The Association of Theological Schools
The Commission on Accrediting

Communicating Well in Crisis: What We Learned from ATS School Website Responses to COVID

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Overview

To better understand how its member schools initially served their constituents during the COVID-19 pandemic and to be better-positioned for future crisis, The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) conducted a series of research studies in the 2020 Spring Semester. Included was an effort to analyze the COVID-related data on the websites of the 276 ATS member schools (2019-2020). This report discusses the findings that arose from website analysis.

Methodology

To have a broad understanding of the organizational movements within ATS member schools, this report pays special attention to the following aspects of schools:

- **Courses**, decision on learning modality for 2020 Spring, Summer, Fall
- **Commencement**, decision on
- **Public Events**, mention of
- **Residence**, decision on
- **Refunds**, mention of
- **Care Resources**, mention of
- **Financial Matters**, decisions on
- **Personnel Matters**, mention of
- **Board of Trustees**, mention of
- **Update Frequency**
- **Tone of Updates**

ATS staff and consultant collected and coded COVID-related information from school websites over a span of three weeks from April 20 to May 7 of 2020.

Before reviewing the findings, readers are reminded that a number of schools only published a scant amount of COVID-related information on their websites. Possible reasons include: electing to communicate with students and employees through e-mail or school understaffing caused by COVID disruptions. It could also be the case that some schools prioritized social media platforms over official websites. Consequently, a lack of mention on a school's website could, but not necessarily, mean that actions or decisions related to certain items were missing from the school.

Of the 276 ATS member schools, 12 did not have any COVID-related information on their official websites. This report, therefore, only discusses data from the 264 schools in which information was available.
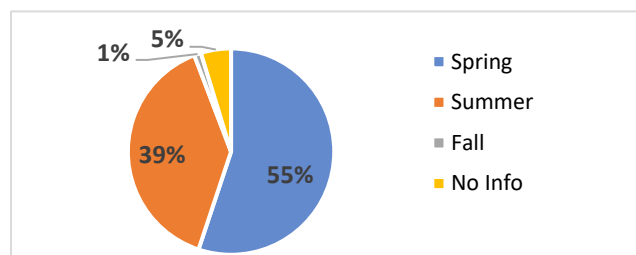
Findings

Courses

- **How far ahead was the school in announcing the learning modality for upcoming semesters or quarters in 2020?**

Of the 264 ATS member schools, 55% indicated that they had moved Spring courses online. The 39% coded as Summer either announced that they would move their summer classes online, or that they have cancelled their summer classes. The 1% coded as Fall consisted of three schools that announced their decisions to offer Fall classes online. They are Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (Massachusetts), Interdenominational Theological Center (Georgia), and McMaster Divinity College (Ontario, Canada). While the first two schools announced that they would offer all Fall classes online, McMaster decided on a hybrid format for Fall which will begin with online teaching followed by in-person classes if health situation permits. See Figure 1. Readers should keep in mind that schools with already fully online programs may not have seen the need for special website announcement about online course offerings in Summer or Fall.

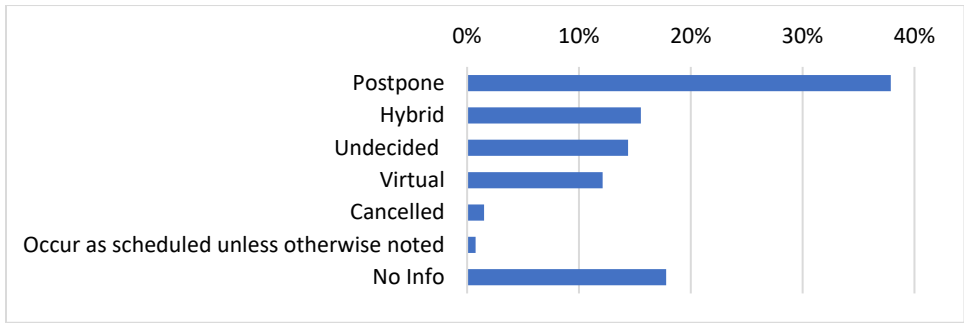Figure 1: Courses, decision on learning modality

