

REVIEW OF PSI RESPONSE TO THE FIRST WAVE OF COVID-19

IN-ACTION REVIEW

SEPTEMBER 2020



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), responsible for COVID-19, swept across the globe prompting a significant response from every nation. In Alberta, post-secondary institutions (PSIs) dedicated personnel, resources, and services to ensure the health and safety of students and staff as well as continuity of learning and other essential operations and minimize the financial impact of the pandemic.

COVID-19 is a novel coronavirus: there is an absence of best practices with which PSI industry professionals can guide their response. As a result, research, internal and external collaboration with subject matter experts and key partners, and timely, risk-based decision making was required to rise to the challenges of this unprecedented worldwide disaster. In many cases, what was a win for some institutions represented an area of improvement for others; as a result, the recommendations in this report reflect this. PSIs identified successes and challenges during preparation activities: activation of their Emergency Coordination Centres; management of staff and students including HR processes; and ensuring consistent and coordinated communications, academic functions and operations management, and procurement supply and distribution. This In-Action Report provides a distilled summary of recent actions to develop best practices to guide PSI planning for the second wave of COVID-19.

Background

In late 2019, a pneumonia of unknown cause was detected in Wuhan, China, and reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) country office on December 31. The first Canadian case was reported on January 15, 2020. On March 5, Alberta's Chief Medical Officer reported the province's first presumptive case of COVID-19. On March 11, the WHO declared the coronavirus as a global pandemic, and on March 17, on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer, the Premier of Alberta declared a State of Public Health Emergency to access the extraordinary powers under the Emergencies Act to respond to this rapidly evolving global threat.

While some post-secondary institutions (PSIs) were actively tracking the progression of this virus since early January, most were prompted to activate their Emergency Coordination Centers (ECCs), or similar crisis management function once direction came from the provincial government to close all K-12 facilities, daycares, and post-secondary classes on March 15, 2020. Since this time, PSI emergency managers have steadfastly worked to protect the health and safety of students and staff on campus, ensure continuity of learning and other essential operations, and minimize the financial impact of the pandemic. PSI emergency managers identified that some gaps in response capability were previously anticipated through their business continuity plans (BCPs), others through questions of faculty and students, and others through real-time needs. In this novel environment of physical distancing and the prohibition of large gatherings, mandatory mask wearing, increased sanitization procedures, business closures, COVID-19 screening, and contact tracing, solutions required agility and innovative practices.

Having tested the system in unparalleled fashion, Alberta's PSIs have demonstrated resiliency and ingenuity. While it is impossible to know how long this virus will persist, public health experts now predict that this is a state of "new normal" (CNBC.com). In preparation of planning a long-term emergency response, the University of Alberta in collaboration with the Provincial Emergency Management Group commissioned this In-Action Report to collectively reflect upon PSIs' management of the first wave of COVID-19, assess the reasons for such decisions, identify existing gaps, and identify current recommendations for successive waves of COVID-19 or future public health emergencies.

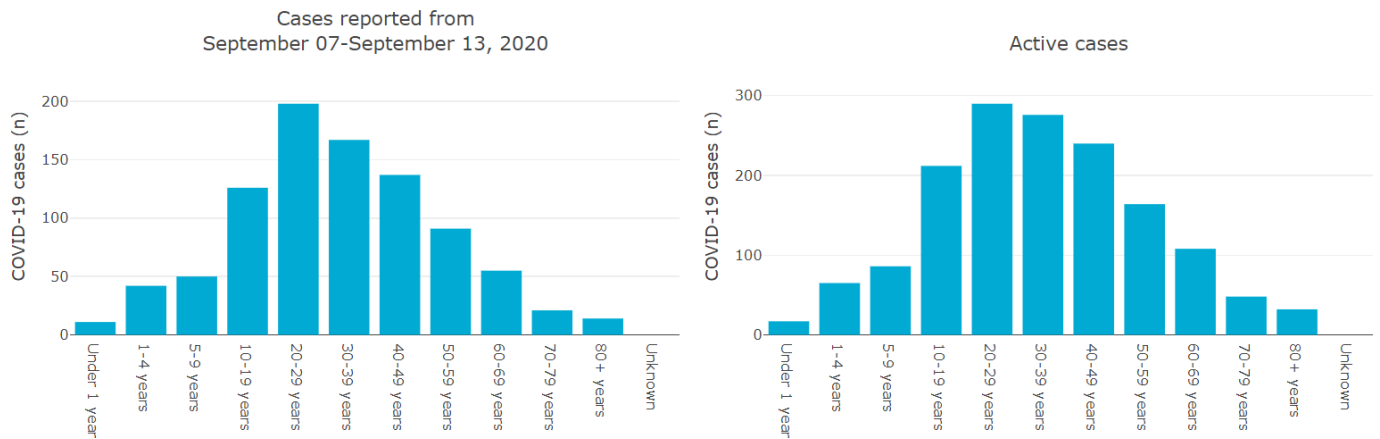


Figure 1: Data included up to end of day September 14, 2020

Retrieved from: <https://www.alberta.ca/stats/covid-19-alberta-statistics.htm>

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PLANNING SUBSEQUENT WAVES OF COVID-19

