COVID-19 Planning and Process Changes

Institutional Response

Institution: Ferris State University   City, State: Big Rapids, Michigan

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Please complete the following questions based on the institution's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The prompts below are intended to help institutions articulate to peer review teams adaptations made in response to COVID-19. Understandably, some prompts may not be relevant to all institutions; in such cases, simply indicate so. By focusing institutional adaptations in this form, institutions can provide information to peer teams about how they are handling the pandemic, while retaining the Assurance Argument's traditional focus on long-term, non-pandemic operations. The COVID-19 Institutional Response should not exceed 10 pages. Upload the form in the Forms tab of the Assurance System prior to the institution's lock date.

Questions

Criterion 1. Mission. Please answer the following questions describing any changes the institution implemented related to Criterion 1.

- What, if any, program changes has the institution implemented (e.g., program hiatus, closure, launch) this fall? How do these service changes align with the institution's mission?

  No existing Ferris programs were affected by the pandemic; however, a couple of new programs that were expected to launch in fall 2020 were delayed. First, review of Kendall College of Art and Design (KCAD) curricular revisions by their accrediting organization NASAD were delayed (affecting the associate degree of Fine Arts in Design). Once approved, this change will go into effect in academic year 2021-22.

  Program offerings at two new off-campus sites, Kalamazoo and Benton Harbor, were also delayed, with launches planned for January 2021.

  The Ferris State University Western Michigan English Language Institute (WMELI) has suspended enrollment and a voluntary withdrawal of accreditation from the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA) was made effective 08/26/2020. Amid steadily decreasing enrollment and budget challenges, the WMELI has not renewed any faculty contracts for the Fall 2020 semester, and the program has no student enrollment. Students from the 2019-20 academic year successfully completed the program

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or returned to their home institutions after semester exchanges; therefore, no students have been adversely affected by the suspension of the program.

KCAD suspended the face-to-face continuing studies programming for community members due to the COVID-19 disruption; however, plans call for restructuring of this programming, providing an opportunity to integrate efforts with the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts.

- How has the institution's commitment to the public good been maintained during this period? What was the pandemic's impact on its civic engagement/community-based work?

From the early days of the pandemic response, Ferris has kept transparency and communication at the forefront. From web-based announcements to targeted emails, Ferris has kept its mission and responsibility to its students central. Since early summer as plans for the fall were developed and put into place, Ferris State University's Re-entry Committee has maintained the institution's commitment to the public good by keeping its charge at the forefront of all decision making. Ferris is committed to ensuring that all plans are inclusive and supportive of the high-quality teaching and engagement opportunities, while operating in a safe manner consistent with federal and state mandates and/or guidelines. Throughout the pandemic our work — and our commitment to excellence — continued, albeit in different ways and through different delivery modalities, serving our students and maintaining our efforts with community engagement and educational initiatives.

During the pandemic, Ferris faculty, staff, and students contributed to local, regional, and national service projects, representing the institution and our commitment to public good. Examples include these: College of Pharmacy faculty and students contributed to a national database of research articles related to the coronavirus. In addition to donations of PPE inventory to local healthcare facilities, faculty and staff from several colleges and University areas also teamed to create plastic face shields and ear guards, test their effectiveness, identify local need, and distribute these to local hospitals.

Since April, more than 28,000 pieces of PPE have been produced for distribution. The coordinator of Ferris' COVID-19 Community Response Team saluted the faculty, staff, and student work: "So far, this team has produced and delivered 883 ear protectors, more than 25,000 face shields, and 1,380 cloth face masks to 45 different organizations. When the market could not keep up, this group supplied organizations with crucial personal protective equipment to ensure the health and safety of our communities."

Other faculty and staff contributed by sharing their professional public health expertise on local COVID-19 taskforces, supporting local food bank efforts, and volunteering at community centers. Students were encouraged to continue community service activities, such as the annual Big Event, and assist neighbors and community members with shopping, yard work, and similar household tasks. Since July, several town halls have been conducted for the Ferris State University community, including faculty, students, staff, and members of the Big Rapids municipal government. COVID-19 testing protocols have been developed in collaboration with Pharmacy and Health Professions administration and faculty that have included coordination with the Birkam Health Center and District 10 Health Department.

