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## Communication Strategies' Impact on Finances at Kentucky Higher Education Institutions During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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*Communication Strategies' Impact on  
Finances at Kentucky Higher  
Education Institutions During the  
COVID-19 Pandemic*

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**Jacob Most  
University of Kentucky  
Capstone Project  
Summer 2021**

 **Martin School of Public  
Policy and Administration**

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## **Executive Summary**

Kentucky public higher education institutions faced a financial cliff with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Capilouto, 2021 Jan.). Campuses across the state closed in spring 2020, with the list of unknowns outnumbering the knowns by a significant margin (Monday, E., Blanton, J., and Kiser, K., 2021). In the face of an unknown future, administrations at Kentucky institutes of higher education relied upon communication strategies more than ever to outline Universities' plans for reopening, reinvented operational plans, outlining contingencies, and fulfilling an invaluable role in efforts to test, contact trace and eventually vaccinate campus and broader community populations. This project will seek to determine to what extent communication strategies and the effective dissemination of information created an environment for universities to weather the COVID-19 financial storm.

## **Introduction**

### ***The pandemic and higher education in Kentucky***

The University of Kentucky (UK), University of Louisville (U of L), Western Kentucky University (WKU) and Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) make up the largest institutions of higher education in the Commonwealth of Kentucky as measured by enrollment (Evans, 2021). All of the institutions examined are public universities within Kentucky. The university in Kentucky with the next-most students enrolled is Jefferson Community and Technical College, a community college, less comparable to the four-year public universities that comprise the four most attended institutions in the State (Evans, 2021). Northern Kentucky University (NKU) is the sixth most attended college in Kentucky, and the fifth most attended four-year public

university (Evans, 2021). NKU was considered for this project to round out the cross-section at five in effort to broaden the sample with an additional significant subject.

***Leading Kentucky public higher education institutions enrollment and tuition rates (per semester)***

<b><i>Institution</i></b>	<b><i>Enrollment (Fall 2020)</i></b>	<b><i>In-State Undergraduate Tuition</i></b>	<b><i>Out-of-state Undergraduate Tuition</i></b>
<b><i>UK</i></b>	31,110	\$ 6,242	\$ 15,647
<b><i>U of L</i></b>	20,074	\$ 6,087	\$ 14,260
<b><i>WKU</i></b>	17,518	\$ 5,401	\$ 13,248
<b><i>EKU</i></b>	14,465	\$ 4,633	\$ 9,669
<b><i>NKU</i></b>	16,212	\$ 5,148	\$ 10,128

By mid-March of 2020, UK, U of L, WKU, EKU and NKU – like a majority of schools across the United States – each had to close their campuses for regular in-person instruction for the remainder of their spring semesters. The widespread closures came in the wake of the World Health Organization’s declaration of a global COVID-19 pandemic and increased spread of the viral disease within the state (Decker et al., 2021). Universities had to quickly shift almost all their academic operations to distance-learning techniques, which tend to be highly reliant upon technology infrastructure (Smalley, 2021). Such shifts in the middle of a semester were dependent upon communication strategies to ensure (at the most basic level) students would not return to campus – which would have hindered the purpose of cancelling in-person learning: to reduce spread of the virus. Strategies also included informing stakeholders like educators, students and staff on the resources available to help adjust to the fully remote completion of the semester, and to set expectations for what the new normal at universities could be like through the summer and into the fall.

At the same time when most academic and auxiliary operations were shifting to remote-only operations, universities with medical campuses serving vital community needs in a public health crisis became even greater priorities. UK and U of L operate medical centers as part of their broader campuses, which needed to remain operational while continuing to carry on as academic medical centers serving patients as well as continuing medical school students' education.

### ***University communications and public relations departments***

Public relations (PR), communication, and marketing departments serve university administrations by performing management function tasks including, but not limited to:

- Advertising
- Coordinating journalist inquiries seeking academic experts to provide context for news stories
- Graphic design and creative
- Handling media inquiries
- Managing the university's communication platforms on social media, as well as public radio and television
- Providing speech writing services for university leaders (Melichar and Brennan, 2017)
- Providing training for staff, faculty and students preparing for interactions with the media (Hanover, 2014)
- Video production
- Web services

- Writing and delivering press releases (Creech, n.d.)

The research of this project found none of the Kentucky institutions examined in this project were reliant upon external public relations firms for the key functions of public relations departments. PR and communication departments operate in the administrative arm of universities and are separate from academic schools of public relations or strategic communications that offer degrees in the field, although employees of these departments can sometimes intersect.

PR departments at universities often operate on the front lines of the ongoing competition among universities to recruit talented students, staff and faculty as well as to help campus constituents attract funding (Hanover, 2014). PR and marketing departments often lead the formation of strategies that seek to influence the “brand identity” the broad public associates with institutions (Melichar and Brennan, 2017).

As Kentucky universities shut down in the first quarter of 2020, communication management functions became increasingly important. PR departments played a vital role in announcing plans, providing information as community stakeholders adjusted to a new and altered normal and finally in disseminating universities’ intentions to re-open with reinvented operations in the fall of 2020. Clear, effective, and regular ongoing communication about reopening plans for the fall semester of 2020 took on increased importance because universities depend upon enrollment and retention as key drivers of financial outcomes. With tuition payments making up about half of all revenue in U.S. public higher education budgets, universities needed to ensure the steady revenue streams associated with recruiting and retaining enough students would carry on into the 2020-21 academic year (Dedman, 2018). Effective strategies to communicate that universities would open safely and provide a valuable college

experience to new and returning students were more important than ever to ensuring adequate university finances in the face of uncertainty posed by the pandemic.

### **Research Question and Design**

Kentucky public higher education institutions grappled with financial challenges at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, having to divert resources from on-campus learning in the spring of 2020 while increasing investments in health care infrastructure and personal safety (Capilouto, 2021 Jan.). With more than a year having passed from the onset of the crisis in spring 2020, universities in Kentucky can now look back at how particular strategies impacted institutional finances.

This project sought to determine to what extent, if any, Kentucky universities' communication strategies, and the way communication sides of administrations support finance leaders, contributed to creating an environment for higher education institutes to weather the COVID-19 financial storm. Public relations professionals, including those in higher education often struggle to attribute revenue and financial performance to their work (Campbell, 2018).

The project endeavored to answer the research question: **How did communication strategies impact finances at Kentucky higher education institutions during the COVID-19 Pandemic?**

The project looked at the question through the following two prisms:

#### ***Enrollment***

Did universities' particular strategies impact enrollment, which is a key driver of revenue streams for higher education institutions (Sedmak, 2020)?



***Dollars***

What financial gains and losses can be attributed to communication strategies utilized for addressing the COVID-19 crisis?

This project's research utilized concepts learned throughout the University of Kentucky Martin School Masters in Public Financial Management program through aggregating data such as university budgets, enrollment figures and other key performance indicators published by Kentucky public institutions of higher education. The analysis compared data to the public announcements made by university communication and finance leaders obtained through evaluation of public communications. The examination sought to draw conclusions on how communications strategies impacted the financial outcomes outlined in budgets and other business measurement instruments.

The project elected to observe a cross-section in the form of the five of the largest public universities in the state because of the comparable characteristics of those institutions. Each of the five universities operate in the same Commonwealth with the same regulatory requirements from state government with respect to COVID-19 policy. They also recruit from similar regional pools of potential students. Each of the colleges have comparably sized enrollments and are chartered as public state universities. Additionally, the five selected institutions are more like each other than the fifth largest post-secondary institution in the state: Jefferson Community and Technical College, a two-year community college with different goals and operating structure. The project chose to examine the four biggest universities in the state. The fifth-largest institution of higher education in the state was excluded, and the sixth was added to the

examination because the similar makeup of the universities allowed more comparable factors. NKU was added to broaden the data sample with another comparable institution in size, mission, and makeup.

Studying communication strategies and their connection to finances at public institutions benefits from taking a focused in-depth look at comparable cases instead of a sweeping statistical survey. This project employed a cross-section study of similar Kentucky universities in navigating the COVID-19 pandemic in attempts to remain economically viable. Examining a cross-section of Kentucky universities in a case study such as this offered advantages by creating opportunities for details to be collected that would be more difficult to obtain in other research designs. This case study examined how a once in a century global pandemic impacted a specific set of similar institutions, which met the parameters to study a rare case without large samples of similar participants available (Morgan, 2014).

This case study has limitations including reliance upon this researcher's instincts and abilities to examine the right factors, ask the right questions and be aware of biases that can impact the finished report (Wiley, 2009). In attempting to examine a case study of a cross section of Kentucky public institutions of higher education, care was taken to ensure the sample was representative of a comparable set of universities and that the right set of factors were compared to accurately ascertain to what extent communication strategies can impact finances.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Background***

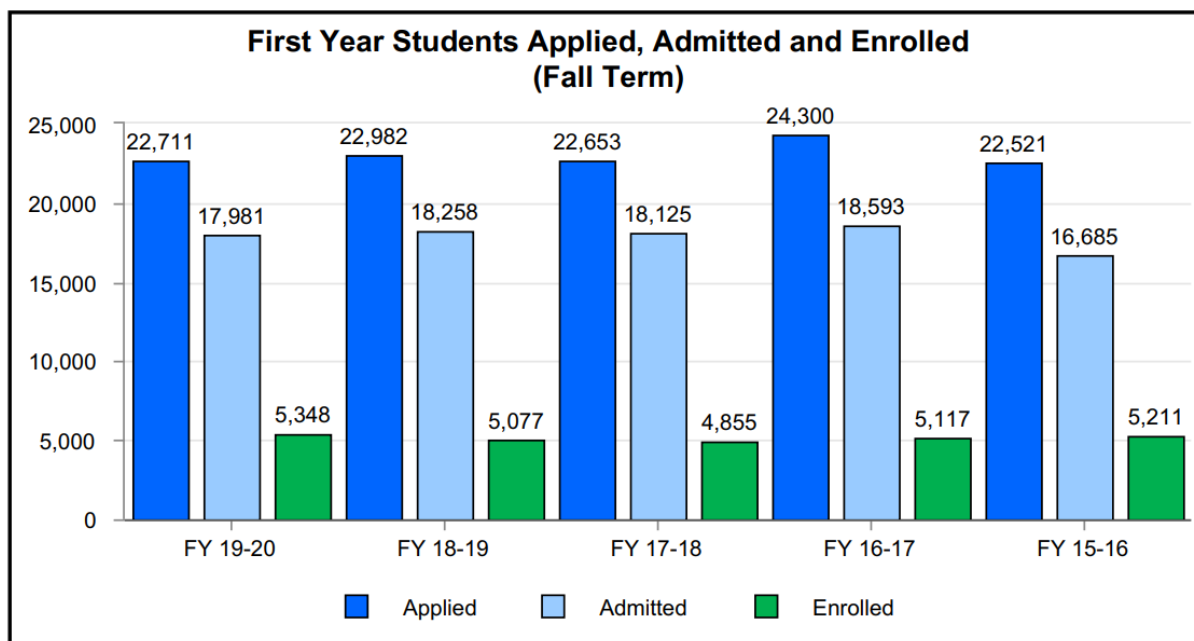
Universities in the Commonwealth of Kentucky serve Kentuckians by providing education services across multiple areas. Founded in 1865, the University of Kentucky is a

public, land-grant university that prioritizes “improving people's lives through excellence in education, research and creative work, service and health care.” The University is Kentucky's flagship institution, embracing a leadership role in “promoting diversity, inclusion, economic development and human well-being” (University of Kentucky Financial Statements, 2020). The University lists Southeastern Conference peers as benchmark institutions as well as the eight institutions that have established schools in Agriculture, Engineering, Medicine, and Pharmacy on a single, contiguous campus as comparisons for the University to be measured against (Benchmark Institutions, n.d.). Comparable institutions in Kentucky which operated under similar state guidelines regarding opening during the COVID-19 pandemic include U of L, WKU, EKU, and NKU.