"We are not preparing yet for the implications of a larger more serious second wave. We are braced for it, but not actively doing any scenario planning."

– PSI Focus Group Participant

1. Create contingency plans that consider partial and complete shut-downs. Conduct a comprehensive risk assessment and thoroughly identify key threats, impacts to your organization, and triggers/tripwires so as to proactively anticipate leads on each emergency, who should be involved in decision-making, and delegations of authority. Be prepared to adapt and refine the plans as you go.
2. Where possible, adopt a collaborative approach between the municipal authority and/or provincial health authorities, internal subject matter experts, and members of the PSI Emergency Management group so that synergy is achieved in contingency planning.
3. Develop a robust service/program inventory to include dependencies such as supply chains, IT, personnel, facilities, and equipment.
4. Develop a cost-centre or financial code associated with your crisis management activities to ensure robust tracking of extraordinary costs.
5. Maintain situational awareness and activate your EOC early if cases start to reach your organization's trigger points. Ensure representation from Operations and Academics within your EOC's leadership, dedicated staff from a variety of departments within the overall structure, and sufficient staffing depth.
6. Promote health and safety aimed at mental as well as physical wellbeing of all staff and students. This includes ensuring adequate staffing depth in the EOC, avoiding double-tasking staff for extended periods of time, and providing health benefits to staff who are temporarily laid off.
7. Provide accurate, timely, and consistent communications through one central source of information, ideally your EOC, and make this readily accessible to all staff and students.
8. Maintain an ongoing discussion regarding your organization's critical functions to understand the changing requirements for facilities management. Ensure staff and students understand and adhere to safety protocols while on campus.
9. Be prepared to surge IT capacity (staff, technology, equipment, costs) to address heavy reliance on IT-based solutions.
10. As far as possible, a collective PSI approach to planning is desirable to mitigate potential liabilities, complaints, and legal actions.

METHOD

The report was initiated by the University of Alberta as lead of the PSI Emergency Management Group consisting of partner PSIs across the province. Partners were identified and invited to participate in an initial survey and two subsequent focus groups. These activities occurred between August 10 - 27, 2020. The timing of the report was intended to benefit from the recent initial decisions and action during the March-June timeframe when PSIs worked to manage ongoing academic activities balanced with the typical academic lull in the July-August period. The structure of and approach to the activities balanced the need for participation in these activities, ongoing planning/preparation activities, and a period typically used for summer holidays.

The initial survey was distributed via email one week prior to the first focus group meeting. It comprised 15 questions with a completion time of 35-45 minutes. The focus groups were scheduled one week apart and lasted approximately two hours each. These activities focused on identifying key strategic issues and persistent challenges and identifying and reinforcing best practices. The survey results and focus group outcomes provided rich context about many aspects of the post-secondary COVID-19 response in Alberta. While neither focus group was recorded, minutes were taken for synthesis and presentation to provide an unattributed, thematic summary of results.

What follows is a set of high-level recommendations for PSIs to consider when planning for and dealing with the second wave of COVID-19 in light of the upcoming academic terms, supplemented by the results of best practices outlined by the emergency management group throughout the research process. Given the breadth and scope of feedback and the inability to see long-term successes due to the short-term scope of the report, focus was given to broad organizational outcomes rather than specific decisions or actions by individuals or institutions.


RESULTS

Findings and best practices are presented in the following sections:

1. Preparation
2. EOC Activation
3. People
4. Communications
5. Operations Management
6. HR Work Processes
7. Procurement, Supply & Distribution

1. Preparation

Preparation and planning were frequently cited as significant sources of strength with regard to this first wave of COVID-19 as were adequate training and building of relationships with key stakeholders before the disaster happens.


