

Higher Education Telework and Flexible Work Survey

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Introduction

Background

The “Higher Education Telework and Flexible Work Survey” was designed to address a general lack of understanding about how higher education institutions are approaching telework and flexible work as a result of COVID-19. The survey was created using Microsoft Forms by Ben Auger, program manager for education and outreach in George Mason University’s Office of Sustainability, with input from Office of Sustainability colleagues and members of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. At the time of the survey’s creation, Ben was not aware of any other survey that specifically sought feedback from institutions of higher education about their response to COVID-19 as it pertains to telework and flexible work.

Distribution

The survey was publicly issued on June 1, 2021, through various sustainability-focused listserv groups, including “VASHE” (a group of Virginia-based Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education members) and the “Sustainability Communicators” (a group of higher education professionals whose sustainability responsibilities involve communications work). Members of the listservs were encouraged to share the survey with their networks in higher education. In addition, the survey was posted on the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) Discussion Board and on the AASHE Bulletin in the “opportunities” section.

Reminders were sent or posted on June 4, 9, and 11. The Microsoft Forms survey automatically closed and stopped accepting responses on June 11 at 11:59 p.m. EDT.

Responses

63 unique responses were received with the <http://go.gmu.edu/TeleworkFeedback> link receiving 373 clicks, representing a conversion rate of 16.8%.

- **93%** of responses (59) were from four-year institutions, **5%** of responses (3) from two-year institutions, and **2%** of responses (1) from an institution offering two-year and four-year degrees.
- **87%** of respondents were directly employed in a position with a title that included “sustainability” or were actively engaged in institution-wide sustainability efforts, such as serving on a sustainability committee, or similar (based on their response to the question “What is your current role at your institution?”).
 - o The remaining **13%** of respondents were employed in positions that did not explicitly mention “sustainability” in the position title and were not actively engaged in institution-wide sustainability efforts (based on their question: “What is your current role at your institution?”) and included: instructor (2 respondents), vp and chief of staff (1 respondent), environmental health and safety (1 respondent), transportation and mobility planning (2 respondents), project management (1 respondent), and someone who chose not to disclose (1 respondent).
- Most respondents (**92%**) were from the United States. The remaining responses (**8%**) were from Canada (4 responses) and the United Arab Emirates (1 response).

Analysis

Survey responses were manually analyzed by Ben Auger using Microsoft Forms and a mass export of data to Microsoft Excel. The results of this analysis are summarized in this document.

Limitations

The survey was narrowly focused on collecting data from sustainability professionals in higher education, which may bias the results, especially as sustainability professionals will view flexible work differently than others, given their professional responsibilities. Additionally, it is not likely sustainability professionals will be significantly involved in operational decision-making about flexible work at their institution, though it could be reasonably presumed they would possess the same level of knowledge as any other employee at their institution.

The survey was distributed through popular channels where sustainability professionals frequently network and engage with each other, but this does not make it possible to reach most sustainability professionals in higher education. For example, although there are more than 1,000 members of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), there are more than 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States alone. Thus, the survey's sample size of 63 represents a small fraction of the colleges and universities in the United States, let alone the world. Plus, the author's primary language is English, and they're located at an institution of higher education in the United States, so their familiarity with sustainability in higher education is biased towards sustainability in the United States, which certainly affected the sample and the results. In addition, the survey was only distributed for a brief period during a continuously unfolding global pandemic, which might have impacted participation.

Although this document contains carefully analyzed results and findings, it should be noted that they were not reviewed in a formal peer review process.

Key Takeaways:

- **94%** of employees at responding institutions transitioned to telework during COVID-19 for the spring 2020 semester, summer 2020 semester, fall 2020 semester, spring 2021 semester, and/or summer 2021 semester.
- As of June 11, 2021, the current work environment for employees at responding institutions is mixed:
 - **52%** indicated that everyone who can work from home is
 - **24%** indicated that there is an option to work onsite, but most prefer to telework
 - **14%** indicated that some employees are onsite and some are teleworking - there doesn't seem to be a preference for one or the other
 - **6%** indicated that everyone is working onsite, minus a few exceptions
 - **3%** indicated that there is an option to telework, but most prefer to work onsite
- As of June 11, 2021, telework for fall 2021 is all over the place:
 - **43%** noted that guidance for telework in fall 2021 is either unknown or not yet been announced
 - **27%** indicated that telework depends upon their manager or supervisor's decisions
 - **25%** indicated that telework depends upon their department's decisions
 - **13%** selected "other" and indicated that all employees are required to work on-site, with most returning to work on-site in July or August, or are already on-site