The University of Kentucky’s Board-approved budget for fiscal year 2020-21 was \$4.4 billion, with a more than \$70 million shortfall in Undesignated General Funds in the wake of COVID-19. Even with that, the University sought to ensure its budget included caps on increases in in-state tuition, continuing investments in scholarships, limiting reductions in force, increased investments in graduate student stipends and support services and better asset allocation for hiring diverse faculty (University of Kentucky | FY 2020-21 Operating and Capital Budget, 2020).

Kentucky centers of public higher education encountered significant financial challenges at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Capilouto, 2021 Jan.). More than a year after the closure of campuses in spring 2020, the University of Kentucky’s finances rebounded considerably while still facing significant headwinds. Much of that rebound can be attributed to the stability of enrollment in fall 2020, which may have seemed unlikely in the spring and summer of that year (University of Kentucky | FY 2020-21 Operating and Capital Budget 2020).

**UK Recruitment Year on Year Comparison**



Source: University of Kentucky 2020 Financial Statements

The UK Administration elected to increase employee compensation across the board, raising minimum wage to \$15 per hour, increasing salaries by 2 percent based on merit, providing one-time \$1,000 payments to all employees, and reinstating its generous employer contributions to defined contribution retirement plans as another benchmark of financial recovery (Capilouto, May 2021). U of L reported similar levels of stability in its 2020 financial report (U of L Auditor’s Report and Financial Statements, 2020).

WKU, ECU, and NKU did not fare as well as UK and U of L through the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic. WKU’s total net position decreased from \$62,607,000 in 2019 to \$4,248,000 in 2020, the third-consecutive year in which net position reduced (WKU Report on Audit, 2020). ECU’s financial position decreased at the end of the 2019-2020 fiscal year. ECU total net position decreased to \$41,848,000 in 2020 from \$109,344,000 in 2019 (ECU Financial

Report Year Ended June 30, 2020). NKU's total net position decreased to \$15,404,000 in 2020 from \$48,078,000 in 2019 (NKU Annual Financial Report 2020). As the WKU Annual Financial Report's Management's Discussion and Analysis stated, "the financial viability of a public university is a function of a secure and preferably growing enrollment base," (WKU Report on Audit, 2020).

### ***Revenue trends in Kentucky higher education***

The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it one of the sharpest economic downturns in recent history. From that, declines in revenues could have been expected, while many anticipated increases in costs with the need to invest in risk mitigation infrastructure (Capilouto, 2021 Jan.). The "higher education industry" lost more than \$183 billion in revenue, more than 650,000 jobs and more than 600,000 students from March 2020-July 2021 (Fuller, 2021).

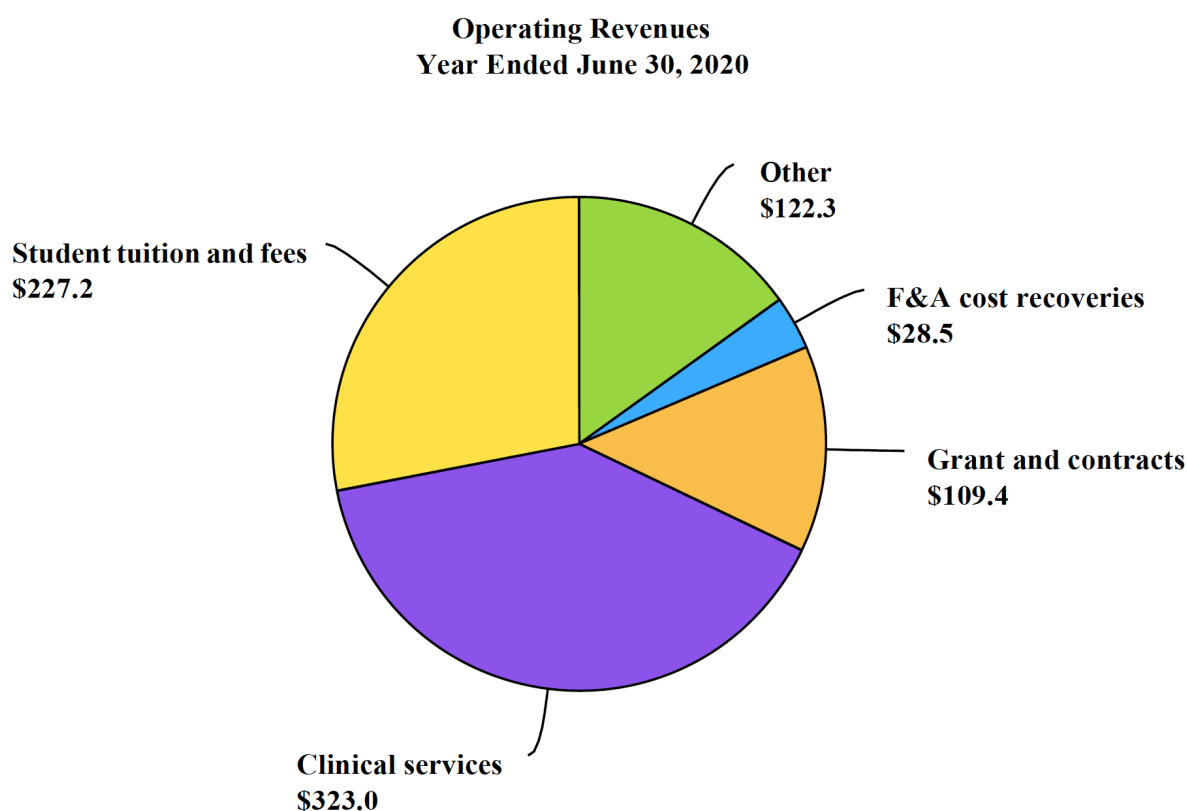
The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), of which UK and U of L are members, surveyed a representative sample of 56 its members about their COVID-19-related spending and losses. The survey found respondents suffered extensive revenue declines in the key areas of tuition and housing. (Whitford, 2021).

"Half of the APLU respondents lost between \$1.1 million and \$13.5 million in tuition and fees revenue this fall when compared to previous fall numbers. Room and board declines were much higher: 50 percent of respondents lost between \$4.3 million and \$28 million in room and board revenue compared to last fall, according to the survey data" (Whitford, 2021).

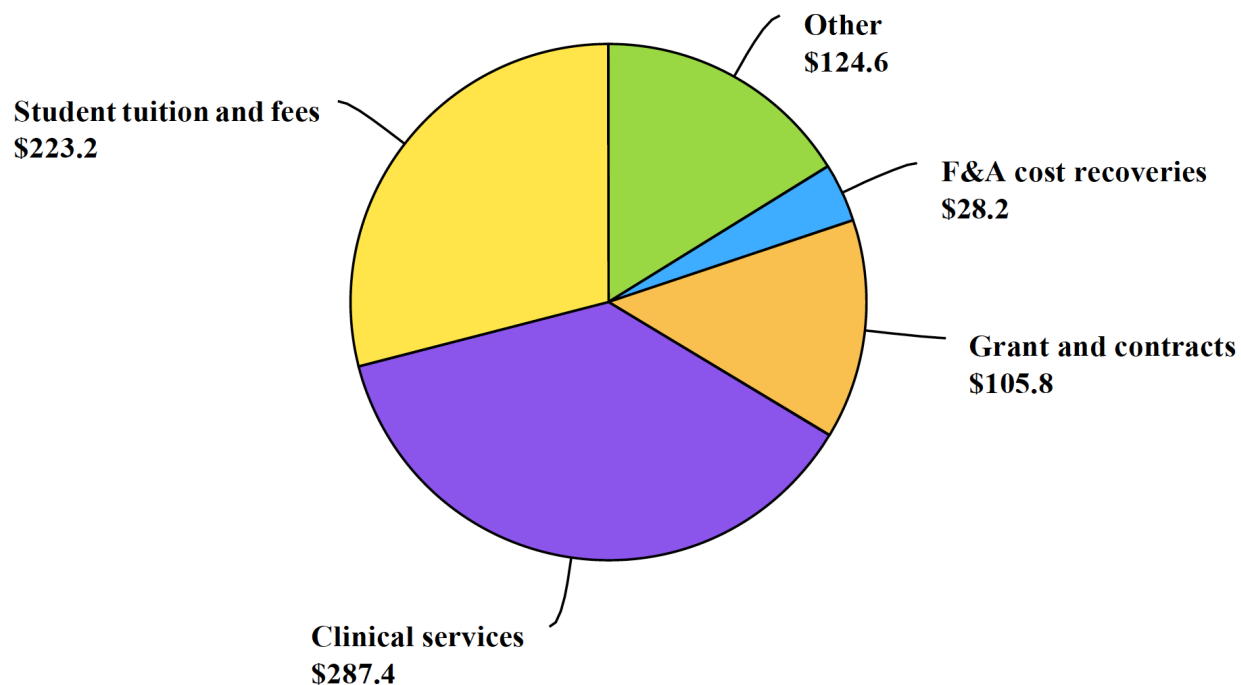
In the face of a crisis that brought huge financial losses to similar institutions, revenues for institutions like UK and U of L remained relatively stable. Steady rates of tuition and fee income, which make up the one of the biggest revenue sources at universities, linked with stable

enrollment helped ensure universities maintained adequate funding even when it seemed more students would opt out of a “socially distanced” college experience (U of L Auditor’s Report and Financial Statements, 2020). While online-only tuition payments generate revenues comparable to those traditional on-campus students provide, costs associated with distance learning tend to be greater than the established on-campus experience (Downs, et. A, 2017 and Blanton, 2020 July). Institutions with medical centers, like UK and U of L increasingly count “clinical services” for large portions of their operating revenues (Monday, E., Blanton, J., and Kiser, K., 2021).