<u>Confirm, review and validate plans</u>	
Many organizations have found themselves in the position where the plan was under-developed or absent. Organizations who reported successful outcomes from their plans for COVID-19 chose to follow the response strategy outlined for H1N1 and began to update the Pandemic Plan with COVID-19-specific information as information became available. Best Practices identified include:	
	
	Start planning early and consider events of greater scope and scale. Those institutions who closely tracked COVID-19 in early January were able to adapt their plans and adjust as required. Create plans that provide clear and measurable thresholds or tripwires on which to base decisions. These plans should consider responding to positive cases, understanding what the elements are, articulating roles and responsibilities (including tracking students and staff on campus), and preparing contingency plans for second wave and other potential outbreaks. See Appendix B for specific details.
	Engage leadership in the planning phase to build situational awareness, enhance buy-in, set priorities and expectations, and build trust and comfort with subject matter expertise. If senior leadership intends to be personally involved, ensure they have appropriate roles, understand their scope of responsibilities, and know where delegations need to be made so people can “do their job.”
	Ensure your plan considers COVID-19-specific hazards and impacts. PSIs who had pandemic plans based on flus like SARS, H1N1, meningitis, and other communicable diseases were advantaged with a solid starting point from which to adapt and refine their plans as more information became available.
	Practice your plan. Organizations who had recently met to review their plans, conduct table-tops, or practice drills found themselves in a stronger position to respond.

	Review planning assumptions. Many plans were geared more towards large volumes of staff being sick and/or off work where the focus became one of supporting whole-campus business closures, work from home, and infection prevention.
	Be prepared to adapt or refine the plan as you go as new information, practices, or guidelines emerge.
	Lean on your subject matter experts and those within your organization. PSIs have a wealth of talent, knowledge, and expertise within their grasp by turning to researchers, faculty, or administrative staff for information and guidance.
	Consider collaborating with other PSIs to build one standardized response and tailor as required.

Have a Business Continuity Plan

Perhaps the biggest finding through the focus groups and questionnaires were the challenges to implementing a business continuity plan after the pandemic emerged. BCP documentation, in general, tended to be out of date, focused on previous pandemics, or missing key information on which to base decisions.


When conducting business continuity planning during a crisis, it is vital to follow the regular business continuity planning process as you would in advance of the event, with the exception that it must be done more quickly with less information. Best Practices identified include the following:

	
	<p>Establish a BCM committee of members from across the organization that have a sound understanding of the processes and services delivered and are capable of making decisions under stress and uncertainty. Ensure academics and operations (include operational side as well (facilities, OH&S, IT, etc.)) are included and help build an understanding of planning elements and considerations so their input can be considered and included in the plan.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will you ensure the organization's ability to work remotely? • Identify essential courses that have to be delivered on campus. • Consider OH&S requirements for both on- and off-campus work.
	<p>Develop as robust a service and program inventory as possible including dependencies such as supply chains, information technology, personnel, facilities, and equipment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider how partial or complete society closures can impact these services and where they can be sourced or potentially stockpiled.
	<p>Accept that the plan will only be as good as time and information allow and that the product will be a suitable starting point but not a full and comprehensive BCP. While unfortunate, time is of the essence at the expense of completeness.</p>

Training

"You fall back to where you feel safe." – PSI Focus Group Participant

Some organizations attributed their early success to training which was also seen to enhance leadership buy-in and afforded them the confidence to grant their team enough autonomy to be effective. Training prior to the event, even if focused on different hazards or based on out-of-date plans, still provided participants with key skills they could use to solve the specific problems posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Best Practices identified include the following:


	
	PSIs are encouraged to conduct small-scale exercises or tabletops to practice plans prior to implementing them. This will help ensure plans are verified, assumptions are validated, and personnel is familiarized with the actions expected of them during a second wave. While it is recognized that people's time and focus are already stretched thin, having at least some exposure to the plans and expectations will yield significant benefits during a second wave.
	Ensure there is an adequate training component to complement your plans. Courses on basic emergency management were identified to acquaint ECC staff and leadership with key principles and enhance buy-in while incident management courses (such as ICS) were envisioned to empower ECC staff to work effectively within the response phase. A gap in ICS training that fails to address industry ECC operations was identified: concept of operations was discussed as an alternative.
	PSIs may want to consider whether to adopt a common incident management system (such as Incident Command System Canada methodology) to establish interoperability and provide/receive mutual aid if required.
	Workshops to assist business units in developing plans such as business continuity were identified as a need.