- *Note: the above-noted percentages may total more than 100% as individual respondents could select multiple categories. The percentages reflect the percentage of 63 respondents to the survey that selected each category*
- Telework policies prior to spring 2020:
 - **41%** indicated telework policies have not been the same for faculty and staff as compared to **16%** who indicated that they were the same
 - But there's also a lot of confusion about the application of telework policies to faculty and staff as **38%** indicated they were unsure
 - **5%** of respondents selected "other," two of whom shared that there was not guidance in the past and the other shared that the policies were the same, but in practice they were not
- Telework policies announced or expected for fall 2021:
 - **17%** indicated telework is the same for faculty and staff for Fall 2021, but **19%** indicated that telework isn't the same for faculty and staff
 - **51%** indicated they're unsure and another **13%** indicated "other" and shared that policies were being evaluated or drafted, that telework wasn't the same for faculty and staff, and that telework depended upon supervisors
- As of June 11, 2021, employees are returning to onsite work at different times:
 - **1.5%** (1 respondent) indicated that employees will return in June 2021
 - **8%** indicated that employees are already working on site
 - **9.5%** selected "other" and shared various responses, including that they would be returning sometime in July/August (1 respondent), returning for the remainder of the calendar year (1 respondent), that return would depend on vaccination rates (2 respondents), and that announcements were expected in September along with formalized work agreements
 - **11%** indicated that employees will return in September 2021
 - **14%** indicated that employees will return in July 2021
 - **24%** indicated that a decision has not yet been made, announced, or known yet
 - **32%** indicated that employees will return to work in August 2021

Telework before and during COVID-19*:

**For the purposes of this survey, the duration of COVID-19 is referenced as occurring from October 2019 through June 2021. So, any reference to "before" COVID-19 means before October 2019. Any reference to "during" COVID-19 means between October 2019 and June 2021 since survey responses were collected from June 1, 2021, through June 11, 2021.*

COVID-19's Impact

62% indicated that COVID-19 directly influenced the changes to their institution's work environment and flexible work policies, with only **10%** stating that COVID-19 did not have an influence. **19%** were unsure about COVID-19's influence on institutional decision making and **10%** shared that new policies were being discussed, but decisions were not final.

Respondents' Key perceptions about COVID-19's influence

It is important to note that respondents did not indicate any explicit apprehensions or reservations about teleworking themselves. However, they did indicate that, especially before COVID-19, many managers, supervisors, and senior leaders were previously hesitant or actively resistant to telework.

- Employees demonstrated their productivity and showed work responsibilities could be completed while teleworking, which changed cultural perceptions about telework and made managers, supervisors, and leaders willing to accept telework during COVID-19 and for many, to begin drafting new telework policies or updating old ones.
- The cultural change spurred by COVID-19's transition to telework led to the allocation of institutional resources through the formation of committees, task forces, or other working groups to explore the updating of old telework policies or the creation of new telework policies where they didn't previously exist.
- The shift to telework demonstrated numerous benefits, which varied across institutions, and included enhancing employee well-being, reducing commute times, decreasing environmental impacts, reducing institutional costs due to the elimination of leases and office space, and enhancing employees' productivity. This, in turn, increased the willingness of institutions to consider future implementation of telework at their institutions.
- For others, without COVID-19, a change to telework would not have been possible given institutional priorities such as a focus on a highly residential campus experience.

Flexible Work Policies before COVID-19

Before COVID-19 began in October 2019, **60%** of institutions had a formal policy or policies for flexible work and **40%** did not, according to responses to an explicit question asking if the respondent's institution had a policy for flexible work, which might include telework.

- For many, flexible work policies were previously determined by supervisors, managers or department heads. In addition, many others followed state human resources guidelines (for state institutions). For some, flexible work policies were ad hoc or informally allowed whereas for others, although there might have been a formal policy in place, implementation varied.

27% of respondents indicated their institution was allowing telework for employees in response to a question asking what types of flexible work options employees were permitted to engage in *before* COVID-19.