The University's response to ensure the safety of students, faculty, and staff considers multiple testing modalities and protocols. Upon entry, all students residing in any form of university housing were tested using a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test. Over 2,300 PCR tests were conducted with a turn-around of 24-48 hours through a relationship with GeneMarkers, a clinical laboratory in Kalamazoo, Michigan. This testing established a baseline of prevalence within those residing on-campus. Further testing will also include the regional healthcare system, Spectrum Health. The University is continuing to pursue point-of-care testing through a collaboration with Quidel Corporation. At this time, access to the rapid antigen-based testing is limited. Antigen-based testing may be utilized for ongoing surveillance testing of the University community. In addition, Ferris possesses the needed instrumentation to conduct waste-stream sampling for the SARS-CoV-2 antigen. This unique testing methodology monitors for the presence of the SARS-CoV-2 antigen in the isolated wastewaters of instructional and residential facilities. A protocol is being developed for testing through the University's Shimadzu Core Lab; coupled with the entry-testing protocol, the University's Re-entry Committee will be determining a comprehensive approach to surveillance.

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- Has the institution adjusted its recruitment, enrollment, and support strategies to serve traditionally underserved students? If so, how?

Ferris implemented several key accommodations within hours of Michigan's initial State of Emergency ("stay home, stay safe") order, including assisting faculty and students with immediate shifts to online courses, providing loner computers / laptops / mobile internet hotspots, and offering virtual advising and counseling services. Within the first week, Ferris also established a new Student Hardship Fund providing emergency funding to Ferris students financially impacted by the pandemic. As of 09/04/20, $135,351 has been raised and over 2,000 students have been assisted through distribution of these funds. Once the CARES Act Funds were available, these services expanded the level of financial support available for students.

Since then, Ferris has continually expanded its support to meet a broad range of student needs, including

Academic / Educational

- Virtual / synchronous online tutoring and writing support services using MS Teams.
- Virtual and hyflex support for Structured Learning Assistance (SLA) courses.
- Virtual student success programming, including tutoring strategies, videos, best practice strategies, and resource guides to help aid successful online learning.
- A COVID-related accommodation process to assist students experiencing challenges with instructional engagement.
- Paging services and curbside pickup processes to accommodate access to instructional materials and university library materials.
- Online support and remote delivery formats for all secondary school partners in the FerrisFirst program.

Admissions

- Many admissions processes moved online to Zoom meetings and virtual tours, including orientation.
- Extended personal outreach to admitted students and those who had incomplete application materials.

Access / Community Resources

- Accessible online resources and website information linking students to key community and academic resources.
- Modified ADA accommodation processes, providing students with accommodated services, without immediate need for medical documentation affected by COVID-19 delays.
- Online access to counseling and support services.

Health / Safety

- Masks and alternative face coverings (clear face masks and face shields) to accommodate individual needs.
- Ferris Forward Together Bond: University's community pledge and commitment to ensure personal and community health and welfare.

Criterion 2. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct. Please answer the following questions describing how the institution maintained integrity, as outlined in Criterion 2, as it implemented changes to regular campus practices during this period.

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- Has the institution altered any existing policies or procedures (e.g., admissions, grading, registration, etc.) in response to the pandemic? If so, please describe them. Will these changes remain in effect, or will they revert to the original policy after the pandemic has subsided?

Once Ferris transitioned to the fully online spring semester, the University offered a one-semester revision to its grading plan: Once grades were posted at the end of the spring semester, for all standard letter-graded courses, students had the option of requesting any passing grade (D- or higher) be changed to CR, and request that any failing grades be changed to NC. These changes were implemented only for those requested by the students, and only for courses that did not require a GPA for accreditation or credentialing purposes.

Prior to the pandemic shifts, Ferris had begun a test-optional (ACT/SAT) process for admissions; this process has been continued and encouraged. Students were also allowed to self-report their high school grades when their schools were unable to submit electronically.

Additional policy and procedural changes (spring 2020 semester only):

- Course withdrawal deadline, extended to May 1.
- Faculty submission of final grades, extended by one week.
- Exam week used for additional course time as well as final exams/assessment.
- No academic dismissals.
- Requirement for an Incomplete grade was reduced to 50% of course work completed (vs 75% completed).

Additional policy and procedural changes (fall 2020):

- Online tuition fee waived.
- Student account balance restrictions (the balance allowed before an account "hold" limits students' ability to register for courses or incur additional charges) were increased from $300 to $1,000.

- Has the institution made changes to any contractual agreements during this period that have a bearing on educational activities? If so, please describe them.

None.

