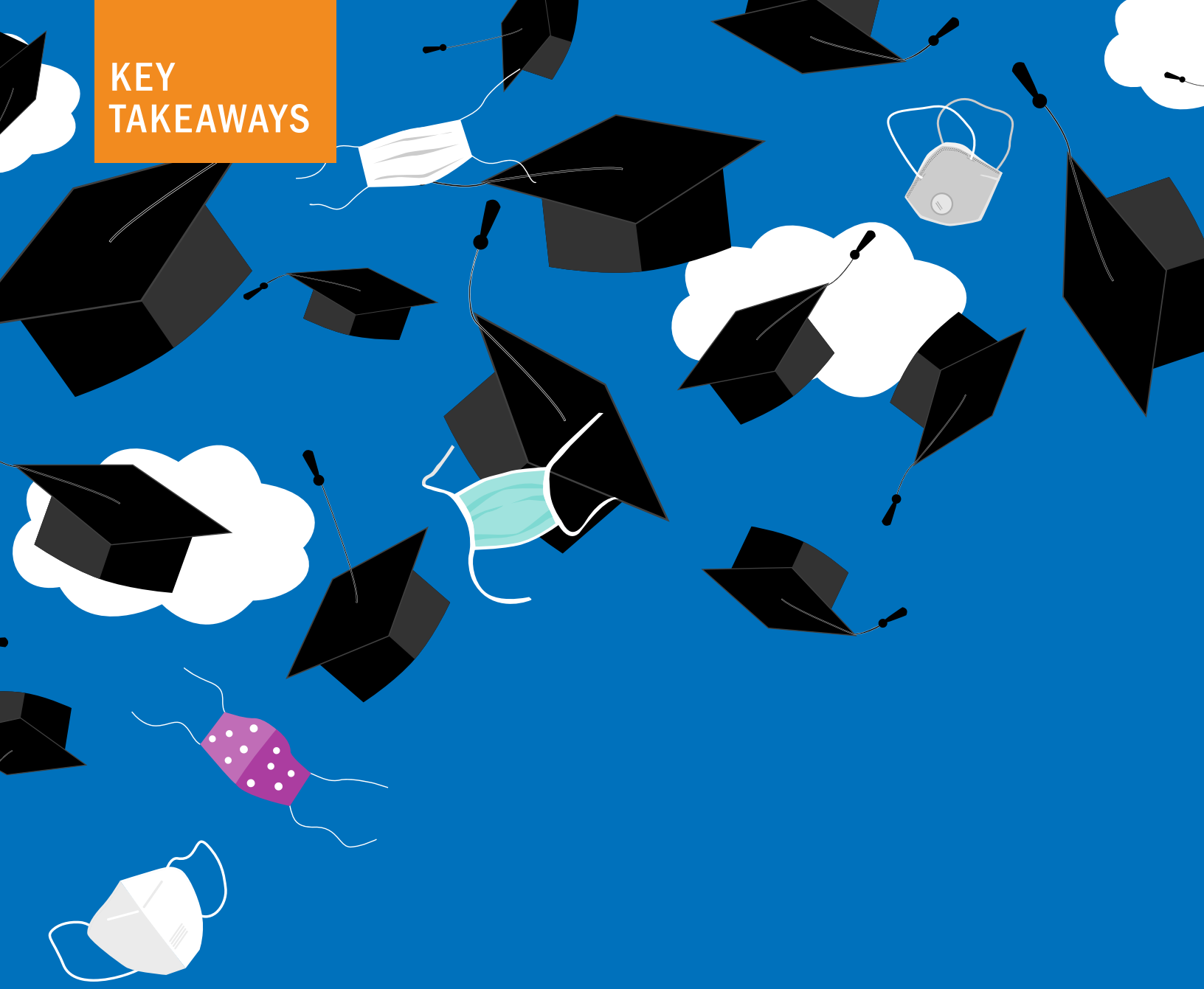
KEY TAKEAWAYS



Student Success in a Pandemic

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For more than a decade, the world of higher education has been focused on student success. Then came the Covid-19 pandemic, a recession, and a national reckoning on racism in everyday life. What are colleges doing to continue their progress on completion rates, equity, and social mobility? What are the most effective ways to engage students at various stages of the college experience virtually? And how can colleges holistically support their most vulnerable students?