Build Relationships Prior to the Disaster

Most PSIs voiced being strengthened by the respective networks they had created with external and internal stakeholders prior to this response. Benefits cited were expertise, accessing timely information and information sharing, ensuring alignment with protocols and expectations, opportunities for funding and advocacy, and social support and camaraderie, highlighting "we were all in this emergency together." Key points of contact that appeared to make a difference for PSIs included the following:


- The PSI Emergency Managers Group – cited many times
- Internal campus experts
- Alberta Health Services/Alberta Health
- Advanced Education and the Provincial Operations Centre
- Economic Development Trade and Tourism
- Labour Union
- Local Authority
- Community partners
- Third-party service providers (Food Services, Parking, Child Care providers)


Best Practices identified include the following:

	
	PSIs are encouraged to reach out to stakeholders and partner agencies early and often in the event of a second wave. Designating a liaison function aided in regular and meaningful discussions, sharing of objectives, and collaborative problem solving. This will be essential to managing the ongoing and potentially changing challenges. It is especially true for smaller institutions that may not have significant personnel or resources to dedicate to a pandemic response in addition to ongoing administrative, academic, and operational functions.

2. ECC Activation


Most post-secondary institutions elected to activate a campus emergency coordination centre (ECC) or crisis management team. While some activated in early January with news of the virus in Wuhan, China, most activated in March when cases were identified in Alberta and school closures were looming. Success factors identified included early ECC activation, ensuring adequate depth and critical personnel, structural flexibility, cross-team collaboration, strong information management, and advanced planning.

Early Activation	
Those PSIs who activated early identified this as an advantage when managing implications, particularly in reference to international students and staff working abroad. Early activation enabled careful review of plans and permitted team restructuring to best fit the needs of the pandemic. Another advantage of early activation includes the opportunity to identify your priorities early and adjust accordingly if required. Best Practices identified include the following:	
	
	Ensure your ECC staff has the resources required to work remotely if required by pandemic shut-downs or restrictions.
	Meet frequently or maintain regular communications to address the concerns of and responses to our various groups within the campus body.

Plan your Structure	
Successes in the ECC structure were garnered when it worked in unified command or when it was able to shift between command/control to academic/collegiate to reflect the unique perspectives of academia and operations, ensuring continuity between them. Best practices identified include the following:	
	
	Ensuring a cross-collaborative team structure with representation across the organization including facilities, marketing and communications, health services, health & safety, environment research, and academics.
	Having the right people in the ECC with the authority to make decisions.
	Having a scribe on every team to track briefings, decisions made, and authorities. Options for this role include using software like Otter.AI (see references).
	Creating working groups to tackle specific objectives and developing solutions accordingly. Teams created for this pandemic include Research, Facilities, HR, Legal, Student Affairs, Operations, Residences, Food Services, and Academic.
	Creating a situational awareness function to build a common operating picture.
	Creating an advisory committee, a plan review committee, and a relaunch committee.
	Embedding a communications specialist into the working group strengthened the response by ensuring key messages were identified, captured, and shared.

Staffing Depth & Ensuring Critical Personnel

Many PSIs reported having held up under pressure but echoed “it was close,” adding that they required all hands on deck to manage a disaster of this magnitude. In this pandemic environment, there is a very real risk to corporate memory and continuity of decision making when we rely on single people to perform key roles. Giving careful consideration to all staffing risks including infection and illness, burnout, impacts to schools and daycare closures, and budgetary cuts, the need for staffing depth cannot be overstated. Best Practices identified include the following:

	
	Identifying key internal and external stakeholders as quickly as possible and connecting everyone is vital as is maintaining a critical personnel list and access provisioning.
	Identify additional staff that could step in to support key functions and train them accordingly.

3. People


“People are our greatest asset.”

– PSI Focus Group Participant

A number of PSIs voiced pride in the way their organizations managed the extraordinary demands of this pandemic on staff and students by prioritizing the health and wellbeing of students, faculty, and staff above all else while continuing to deliver excellent learning experiences and comprehensive supports to achieve success in all delivery models for students.

Caring for your people

While concerns for mental health and wellbeing were identified for staff and students both nationally and internationally, many institutions have implemented measures that are well underway. Best Practices identified include the following:

	
	Social isolation created through remote work can be partially addressed by creating wellness activities that congregate staff such as outdoor walks that permit social distancing.
	The sudden shift in business and challenges working from home while caring for families has also added undue stress on staff and students. Providing access to webinars on wellness strategies, Employee and Family Assistance Programs (EFAP), and student assistance services has also been successful. In addition, Wellness Together (https://ca.portal.gs/) through Homewood Health is another open source available to Canadians who are experiencing impacts to mental health as a result of COVID-19.
	Burnout has been identified as a result of low staffing levels, more capable people asked to do more, and key functions being performed by single individuals, many of whom who also must manage their usual day-to-day functions. Best practices include considering secondments from traditional positions and setting a time horizon well ahead of time so that people can be appropriately back-filled. Additional mitigation measures include building depth across the organization and training to build organizational capacity.
	With most PSIs now into their sixth or more month of dealing with the pandemic, use of these health services should be monitored for trends. Increased use may mean strain on the staff and the services themselves, and PSIs should be ready to allocate increased resources to the services.
	Coordinate and provide supports to international students who could not return home.