***U of L Operating Revenues: 2019 vs. 2020***



**Operating Revenues  
Year Ended June 30, 2019**



Source: U of L Financial Statements, Operational Revenues by Source, 2020

***Benchmarking communication with financial performance***

As higher education institutions have grown in size, scope and institutional might, successful communication has become increasingly important to organizations' effective governance (Amara, 2004). Institutional leaders seek to implement effective communication strategies in their budget proposals to boards, telling the story of budget needs and why they deserve investment (Capilouto, Jan. 2021). PR departments are tasked with creating the messages disseminated through a variety of media platforms to recruit talented students, staff and faculty as well as to help campus constituents secure funding (Hanover, 2014). Successful achievements in the pursuit of these communication goals result in financial outcomes as

evidenced by the link between enrollment and retention with the revenues that come from tuition, residential fees and auxiliary services (Whitford, 2021).

Literature on the topic of communication's impact on financial performance links effective strategies to more sustainable outcomes (Fagan-Smith, n.d.). "The quality and consistency of message content predicts financial performance and is a major contributor to an environment of trust and engagement" (Fagan-Smith, n.d.). With COVID-19 posing the latest in an ongoing list of crises for economies, businesses, institutions, and individuals to address, effective communication strategy implementation appears likely to increase in importance as organizations work to achieve their objectives. In the higher education sector, universities saw opening in a "reinvented normal" as vitally important to their ability to continue to finance their operations (Startz, 2020). Effective communication strategy relating to persevering through the pandemic followed Fagan-Smith's model, which emphasized consistent, clear and quality messages as a driver which can improve financial performance.

### ***Effective communication strategies***

Good communication strategies support institutional missions by aiding recruitment messages, which lead to the biggest drivers of institutional revenue streams. Effective public communication also improves key stakeholders' general impressions of universities (Hanover, 2014).

"Good storytelling in higher ed takes the facts of the life and work of our institutions and adds an emotional layer to it to influence our audience" (Fuller, 2021). In the context of reassuring incoming students and their families that college life during a pandemic would be



worth their tuition, housing, and cost of living dollars, telling the story that campus stakeholders could expect a safe and valuable college experience took on added significance (Startz, 2020).

Still, measuring the extent to which effective communication drives financial outcomes can be difficult to correlate (Campbell, 2018). “For higher ed marketers, the measurement of traditional marketing and communications efforts generally falls into three buckets: proxy measures, survey results and digital analytics” (App, 2021).

Proxy measures in the form of key financial drivers like enrollment and retention can be the most effective means to measure how communications efforts impact financial outcomes for universities. Significant budgetary contributions are allocated toward communications efforts with the expectation that telling the story of a university leads to student recruitment and retention by expanding awareness, persuading potential students, and improving institutional prestige. Given the budget outlays made in support of communications efforts, administrators are likely to expect return on investment (Campbell, 2018). Measuring enrollment and retention year-on-year can serve as a proxy to help determine how communication services drive the revenue streams associated with adequate enrollment (App, 2021). Institution-wide proxy measures also pose limitations because such data is often only updated annually, meaning administrators have to operate with uncertainty for long periods of time (App, 2021). This limitation factored into this project where a heavily impacted fiscal year (2020-21) had not been fully reported upon yet.

A report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) surveying how the pandemic impacted student finances, housing and enrollment found majorities of college students believed their institutions provided them with helpful informational outreach (Cameron et al., 2021).

“About 70 percent (69.6 percent) of undergraduate students said their institutions provided helpful communication about COVID-19 impacts on access to coursework. Smaller percentages agreed that their institutions provided helpful communications about pandemic impacts on degree program progress (57.5 percent), on-campus or college-owned housing (55.6 percent), financial aid (44.6 percent), and campus employment (39.1 percent). Additionally, 40.8 percent of students said their institutions provided needed information about obtaining physical or mental health care and about accessing emergency financial assistance from any source, and 37 percent said their institutions provided needed information about accessing food assistance,” the NCES statistics report documents found (Redden, 2021).

The NCES research determined a majority of U.S. students felt their universities provided effective communications outreach about how pandemic mitigation efforts would impact them personally (Cameron et al., 2021). Such effective communication strategies could have helped student recruitment and retention by clarifying the ways university services could encourage student success. Such efforts were made to reduce the chances students wouldn't feel safe and supported in attending school through a pandemic.

Digital analytics can provide short-term information like “click-through rates, page views, engagement rate, reach or earned media value” (App, 2021). Still, such data is more effective in showing values like influence and perception. Financial value is more difficult to attribute to communications strategies through analysis of such data.

Stephen App, a business development manager at Campus Sonar, a specialized digital media listening agency that works extensively with higher education partners, sought to define measurement frameworks for determining the effectiveness of communication strategies. App described the three main frameworks communications professionals could use to baseline the

effectiveness of their strategies – proxy measures, survey results and digital analytics (App, 2021).

***“The quality and consistency of message content predicts financial performance and is a major contributor to an environment of trust and engagement”***

– Barbara Fagan-Smith,

*Founder and CEO of ROI Communication*

***Communication strategy success measurement frameworks***

<b>Measurement framework</b>	<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>
<b>Proxy measures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessible</li> <li>• Significant</li> <li>• Provide quantifiable analytics on topics that can otherwise be difficult to measure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be difficult to quantify the effectiveness of persuasive messaging in a definitive manner</li> <li>• Updates tend to be infrequent, leading to uncertainty for long periods of time</li> </ul>
<b>Survey Results</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can measure how impactful communications strategies are by asking specific questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often are only repeated years apart, leading to uncertainty for long periods of time</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repeatable, allowing measurement over time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be difficult to get consistent response rates to generate a representative sample</li> </ul>
<b>Digital Analytics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Near-instant feedback on individual pieces of content as well as aggregated trends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult to attribute financial value to communications data</li> </ul>

Source: App, 2021

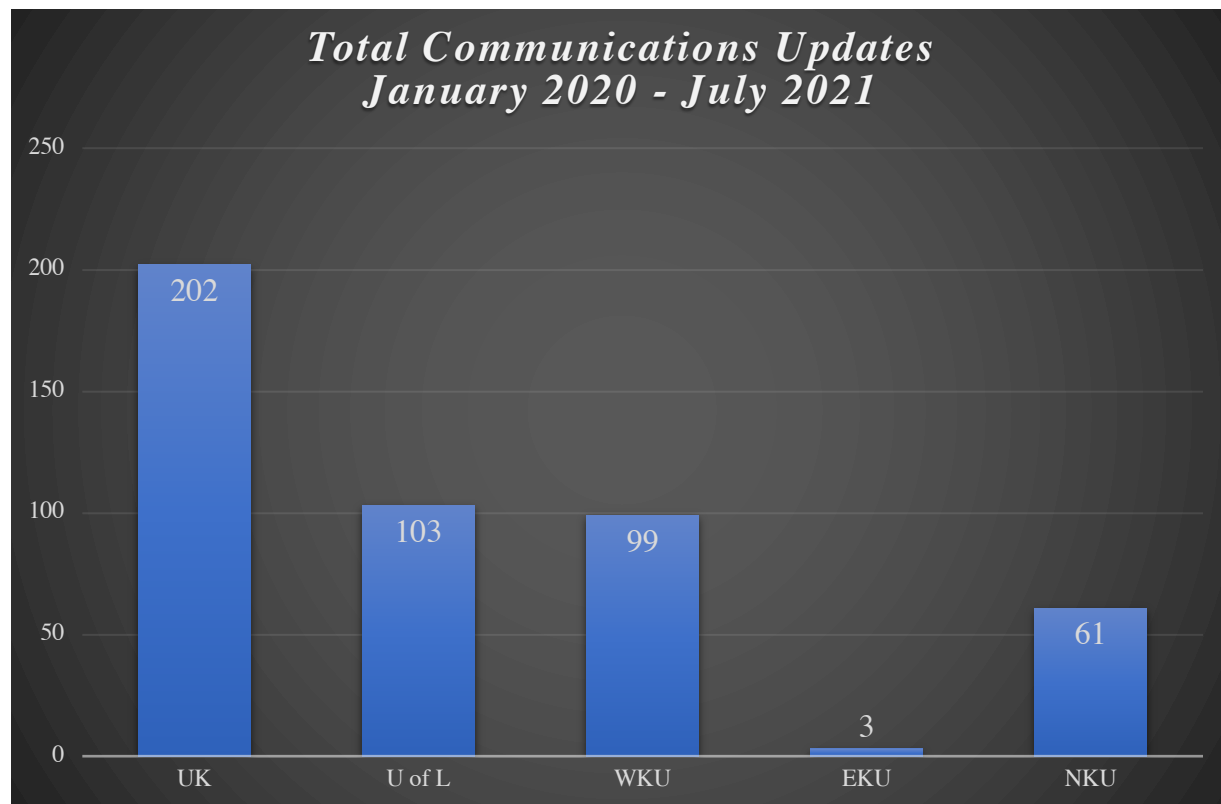
This project sought to add to the existing research examining the link between effective communication and higher education institutional finances through the prism of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which required administrators to tell the story of why campuses needed to be open in a reinvented normal with safety from viral outbreak as a priority. Under the presumption that simply closing could be financially catastrophic, universities sought to make the case for reopening in fall 2020. This project examined ways to measure whether communications strategies employed to support announcing plans for campuses to operate in the 2020-21 academic year significantly contributed to universities' financial outcomes.