To learn more about where efforts stand now and how colleges are adapting them to the current reality, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* recently hosted a virtual forum, with support from Mediasite, which was moderated by Sara Lipka, an assistant managing editor at *The Chronicle* and an author of the report "The Truth About Student Success: Myths, Realities, and 30 Practices That Are Working." The panelists were Shauna Davis, executive director of holistic student supports at Achieving the Dream; Loretta Ussery Griffy, associate vice president for student-success strategic initiatives at Austin Peay State University; Tiffany Beth Mfume, assistant vice president for student success and retention at Morgan State University; Mike Muñoz, vice president for student services at Long Beach City College; and Sabrina K. Sanders, director of student-affairs projects and initiatives for the California State University system.

The following comments, which have been edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the forum. To hear the full discussion, access the archived version here.

Sara Lipka: Let's focus on the academic and holistic support that students need now. Students have always needed information and guidance. With the spring, and the sudden pivot to online, what have you found to be the most effective form of communication?

Mike Muñoz: As we transitioned last March, we put ourselves in the student experience. We had the conversation, what do students need right now, what are the support services they need to access, and the information they need to make this transition. We developed a micro student-services website.

I asked the departments to drill down to one landing page that helps students know how to get in contact with you, what hours you are available, and what are the course services they can access. That made it easier for students, and we got a lot of positive feedback. Situating ourselves in the student experience really led all of our problem-solving. We pushed communication with text messages and emails, but that condensed micro site was really an effective way to reach students with the information they needed.

Lipka: I know these are challenging times for students, so how do you direct them to the right place?

Sara Lipka
assistant managing editor,
The Chronicle of Higher Education

Mike Munoz
vice president of student services
Long Beach City College

Tiffany Beth Mfume: We are finding that students are facing all kinds of challenges. We are speaking virtually online with video chats and by phone. We can call them to assist them with bills or technology. They're happy to share their stresses. So we make sure that everyone advising and supporting them can share the resources we have, from our emergency fund to help students navigate the technology they might not have to our counseling center, to have someone talk to them about depression and anxiety.

We built a survey into our course evaluations in spring. We captured more than 5,000 student responses for the second half of the semester, which was all virtual. Students let us know that they still craved engagement. For example, you could have an asynchronous or synchronous model where they have the option to meet via Zoom or go to their LMS blackboard or Canvas. Our students preferred being in classes. They wanted to see the faces of their classmates and to meet with their faculty member. Students craved that virtual engagement. They wanted to see us and talk to us. Our appointments are longer, they're sharing more and staying longer. We got that information early on to let us know that they would be responsive to this type of engagement.

Lipka: I know a sense of belonging is a big deal for student motivation. The sense of isolation can be strong. How do you foster relationships to help them feel connected?

Shauna Davis: Some of the things we've already heard lead into that. The idea of micro sites, streamlining the information, simplifying and building relationships, saying, I'm your person. And that there is no wrong door. Anyone at the institution can help you. Those are the foundational pieces, that if anything good can come out of this, that helps cultivate the sense of belonging and connection.

We see faculty becoming intentional with the strategies they use to connect with students. Engaging with students who aren't necessarily wanting to be drawn out but have something to give. We see outreach programs from phone campaigns to social media to virtual student life.

We're seeing some practice and policy changes across institutions. Just the intentionality of knowing who your students are and understanding that there are different ways to engage them. Ultimately, what we see is that students want it to be authentic. Their expectation is that when Covid is over, the engagement, the outreach, the intentionality, and the connections don't go away.

Lipka: I want to follow up on getting good at virtual student life. Can you share any examples?