	In the case of a second wave, the PSI should continue to promote an appropriate health and safety message aimed at mental as well as physical wellbeing, even with staff and students working remotely. A culture of health and safety needs to be maintained with messages and measures adapted to the remote workplace/work from home situation so that it stays relevant.
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4. Communications

"Feed the Beast before it feeds you."

– PSI Focus Group Participant

Many institutions reported being inundated with questions from staff and students regarding impacts to their jobs or classes, managing incorrect information being disseminated from unauthorized staff, and challenges with communicating health and safety.


Specific challenges to communication were isolation of staff and stakeholders; efforts to manage a quick transition to online learning; and a lack of plans that identified key processes, stakeholders, and dependencies.

Providing frequent, timely, and accurate information to both students and staff is essential to the success of any response. Due to the novel nature of this virus and resulting gaps in information, being prepared to pivot to observe sudden government decisions on short notice may again be required. Best Practices identified include the following:	
	
	Appoint one person/team to identify key and emerging issues that will require mass communications.
	Provide accurate, timely, and consistent communications through one central source of information, ideally your campus ECC, which affords centrality and situational awareness of key and emerging issues. Frequent engagement will establish its credibility as the single source of truth, permit the correcting of faulty information, and encourage questions to be sent back to the proper source. As this is a cornerstone to a successful response, dedicate one person/team to this task.
	Key communication items shared by the group were regularly updated FAQs for staff and students including health and safety protocols, updates to campus operations, links to mental health resources, and an online isolation registry or self-reporting system.
	Consider a variety of channels that permit both one-way communication mass emails; website; safety app; social media outlets; and two-way communications to answer student and staff questions such as hosting a school town-hall, enabling chat features on the school website, or dedicating a central school email for COVID-19-related questions.

5. Operations Management


Health & Safety

Instituting health and safety measures to exercise each organization's due diligence presented some challenges to the PSIs. Information and corresponding protocols have been rapidly evolving, presenting challenges to decisive decision-making and communication. The most significant challenges articulated by PSIs related to translating AHS health and safety guidelines to their post-secondary environment and instituting new processes to manage screening and dealing with COVID-19 exposures. Best Practices identified include the following:

	
	While Alberta Health Services and Alberta Health have worked to clarify and communicate provincial orders, the responsibility for adhering to and implementing these orders rests with each PSI. This includes OH&S legislation, federal and provincial statutes related to emergencies and public health (i.e., travel restrictions), and municipal orders.

Facilities management

Facilities presented numerous challenges when faced with the logistics of facility closures, ensuring the safety of critical staff on campus and ensuring facility integrity with the need to physically restrict all spaces on an otherwise "open" campus with campus-wide security. Best Practices identified include the following:

	
	Identify, assess, and prioritize requirements to reduce the number of operating facilities on campus. This requires a solid understanding of the organization's critical functions and operating costs in addition to its duty to care for special facilities and operations such as residences.
	For facilities that must stay open, ensure the health and safety of all staff and students. This may include providing education to staff and students about health and safety protocols, requiring them to complete a self-assessment prior to entering campus, providing face masks, ensuring handwashing stations and hand sanitizer are readily accessible, increasing number of cleaning times, and posting information to remind people to practice physical distancing including markers on the floor for locations where people may congregate.
	Develop a tracking system for staff and students who will be on campus. It was identified that staff with inconsistent work times presented a greater tracking challenge, so consider instituting a mandatory online reporting platform that is intuitive and easily accessible.
	Ensure appropriate storage and installation of alcohol-based hand sanitizing dispensers and other cleaning products in accordance with appropriate WHMIS regulations.

Research


Consistently, research institutions voiced surprise with the unanticipated consequences of facility closures. Major challenges were identifying criteria for 'essential research' and collaborating to mitigate unanticipated interruptions to research and grants. In many ways, research represented another operational aspect that needed to be assessed and managed under a business continuity management perspective. Best Practices identified include the following:

	
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	Develop a process for research to communicate its purpose, requirements to be on campus, and consequences of developing a phased approach to re-opening or closure. Some PSIs successfully followed a phased approach by soliciting a research plan that was then approved by an academic committee before restarting.
	Re-assess your institution's critical functions that include critical research. Acquire a solid understanding of the nature of research, required processes, and outcomes so that you may prioritize these functions to determine sequence of pauses to specific areas of research if required. Utilize a similar business continuity approach as you would for other operational and administrative tasks.
	Be prepared for how you will respond to pressure/pushback when required to defend your position on what is critical research and what is not.
	Consider how you will continue critical research while ensuring safety and hygiene protocols are in place.