Commencement

- **What decision did the school announce regarding 2020 commencement?**

Regarding 2020 Commencement, Figure 2 shows that 38% of schools decided to postpone the in-person celebration, whereas 16% opted for a hybrid format that included a virtual commencement and an in-person event at a future date. A further 12% decided on a virtual commencement, and 2% reported that they cancelled the event without specifying alternatives.
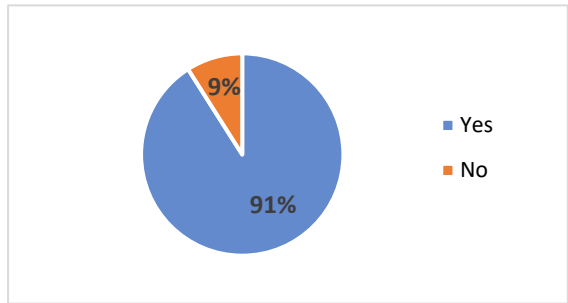
Figure 2: Commencement, decision on

Public Events

- **Did the school mention anything about public events (public lectures, chapel, sports, etc.), regardless of plans?**

Figure 3 shows that a significant number of schools (91%) mentioned that they cancelled or suspended public events (e.g., public lectures, conferences, sporting events, gala) on campus, or that they moved certain events online, with chapel being the most common case.
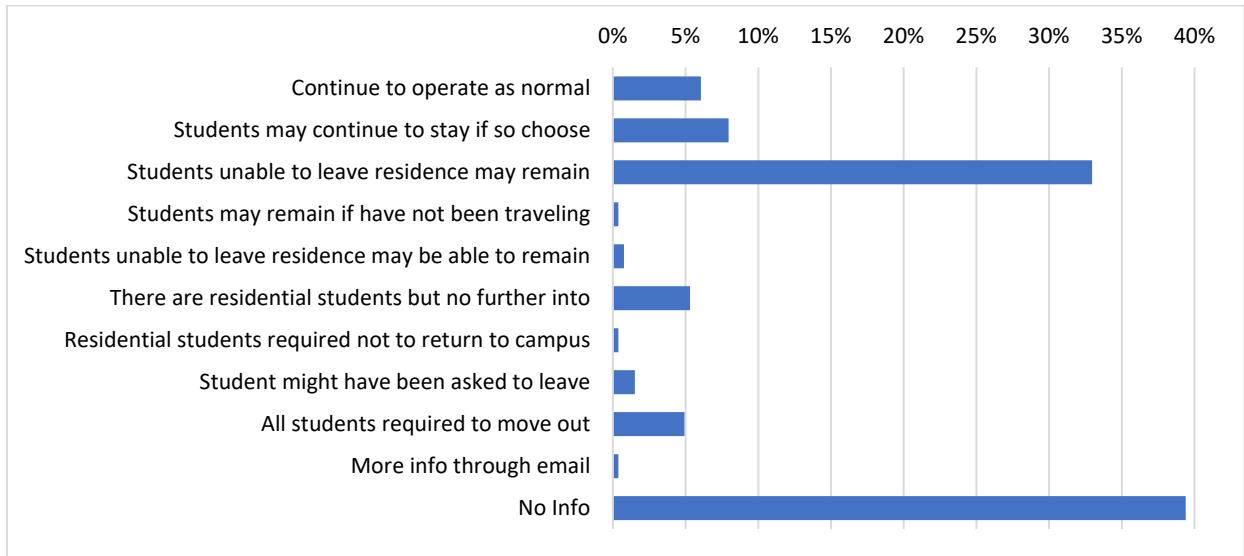
Figure 3: Public Events, mention of

Residence

- **What decision did the school announce regarding residence halls?**

Concerning housing matters, a third (33%) of the 264 member schools indicated that they would only accommodate students with extenuating circumstances (more below). Another 14% either announced that their residence halls were operating as normal (6%), or that students could continue to stay if they so choose (8%). Although worded differently, about 7% of schools seemed to require all students to move out from residence halls without any exception (e.g., "Residential students required not to return to campus"; "All students required to move out"). See Figure 4 for full list.