- How did the institution communicate with students, staff and other stakeholders about any relevant operational changes during the pandemic?

Ferris' communication strategy during the pandemic restrictions included (1) University homepage announcements, (2) regular social media messages using all Ferris community and student-facing groups, (3) FAQs collected and reported regularly for students through the student portal, and (4) all University group updates collected, reported, and linked to the COVID-19 Campus Information and Updates webpage https://www.ferris.edu/coronavirus).

In addition to these broader community communication strategies, several Ferris groups held virtual town halls over the spring and summer to discuss strategic and long-range planning (SPARC meeting), re-entry planning (entire campus community), faculty concerns about re-entry (department and college groups), student concerns about re-entry (student organizations), and community issues. Deans and vice presidents also conveyed relevant information to their teams during regular staff meetings and email communications.

To prepare for re-entry, internal communication about operational changes were also channeled through the Re-Entry Committee and consisted of active work group assignments to develop plans, ensure area awareness of needs and progress, and identify unresolved problem areas. A Supervisor Re-Entry Plan database was created — and maintained in a Sharepoint location — to track and report these actions.

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The Re-entry Committee hosted two town halls in late August, one for city/county leaders, local law enforcement, and off-campus apartment complex managers, and the second was specifically for students. Information was shared about our re-entry planning and what the University experience will look like this fall. Both were well attended with good dialogue and discussion. Another town hall for the University community is planned for September.

- How has the institution's board been involved in monitoring potential disruptions to the institution's enrollment or financial stability?

  Ferris' Board of Trustees has been actively monitoring the budget implications throughout the pandemic restrictions, engaging in work group meetings, meetings with the president, and sessions with the President's Leadership Team.

Criterion 3. Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources and Support. Please answer the following questions and describe the institution's ability to provide quality education, teaching and academic support services during this period.

- Which delivery modalities will the institution employ during the 2020-21 academic year? Check all that apply.

  - On-site classroom teaching, with social-distancing measures within the classroom

    ☒ Fall   ☒ Spring   ☒ Summer

  - On-site classroom teaching, with fewer students in larger classrooms

    ☒ Fall   ☒ Spring   ☒ Summer

  - Hybrid models, with some learning in a classroom and some learning online

    ☒ Fall   ☒ Spring   ☒ Summer

  - 50% models, with one-half of students in the classroom and one-half present by video conference for each session

    ☒ Fall   ☒ Spring   ☒ Summer

  - Synchronous classes, offered online for all students during the regularly scheduled class time

    ☒ Fall   ☒ Spring   ☒ Summer

  - Fully online classes, offered using an LMS integrated with regular student/teacher contact

    ☒ Fall   ☒ Spring   ☒ Summer

  - Other—Please describe:

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- What type of training did the institution provide for its faculty members on distance learning/hybrid formats to prepare them for this work? Check all that apply.

  ☐ Training for all faculty, delivered virtually

  ☒ Individual training with IT professional on the campus

  ☐ Access to online training on distance delivery offered by an outside provider to all faculty

  ☒ Individual training/coaching offered by experienced online faculty members on campus

  ☒ Department-level, department-specific training by subject area

  ☒ Recorded or live webinars/resources offered by outside providers

  ☒ Recorded or live webinars/resources offered by the LMS provider

  ☐ Other—please describe:

  While training was not required for all faculty, it was offered to all. Many faculty members participated in the training sessions (offered at the time of the transition); others worked individually with eLearning staff over the spring and summer to increase / enhance their online course delivery approaches.

Criterion 4. Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement. Please describe how the institution maintained the evaluation and improvement, as outlined in Criterion 4, as it implemented changes to regular campus practices during this period.

- How has the institution's ongoing student assessment changed since the COVID-19 disruption? If the institution altered the regular assessment program or processes, what has the institution implemented instead to assess student outcomes during this period?

  The University's assessment cycles were not changed because of the pandemic shifts; however, many programs delayed reporting spring semester data with plans to resume in the fall. Some discussions of assessment results were postponed (plans to reschedule in early fall 2020); for example, the General Education program postponed two of the "Closing the Loop" conversations originally scheduled for spring 2020.

  The Academic Program Review (APR) process for 2019-20 academic year was completed prior to the disruption. The 2020-21 APR cycle has been launched and programs were given the opportunity to request an extension due to the COVID-19 disruption. At the time of this submission, all programs are either on-track to report as planned or have been rescheduled to a future APR cycle. Similarly, KCAD deferred some External Program Review processes due to the COVID-19 disruption; however, plans are in place to resume these when feasible.