Flexible Work Policies during COVID-19

During COVID-19, from October 2019 through June 2021, **46%** of institutions created a policy or policies for flexible work, which might include telework, and **54%** did not, according to responses to an explicit question asking if the respondent's institution had a policy for flexible work, which might include telework.

- For most, the new policies were formally created and issued by human resources.

83% of respondents indicated their institution was allowing telework for employees in response to a question asking what types of flexible work options employees are currently permitted to engage in *during* COVID-19.

Flexible Work Policies for Fall 2021

As of June 11, 2021, for fall 2021, **43%** of institutions were planning to create, update, and/or implement a policy or policies for flexible work, which might include telework, and **16%** were not. **41%** indicated that they were not sure or their institution's plans are not known.

- For **49%** of institutions, feedback about flexible work for faculty and staff was sought from employees. However, **38%** of institutions cited that feedback was not sought and there

are no plans to collect feedback. **13%** of institutions indicated that feedback has not yet been collected, but there are plans to do so.

- Feedback was most often collected in the form of a survey or multiple surveys; some of the surveys were issued by human resources, by staff or faculty senate, by units or departments, or centrally from the state system (for public institutions). In addition, feedback was frequently done one on one between supervisor and supervisee or via online methods such as town halls or webinars. For others, a draft flexible work policy was shared with campus and feedback was requested or employees were encouraged to join newly formed committees or task forces.
- Only **28%** of institutions have yet communicated a decision about flexible work, including telework, for Fall 2021. **56%** of institutions indicated this decision is expected and **15%** indicated that a decision had not been made.
 - Those involved in the decision-making process frequently included human resources, the president, the provost department heads, faculty and staff senate, and other senior leaders. Others involved often included environmental health and safety, facilities, finance, deans, decisions aligned with state policies and requirements for public institutions.
- Decisions were most frequently communicated by the President's Office (**35%**), followed by the Provost's Office (**31%**), the Department of Human Resources (**27%**), and others shared that the Chancellor's Office or Strategic Communications communicated the decision (**8%**).
- When considering factors that informed institutions' decision about flexible work and telework, improving health and well-being for employees was the most frequently cited reason for decisions about telework (**10%**), followed by decreasing costs of operation (**8%**), addressing high costs of living in the area or region (**6%**), employees retaining more of their paychecks (**6%**), improving employee recruitment and retention (**6%**), increasing flexibility (**6%**), reducing commute times (**6%**), and reducing scope 3 emissions (**6%**). Some (**6%**) did not know the reasons for their institution's decision about flexible work.
 - Some shared that their institution is required to follow state guidelines (public institutions), others noted that there were tax law implications, costs of furnishings and retrofits to accommodate workplace changes, and ergonomics.
 - Other factors were only cited once by respondents, including making boundaries between work and life more clear, making boundaries between work and life more ambiguous, concerns about efficient communication, difficulties in supervision of management of employees, fewer workplace interruptions, harms to workplace culture, improving inclusivity and diversity in recruitment and hiring, lack of trust in employees, lack of workplace culture, maintaining a workplace culture, more difficult to collaborate, productivity and performance decreases, too big of a change to make, too dependent on technology.

Conclusion

Based upon the survey results, COVID-19 drove the majority (**94%**) of responding institutions of higher education to transition to telework as an operational necessity. This likely caused numerous challenges, especially as **40%** of responding institutions indicated that their institution did not have a policy or policies for flexible work, which might include telework, *before* COVID-19. As a result of this transition to telework, **46%** of responding institutions created a policy or policies for flexible work, which might include telework, *during* COVID-19.

Interestingly, **27%** of respondents indicated their institution was allowing telework as a flexible work option for employees *before* COVID-19 in response to a question asking respondents to select all flexible work options allowed at their institution, of which telework was one of the options. However, when asked explicitly if their institution had a formal policy or policies for flexible work, which might include telework, *before* COVID-19, **60%** of respondents indicated their institution did have a policy or policies for flexible work. This may indicate many flexible work options other than telework were permitted at many institutions *before* COVID-19. In addition, it may demonstrate that telework, *before* COVID-19, was not as frequently utilized as a flexible work option.

