

COVID-19 Impact Research Brief: Virtual Exchanges at Community Colleges

By Kimberley Cossey, MA, and Heidi Fischer, PhD

The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected almost all aspects of higher education in the United States. Community colleges have fared particularly poorly as the pandemic has compounded the financial constraints that many community colleges already faced due to declining state appropriations (Gardner 2020). These trends are concerning given the key role that community colleges need to play in workforce development as the country recovers from the pandemic (Autor, Mindell, and Reynolds 2020). Community colleges have been internationalizing their curricula and programs for many years in an effort to prepare students for diverse careers in today's global workforce by helping them develop the skills they need (NACE 2019; Raby 2008, 2020). Unfortunately, international education (IE) programs, including international student enrollment and education abroad (EA), have experienced many pandemic-related disruptions (Fischer and Whatley 2020; Martel 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; NAFSA 2020). At the onset of the pandemic, IE practitioners suggested that it may be prudent for institutions of higher education to pivot their internationalization efforts to include virtual exchange programs (VEPs; Martel 2020b) in the absence of EA. Some community colleges have offered VEPs for decades, and outcomes support the idea that VEPs can cultivate global competencies, allowing students to be more competitive in the workforce (Custer and Tuominen 2017; NACE 2019).

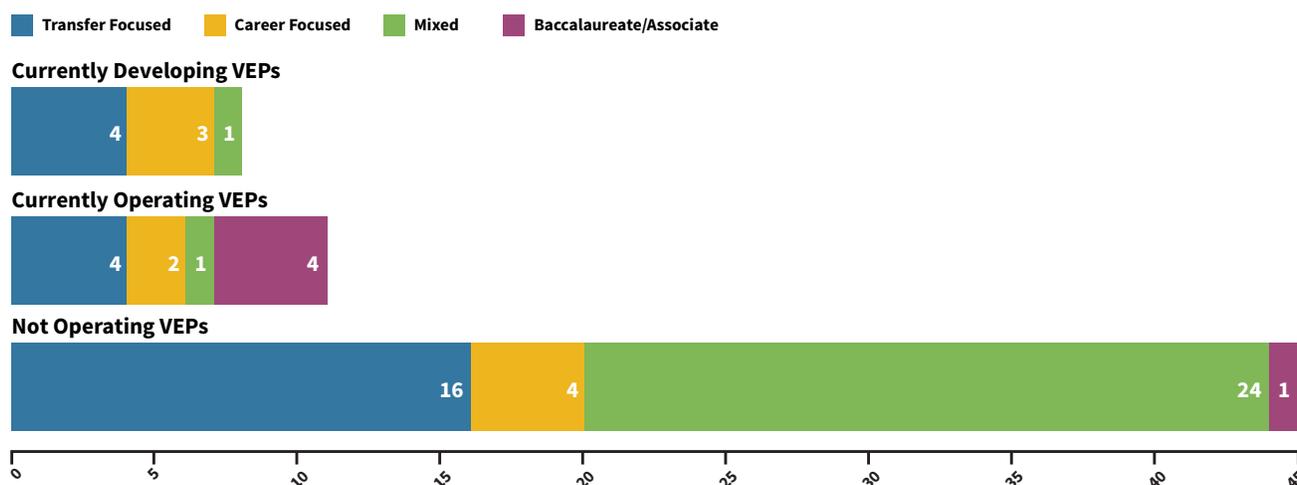
Insights from this research brief will assist community college administrators, international educators, and VEP faculty as they consider developing or expanding VEPs at their institutions. Considering the uncertainties regarding institutional budgets and internationalization priorities during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research may also benefit administrators, faculty, and staff supporting internationalization at home strategies at higher education institutions, and particularly at community colleges.

VEPs are often a crucial component of curriculum internationalization strategies (Beelen and Jones 2015; de Wit 2016) and can take various forms. Curricular VEPs, often referred to as collaborative online international learning (COIL) in the United States, have been administered since the early 2000s. Outside of the COIL model, common approaches include project-based learning or language exchanges between students in classrooms at U.S. institutions and partner institutions abroad. VEPs can take place synchronously or asynchronously and utilize various technology platforms. The benefits of VEPs include increased access to IE, enhanced student interest in EA, exposure to new cultures and pedagogies, increased collaboration between partner institutions, and reduced administrative costs (de Wit 2016).

This research brief presents key findings of a mixed-methods study exploring VEPs with practitioners at U.S. community colleges (defined as public, two-year institutions) administered in fall and winter 2020–21. For phase 1 of the study,

researchers collected responses to a survey that included questions about institutional support for international initiatives. Respondents who indicated their institution had or was developing VEPs were asked additional questions about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these programs. At the end of the survey, respondents could volunteer to participate in an interview. A link to the survey was emailed to a convenience sample of 1,220 faculty, staff, and administrators at U.S. community colleges. Links to the survey were also posted on professional organization forums and social media. Survey responses were collected from 86 individuals at 63 community colleges and 2 community college districts. Participants represented institutions in 25 states in 7 different U.S. regions and a variety of Carnegie Classifications (see figure 1). Survey respondents at 19 institutions reported that their college either offered or was developing VEPs at the time of the survey.

