s)' positivity rates decreased below 10% or students successfully completed the isolation or quarantine period."

- Many institutions allowed students and faculty to switch to emergency remote learning on a case-by-case basis.
    - "Remote learning was a request and approval process. Students had to request permission to be remote. They were then screened, and only if they met certain requirements were they permitted to learn remotely in Fall 2020."

- Faculty training was a huge component of a successful switch in modalities, and many institutions recognize the effort of their faculty and staff to make the term successful.
  - o "Our standards for instruction in eLearning were waived due to the pandemic. Many of our instructors have been switching over their courses to online and received training to become certified in eLearning instruction. We are all working to keep our standards and success rates at equal to or better than on campus. We pride our eLearning program in student success and quality of education. This emergency really challenged us all. I have to say our faculty really stepped up and produced."

- The IPEDS (and therefore NC-SARA) definitions / instructions were not clear – many institutions did not include emergency remote learning as distance education, and it appears many institutions received conflicting guidance from IPEDS.
  - o "Only students who are under our online program were included as a part of this study. Students who took some online classes due to Covid-19 were not considered here since traditionally those are on campus courses."

Plans for the Future

Institutions were also asked to add any additional comments about plans for future terms for either remote instruction or permanent online learning.

- Some institutions reported that the forced transition to online learning, though difficult initially, has opened up opportunities for future growth now that faculty and students are trained on and comfortable with necessary technologies.
  - o "Now that many instructors have found that they are more technically capable than they may have originally thought, there is more confidence about shifting courses to a HyFlex format. This is something we are looking at with regards to scheduling."

- Some institutions reported they planned on returning to in-person learning as soon as possible for those courses previously offered that way.
  - o "All faculty and students are expected to teach and attend classes on-ground during Fall 2021 with no exceptions. Our institution plans to return to pre-COVID practices with all sessions in-person Fall 2021."

- Other institutions reported that they found value in offering online and synchronous courses and plan to expand these offerings in order to provide greater student flexibility.

o "I think many students and faculty alike were forced to embrace online learning, and as a result, we will see a sustained increase in online enrollment and course offerings to provide the modality preferred by our student and faculty populations."

These comments and the quantitative responses demonstrate that COVID-19 had a significant impact on the amount of distance education taking place in Fall 2020. While many institutions plan on returning to face-to-face instruction because of their institutional culture or types of coursework offered, many found the increase in online education met the needs of students during the pandemic, but also provide flexibility that students (and faculty) may demand going forward.

## Virtual and Out-of-State Learning Placements

The survey also asked six questions related to virtual and out-of-state learning placements (OOSLP). Learning placements are field experiences such as, but not limited to, clinical rotations, internships, or student teaching. NC-SARA only collects data on out-of-state learning placements and does not collect data on virtual (online or remote) learning placements. However, due to the unique circumstances of 2020, institutions were asked about their virtual learning placements to provide additional context to the decrease of OOSLP reported in NC-SARA's annual data collection.

- Only 71% of responding institutions offer OOSLP at their institution. This is likely due to the institutional mission and types of programs offered, as the majority of learning placements that NC-SARA has collected data on take place in healthcare, education, and business programs. Institutions may offer internships or other types of learning placements, but not necessarily across state lines.

Institutions were asked for the approximate number of learning placements that took place virtually in calendar years 2019 and 2020. A significant number of institutions reported that they do not track or collect this data. Of those that do track virtual learning placements, the majority did not report a significant increase in the number that took place in 2020.

When asked what percentage of overall learning placements took place virtually in calendar year 2020, 53% of those who are able to track this data indicated that at least a portion of their learning placements took place virtually. Figure 5 displays the responses for all institutions.

Figure 5. Percentage of learning placements taking place virtually
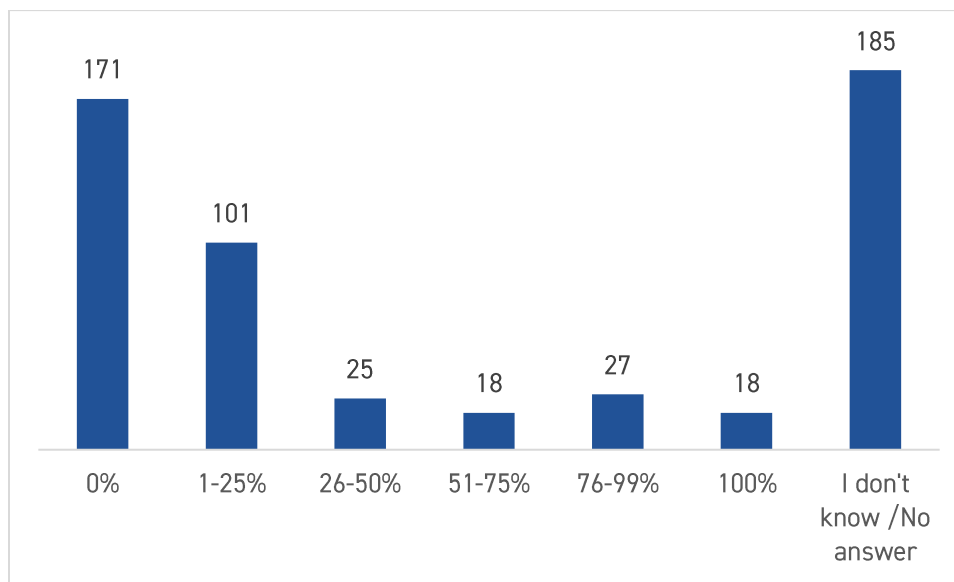
In addition, 17% of institutions report that they plan to continue all or some of their virtual learning placements post COVID-19, though the majority of institutions (50%) responded that they don't know.