Figure 4: Residence, decision on

For most schools, the extenuating circumstances that permitted students to remain in residence halls generally included the following scenarios:
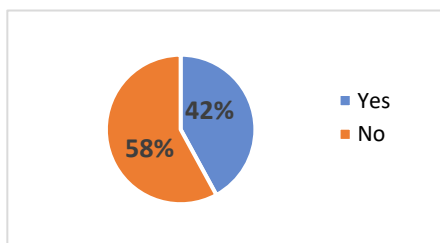
- students with significant travel difficulties or restrictions
- compromised health situations at home
- students with online access issues
- international students

Refunds

- **Did the school mention refunds (for meal plans, housing, events, etc.), regardless of decisions?**

Figure 5 shows that 42% of schools mentioned refunds on their website. The majority of these schools stated that they would issue refunds for meal plans, housing, or events. Less than a handful of these schools stated that they had not made their final decision on whether to issue a refund or not.
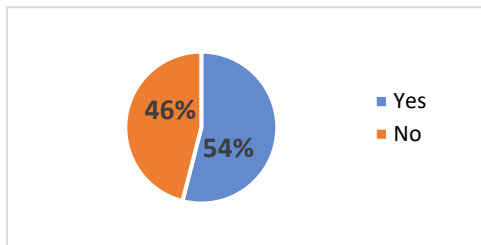
Figure 5: Refunds, mention of

Care Resources

- **Did the school point their students and employees to care resources (e.g., counseling services, pastoral care, spiritual direction)?**

Figure 6 shows that over half (54%) of ATS member schools listed the care resources available to students or employees on their COVID response page. The types of resources included primarily campus counseling services and pastoral care. A number of schools also pointed their constituents to off-campus counseling services.

Figure 6: Care Resources, mention of

Financial

- **What decisions did the school announce regarding finance-related issues (e.g., student workers' pay, emergency funds)?**

For the financial aspect of school announcements, we focused on identifying whether the schools' websites addressed the following items:

- Addressing institutional financial issues and/or challenges
- Employee payroll information
- Student employment and payment information
- Emergency funds for students

Of the 264 ATS member schools, 102 schools provided finance-related information. Figure 7 shows that 10% of the 264 schools addressed financial issues or challenges the institution is facing on their website, and 15% provided extensive employee payroll information.
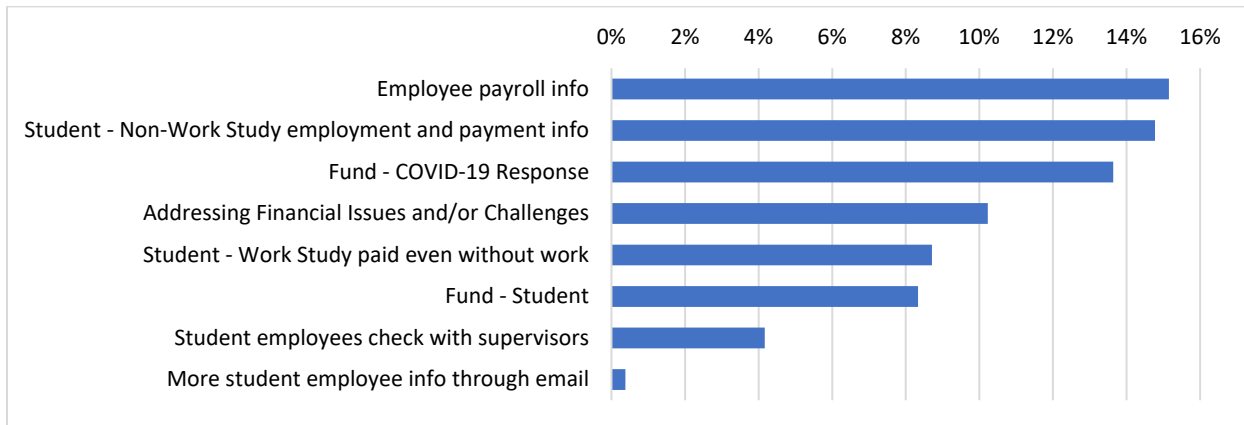
According to information found on school websites, 14% of schools set up a separate emergency fund specifically for students impacted by COVID, and another 8% pointed students to other assistance funds available. A number of schools had both types of funds in place. The coding process did not consider the CARES Act: Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund provided by the US government or the Canada Emergency Student Benefit provided by the Canadian government.

In terms of student employment and payment, 15% of the 264 schools discussed employment and payment information of non-Work Study students. Of these 15%, slightly more than half indicated that student employees would only be paid for actual hours worked, implying that student workers would not receive wages if circumstances did not permit them to provide

services, on-campus or remotely. In contrast, some schools stated that student employees would continue to get paid even if they were unable to work, but only until a certain date that fell somewhere between March and June of 2020. Another quarter decided that student employees would continue to get paid even if they were unable to work without specifying an end date.