***“For higher ed marketers, the measurement of traditional marketing and communications efforts generally falls into three buckets: proxy measures, survey results and digital analytics”***

- Stephen App, Business development manager at Campus Sonar

**Analysis and Findings**

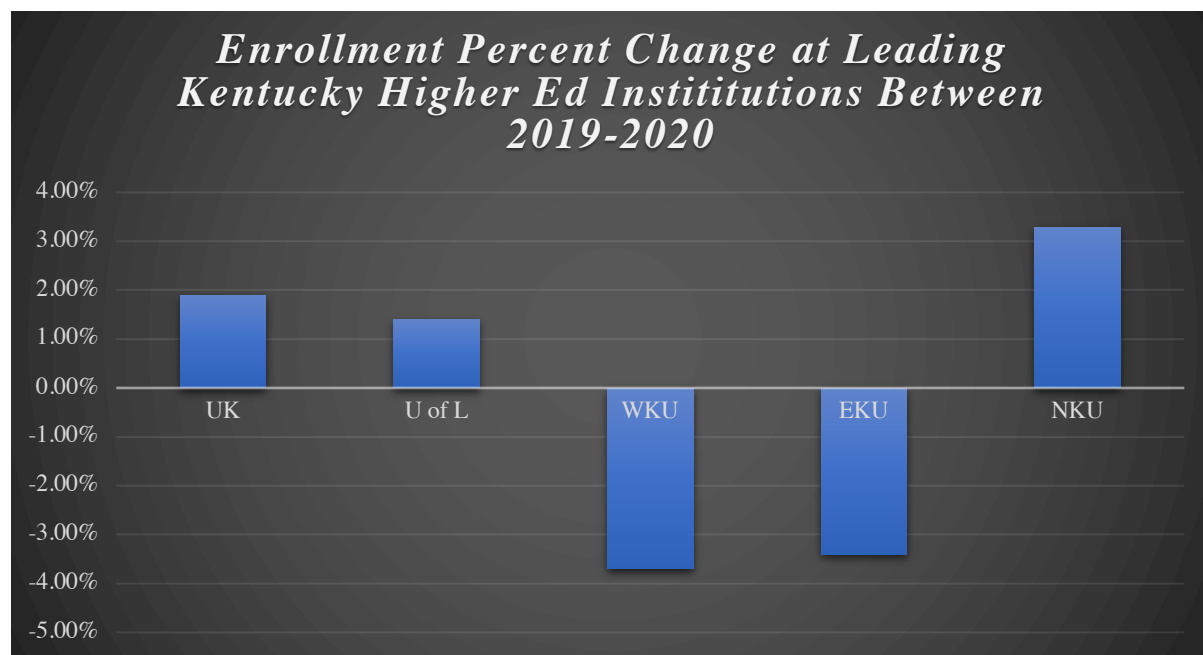
As the spring semester approached in January 2020, college campus leaders in Kentucky, began announcing that they were tracking the “novel coronavirus,” which originated in Wuhan, China. By mid-March UK, U of L, WKU, EKU and NKU had all cancelled in-person classes for the duration of the spring 2020 semester and begun the process of revealing how the academic term would conclude remotely. By June, each University had publicized intentions to open for “in-person learning” in the fall of 2020, allowing plenty of time to boost enrollment with the presumption that institutional finances could correlate with the more students registered (Caboni, 2020). As terms began in August 2020, institutional leaders continued providing updates such as positivity rates, changes in testing and contact-tracing policies as well as reactions to government mandates like bans on indoor dining in late fall (UKY.edu/coronavirus, n.d.).



The project reviewed university Websites and other communications platforms. Findings included frequency of updates from university communication arms, as well as a look at the visibility of such efforts. The analysis then considered institutional enrollment figures and budget reports as proxy measures to examine financial outcomes' relation to university communications efforts.

**Enrollment Change from 2019-2020 at Kentucky Institutions of Higher Education**

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Enrollment (Fall 2019)</i>	<i>Enrollment (Fall 2020)</i>	<i>Percent Change in 2020</i>
<b>UK</b>	30,545	31,110	+1.90%
<b>U of L</b>	19,791	20,074	+1.40%
<b>WKU</b>	18,183	17,518	-3.70%
<b>EKU</b>	14,980	14,465	-3.40%
<b>NKU</b>	15,687	16,212	+3.30%



**UK***Frequency of updates*

The University's "COVID-19 headquarters" Website: UKY.edu/coronavirus tracked the published communications sanctioned by UK administrators and included a database linking to 202 "campus messages and updates" providing messages from leaders, information, plans, maps and links to resources dating from January 2020 to July 2021. The updates took the form of news articles, graphics, data downloads and videos. The University provided an average of 11.2 "messages and updates" per month, or 2.6 per week during that span. The UKY.edu/coronavirus Website provided a one-stop-shop to access the archived database of all the University's communications tentpoles aimed at ensuring an environment of trust and engagement (UKY.edu/coronavirus, n.d.). Such consistent and frequent informational messaging followed Fagan-Smith's prescription for quality and consistent messaging.

Knowing the University depends upon consistent enrollment for financial sustainability as referenced in the 2020-21 "budget message" from the President of the University, the ongoing effective dissemination of information regarding the University's response to COVID-19 played an important role creating that environment of trust and engagement (University of Kentucky | FY 2020-21 Operating and Capital Budget, 2020). The consistent messaging could have provided a framework for potential students to feel UK was a good place for them to be for the 2020-21 academic year independent all the academic and societal reasons they chose the University.

UK communication efforts also returned some of the greatest outcomes in terms of visibility. The UKY.edu/coronavirus Website provided a hub for all the University-distributed communications, and produced articles citing high-profile "earned media" coverage. The

University was a leader in announcing plans to reopen in spring 2020, which resulted in national news media interest. A May 19, 2020, the article titled: “Fever Checks and Quarantine Dorms: The Full College Experience?” in *The New York Times*, the nation’s second most read newspaper, highlighted the University’s planning process for offering a “on-campus” experience that would offer value to students seeking a sense of college life normalcy (Hartocollis, 2020 and Misachi, 2017). On May 21, 2021, University of Kentucky President Eli Capilouto appeared on the Fox News Channel answering questions about UK’s reopening planning process for fall 2020 (Hemmer, 2021). Appearances by campus leaders on high-profile outlets like the United States’ top-rated cable news network for each of the past 19 years, as well as being the subject of an article in one of the most-circulated newspapers in the country, allowed the University to reach a massive audience. UK earning national media appearances extended the University’s reach to broader audiences than the viewership, readership, or listenership “local media outlets” and direct UK channels could offer (Glancey, 2021). A message reinforcing the institution’s commitment to opening safely, having taken input from various stakeholders, could only have increased the likelihood that effective messaging around commitment to reopening – with the goal to attract potential students hoping for an in-person college experience – would help bring more enrollees.

### *Enrollment*

UK enrollment increased from 30,545 to 31,110 in fall 2020, a 1.85 percent increase from the pre-pandemic prior year (Blanton, 2020 August). Retention rates also set records for fall 2020 increasing nearly 1.5 percent from fall 2019. President Capilouto himself alluded to the University’s ability to communicate its commitment to creating a safe environment where



students could thrive, even in a pandemic, as a driving factor in the positive recruitment and retention numbers.

“Students and families — even in a time of so much anxiety and uncertainty — are choosing the University of Kentucky because we place students and their success at the center of everything that we do,” Capilouto said. UK enrolled 4,961 new students in fall 2020, almost 500 more than what administrators projected over the summer during the budgeting process (Blanton, 2020 August).

### *Dollars*

In UK’s 2021-22 \$5.1 billion budget, the base of the budget for the four-year comprehensive institution not including UK HealthCare’s multi-billion-dollar operation, research funds and auxiliaries like athletics and UK dining was \$850 million. That base, as described by UK’s Executive Vice President for Finance and Administration Eric Monday, was made up of funds attributed to the four-year base operations of the University (Monday, E., Blanton, J., and Kiser, K., 2021). \$528 million of those funds came from student tuition and fee payments, therefore more than half of the non-healthcare, research and auxiliary budget came from tuition (University of Kentucky | FY 2020-21 Operating and Capital Budget, 2020).

UK revenue from tuition and fees increased 3.8 percent from \$343,293,000 in 2019 to \$356,197,000 in 2020. With the increase in enrollment from the prior year, even in the face of caps on tuition below the rate of inflation, tuition and fees revenue could increase again in 2021 when those financial reports are published (University of Kentucky | FY 2020-21 Operating and Capital Budget, 2020). UK Administration elected to increase employee compensation across the board, raising minimum wage to \$15 per hour, increasing salaries by 2 percent based on merit,

providing one-time \$1,000 payments to all employees, and reinstating its generous employer contributions to defined contribution retirement plans (Capilouto, 2021 May).

## *U of L*

### *Frequency of updates*

U of L's "Coronavirus Headquarters" Website: [Louisville.edu/coronavirus](https://louisville.edu/coronavirus) tracked the published communications from University administrators. The Website features a database linking to 103 "communications and updates" providing messages from leaders dating from January 2020 to July 2021. U of L provided an average of 5.7 "communications and updates" per month, or about one per week during that span (U of L Communications and Updates).

Additionally, U of L published a "Pivot to Fall Planning Document" that sought to answer frequently asked questions and reassure potential doubters of the University's plans to reopen (Pivot to Fall Planning Document, n.d.). U of L's COVID-19 Website is an easy-to-access archived database of all the administration's communication efforts, which sought to reassure the University community the return to campus process could be trusted and pursued. U of L did not provide evidence of earned media on high-profile national outlets the way UK cited key figures' appearances on cable news or references in national newspapers.

### *Enrollment*

U of L reported 20,074 students enrolled in fall 2020, a 1.4 percent increase from the fall 2019: 19,791 (Cappiello, 2020). Neeli Bendapudi, U of L president, echoed UK President Capilouto in alluding to the effectiveness of communication outreach with respect to the measures the University was taking to ensure a safe environment despite the pandemic.

“Our Cardinals are not going to let the Covid-19 pandemic deter them from furthering their education,” Bendapudi said. “They are back on campus and online, moving forward with their classes in safe and responsible ways.”

U of L had its best enrollment year in 2020-21. The administration’s budget overview cited successful communications regarding recruitment and citing risk mitigation efforts with respect to COVID-19 in supporting positive enrollment figures (Bendapudi, n.d.). The FY 2022 Operating Budget proposed additional communication efforts to publicize various strategies aimed at reducing COVID-19 spread as part of its risk mitigation plan to ensure enrollment and associated tuition and fees revenue did not decline too much.

### *Dollars*

U of L’s 2021-22 \$1.3 billion budget projected a 4.2 percent increase in tuition and fees revenue to \$339,524,920 from \$325,927,672. The revenue increase was attributed to “better-than-expected enrollment in FY 2021” (Bendapudi, n.d.).

“FY 2021 tuition and fee revenues are projected to exceed budget by about \$8 million which provides a higher starting point for the FY 2022 budget” (Bendapudi, n.d.).