Technology & Equipment

Technology and Equipment were cited as one of the most significantly impacted response operations as most post-secondary institutions reported that online curriculum delivery and remote work were not the norm. Some institutions reported that operations were able to resume within a matter of a few short days while the norm appeared to be closer to 2-3 weeks for resumption of normal activities. It was noted, however, that this was the case for all staff who had not been readily identified for remote work capacity (administrative staff, payroll, etc.). While some post-secondaries shared that the government closure helped free up additional resources to soften business impacts, challenges remained to facilitating online learning and remote work as gaps in hardware, software, ergonomics, IT staffing levels, and bandwidth/server capacity were identified: there are still areas in Alberta that do not have adequate internet free of dragging, buffering, or even stopping. Best Practices identified include the following:

	
	<u>Curriculum Delivery</u> : While expertise for translating traditional lecture-style curriculum to online platforms can be leveraged across PSIs, more careful and creative planning must occur for trades and apprenticeships programs. Some schools have 'hands-on' courses that must be delivered in a class or lab while adhering to smaller class sizes to ensure physical distancing. Developing partnerships between PSI polytechnics to share knowledge, facilities, and experience is also advised.
	<u>IT Capacity</u> : Be prepared to surge IT staff capacity to address heavy reliance on IT-based solutions including online curriculum delivery and remote work functions such as meetings, virtual tasks, and deployment of new equipment.
	<u>Hardware</u> : Providing laptops, desktop computers, monitors, and other resources for staff and students presented a challenge for some institutions. Many staff were not provided with laptops to work from home prior to the closure; students who had previously depended on the school's computer labs for access struggled with online work. Best Practices Include maintaining a supply of laptops to allow for remote work/online course work, leveraging staff personal computers while accessing remote desktop applications, or developing partnerships with local computer stores and securing buy-back programs for staff.
	<u>Software</u> : Review your organization's needs in relation to online curriculum delivery and remote work. This includes reviewing licensing agreements that align with your chosen hardware, programming, and privacy concerns and providing access to remote desktop applications.


	<p><u>Ergonomics</u>: Ensure proper office equipment and setup to mitigate workplace-related injuries for all staff. Ergonomic assessments can often be done online through step-by-step videos. They can also be conducted at the staff member's home while ensuring proper hygiene protocols and reporting measures. To ensure these measures were in place quickly, some institutions encouraged staff to use Professional Development funds to buy relevant equipment during the initial shift to working from home when pre-approvals were temporarily lifted to expedite the use of funds.</p>
	<p><u>Managing Poor Internet</u>: PSIs need to ensure the conversion to an online learning environment is done with full understanding of the needs of their students and staff. In addition to identifying key curriculum for delivery, consideration must be paid to the training medium and available platform. Asynchronous learning platforms can be leveraged effectively to deliver training without the need for the instructor to "stand and lecture" in the traditional method. This may alleviate the need for students to access large video presentations and mitigate against the lack of high-speed internet or high bandwidth access. For staff, some institutions weighed approaches to dealing with connectivity issues on a case by case basis: some staff were permitted to attend their offices on campus since physical distancing and other health measures could be ensured.</p>

<p><u>Managing Operating Costs</u></p> <p>In light of the economic uncertainty that precluded and was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, focus group participants expressed concerns over the additional costs related to the purchasing of extra hand sanitizer and pandemic supplies, increased cleaning responsibilities, technology for remote learning/work, and the upgrading of security needs. While this report does not make specific recommendations with regard to sourcing additional financial assistance to deal with these emergent expenses, suggestions are offered based on leading practices of tracking and managing pandemic-related costs. Best Practices identified include the following:</p>	
	
	<p>Establish a standing cost-centre or financial code associated with the crisis management team/emergency operations centre or disaster/event. This cost-center coding should be used on every extraordinary purchase or financial obligation incurred due to the crisis (in this case, the pandemic). When departments order things such as hand sanitizer and pandemic supplies or increase the budget for cleaning and sanitizing, these expenses can be tracked through the coding or cost centre associated with the pandemic. This allows for a more robust tracking of extra pandemic costs and provides a clearer understanding of the financial burn rate or impact on the PSI.</p>

6. HR Work Processes


The demands placed on Human Resources upon closure of post-secondary institutions highlighted the need for organizational re-structuring and the absence of policies for changed work processes for both staff and managers. The pandemic appeared to heighten pre-existing economic pressures as a result of recent provincial budgetary cuts to reduce staff. While PSIs waited for more information to determine the impacts of COVID-19, most PSIs did not have policies or processes to enable the temporary modification of staff duties in the face of public health (or other) emergencies.