Figure 1. Carnegie Classifications Represented in Respondent Sample



Note: The two system respondents are not included in the Carnegie Classifications.

Phase 2 of the study consisted of interviews with 21 participants, 15 of whom were at institutions currently offering or developing VEPs. Interviewees represented a mix of full-time faculty (n=8), faculty with reassigned time (n=3), administrative staff (n=7), and senior administrators (n=3). Interview questions included the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on IE at their institution and best practices surrounding the development of VEPs at their institution.

Impact of COVID-19 on Existing VEPs

Survey respondents at 11 community colleges and one system office offered VEPs during the 2019–20 academic year. Most institutions indicated that they offer one or two VEPs per academic year (n=7), with fewer institutions offering three or four (n=3) or five or more VEPs (n=2). Half of the institutions were in their first year of offering VEPs (n=6), while others had operated them for two to four years (n=3) or five or more years (n=3). The five most common fields of study for VEPs were business (n=11), humanities (n=6), math and physical sciences (n=5), English language and literature (n=4), and world languages (n=4).

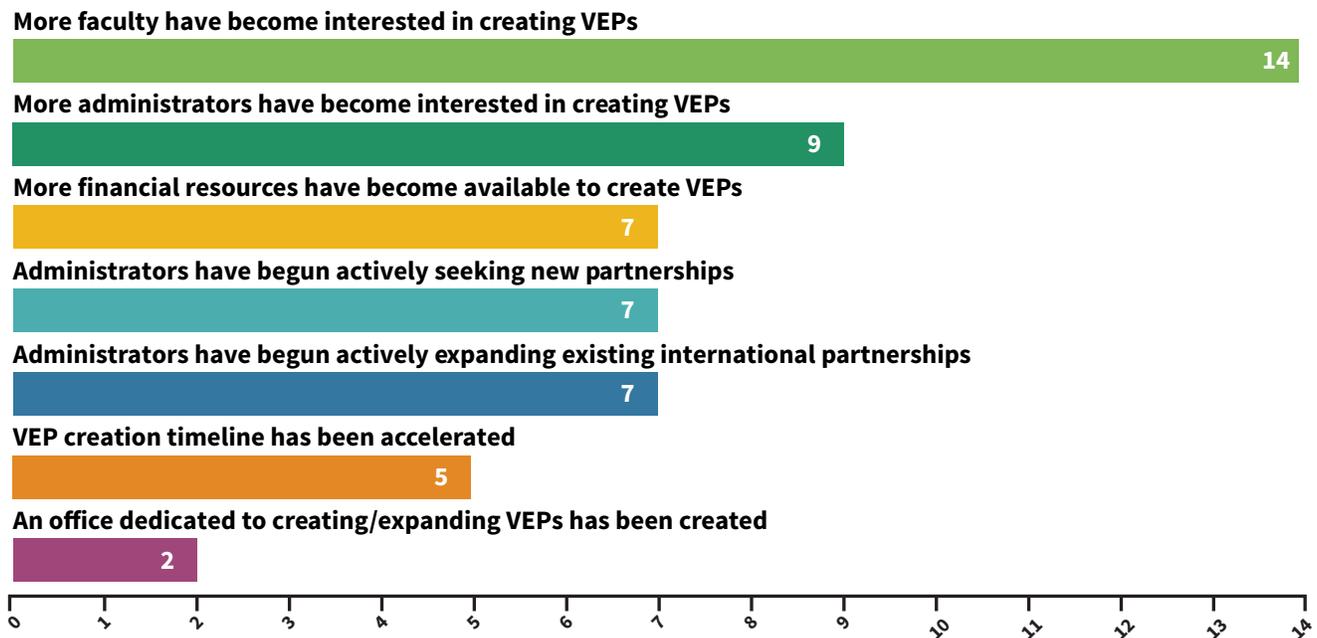
Community colleges offering VEPs in spring 2020 were not immune to the pandemic’s adverse effects, despite already operating in an online environment. One faculty interviewee described how the COVID-19 pandemic derailed an ongoing VEP: “[The VEP course] started before COVID, and [it] was supposed to finish after COVID, but the [overseas instructor] was overwhelmed by the changes, the new situation, and that was not successful.” Another faculty member explained that her course required the use of an on-campus computer

lab. When their institution closed, the faculty member was unable to sustain VEPs in her courses, as her students did not have access to the necessary technology.

Impact of COVID-19 on Developing New VEPs

Generally, survey respondents from institutions that were currently developing or operating VEPs reported a variety of positive impacts on VEP development due to the pandemic (figure 2).

Figure 2. Positive Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on VEP Development



Note: Respondents were able to select more than one option.