Additionally, 9% of the 264 ATS member schools stated that Work Study students would continue to get paid regardless. A number of schools advised their student employees to look for other available jobs on campus if their original job(s) could not use their labor any longer due to COVID disruption.

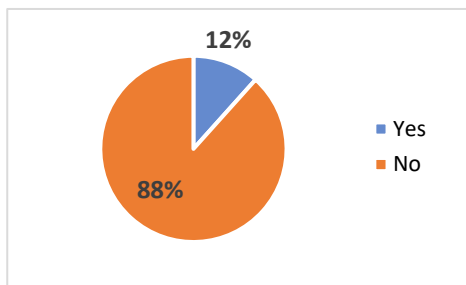Figure 7: Financial Matters, decisions on

Personnel

- **Did the school say anything about personnel matters (hiring freeze, furlough, etc.)?**

Figure 8 shows that 12% of schools discussed personnel matters on their COVID response page. A number of schools announced hiring freezes in response to the coronavirus, and some others revealed that they had had to or would be laying off or furloughing several of their employees. One school publicly disclosed the number of employees impacted by stating that roughly 25% of their staff would be furloughed, beginning May 2 through July 31, 2020.

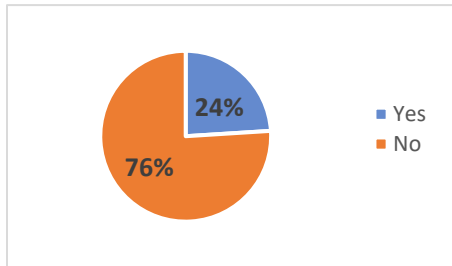Figure 8: Personnel Matters, mention of

Board of Trustees

- **Did the school mention the Board of Trustees?**

We see in Figure 9 that nearly a quarter of schools (24%) mentioned the Board of Trustees on their COVID response page. In most of these cases, the Board of Trustees were mentioned to signal their involvement as decision makers or encouragers during these unprecedented times.
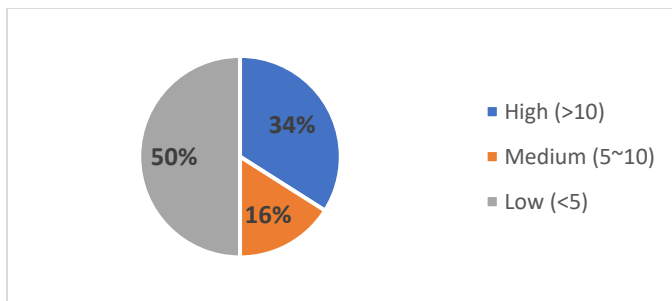
Figure 9: Board of Trustees, mention of

Update Frequency

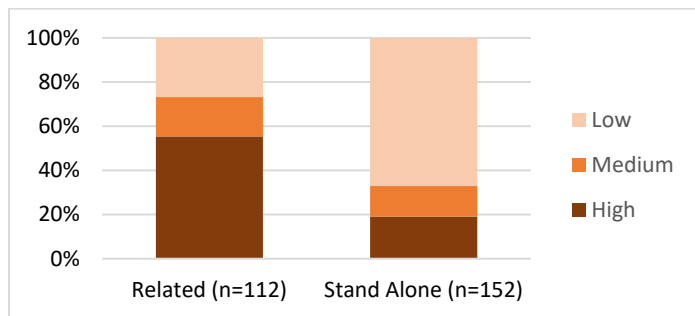- **How often did the school update their COVID response webpage?**

While some schools started posting COVID-related information on their website as early as January 2020, others only started doing so in February or March. To determine update frequency, COVID-related updates (with an identifiable issuance date) were counted from their first post until the code date (April 20 to May 7 of 2020). Schools that issued more than 10 updates from their first post until the code date was marked as high; 5-10, medium; less than 5, low. Figure 10 shows that of the 264 member schools, a third (34%) updated their COVID-response webpage at high frequency; 16%, medium; and 50%, low.