U of L enjoyed record enrollment, which correlated with welcome revenue increases in 2020-21. The University administration cited effective communication as a contributor to those better-than-expected outcomes. U of L’s administration showed willingness to invest even more into getting out the message about COVID-risk mitigation efforts to continue driving revenues as well as fighting against the possibility that enrollment rates would decrease (Bendapudi, n.d.).

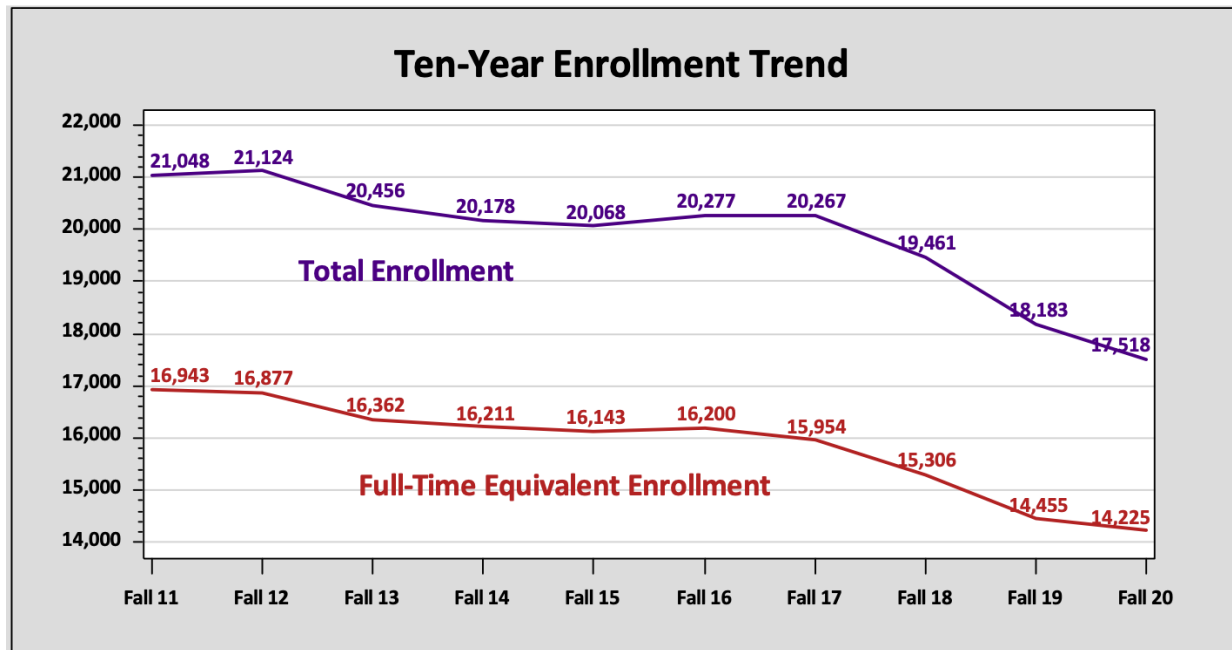
***WKU****Frequency of updates*

WKU published a “Big Red Restart Plan” providing a blueprint for reopening in anticipation of the fall 2020 semester but did not utilize a “COVID central” page with the University Website domain/Coronavirus in the way UK and U of L pinpointed their pandemic-related communication. The University’s Website WKU.edu has a “Healthy on the Hill” page that features a database archive of news articles providing COVID-19-related updates. WKU’s Communications and Marketing office issued 99 messages between January 2020 to July 2021. WKU provided an average of 5.5 “communications and updates” per month, or 1.53 per week during that span (WKU Healthy on the Hill - Messages). WKU did not publish any reference to the University on widely-known national outlets, representing less visibility than UK was able to earn with a cable TV appearance for its President and being the subject of an article in a national newspaper of record.

*Enrollment*

WKU enrollment declined 3.7 percent to 17,518 from 18,183, but that rate tracked with a broader 10-year negative enrollment trend (WKU Office of Institutional Research, 2021). WKU’s financial management themselves cited maintaining consistent enrollment as a key to public institutions’ financial viability, and that assertion bore out in the University’s financial reporting. A framework utilizing proxy measures tracking enrollment could compare WKU’s student population decline alongside its relatively decentralized, less structured communications strategy (WKU Report on Audit of Institution of Higher Education in Accordance with Uniform Guidance, 2020).

**WKU 10-Year Enrollment Trend**



(Source: WKU Enrollment Report)

*Dollars*

WKU net tuition and fees revenue declined 5.2 percent to \$120,036,000 in 2020 from \$126,640,000 in 2019. Those figures correlate with the decline in enrollment despite tuition increases capped at not more than six percent over two years (WKU Report on Audit of Institution of Higher Education in Accordance with Uniform Guidance, 2020). In the face of declining financial outcomes, WKU’s communication efforts were not as clear and consistent as either UK or U of L and they also were lacking reach and visibility in comparison with the Kentucky universities with larger enrollments. Even while making nearly 100 communication outreaches, many of which sought to aid recruitment, WKU was unable to maintain enrollment nor revenues adequate for net positive financial outcomes.

***EKU****Frequency of updates*

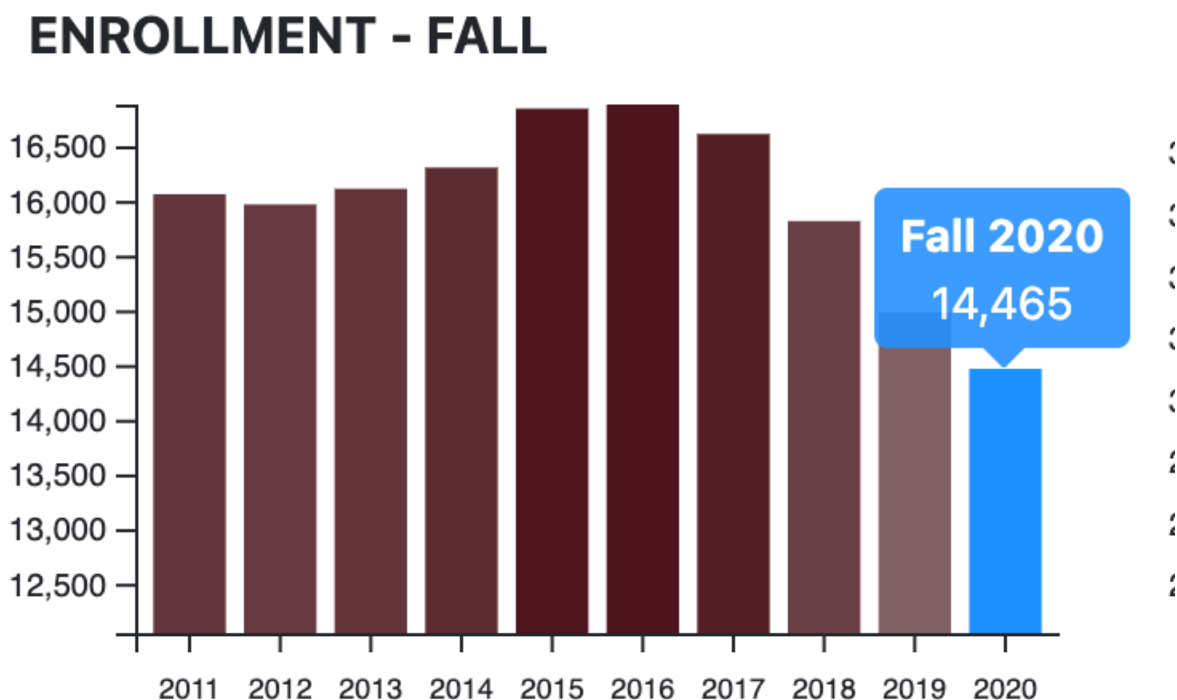
EKU employed a “Planning Task Force” similar to COVID crisis committees at the other universities in Kentucky. An EKU.edu/coronavirus or similar “all-encompassing” COVID-19 information hub on par with those offered by UK and U of L was not easily accessible. EKU’s communication efforts led by its planning task force were even less frequent and more decentralized than WKU’s. The communication efforts at WKU were less recurrent and less accessible than those initiated at UK and U of L. The task force offered three messages to campus between May and June 2020 publishing administrative plans for return to campus in fall 2020. Those three articles were the only pieces linked on EKU’s “Novel Coronavirus” informational landing page. Considering the relatively sparse communication in comparison with other benchmark universities, EKU seemed to value consistent and ongoing communication, which Fagan-Smith suggested can drive financial performance, less than UK, U of L and WKU.

*Enrollment*

EKU enrollment fell 3.4 percent to 14,465 in 2020 from 14,980 in 2019. Those declines were part of a broader four-year downward trend in enrollment. Still, EKU’s commitment to clearly communicating its COVID reopening plans were significantly less frequent and not nearly as bold when compared to the three previously examined Kentucky universities. The sparse enrollment when taken as a proxy measure of communication strategy effectiveness with respect to financial performance, could indicate that EKU’s communication efforts were inadequate to support enrollment recruitment. Still, EKU’s enrollment declined for three years

prior to 2020, therefore the negative outcomes were likely not solely related to the pandemic or lack of communication about measures being taken to mitigate risk.

***EKU fall enrollment***



Source: *EKU Data Page*

*Dollars*

EKU’s forecasted tuition and class fees for FY 2021-22 were \$144,037,554 in the recently published operating budget (EKU Operating Budget FY 2021-2022). Revenues from tuition and fees declined 1.1 percent to \$150,873,000 in 2020 from \$152,593,000 in 2019 (EKU Financial Statements). EKU published less information and conducted less outreach to potential students through mass communication platforms about its reopening plans for fall 2020 in the

midst of COVID-19 and had lower rates of enrollment and revenue from tuition and fees than its peer institutions in Kentucky.

## ***NKU***

### *Frequency of updates*

NKU 's "COVID-19 information page" is located at [nku.edu/covid19](http://nku.edu/covid19) and that page hosts a database featuring the University's "Campus Communications" (NKU Coronavirus Page, n.d.). The campus communications database tracked published communications from University administrators linking to 61 messages from campus leaders regarding COVID-19 from February 28, 2020 to July 2021. NKU offered an average of 3.4 updates per month – nearly one per week – during that span. The communications cited took the form of policy memoranda from University administrators, most frequently from President Ashish Vaidya and interim Provost Ande Durojaiye to faculty, staff and students (NKU Coronavirus Page, n.d.). NKU employed centralized, simple, policy memo-style updates on the campus communications portion of the COVID-19 Information page. NKU's campus communication archive was a public relations style in line with ECU and WKU's archived list of outreaches related to COVID-19. NKU's 61 messages fell between ECU's three updates and WKU's 99 messages about COVID since January 2020.