When a similar question about permissible flexible work options *during* COVID-19 was asked, **83%** of respondents indicated their institution was allowing telework for employees in response to a question asking respondents to select all flexible work options allowed at their institution, of which telework was one of the options. However, **46%** of respondents, when asked explicitly if their institution created a policy for flexible work *during* COVID-19 which might include telework, indicated that their institution created a policy. This may indicate that telework is permissible, as a flexible work option, *during* COVID-19, but there will not be an institutionalization (through policy) of telework as a long-term flexible work option. In addition, it demonstrates a **56%** increase in telework as a flexible work option in practice *during* COVID-19 as compared to *before* COVID-19.

As noted earlier, COVID-19 drove **94%** of responding institutions to transition to telework as an operational necessity. **62%** of respondents indicated that the impacts of COVID-19 directly influenced the changes to their institution's flexible work policy or policies, including telework. Based upon respondents' perceptions, employees successfully demonstrated an ability to complete their job responsibilities while teleworking. In turn, this changed institutional culture and changed perceptions about telework, especially among key decision-makers like supervisors, managers, and senior leaders. As a result, **46%** of respondents indicated new telework and flexible work policies were created at their institutions *during* COVID-19 where they did not previously exist. This finding is strengthened by the finding that **43%** of responding institutions were planning to create, update, and/or implement a policy or policies for flexible work, which might include telework, for fall 2021, although **16%** were not (**41%** of respondents indicated they weren't sure).

At the time of the survey, the work environment for employees varied, although **52%** of responding institutions indicated everyone who can work from home is. There is also significant variance in institutional plans for a return to work, with **32%** planning to return to onsite work in August 2021. It is concerning that **24%** of respondents indicated a decision about a return to onsite work had not yet been made, announced, or known for fall 2021. This finding, when coupled with the finding that only **28%** of institutions had communicated a decision about flexible work and telework for fall 2021, demonstrates that the future of work for many employees is unknown.

To reach decisions about fall 2021, feedback was collected from employees at a majority of responding institutions, but **38%** of respondents indicated feedback was not collected and there were not plans to do so. This is especially concerning given that survey results indicated respondents viewed telework and flexible work favorably, and indicated numerous benefits to telework, which varied across institutions. Also concerning, are the findings that telework was not implemented the same for faculty and staff *before* COVID-19, according to **41%** of respondents, nor is it being implemented the same *during* COVID-19, according to **19%** of respondents.

It is clear from this survey that additional research about telework and flexible work in higher education is needed. This is especially true given the immense variance in the operation of institutions of higher education and the limitations of this survey.

Telework Resources from Responding Institutions

Institution	Resource
American University	https://www.american.edu/hr/covid-19/telework-guide.cfm
Brandeis University	https://www.brandeis.edu/human-resources/covid-19/pdfs/scaling-up-guide.pdf
Brandeis University	https://www.brandeis.edu/covid-19/faculty-staff/index.html
Cleveland State University (requires Microsoft login from the institution)	https://mycsu.csuohio.edu/offices/hrd/Policies_Procedures/Telework%20Protocols.pdf
Colgate University	https://www.colgate.edu/colgate-together/summer-2021-campus-guidelines
Concordia University	https://cupeu.org/collective-agreement/
Emerson College	https://hr.emerson.edu/hc/en-us/articles/1500007898622
Georgia Southern University	https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1088&context=humanres#:~:text=An%20employee's%20participation%20in%20Georgia,employee%20and%20his%20supervisor
Haverford College	https://www.haverford.edu/human-resources-and-budget/covid-19-working-haverford
Kent State University	https://www.kent.edu/hr/wellness/teleworking-during-covid-19
Kent State University	https://www-s3-live.kent.edu/s3fs-root/s3fs-public/file/FWA%20Guidelines_Feb%202020_Web_0.pdf
McGill University	https://www.mcgill.ca/hr/employee-relations/policies-procedures/hours-work
Northern Virginia Community College	https://www.nvcc.edu/policies/_files/402-Telework.pdf
Penn State University	https://sites.psu.edu/remotework/
Penn State University	https://policy.psu.edu/policies/hrq02
Penn State University	https://policy.psu.edu/policies/hrq02
Penn State University	https://sites.psu.edu/remotework/
Penn State University	https://virusinfo.psu.edu/faculty-staff/
Princeton University	https://hr.princeton.edu/policies/flexible-work-schedules
Princeton University	https://hr.princeton.edu/news/2021/provost-deborah-prentice-executive-vice-president-treby-williams-message-regarding
Princeton University	https://hr.princeton.edu/news/2021/vice-president-human-resources-message-regarding-summer-hours-holidays
Princeton University	https://hr.princeton.edu/news/2019/revised-flexible-work-arrangements-policy-new-remote-work-arrangements-policy-posted
Seattle Colleges	https://www.seattlecolleges.edu/about/policies-and-procedures/pro447?hasboth=1&docID=447&companionId=pol
Stanford University	https://adminguide.stanford.edu/chapter-2/subchapter-1/policy-2-1-20
The University of Vermont	https://www.uvm.edu/hrs/flexible-working-arrangements