- How has the current disruption affected the institution's or individual departments' ability to integrate assessment data into ongoing program improvement? Note successes, as well as gaps.

  While minor adjustments to the reporting cycles have been made to allow for additional reporting time or delays in some spring semester program data collection, most areas have been able to complete assessment work and integrate results into program improvement. Several areas, such as the Academic Senate and SPARC (strategic planning), note that the transition from in-person meetings to virtual meetings have actually expanded involvement and, thus, increased efficiencies.

- How have the institution's retention, persistence and completion initiatives been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?

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As noted previously, the University used the pandemic transition as an opportunity to improve, enhance, and expand some current retention, persistence, and completion efforts. From making academic and learning support services more accessible and flexible (see Criterion One response) to enhancing the University's "reach" in addressing mental health, safety, and physical health issues, the University's approach is now more comprehensive.

One key shift was the development of a comprehensive Student Success Plan, bringing together student recruitment, retention, persistence, and completion. While the work began in 2019, it continues as planned with a more enhanced perception of student needs and a goal to look at each student as a "whole person" with complex needs and concerns.

Another effort, started in April and extending over the summer, was the revitalized calling campaign, aimed to reach students who were taking classes during spring semester but had not yet registered for fall courses. More than 155 faculty and staff (from both academic and student affairs divisions) participated in the calling campaign. The campaign focused on helping students with registration holds and financial difficulties and reached more than 3,000 undergraduate and graduate students overall and resulted in contact with almost 90% of the students by phone, email, or text messaging.

Even with the disruptions of the spring semester, withdrawal rates were much lower than past spring semesters. The lower rates may be the result of two changes (noted above) that were instituted because of the pandemic: the later withdrawal date and the credit / no credit grade option.

Criterion 5. Institutional Effectiveness, Resources and Planning. Please describe how the institution maintained effectiveness, resources and planning, as outlined in Criterion 5, as it implemented changes to regular campus practices during this period.

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected enrollments? For each term in the upcoming academic year, please indicate an approximate percent increase or decrease.

  o Fall 2020

  ☐ Increase ☒ Decrease ☐ No change

  Percent change:

  ☐ Less than 5% ☐ 5% to 10% ☒ More than 10%

  o Spring 2021

  ☐ Increase ☒ Decrease ☐ No change

  Percent change:

  ☐ Less than 5% ☐ 5% to 10% ☒ More than 10%

  o Summer 2021

  ☐ Increase ☒ Decrease ☐ No change

  Percent change:

  ☐ Less than 5% ☐ 5% to 10% ☒ More than 10%

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○ Other: Please describe any other COVID-19 enrollment impacts:

- What is the likelihood that funding sources other than tuition will be unable to provide the funds budgeted? If likely, how much of a budget cut does the institution expect?

The State's revenues have been significantly impacted by lost revenue related to COVID-19. Current planning is for up to a 10% reduction in state funding for FY21. State funding for FY20 was reduced 11% and replaced with a matching amount of CARES restricted funds (cannot be used for general operations). The 10% reduction for FY21, from the approved FY20 appropriation base of $56 million, equates to a $5.6 million State reduction. The University has reduced expenses to offset this reduction as one part of a $20 million general fund budget reduction program.

- What measures is the institution taking to address any budgetary issues for the current fiscal year?

The FY21 fiscal year began on July 1. In anticipation of State funding changes as well as the impact COVID-19 will have on enrollment, the University planned, and is implementing, $20 million of budget reductions. As of August 31, $18.7 million of that amount has been achieved; the balance will be addressed during the fiscal year.

- What interim steps has the institution taken to deal with temporary financial shortfalls?

The University instituted temporary employee furloughs for selected employee groups and departments when the campus transitioned to remote operations, significantly limited travel, reduced operating spending where possible, and suspended most building projects.

- What emergency policies or procedures, if any, has the institution invoked because of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The University COVID-19 Re-Entry Committee developed and implemented a COVID-19 Preparedness & Response Plan for Ferris State University in accordance with the requirements in the most recent State of Michigan Executive Orders (EO) concerning employee safety and health, and all requirements therein signed by Governor Whitmer, and also in accordance with Guidance on Preparing Workplaces (OSHA 3993 Guidance Document) for COVID-19 as referenced by EO. All planning information may be viewed at Ferris' Coronavirus Information Resources website (URL presented earlier).