### *Enrollment*

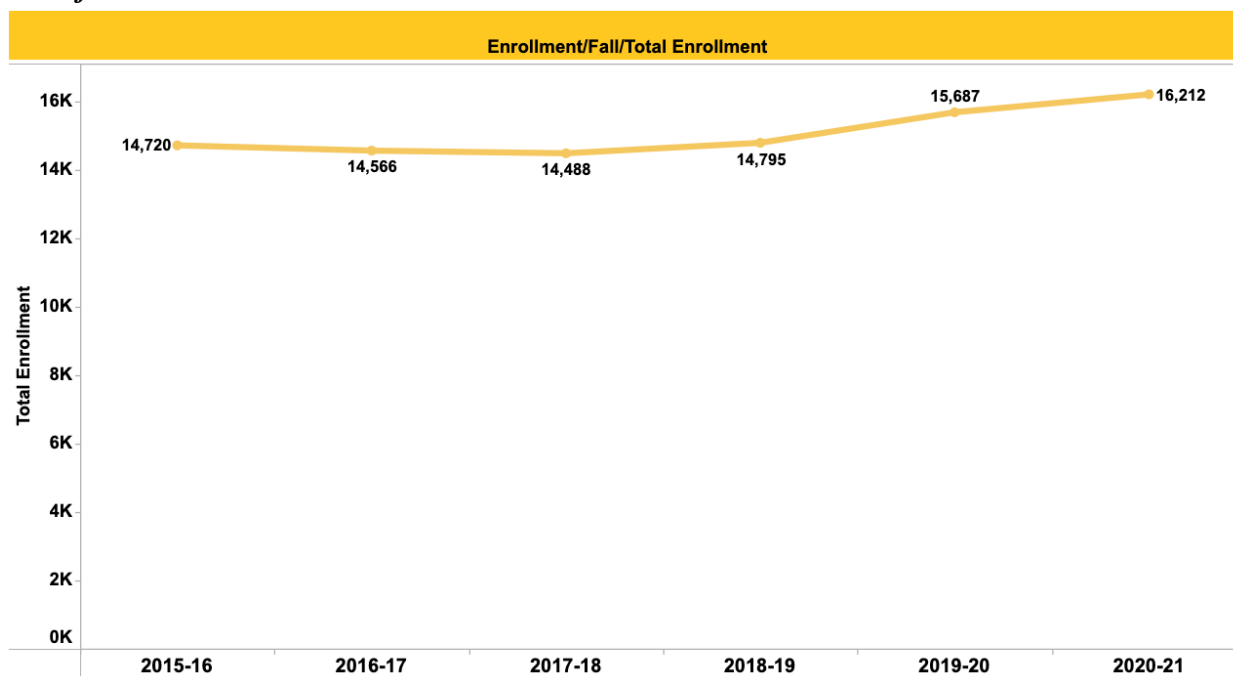
NKU enrollment increased 3.3 percent to 16,212 in 2020 from 15,687 in 2019. That increase maintained a four-year trend of year-on-year increases in enrollment, but the percentage increase in 2020 was only half the increase in enrollment ECU enjoyed a year prior. The rate of



enrollment slowing could reflect the pandemic's impact on students' desire to attend college as well as to afford higher education. Nationally, the broader trend was for universities to experience decreases in enrollment.

The chart below demonstrates the relatively flat enrollment at NKU over the past several years while highlighting the recent increases the institution experienced.

**NKU fall enrollment**



Source: *NKU Enrollment, Degrees, Certifications, and Graduation & Retention Rates* n.d.

*Dollars*

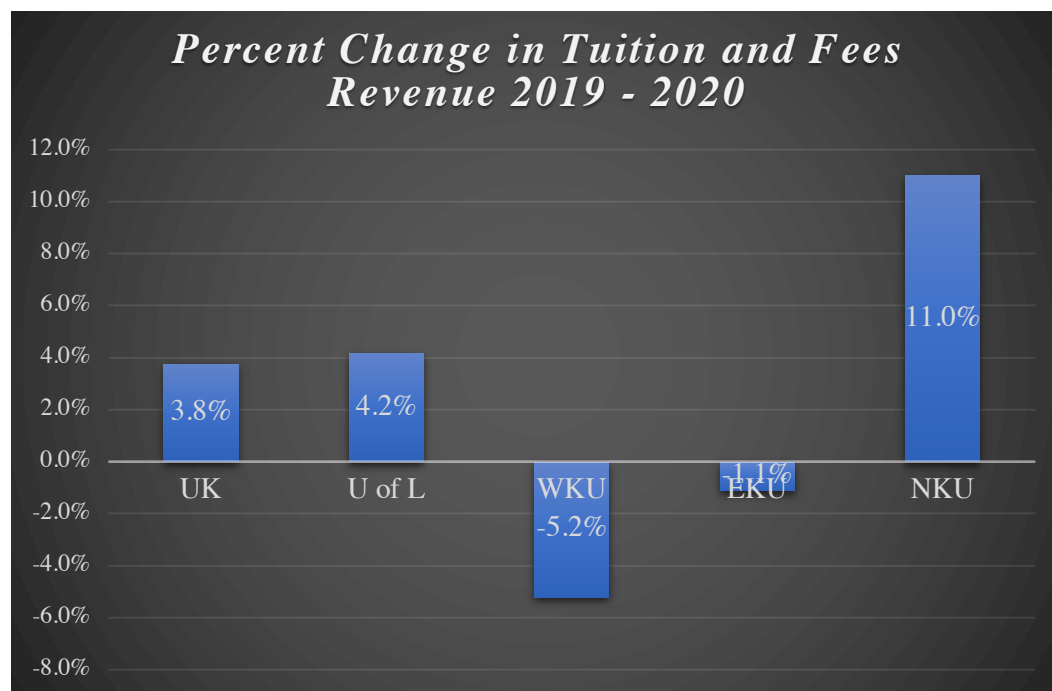
NKU net revenues from tuition and fees increased 11 percent to \$126,477,000 from \$113,949,000 in 2019. The 11-percent increase in tuition and fee revenue was a higher rate of return than the three-percent uptick in enrollment itself. NKU management attributed the greater revenues to higher tuition fees as well as more of the students paying fees for enrolling in online classes, which increase “distance learning” payments. “Operating revenues increased by \$7.5 million for the year ended June 30, 2020, including a \$12.5 million increase in net tuition

resulting from the combined impact of an increase in tuition and fee rate increases and a significant increase in the University's online graduate program enrollment” (NKU Annual Financial Report 2020).

NKU made the fourth most (out of five universities examined) communication updates but had the highest rate of change in tuition and fees revenue as well as enrollment. Still, those increases were attributed to greater online instruction enrollment, which came with tuition rate hikes as well. NKU experienced strong upticks in enrollment and revenue in 2020, but those outcomes were not enough to put NKU in a stronger net position at the end of the fiscal year, potentially indicating that the need to increase tuition rates reflected broader financial challenges for the University.

***Tuition and fees revenue 2019-2020***

<b><i>Institution</i></b>	<b><i>2019</i></b>	<b><i>2020</i></b>	<b><i>Percent Change</i></b>
<b><i>UK</i></b>	\$ 343,293,000.00	\$ 356,197,000.00	3.8%
<b><i>U of L</i></b>	\$ 325,927,672.00	\$ 339,524,920.00	4.2%
<b><i>WKU</i></b>	\$ 126,640,000.00	\$ 120,036,000.00	-5.2%
<b><i>EKU</i></b>	\$ 152,593,000.00	\$ 150,873,000.00	-1.1%
<b><i>NKU</i></b>	\$ 113,949,000.00	\$ 126,477,000.00	11.0%



### ***Conclusions***

Universities' commitments to opening for on-campus learning as early as late spring 2020, and remaining steadfast in that position publicly, seemed to contribute to an environment that allowed for historic levels of enrollment and retention for some colleges in Kentucky in the fall of 2020. Positive enrollment and revenue figures like those experienced at UK, U of L and NKU contrasted with national trends (Sedmak, 2020). UK and U of L, especially, exhibited openness in communications about the pandemic as evidenced by their publishing more than 100 pieces each on the topic. Top leaders of those universities attributed upward enrollment trends – and the positive financial outcomes associated with growing the base of tuition-paying students – with effective, ongoing and consistent communications strategies (Blanton, 2020 August, and Benapudi, n.d.).

Campus executives' affirmations about the importance of strong communications strategy lent credibility to Fagan-Smith's assertion that "the quality and consistency of message content predicts financial performance and is a major contributor to an environment of trust and

engagement.” In the context of planning public communication in support of financial performance (maintaining and growing revenue streams) during a pandemic, “contributing to an environment of trust and engagement” was the name of the game (Fagan-Smith, n.d.). Ongoing consistent and quality messaging likely proved effective in supporting enrollment, which in turn grew revenue from tuition and fees.

Enrollment and retention have proven to be important factors impacting financial outcomes for universities, and significant budgetary contributions get allocated toward communications initiatives supporting efforts help reach those goals (Fuller, 2021). Universities that communicated less, also had negative enrollment and revenue trends, but connecting those factors can prove challenging. The value of investments in communication could be measured when enrollment and retention are used as proxies under App’s measurement frameworks.

App outlined “three buckets” in establishing a measurement framework: “proxy measures, survey results and digital analytics” (App, 2021). This project focused most precisely on proxy measures like enrollment. The total number of students enrolled served as a proxy for how effective strategies were under the presumption that communication about COVID that worked, supported enrollment goals. Enrollment connected to finance because the amount of “paying customers” has a close relationship with revenue (WKU Report on Audit of Institution of Higher Education in Accordance with Uniform Guidance 2020).

Two of the strongest performers in terms of enrollment and dollars: UK and U of L, generated the largest amount of public messages. WKU produced the third most communication updates yet experienced the worst percent change in enrollment. WKU’s case suggests just measuring a quantitative datapoint can prove problematic when relying upon proxy measures to analyze a messaging campaign’s effectiveness. Upon subtler comparison, the comprehensiveness

of UK and U of L's "COVID-19 central" pages stood in stark contrast to WKU and ECU, both of which did not publish a comparable hub of information. NKU, which had the highest positive rate of change for enrollment (and revenue), did create a centralized home base of COVID-related information comparable to UK and U of L's pages. Such factors fell in line with Fagan-Smith's references to quality of content. Just listing updates was likely less successful than weaving together effective messages in media-rich ways, all within an easily accessible spot with consistent application.