Figure 10: Update Frequency

Slicing by school type, Figure 11 shows that of all Related schools (42%), 55% updated websites at high frequency; 18%, medium; 27%, low. Of all Stand Alone schools (58%), 19%, high; 14%, medium; 67%, low. The higher update frequency of Related schools was presumably a function of the need to communicate with a larger constituency more effectively or of the greater number of resources that these schools had.

Figure 11: Update Frequency, by School Type

Tone

- **What was the tone of the school's COVID response page?**

In addition to analyzing the websites' content, efforts were also made to identify the tone of the school's COVID-response page. The tone of 78% of the 264 member schools were coded as **supportive/pastoral** or **informational**, and often both. To highlight uniqueness, item options other than supportive/pastoral and informational were only applied when a school's website displayed particular strengths or intensity in certain areas.

The 22 schools (8%) that were coded as **resource-rich** provided resources not only for the immediate needs of their own constituents, but also for the wider community such as the church, the community, and family and children. These schools included, for example, Brite Divinity School (Texas), Calvin Theological Seminary (Michigan), Regent University School of Divinity (Virginia), and St. Mary's Seminary and University (Maryland).

The 12 schools (5%) that were coded as **ministry-minded** displayed a notably strong emphasis of being the resource center for the wider churches. Types of resources offered included websites, workshops, and webinars, etc. These schools included, for example, Bethany Theological Seminary (Indiana), Saint John's Seminary (Massachusetts), and United Theological Seminary (Ohio).

What is worth highlighting is the ministry material that the Baptist Seminary of Kentucky provided. In addition to a six-session online workshop on Pastoral Care & COVID-19 to assist congregations and their leaders, the Flourish Center at Baptist Seminary of Kentucky (BSK) also designed two sets of Congregational Research surveys (Pastoral Care Survey and Worship Survey) to explore ways in which churches responded to COVID and posted all these resources on their website. Main questions from BSK's surveys included how the respondent's congregation is responding to social-distancing measures, where the respondent is getting information about COVID, and what worship, devotional, teaching, pastoral, or theological resources the respondent's congregation is creating and distributing during this pandemic.[1]

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[1] The surveys were still available on August 6, 2020. See Baptist Seminary of Kentucky's Flourish Center, https://flourish.bsk.edu/.

While a number of schools worked with their communities in different ways, schools were only coded as **serving the wider community** when their websites showed extensive engagements within the communities. The four schools coded as such were Emmanuel Christian Seminary at Milligan (Tennessee), Lutheran Theological Seminary (Saskatchewan), Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary (Michigan), and Yale University Divinity School (Connecticut). The community services included, for instance, producing face shields for healthcare workers, donating supplies and delivering food to individuals in need within the community, and producing podcast programs that discuss mental health issues or self-care tips.

In an age of social media, it is not uncommon for presidents or deans to communicate with students through pre-recorded videos on YouTube channels or other platforms. The method seemed appropriate with the safer-at-home order in effect in most places in the US and Canada in the 2020 Spring Semester. Only one school opted to include **extensive use of pre-recorded videos** on its website. The frequency that the school utilized videos for communications stood out, in that it uploaded twenty-three videos in six weeks, in addition to four brief written announcements on the same COVID-response webpage. The videos contained pastoral devotions, encouragements, and announcements. While the communication style might have catered to the needs of the school's constituents, videos without written highlights or transcripts might easily become a problem when people need to check back for certain information at a later point.

It is unfortunate that the COVID pandemic has accentuated the existing financial crisis that a few schools had been facing. Two schools revealed intense financial challenges, which were coded as **grim** in tone. It is suspected that the pandemic might have also thrust other schools into deeper financial crisis, although more information is needed to verify this.

The three schools coded as **forward-thinking** are Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (California), Duke University Divinity School (North Carolina), and Meadville Lombard Theological School (Illinois). Of all schools, Pacific Lutheran seems to be the school that provided the most extensive logistical planning at an early stage. In addition to a detailed "COVID-19 Preparedness Guidelines" document (22 pages) released as early as March 9, 2020 (version 4.1), they also provided a 3-page "Social Distancing Plan" dated March 14. A further 4-page "Coronavirus Level 3 Plan – Student, Staff, or Faculty Exposed to Virus" (dated March 23) discussed five possible scenarios where, for instance, employees or students appeared to have COVID symptoms or were tested positive, and the corresponding actions needed.