Opportunities for Innovation

Finally, institutions were asked to share any innovative or interesting learning placement opportunities created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many institutions reported that learning placements were either cancelled or happened in-person as planned. However, many reported that virtual learning placements created new possibilities for students. Several themes emerged from the comments, as exemplified by the responses below:

- Virtual learning placements provide opportunities for students regardless of their geographic location or financial limitations.
  - "This did offer new opportunities to our students that cannot afford to re-position themselves out of state. Continuing to look at remote learning placements would benefit students financially."

- Virtual learning placements prepare students for work in today's office environment.
  - "In addition to training employers how to hire, manage, and work with a virtual/hybrid intern, we assisted our population with training for Zoom interviews, group Zoom interviews, the hybrid work setting, and all the moving pieces associated with the same."

- Telehealth is becoming an increasingly prevalent model in healthcare, and participating in virtual learning placements prepares students for that reality.
  - "This provided the opportunity for all of our cohorts to receive extensive training and clinical experience with telepractice, which had been becoming more prevalent in the field, but has become typical practice in most settings to some extent since COVID. Our students are going to graduate from the program with more experience, training, and skill in telepractice service delivery than ever before and in many cases were valuable assets to their off-campus placements due to this experience."

While virtual learning placements may not work for every institution, program, or student, it is clear this is an area of opportunity to consider in the future, and that many institutions are already moving down this path. Institutions should consider collecting additional data in order to evaluate the effectiveness of virtual learning placements as opportunities continue to grow. As one respondent noted, "Offering virtual learning placements worked wonderfully, proving to be a viable alternative to physical classroom-based clinical placements. As such, virtual learning placements are a viable long-term option that we can offer alongside more traditional in-person clinical placements."

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the amount of distance education instruction that took place in Fall 2020, as institutions implemented emergency remote learning, either via online courses or hybrid / synchronous instruction. This resulted in a large increase in the number of students reported as enrolled exclusively in distance education courses. While we might expect a decrease in EDE enrollments in future years, the introduction of emergency remote learning has provided some benefits: training opportunities for faculty in online and distance learning modalities and methodologies; increased flexibility for students; and new modes of delivery for some programs and institutions. As new opportunities for virtual learning placements and innovations in instructional technology continue to develop, we can expect more institutions to utilize distance education to meet the needs of their students.

Appendix: Survey Questions

1. Institution name:
2. Please tell us in which state your institution is located:
3. What size is your institution (based on your institution's total full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment as submitted to the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) each fall as 12-month FTE enrollment?)
    a. Small (under 2,500)
    b. Medium (2,500-9,999)
    c. Large (10,000 or more)
4. What type of institution do you work for?
    a. Public
    b. Private Non-Profit
    c. Private For-Profit
    d. Tribal
5. May we contact you with any additional questions regarding your responses? If so, please provide your email.
6. Did your institution move any courses to remote learning that would otherwise have been delivered in person at any time during the fall term of 2020?
    a. Yes
    b. No
7. Approximately what percentage of your total enrollment in fall 2019 was exclusively distance education?
    a. 0%
    b. 1-25%
    c. 26-50%
    d. 51-75%
    e. 76-99%
    f. 100%
    g. I don't know
8. Approximately what percentage of your total enrollment in fall 2020 was exclusively distance education (including remote learning)?
    a. 0%
    b. 1-25%
    c. 26-50%
    d. 51-75%
    e. 76-99%
    f. 100%
    g. I don't know

9. Approximately what percentage of your exclusively distance education enrollment in fall 2020 (as reported to IPEDS & NC-SARA) was because of remote learning? (That is, what percent of students reported as distance education enrollments intended to be in person on-campus, but moved to online enrollment because of the COVID-19 pandemic.)
    a. 0%
    b. 1-25%
    c. 26-50%
    d. 51-75%
    e. 76-99%
    f. 100%
    g. I don't know
10. For the courses offered by remote learning for the fall 2020 term - do you plan to continue to offer these courses online post COVID-19 pandemic?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Some
    d. I don't know / It's under consideration
11. Is there additional information you can share to provide context about your institution's remote learning in fall 2020 term?
12. Are there any additional comments you can share about plans for future terms for either remote instruction or permanent online learning?
13. Does your institution offer out-of-state learning placements?
    a. Yes
    b. No
14. Approximately how many learning placements took place virtually in calendar year 2019?
15. Approximately how many learning placements took place virtually in calendar year 2020?
16. Approximately what percentage of your overall learning placements took place virtually in calendar year 2020?
    a. 0%
    b. 1-25%
    c. 26-50%
    d. 51-75%
    e. 76-99%
    f. 100%
    g. I don't know

17. For the learning placements offered virtually in 2020 – do you plan to continue to offer these virtually post COVID-19?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Some
    d. I don't know / It's under consideration
18. Did your institution do anything innovative or interesting for learning placements during the COVID-19 pandemic that you would like to share with us? Did the introduction of or increase in virtual learning placements provide any new opportunities for students? We would like to be able to highlight work being done by our participating institutions.

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