

**Tenth Annual National Conference
on Higher Education in Prison**

2021 Exit Report

March 1-5, 2021
Virtual



ALLIANCE
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON

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Introductory Note

Thank you and welcome

Thank you for your interest in the 2021 National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (the 10th National Conference). This report details the higher education in prison community's experiences with its first-ever "virtual" conference, featuring daily presentations hosted online via Zoom March 1-5, 2021, and under the theme "Amplifying Access."¹ The 2021 conference occurred online in the context of the ongoing global pandemic, which prompted the cancellation of plans for a 2020 conference originally scheduled to take place in Denver, Colorado.² As the COVID-19 crisis continued into early 2021, the Alliance Team and its original 2020 conference planning committee made the difficult decision to hold the conference online instead. This report is offered with the hope that future NCHEP conferences, be they in person, virtual or "hybrid," will continue to inspire the expansion of equity, excellence, and access within the nation's higher education in prison programs.

What is the annual NCHEP Exit Report? Who is it for?

Since first hosting the annual conference in 2017, the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison has published an Exit Report as part of its reporting in the days and weeks following the annual National Conference on Higher Education in Prison.³ The annual Exit Report presents an opportunity for both reflecting on the state of the field of higher education in prison, and for making observations about where it might be heading. The Alliance imagines several kinds of readers when it produces the Exit Report each year:

- **The NCHEP Planning Committee** directly involved in the hosting of the NCHEP, and for whom the report operates as an official debrief on the conference experience. The Exit Report should also offer the Planning Committee something of a retrospective on the planning steps that worked and did not work.
- **Future NCHEP planning committees**, who should read the report looking for lessons on how to improve the conference, be it online, in-person, or "hybrid" in the future.
- **The Alliance's Team and Advisory Board**, as the National Conference ranks among the most important events the Alliance helps convene each year for the field.

¹ The 2020 NCHEP Planning Committee crafted the conference theme back in early 2020, but when the Denver conference scheduled for that fall was cancelled, it became the theme for the March "virtual" conference instead.

² The World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, barely two months into the planning process for the cancelled 2020 Denver National Conference on Higher Education in Prison.

³ The 2017 Exit Report came together as a trial run for the Alliance in its earliest days as an organization and as a first-time NCHEP host. The 2017 report circulated initially only among the Alliance Team and Advisory Board. Not initially offered for public feedback, it is posted now to the Alliance's website: higheredinprison.org. The 2018 and 2019 reports were both made immediately available to the public and can also be accessed on the Alliance's website at any time below the "Conference" tab.

- **Participants in the NCHPEP**, including especially those who presented, spoke, or attended as audience members.
- **Anyone involved with the planning or conference experience** across the broader higher education in prison community.
- **Anyone in the community** who wants to learn more about the NCHPEP and/or the field of higher education in prison.

The Alliance’s goal with the annual Exit Report has remained the same throughout these past several years: to make the annual report accessible, informative, and practical *for all* in the field of higher education in prison.

How are the Exit Reports put together?

From 2017-2019, the Alliance’s Director, Mary Gould, collaborated with co-author and Alliance Information Manager Jesse Gant to produce the first several NCHPEP exit reports. In 2020, the Alliance’s Team grew, and several Team members—Steph Iasiello, Ved Price, and Lauren Reed—contributed with information and support that aided the production of this report in a number of ways. In the meantime, Jesse Gant remained active as one of the report’s co-authors, working closely with especially Mary Gould and Valeria Dani, the Alliance’s Community Engagement Director, who together served as the co-authors of this year’s exit report. The first drafts of the 2021 Exit Report came together in middle and late March 2021, and by the middle of April, the Alliance Team published the report to its website. Much informs the following pages and subsequent discussions. The conference’s Exit Surveys, completed by more than 100 conference participants in 2021, provide much of the baseline for the discussions that come. They are then synthesized and analyzed alongside several other bodies of material, including:

- **Participant and planning records.** Planners and participants provide documentation of their experiences in a number of ways each year. These materials often provide a more holistic view of the event and are significant for being offered from the vantage point of (for example) planning committee members, Alliance Team, Alliance Advisory Board members, conference participants (including paper submissions and the submission review process) and, of course, the conference speakers. Information from the Alliance’s own internal workflows and systems might also, at times, augment this information where it is appropriate.
- **Conference administration records.** The Exit Reports are also developed each year from a set of data and materials collected or developed during the conference itself, such as those that arise through the registration process, sign-in process, etc.
- **Personal and anecdotal testimony from both during and after the conference.** Finally, everyone involved in the NCHPEP each year brings many stories and perspectives every year, and these points of view also often make their way into the Exit Reports. Much of this testimony draws again from the production of the annual Exit Surveys, and, as with past years, this exit report features many direct quotations from participants who offered statements in their own words. In addition, the Alliance Team also welcomes conference participants to share their reflections on the conference experience in a variety of ways, and these stories and perspectives are also carefully considered. They also add to the Alliance Team and Advisory Board’s own experiences and perspectives to provide a more comprehensive portrait of the conference experience.

What does the Exit Report consist of?

The Exit Report then presents its findings within three key areas:

- **The Executive Summary** offers the “brief” or takeaway version of the report and can be approached as the “essential” reading.
- **The Report Body** offers the fuller, more complete version of the year’s exit report, and can be approached as “recommended reading.” It is designed to be especially valuable to conference planners and the Alliance Team looking forward to future NCHEP events.
- **The Appendix serves** as the report’s reference section, often assembling key stats and figures used to build the report’s Executive Summary and its Body.

What are the Key Findings of the 2021 Exit Report?

The 2021 virtual NCHEP worked far better than might have been expected given the circumstances. Despite the many clear and compelling challenges that came in hosting a virtual event for the first time, especially in areas like communication and logistics as they pertained (especially) to securing a reliable conference platform, these aspects of the conference can be easily fixed and improved upon moving forward. The more daunting challenge, a historic one, will once more center on how future NCHEP planners can help improve the overall quality of the content for the conference.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
2021 Virtual NCHEP
March 1-5, 2021

Introduction

As the National Conference on Higher Education in Prison continues to evolve together with the shifting terrain of contemporary U.S. politics and life, it makes sense for the conference planners to keep in mind what has historically worked in making the conference a much-beloved annual event, while also remaining flexible and expansive in the vision of what the conference might yet become. With the many lessons gained from hosting the 2021 NCHEP online comes a new set of opportunities and clear areas for improvement.

Fig. A
2021 NCHEP Adjustments to Make

Each National Conference on Higher Education in Prison, whether in-person or “hybrid” to feature at least some online or virtual components, offers a set of lessons that ought to be valuable for future conference planners. These lessons, again regardless of format, often highlight the conference’s strengths, as well as the many areas where, each year, the conference might be improved. Here are some of the key takeaway lessons of the 2021 Virtual NCHEP.

Strengths

Much attests to the strengths of this year’s conference. While every strength also has its downside, these areas did help make the 2021 conference both memorable and significant as the NCHEP continues to evolve.

- **Amplified Access.** Participation and access was greatly expanded this year with the virtual format, opening the conference to people who might not (in other circumstances) be able to attend in person. In a not unrelated vein, the conference also had a lower cost, and everyone who submitted a proposal had a chance to present, regardless of the reviews offered of their work in the review process. Substantially reduced in terms of cost, and open in new ways to new groups of participants, one could make the case it was the most accessible conference in NCHEP history.
- **Space and time to dwell, even with obvious obstacles.** The NCHEP 2021 events were spread out, and not as many (as in the past) occurred concurrently. This enabled people, by and large, to see the events they wanted to see, free of conflicting schedules created by the conference planning.⁴
- **Capstones to each day’s events.** The inclusion of a plenary or keynote event in the evening served as a nice capstone to each daily session, while also representing a kind of communal, virtual gathering

⁴ Every strength to the conference has its flip side. While the scheduling eliminated some of the problems of the past in terms of overlapping events, those working a 9-5 day or tending to other daily responsibilities during the work week would still face obstacles in viewing the events.

point for the conference.