Duke revealed in mid-April that the school created two strategy teams to plan post-crisis agenda, as they considered moving from emergency management to recovery while navigating uncertainties.

In contrast to the proactive planning of Pacific Lutheran and Duke, Meadville Lombard's forward thinking was manifested through their confidence in providing theological education in these unprecedented times. In a letter to prospective students, the president stated that their low-residency curricular model had prepared their students to be adaptive in the face of challenges,

intentional in their connections, and committed to living out their vocation in the larger world.[2] The school seemed to suggest that they were relatively well-positioned for the crisis, and that they were prepared to produce distinctive thinkers in the meantime.

Discussion

Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. In unprecedented ways, schools were forced to make a series of significant decisions within a matter of days if not hours after the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, and after the US and Canadian governments adopted national measures in response to COVID-19.

Existing Resources

Since all schools had to navigate uncharted territory on their own, schools' COVID response pages showed that existing resources became ready assets during a time of crisis. Adequate care resources (e.g., counseling services), in particular, is a good indicator of whether they had already been set in place pre-COVID. A case in point is Evangelical Theological Seminary that pointed their constituents to available mental health resources.[3] Another example is the aforementioned Baptist Seminary of Kentucky' Flourish Center.

Suggestions

As the COVID-19 situation developed, schools that relied on websites for communication updated their relevant webpages diligently. A significant number of schools created an FAQ section to address common questions. The ever-increasing data, while informative, may cause confusion when information is not well-dated. It was noted that several letters or announcements on some websites were not dated and thus lacked appropriate contexts. A few conflicting statements within a given school's website were also observed.

Knowing the importance of a well-dated system, some schools included a date at the end of an FAQ answer, or indicated the question number most recently updated at the top of the FAQ section. A few schools went so far as to provide not only the date but also the exact time when posting a new update. Such meticulous practice is to be lauded, as there can be more than one update in the same day in a time of crisis. Issuance dates also give readers helpful clues in identifying the most updated answers should they see conflicting statements. A better dating system is not only immediately useful for readers, but will also be conducive for archiving purposes and tracing data months or years later. A few little numbers can indeed go a long way.

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[2] Elías Ortega, "A letter from President Ortega to prospective students: 'Be epochal thinkers in moments of crisis,'" April 7, 2020, https://www.meadville.edu/files/resources/eo-letter-to-prospective-students-04072020.pdf (accessed May 16, 2020).

[3] Evangelical Seminary, "Tips for Stress Reduction & Well-Balanced Living," Evangelical Seminary, https://evangelical.edu/resources/stress/ (accessed April 30, 2020).

Future Research

Several questions are worth further investigation. One of them concerns the tuition remission that some schools offered for 2020 Summer or Fall classes. Another question centers round ways in which COVID informed the schools' decisions to announce more online courses. One of the schools that had already made changes—possibly not unrelated to COVID—is Saint Paul School of Theology (Kansas), which announced in April 2020 that that they had expanded their online course offerings for all of their master's degree programs.[4]

Conclusion

Through analysis of the COVID-related data on ATS member schools' websites, this report shows the patterns of administrative decisions made by schools on, for instance, learning modality for 2020 semesters, commencement, residence, and finances. It also notes whether a school mentioned care resources on their websites and the tone of communication. While common themes were observed throughout, it was evident that schools took a variety of steps to meet the specific needs of the school's constituents and the wider community.

Even though a school's clear website communication may not have helped its constituents take the edge off the stress and anxiety induced by a crisis, it played a key role in providing people with adequate tools as they navigated their own unique landscape. Supportive language, in addition, may have furnished people with just the dose of comfort and strength they needed to walk on.

It is not an overstatement that every inch of our society has been deeply impacted by COVID-19. Having to send students home while school is in session is a huge disruption. Having to move all courses and events online overnight is no less disruptive. Having to navigate remote work, the decline of enrollment, refunding, and even to furlough or lay off employees on top of all changes will have only brought additional strain to schools, especially those that had already been financially stretched.

Lord, have mercy.

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[4] Saint Paul School of Theology, "Saint Paul Increases Online Theology Courses for Master's Students," Saint Paul School of Theology, April 2, 2020, https://www.spst.edu/saint-paul-increases-online-theology-courses-for-masters-students/ (accessed May 15, 2020).