Also highlighted was the need for organizations to have a mechanism to relieve staff of regular duties for re-deployment to serve as part of a crisis management team—either as a leader or in support of response activities. Staff should not be expected to shoulder additional duties for extended periods of time. Best Practices identified include the following:

	
	Understand your organization's critical functions and anticipate how they will be impacted by staff working remotely. Some organizations elected to temporarily lay off staff while quickly negotiating MOUs with the unions. The decision to lay off staff should be balanced against the challenge of returning staff who may be reluctant to return to work due to safety or other concerns.
	Adopt compassionate, person-centric processes to lessen the impact of organizational restructuring. Some PSIs did so by writing leave guidelines that considered impacts to childcare, provided staff members with COVID-19 days (in addition to their sick days), continued to pay benefits for staff who were temporarily laid off, and tracked EAP use to monitor staff wellbeing.
	Assess risks to operations and determine changes to workplace requirements and liabilities. Most PSIs identified the need to develop new policies in reaction to the changed workplace environment. Policies & Guidelines for working remotely safely, such as home hazard assessments, work from home checklists, sample messages for voicemail and email automatic replies, procedures for transporting office equipment from office to home, waivers for coming on campus and screening tools, travel registry forms, and isolation registry forms are just a few examples. Some institutions also implemented school-related international travel bans for staff and students without COVID-19 insurance.
	Address supervisor concerns about being responsible for staff that are required to (or who must) work remotely. Communication and timely information assisted managers in acclimating to virtually management of their teams when they learned, for example, that workplace protections still applied in the remote work environment.
	Anticipate staff refusals to return to work due to their perception that the workplace is unsafe. Best practice is to consult and collaborate with your risk and legal, leadership, HR, and health and safety teams to proactively anticipate and address staff concerns. Collaborate with other PSIs to align approaches; related messaging may also be appropriate. Consider conducting Hazard Assessments and educating staff and students accordingly. As far as possible, a collective response for PSIs is desirable to avoid complaints and commencement of legal actions.

7. Procurement, Supply & Distribution

Procurement, Supply & Distribution impacts were observed during this first wave. Disruptions to third-party providers which trickled down to contracts and sourcing cleaning supplies, masks, and sanitizer were also observed. Best Practices identified include the following:

	
	Review contracts you have with third-party providers that would have significant impact on emergency or routine operations within your organizations. Include legal in this discussion to determine additional impacts and mitigation measures.
	Review your supply chain for critical supplies to identify alternatives, if required.
	Build a stockpile of masks, cleaning supplies, and sanitizer and maintain this for future waves or other public health emergencies.
	Consider building a mechanism to share between PSIs or with AHS if required.

CONCLUSION

“I was proud of how we came together as a team. We did what we needed to do to get through and we will work to improve for future situations.”

– PSI Focus Group Participant

When faced with extraordinary circumstances, post-secondary institutions’ emergency managers rose to the challenge to protect the health and safety of staff and students while ensuring academic delivery and ongoing operations. In the absence of formal best practices, PSI emergency managers made timely, risk-based decisions through research and ongoing consultations with internal and external stakeholders. While the successes and challenges of each institution differed, results captured herein reflect a distilled summary of recent actions and best practices. With these in hand, this In-Action Report will serve to guide PSI planning for the subsequent waves of COVID-19 or other public health emergencies.

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- Lethbridge College
- MacEwan University
- Medicine Hat College
- Mount Royal University
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- Norquest
- Northern Lakes College
- Olds College
- Portage College
- Red Deer College
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- University of Alberta
- University of Calgary
- University of Lethbridge

APPENDIX A

Survey and Interview Questions

Survey Questions

When answering the following questions, we ask that you consider all areas of functionality under the emergency management purview of your post-secondary institution. This may include considerations to all or some of the following areas: academic programs, lab-based work (sciences, trades), physical activities (kinesiology/athletics/music/dance), practicum programs (medical, education, work placement, coop), residences, continuing education, public outreach/activities, governance and administration, facilities management, and other.