### *Recommendations*

Clear, consistent, and centralized communication from universities likely aided adequate enrollment and retention levels at Kentucky colleges that experienced positive financial outcomes through the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings suggest financial leaders and communication managers seeking to weather future jarring events like pandemics could consider implementing quality, consistent messaging, centralizing information, and utilizing measurement frameworks to determine if strategies are meeting objectives and to guide future decision-making.

#### *1. Quality, consistent messaging*

Effective communication strategies like the consistent and clear messaging about preparations for opening during the COVID-19 pandemic could help support enrollment increases. At Kentucky universities, effective implementation of consistent and clear messaging strategies helped result in enrollment outcomes that outpaced original projections. University

financial reports indicated enrollment figures above original projections helped stave off a campus-wide financial crisis, which many predicted in the early days of the pandemic and throughout summer 2020. Universities like UK and U of L experienced less financial pain because their enrollment rates remained stable. One could reasonably argue, using enrollment as a proxy measure for the effectiveness of communication strategies, that Kentucky's largest two universities' consistent commitment to communicating their plans to be open in fall 2020 and their efforts to make that reopening successful contributed to positive enrollment figures, which drove tuition and fees revenues.

Since enrollment drives revenues in higher education, officials at institutions like ECU and WKU, could consider increasing and/or improving proactive communication efforts as a tactic, citing Fagan-Smith's assertion that clear, consistent communication positively impacts financial performance (Fagan-Smith, n.d.)

## *2. Centralize information*

Frequency of updates regarding COVID-19 policy alone did not reliably predict enrollment or tuition revenue outcomes. The universities that provided comprehensive home pages for COVID-19 information, UK, U of L and NKU, had the highest positive rates of change for enrollment and revenue. WKU and ECU each neglected to create "COVID-19 central" pages, and those institutions had negative enrollment as well as tuition and fee outcomes from 2019-2020. Universities that provided comprehensive, centralized hubs of information offered campus and community stakeholders easy access to information that could provide value in terms of alleviating concerns by clearly communicating administration's plans for operating safely in a pandemic. The less centralized that information was, the harder time those stakeholders might

have in finding the messages they need. Increasing the challenges potential students might face in accessing information could result in those recruits being less likely to feel safe enrolling. Institutions that can successfully integrate powerful messages within an easily accessible spot with consistent application improve the chances that communications strategies will support financial goals.

### *3. Measure communication effectiveness*

Placing specific financial values on communication strategies' effectiveness can prove difficult (Campbell, 2018). Communication, PR and marketing departments are tasked with supporting their institution's primary objectives. Financial sustainability at minimum would be core to any university's ability to sustain operations. Communication professionals could therefore find motivation to attribute their efforts to revenue generation, positive financial outcomes, and achievement of institutional objectives as justification for ongoing and future investment in their departments. Communication leaders and their financial management colleagues therefore would be well-served by utilizing a measurement framework to help determine how effective messaging efforts are, and what additional investment might return.

Administrators could consider App's three-bucket measurement framework: "proxy measures, survey results and digital analytics," when searching for a means to determine how effective communications strategies are and what the return on investment they bring is (App, 2021). Looks at higher education communication effectiveness might utilize proxy measures like enrollment rates. Enrollment can be an effective proxy for how communication strategies resonate with target audiences. Measuring enrollment can provide an accurate reflection of the connection between communication and finance because the amount of "paying students"

closely correlates with tuition – the category that makes up the biggest share of revenue at many universities (WKU Report on Audit of Institution of Higher Education in Accordance with Uniform Guidance 2020).

Measurements using enrollment as a proxy for communication effectiveness with respect to connection to revenue come with limitations as well. Future research is necessary to better examine and account for additional factors influencing communication strategy effectiveness and financial outcomes. Factors could include how campus proximity to urban centers or rural areas influenced enrollment, or how communication department funding impacted professionals' ability to carry out their responsibilities. Different measurements might utilize other factors when seeking to attribute financial outcomes to communication strategies.

App's additional measurement frameworks: survey results and digital analytics, could prove more challenging and yield varying insights. Further research could use more survey results when seeking to improve understanding of communication strategy effectiveness. Surveying more university leaders, like university presidents/chancellors, financial executives, communication leaders and enrollment management professionals, could provide more information to support or refute Capilouto and Benapudi's premonition that effective, ongoing, and consistent communication helped University finances (Blanton, 2020 August, and Benapudi, n.d.). Surveying students, as well as their parents and guardians, about their decision-making processes would also contribute to understanding communication strategy effectiveness more precisely. Other research along the lines of the NCES survey on how the pandemic impacted student finances, with questions focused on how university messages resonated with incoming scholars, could benefit others seeking to determine how communication strategies impact finances at higher education institutions.



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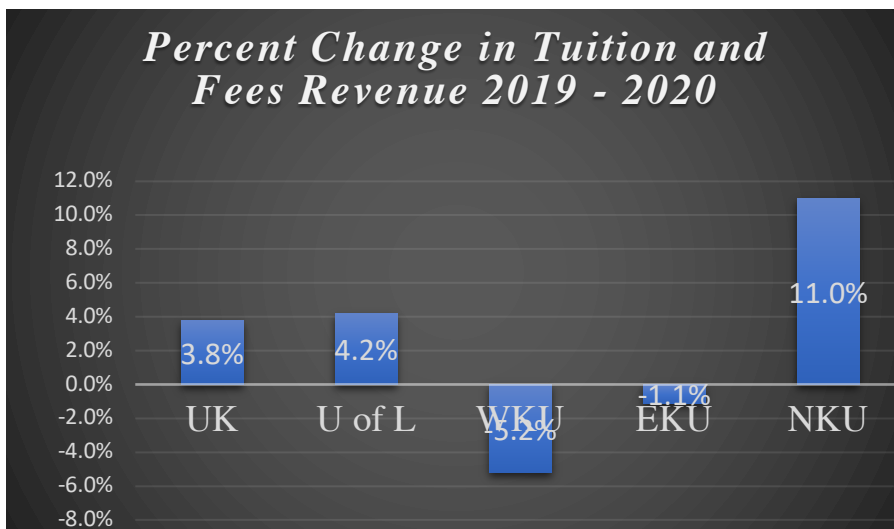
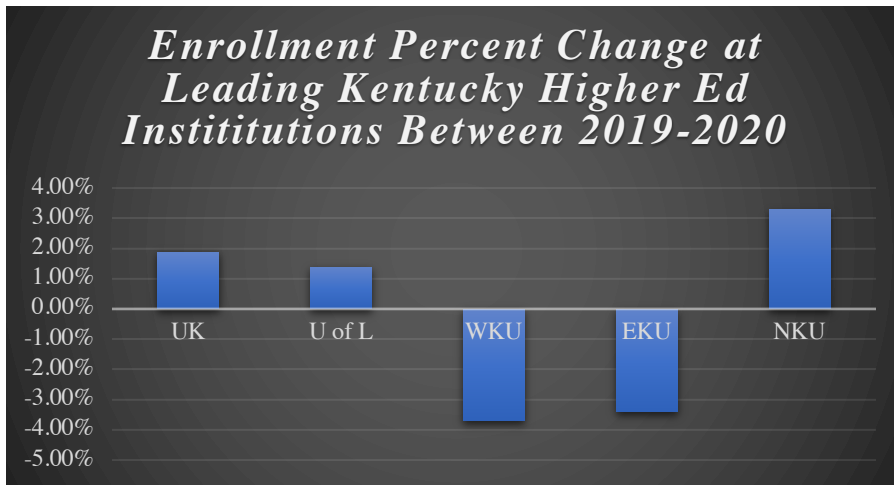
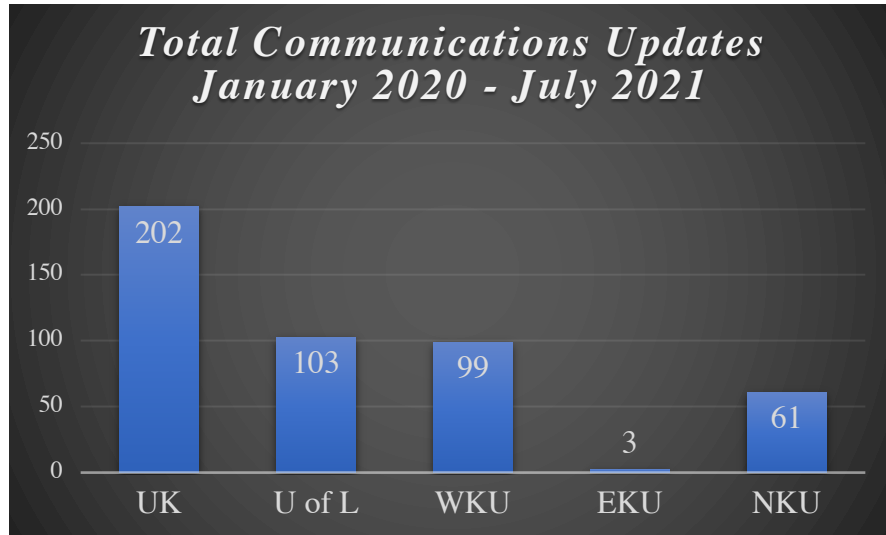


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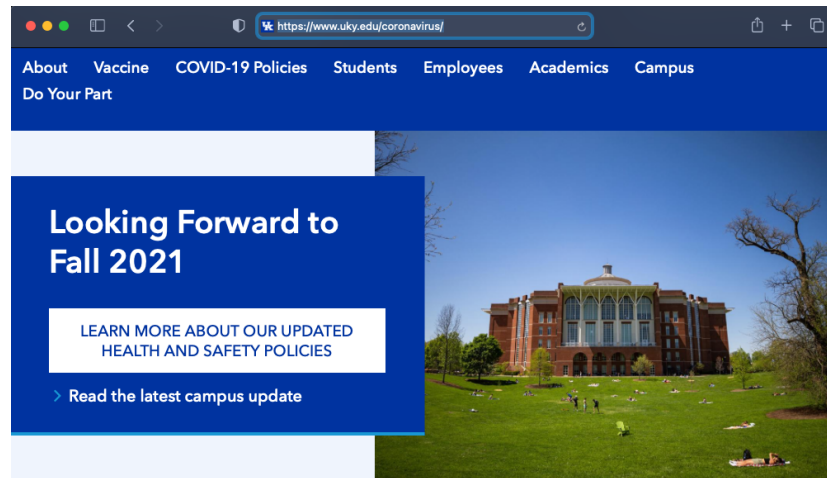
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**Appendix I- Communications, Enrollment and Revenue**