Specific University actions have included closing facilities to the public, mandating wearing of masks, extensive facility cleaning and re-entry preparations (including signs and placards related to social distancing and PPE). All students living in campus residence halls, suites, and apartments were required to complete a COVID-19 PCR test upon arrival to campus. Ferris is also testing wastewater from these housing facilities for COVID-19.

Ferris has also modified some non-instructional spaces to provide additional larger classrooms, following Executive Orders from the State of Michigan and waivers of fire marshal regulations.

As noted previously, Ferris also adjusted some University policies affecting course registration related to tuition non-payment or delays in receiving financial loans, scholarships, or other supports.

- How have these changes affected institutional budgets for educational programs, support services and cocurricular activities?

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All budget areas have been affected by fiscal reductions. Vice presidents have identified areas of reduction based upon enrollment demands and the strategic planning focus of the University.

Educational Programming. Because of the projected enrollment decline of 11%, largely as a result of COVID-19, we planned and implemented a 10% base budget reduction in Academic Affairs equal to $12.4 million for FY21. Because most of the faculty and administrative positions that were cut to achieve these reductions were vacant, and coupled with the reductions in student enrollment, the cuts had little to no impact on the overall quality of our educational programs. Additionally, a voluntary separation program was offered to faculty, resulting in the reduction of 23 faculty FTEs, of which 7 were part of the $12.4 million that was reduced for FY21.

Student Affairs / Cocurricular Activities. Because of projected enrollment decreases and also the effects of the pandemic, the Student Affairs division implemented a 10% reduction to general fund base budgets. This resulted in $944,000 in reductions inclusive of all operational budget categories. As most of the personnel positions that were cut were voluntary separations or from departments that are able to adjust workflow, minimal impact to support services is expected.

The Re-Entry Committee sub-groups working on student engagement have developed plans for converting many student activities to virtual environments, developing opportunities for safe events on campus in residence halls, and promoting safe, responsible behavior in campus and the local community. The reductions to general funds in the areas of co-curricular activity support will result in the need to utilize divisional discretionary funds to ensure we continue to offer exceptional co-curricular activities for our students.

Support Services. Because student support services were ramped up in immediate response to the pandemic restrictions (including, as noted earlier, with virtual advising services, equipment loans, and new subscriptions for technical services), the budget effects included purchasing additional online, full-text and multimedia resources available for remote library /research. Existing technology allowed for active engagement with students and little disruption in student support offerings. Student support services continue to be a priority for re-entry planning, with expectations for budget implications once the effect on state appropriations becomes clearer.

Financial Resources. As noted earlier, both the Student Hardship Fund and the CARES Act funds provided support to respond to student emergency need caused by loss of employment or increased costs associated with the pandemic restrictions.

Student Housing & Dining Refunds. When the pandemic closed campus and campus housing, students who did not return to campus received prorated refunds for housing and dining. Refunds totaled $5,246,050 and were paid for by Federal CARES Act institutional funds as an allowable expense. The refunds did not have an impact on the FY21 budget.

- What type of pandemic-related planning is the institution doing for Academic Year 2021–22?

The Re-Entry Committee, comprised of faculty, staff, and students, has been active since late spring and has approached its work through work groups for Academics, Employees, Facilities, Health, Procurement, and Students. The Committee developed a broad, comprehensive approach to its planning, applying a 4-pronged approach: (1) plan for re-entry, (2) plan for monitoring the virus, (3) plan for containing the virus, and (4) plan for return to remote status, if needed. Current news, updates, and results of the Committee's efforts and actions are collected on the website (see link included above).

The Academic Affairs re-entry work group analyzed density data for all classrooms and buildings, seeking ways to mitigate risk by strategically reducing density in certain areas at particular high-volume times. Recommendations were presented to the Facilities Work Group for implementation. KCAD also completed planning to reduce density in their physical spaces to support social distancing expectations for the health and safety of all faculty, staff, and students.

As the fall semester begins and re-entry plans are implemented, areas of focus for FY 2021-22 strategic planning will include State funding (as the Michigan economy has been significantly impacted by the

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pandemic) and enrollment (also greatly impacted by the economic situations faced by students and families). SPARC will address the specific Strategic Plan targets that align with the changing landscape of higher education affected by the pandemic. The August retreat for the Board of Trustees included reports on key targets, specifically focusing on ways these may need to be adjusted in response to the pandemic.

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