Respondents indicated that faculty and administrative interest in VEPs and access to financial resources had increased. In response, community college faculty and administrators acted quickly to develop and expand VEPs, with one institution reporting that their faculty proposed creating a program coordinator for IE in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviewees reported reaching out to strengthen current international partnerships and develop new ones. Practitioners described contacting a variety of personal connections at institutions abroad, utilizing state consortia for recommendations, and working with current EA providers to increase capacity. Administrators also reached out to internationally engaged faculty members, asking them to connect with international colleagues and leveraging faculty champions leading the way with VEP implementation. Other participants indicated that EA program cancellations and postponements as a result of COVID-19—from spring 2020 through fall 2021, or even summer 2022—allowed them to shift resources from EA toward VEPs. The repurposed funds included those typically allocated to support faculty travel. Interviewees described repurposing financial resources to apply toward faculty stipends, professional development, or VEP consulting agencies or for partnering with EA providers.

Despite these short-term positive effects on VEPs, many interviewees expressed uncertainty about the COVID-19 pandemic's long-term impact on institutional and departmental budgets. One interviewee, concerned about the sustainability of newly created VEPs, asked, "Will I be allowed to pivot and invest significantly in three or four [VEPs], or will I be told the financial situation is really bad and we need to

hold back funds?” Similarly, another interviewee shared, “[VEPs are] not the highest priority for anyone’s institutions right now because budgetary issues are so paramount. Fear and uncertainty is such a big factor.”

One-third of survey respondents whose institutions did not have VEPs in fall 2020 were interested in developing these programs in the future. The most commonly cited reason for considering implementing VEPs was the benefits students would receive from having an international or intercultural experience (n=6), followed by the lower cost to both the institution and students of VEPs versus EA programs (n=3). One respondent summarized that view, saying, “[VEPs are] low impact and low cost, but the reward is substantial.” These financial considerations may fluctuate depending on how the financial state of community colleges changes postpandemic.

New Virtual Models for International Education

In addition to pivoting toward new VEPs, community college administrators also diversified their IE portfolios by redesigning canceled EA programs as virtual modules. One popular transformation included subscribing to virtual content created by EA providers, such as 360-degree market tours or guided museum visits. An administrator was impressed by the benefits of this model for recruiting new faculty to lead EA programs in the future, saying, “Our hope was that it would make infusion of internationalization easier for faculty who haven’t done it yet. We’re excited to use our small focus group of passionate international faculty members to then expand this and get other faculty interested in physical study abroad as well.” On another campus, the virtual content was applied to various courses across disciplines. The faculty coordinator explained, “Why would we need to be restricted to just these two classes if we’re switching to virtual? We’re going to have this virtual study abroad component that in theory could be embedded into any course...so we decided to open it up to anybody teaching a summer [2021] course.”

Access to interdisciplinary virtual modules was a key factor in fostering faculty interest in virtual EA. An administrator explained that subscribing to a virtual library of international course content was akin to having a “product line...a proof of concept,” making faculty more comfortable incorporating virtual EA into their existing courses. Another educator used their previous relationship with an EA provider who had pivoted to virtual EA to create opportunities for community colleges statewide: “[We] were so excited...and established a good relationship with [the EA provider], and I told our [state community college IE consortium] about it. Guess what? [The consortium] negotiated a contract...with [the EA provider]. So now, everybody is going to get virtual study abroad.” Despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic, these community colleges have used interdisciplinary, scalable virtual IE libraries to provide faculty with the option to integrate virtual EA into existing courses.

The pandemic also impacted community college IE offerings outside the classroom. Cocurricular virtual content, such as international guest speakers or online presentations on other cultures, provided opportunities for practitioners to not only educate students but also increase campus administrators’ awareness of and interest in IE. Interviewees discussed using these virtual offerings to advance internationalization strategies. In one case, a faculty member attended an international conference, then worked with colleagues from the conference to create a “virtual world tour” for U.S. students. On another campus, this virtual international content became an opportunity to educate administrators as well. The interviewee explained, “All over campus we have people that had never left the U.S. They didn’t get this international thing...The virtual world tours...are certainly bringing internationalization at home at almost no cost.” On some campuses, cocurricular international content may become the first step toward VEP development.

Implications

The results of this study have important implications for community college administrators, faculty, and IE leaders:

- As more higher education leaders consider developing VEPs at their institutions, they may encounter the need to maximize their campuses' existing resources to broaden the reach of these programs. Recommendations include seeking out campus partners, such as faculty with international contacts, language faculty, and EA program leaders.
- It is important to cultivate varied international partnerships and leverage existing international connections, such as consortia and universities abroad that have previously hosted EA programs.
- In light of budgetary uncertainty, effectively scaling up VEPs may depend on implementing sustainable practices, such as securing internal and external grant funding, partnering on more than one course per partner institution, and creatively incentivizing faculty participation.
- During future disruptions of EA, faculty leaders and EA administrators may benefit from remaining flexible and thinking creatively about developing international course content. In an effort to maximize existing resources, faculty leaders and EA administrators could consider creating virtual EA components that can be integrated into a variety of different courses, regardless of discipline.
- In addition to exploring VEPs, campus leaders may consider adding curated virtual content to existing courses. Outside the classroom, leaders could facilitate exchanges between student organizations on campus and at partner institutions abroad and invite international experts to offer guest lectures to the entire campus community. Additionally, institutions may benefit from engaging interested staff members outside traditional faculty supporters, including academic advisers and the office of finance.

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