## Appendix II: UKY.edu/coronavirus



**Questions About Screening, Testing or Tracing? Contact Our Health Corps.**

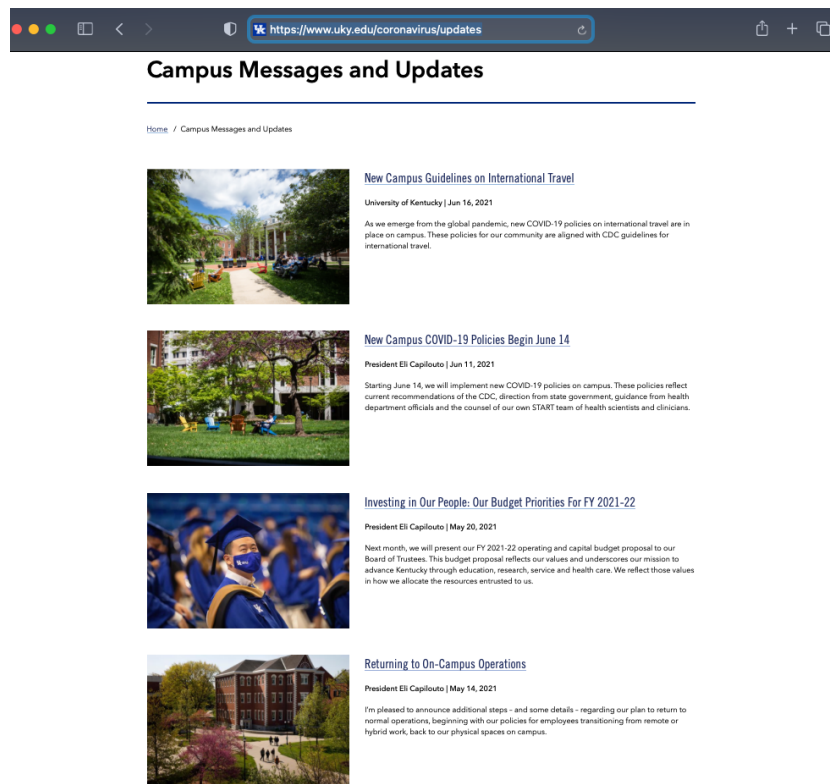
- > Call 859-218-SAFE(7233)
- > Email [healthcorps@uky.edu](mailto:healthcorps@uky.edu)

**Current Hours of Operation:**  
 Monday-Friday: 8 a.m. – 6 p.m.  
 Saturday: 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.  
 Sunday: 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.

**New Health and Safety Guidelines**

Throughout our commonwealth and our country, we see growing signs of optimism and hope about emerging from this pandemic and beginning our return to some sense of normalcy. President Capilouto recently communicated with campus updated health and safety guidelines effective June 14.

[LEARN MORE](#)



## Appendix III: Louisville.edu/coronavirus

NAVIGATION ▾

**Stay Safe. Stay Healthy. Stop the Spread of COVID-19.**

**Quick Links**

- [UofL COVID-19 FAQs](#)
- [Get Tested](#)
- [Vaccine Info](#)
- [Testing Dashboard](#)
- [Travel Guidelines](#)

**Business Operations COVID Support Team**

Can't find an answer you need in the FAQs?

Contact the Business Operations COVID Support Team, open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Call 502-852-7549, email [businessops@louisville.edu](mailto:businessops@louisville.edu), or start a live chat.

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**Novel Coronavirus (nCoV2019)**

HOME COMMUNICATIONS AND UPDATES STUDENTS ▾ FACULTY ▾ EMPLOYEES ▾ VISITORS HEALTH PROTOCOLS ▾

**Communications & Updates**

*Collection of key university communications to students, faculty and staff*

Jump to table of all emails

**RECENT UPDATES**

**JULY 20, 2021**

**Message from: Campus Health Services**  
**To: Cardinal Community**  
**Subject: UofL's continued COVID-19 response for fall 2021**

Cardinal Community,

Campus Health Services is gathering student and employee vaccination data to determine our university community's vaccination rate. This information is important for university administration to have as we continue developing our COVID-19 response plans. Campus Health Services already has access to university members' immunization data through the Kentucky immunization registry. Out-of-state immunization records, however, are not available to us.

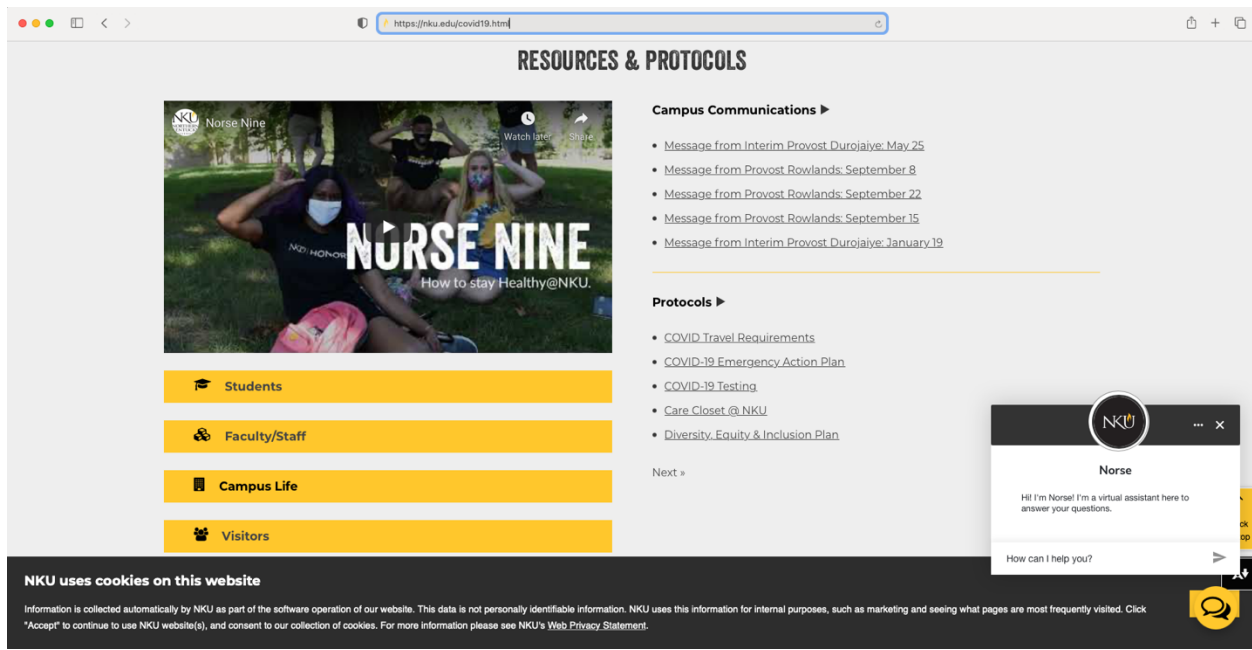
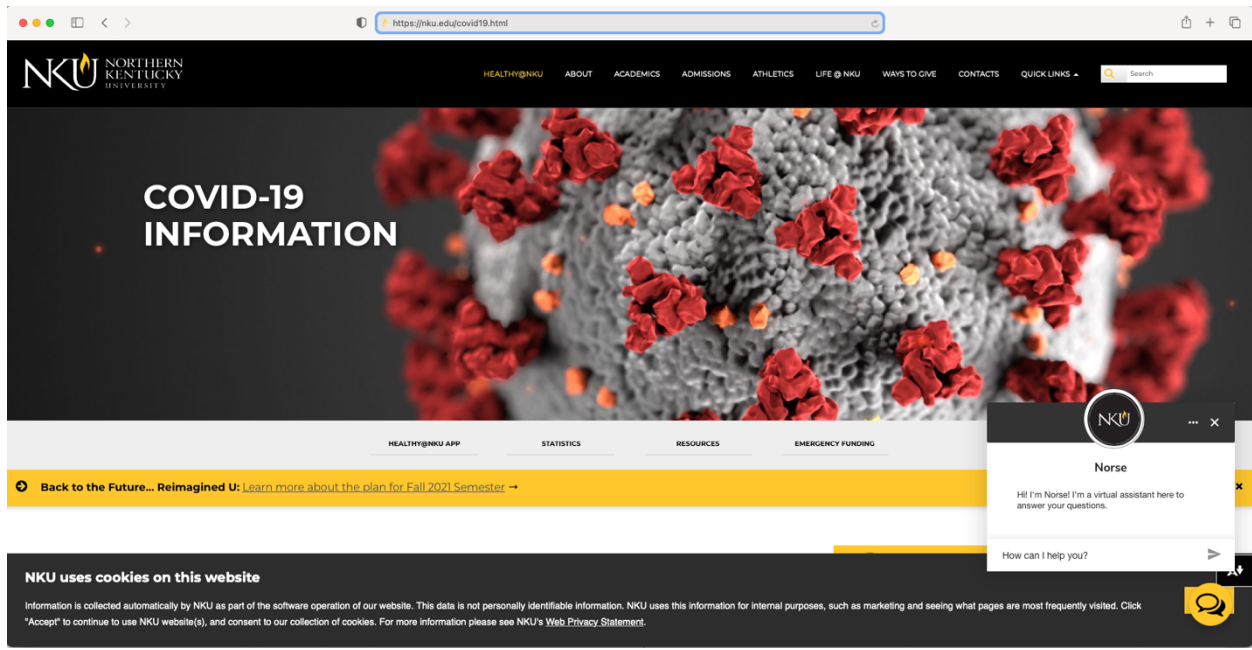
If you were vaccinated out of state, please use the instructions below to upload your COVID-19 vaccination documentation to our secure health portal. If you were vaccinated in Kentucky, you do not need to submit any documentation.

Thank you for helping the CHS team gather this important information. In coming weeks, we will have a COVID-19 vaccination rate dashboard added to the university's COVID-19 website, but we need your help to ensure we have all our university members' data.

[Read the full message \[PDF\] →](#)

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**Appendix IV: NKU.edu/COVID19**



**Appendix V: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) Process**

In preparation for this project, I completed the human subject protection (HSP) training through Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) website.

“The purpose of IRB review is to assure, both in advance and by periodic review, that appropriate steps are taken to protect the rights and welfare of humans participating as subjects in the research. To accomplish this purpose, IRBs use a group process to review research protocols and related materials (e.g., informed consent documents and investigator brochures) to ensure protection of the rights and welfare of human subjects of research.” (IRB FAQs).

The research of this project sought to contribute to generalizable knowledge of the connection of communication strategies to institutional finances. The majority of this project analyzed institutional communications documents as well as financial reports for the years in which those communications occurred.