The University of Vermont	https://www.uvm.edu/sites/default/files/UVM-Policies/policies/telecommuting.pdf
University of California (system)	https://ucnet.universityofcalifornia.edu/working-at-uc/work-life-wellness/flexible-work-and-telecommuting.html
University of California, Davis	https://campusready.ucdavis.edu/fall2021/workplace-reimagined
University of California, Davis	https://ucdavis.app.box.com/s/cpvkbg8eku2j40snad9d2xh8epsqw16
University of California, Davis	https://hr.ucdavis.edu/departments/worklife-wellness/workplace-flex/flex-programs
University of California, Los Angeles	https://ucla.app.box.com/s/4ojnq37jq87d8ggard778wtpd8qh8xg4
University of California, Los Angeles	https://www.adminvc.ucla.edu/telecommuting-guide
University of Dayton (requires login from the institution)	https://udayton.edu/policies/internal/hr/telecommuting-policypage.php
University of Illinois, Chicago	https://hr.uic.edu/telecommuting-policy/
University of Maryland, Baltimore County	https://covid19.umbc.edu/employees/business-continuity/
University of Maryland, Baltimore County	https://hr.umbc.edu/work-life-balance/work/other-flexible-work-arrangements/
University of Maryland, Baltimore County	https://covid19.umbc.edu/return-to-campus-fall-2021/
University of North Carolina	https://hr.unc.edu/covid-19/concerns/
University of North Carolina, Charlotte	https://legal.uncc.edu/policies/up-101.22
University of Pennsylvania	https://coronavirus.upenn.edu/announcements
University of Pennsylvania	https://www.hr.upenn.edu/PennHR/wellness-worklife/flexible-work-options
University of Pittsburgh	https://www.coronavirus.pitt.edu/faculty-staff-workplace/remote-work-resources
University of Pittsburgh	https://www.hr.pitt.edu/news/policy-updates-response-covid-19-sick-leave-and-remote-work-arrangements
University of Pittsburgh	https://www.hr.pitt.edu/news/covid-19-pandemic-supervisors-guide-managing-remote-workers
University of Pittsburgh	https://cfo.pitt.edu/policies/documents/policy07-04-03.pdf
University of Pittsburgh	https://www.svcoperations.pitt.edu/news/update-planning-staff-return-campuses
University of Washington	https://hr.uw.edu/returntowork/
University of Washington	https://hr.uw.edu/returntowork/flexible-work-arrangements/effectively-managing-flexible-work-arrangements/

University of Washington	https://hr.uw.edu/returntowork/telework-policies-and-agreements/telework-policy/
University of Washington	https://hr.uw.edu/returntowork/telework-policies-and-agreements/
Wesleyan University	https://www.wesleyan.edu/hr/employee-resources/alternate-work-arrangement.html
Wesleyan University	https://www.wesleyan.edu/healthservices/coronavirus/faq/index.html
Wesleyan University	https://webapps.wesleyan.edu/portal/file_link/A8FE00E88D4B22F1E053471485814E41
Wesleyan University	https://www.wesleyan.edu/hr/employee-resources/severe-weather.html
West Chester University	https://www.wcupa.edu/healthNotices/employeeCOVIDInfo.aspx
West Chester University (requires SharePoint login from the institution)	https://wcupa.sharepoint.com/sites/af/HR/SitePages/Policies.aspx

Additional Resources

Compiled popular writing, surveys and analysis, and news and case studies about telework, primarily from April to July, 2021, can be found [here](#). This document will not be updated.

The Microsoft Forms template for the survey can be accessed and duplicated at [this link](#). This template will not be updated.

“Cleaned” survey data with participants' names, email addresses, position titles, and other potentially personally identifying information removed can be found [here](#) (you will need to choose how you would like to view the data using the “Open With” selector). This data will not be updated.

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Contact Information

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