Sabrina K. Sanders: We are proud at California State University to focus on student support. As you are likely familiar, we have 23 campuses, 480,000 students, and 23 distinct cultures. Pre-

Tiffany Beth Mfume
assistant vice president for student success and retention
Morgan State University

Shauna Davis
executive director of holistic student supports
Achieving the Dream

pandemic, our Graduation Initiative 2025 established strong connections between faculty, staff, and students through a number of technology platforms, specifically in the advising world.

A lot of those touchpoints were interconnected. Thanks to our initiative, we had some preparation before the pandemic. When we heard we weren't returning to campus in the fall, we had faculty and staff training over the summer to provide a high-quality instructional experience and connection to the campuses for our students.

We have a number of campuses that laid out kind of a Virtual Learning 101. It's a whole new world for faculty and staff. I spoke with a colleague at a student union about how they are doing their campus wellness activities and campus programs, and their numbers are out the door. They used to limit their numbers because of the space that was available. For example, a recreational wellness activity was limited to maybe 30, because of the room accommodation, but now it's virtual in Zoom — and now they have more like 230 participants. So there's more of a connection to students and more opportunities.

Mfume: I wanted to follow up on something that Sabrina said, the word "culture." The unique culture of her campuses. Morgan State is traditionally a Black campus. We bring in about 1,200 new freshmen. We have a cultural transition baked in, with a four-day residential experience that includes some of our HBC traditions. We had to pivot to, how do we take these in-person experiences and bake them into online orientation?

It was fantastic. We figured out how to have a closing rites-of-passage ceremony online. We had a live talent show on Instagram. We looked at every aspect of an in-person experience and tried to translate that to an online experience. We just got our surveys back, and our comments are so exciting. We are still holding true to our traditions that we would have in person, in an online format.

Lipka: Mike, we talked about a sense of isolation and trying to cultivate a sense of belonging. Some students feel overwhelmed. There are mixed messages: This fall is not being normal because of the pandemic, but they still need to do their course work. They may have other obligations. How do you help them?

Muñoz: I think that intentionality is the key. We expanded our mental-health services. We had to find a platform that was Ferpa and Hipaa compliant. We looked at workshops and drop-in sessions for students to have that connection. We directed some of our funding to increase the scaling of some of those services.

We talked a lot about equity and accommodations. We asked, do we require students to keep their cameras on? We have students living with family or multiple students sharing a space. We have

Sabrina K. Sanders
director of student affairs projects and initiatives,
California State University System

to be sensitive that some students might not want their cameras on.

We debated being synchronous or asynchronous, and what equity looks like during the pandemic, and the issues that the pandemic is illuminating. It's scaling of those services and reaching the students we want to reach and supporting them. We addressed the equity issues that have always been there, but they're illuminated by the crisis.

Davis: One thing that stood out was the accommodations piece. We have students that didn't choose certain accommodations, because they expected the course face to face. Maybe in that format, they didn't need it.

When the learning environment changed or our stresses were raised, how do we provide other types of accommodations that are humane, or recognize that you have humans who are struggling because of the things happening in our homes, with people out of work and other challenges? They're partners and parents. They bring their whole selves to college whether on campus or online.

There's a policy with the big P, and then there's what practices do we put in place, and where are we flexible, when we recognize that the conditions around us have changed faster than our ability to put in place through the governance process of policy change.

Lipka: What do you think people are generally expecting from retention rates with all these extenuating circumstances?

Loretta Ussery Griffy: The circumstances make us think how we do our business. I'm seeing promise on our campus for students who have success coaches — we're seeing some higher retention rates — all of this is preliminary.

At some point, some institutions may not be able to completely control who is coming in the door, but they can circle the wagons around those that are at our institutions. So really focusing on retention and building relationships with our students and helping them find their path — this is where we're going to have to focus. I think that nationally and regionally we'll see students swirling from institution to institution, but when they land in our backyard, how do we help them? How do we get them to be where they need to be?

Loretta Ussery Griffy
associate vice president for student-success strategic initiatives,
Austin Peay State University

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