1. Please indicate the size of your institution (population). Please select one:
 - Large (greater than 15000 students)
 - Medium (between 5000-15000 students)
 - Small (under 5000 students)
2. Had the government not forced school closures, would your institution have been able to manage COVID-19 impacts with existing EM structures and plans? (Yes/No)
3. Were there aspects of the required response that caught you entirely off-guard with respect to the existence or magnitude of the challenge? (Yes/No)
4. Did you feel adequately trained to manage your institution's EM requirements brought on by this pandemic? (Yes/No)
5. During the first wave, were staffing levels sufficient to support EM activities? (Yes/No)
6. Were all staff equipped to work remotely prior to the school closure (laptops, VPNS, etc.)? (Yes/No)
 - If not, how long did it take staff to be able to work?
 - What gaps were identified?
7. What areas of need did your institution identify due to government-forced closures?
 - How were areas of need identified?

8. Did your institution have a direct conduit to key external stakeholders? (Please check off those with whom you had a direct liaison.)

- Alberta Health Services/Alberta Health
- Advanced Education
- Economic Development Trade and Tourism
- Labour Union
- Local Authority (Municipality)
- Other

9. Did you have a liaison in your municipality's Emergency Operations Centre? (Yes/No)

- If yes, was it effective? (Yes/No)
- If not, why not?

10. Did your Emergency Plan cover pandemics? (Yes/No)

- If yes, did it assist you in effectively managing the first wave of COVID-19? (Yes/No)
 - Please explain your answer.
- If not, did you rely on ad hoc or novel practices? (Yes/No)
 - What was your process (or processes) for finding solutions to pandemic-related challenges? (space)
 - Was this process useful, timely, and appropriate? (Yes/No)
 - What might have helped you find additional or better options to the challenges you faced? (space)

11. Did your Business Continuity Plan cover pandemics? (Yes/No)

- If yes, did it assist you in effectively managing the first wave of COVID-19? (Yes/No)
 - Please elaborate.
- If not, did you rely on ad hoc or novel practices? (Yes/No)
 - What was your process or processes for finding solutions? (space)
 - Was this useful, timely, and appropriate? (space)
 - What might have helped you find additional options? (space)

12. What do you think your institution did well with respect to its response to the first wave of COVID-19? Please provide examples. (space)

13. What do you think your institution could have done to better manage its response to the first wave of COVID-19? Please provide examples. (space)
14. How were solutions (planned or ad/hoc) implemented? What worked well/did not work with that implementation?
15. Was guidance provided to you by all levels of government timely? (Yes/No) Useful? (Yes/No) What could have been improved?
16. Were emergency management activities adequately supported by school governance? (delegation of authority, resources, timeliness of decisions, etc.) (Yes/No)
 - If yes, were EM activities adequately supported by school governance prior to the pandemic?
17. Looking back, would increased collaboration between Post-Secondary Institutions have improved your school's outcomes? (Yes/No)
 - If yes, please explain.
18. In preparation of successive waves of COVID-19, do needs/gaps still require solutions? (Yes/No)
 - If yes, what are the areas of need?

Focus Group Questions

During the focus groups, participants were asked to reflect on the five following questions:

1. What major EM functions did you undertake during the first wave?
2. What was expected to happen? Were there clear and measurable aims?
3. What went well and why?
4. What can be improved, and how?
5. What would you do differently next time? What changes/preparations should be considered for a future pandemic?

APPENDIX B

Contingency Planning Guidance

1. Creating contingency plans requires identifying tripwires or measurable thresholds on which to base decisions. This includes giving consideration to:
 - Partial shut-down: Identify the threshold of positive cases or exposures to potential cases that would necessitate the cancellation of in-person classes, facilities, or on-campus services.
 - Complete shut-down: Identify the threshold of positive cases or exposures to potential cases that would necessitate the cessation of all on-campus activities.
 - AHS guidelines must be considered when developing these thresholds. While AHS will not likely issue specific direction to a PSI, the tripwires must be based on sound recommendations and guidelines from AHS (but need to reflect the operational reality of the PSI).
2. Identify protective measures to be put in place when the threshold is met.
 - All preventative measures cannot be prepared and held at the ready to be enacted or deployed in the case of a second wave as this would be a prohibitively costly dedication of resources.
 - The development of tripwires must be based on a sound understanding of risk. PSIs should conduct a Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment (HIRA) in light of understood COVID-19 risks based on the first wave. The HIRA should include broad impact areas and meaningful scoring to determine the most likely and most hazardous risks that might present themselves during a second wave. Additionally, this HIRA should identify potential mitigations that can be implemented to reduce the risk to the PSI. Mitigations with the greatest potential impact on risk reduction can be implemented prior to a second wave, or a plan can be developed to deploy those mitigations quickly in the event of the second wave.



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