- **Important Discussions.** The content of the conference overall continued to present many challenges, but the keynote and plenary sessions excelled. Each demonstrated, in their own ways, pathways the field can and must take in the coming years.

Opportunities

While there were many clear strengths with the 2021 conference, these strengths also signal renewed opportunities for the conference planners. The Higher Education in Prison community continues to hold the National Conference for Higher Education in Prison in high regard, and understands that the period between 2020-2021 presented some substantial challenges. Nonetheless, the conference also shined a bright light on some key opportunities planners might build toward.

- **Amplifying Access.**
 - **Access can still be expanded.** The conference became more accessible in a number of ways in 2021. But there is still room to grow. One area that seems promising is leveraging the conference’s “blended” components, especially the potential for recording and hosting of sessions for viewing at a later date, so long as this recording can be done equitably and fairly to all involved.
 - **Keep in mind those “inside” and “outside.”** A second area of opportunity, regardless of conference format, comes from expanding conference access to those inside, or currently incarcerated in correctional facilities. While the conference drew in more than ever before in 2021, it might have been even bigger had not COVID limited the ability of program staff members to secure access to students and/or other presenters who are currently incarcerated. It is not hard to imagine a future conference operating without those boundaries in place, one where students “inside” might well become heavily involved in the conference presentations, if not also the planning processes. As work with the currently incarcerated grows, it is also important to think of how access can be broadened through the circulation of printed and multimedia materials, i.e. those that cannot be constrained by limitations of internet access.
 - **Those in Higher Education in Prison Need Access to Each Other, As Well.** A third area might be thought of as involving increased access to those in the field. While the virtual networking opportunity at the conference worked well from a logistical and operational standpoint, and for some went beyond even that, it is still the case that the Exit Survey captured quite a bit of yearning for a more in-person set of opportunities, something that conference participants have been saying for some time.

Areas to Improve

All of this helps further underscore that while there were many strengths and clear opportunities raised by the conference experience, the community also recognized some clear areas where the conference might be improved moving forward, and in each case these suggestions again apply whether the conference is planned as an in-person or “hybrid” event.

- **A Statement/Bank of Resources on Language.** Many participants continue to express hurt and confusion at the language used during the conference, particularly in regard to those currently or formerly incarcerated. The Alliance and the broader higher education in prison community need to bolster their statements and thinking on language. This work might also include making resources more accessible before and during the conference, especially those new to the field or participating in the conference for the first time. At the same time, and as some noted, the Alliance or any other group cannot be solely expected to referee how everyone at the conference uses language.
- **The Printed Conference Brochure Matters, and Matters a Great Deal.** In terms of promoting a better sense of community belonging, students “inside” are greatly advantaged in having a printed brochure of the conference made available to them, where they can easily access the schedule and see their names included among the conference’s many events and speakers. From a more logistical or operational standpoint, printed materials also (for chairs or moderators during the sessions) tend to set the order for when and how presentations unfold, meaning chairs/moderators will typically have people speak in the order they are listed. If three faculty “outside” are listed in the program before a currently incarcerated student “inside,” this can mean that the student may not have time to share their ideas. Chairs will follow whatever order is given, sometimes sidelining scholars who are currently incarcerated.
- **Overbooked sessions.** It is probably the case that no matter whether the conference is “hybrid” or in person, no more than three paper presentations should be featured within a session. With more than three papers in a session, attention spans of audience members (and presenters!) may tend to wane, and not all presenters may be afforded the proper time or spacer to share their ideas.
- **A National Directory or Conference “Proceedings.”** These resources could be a place to share transcripts, for example, of the major keynote and plenary sessions, and perhaps better network and connect members of the community following the conference, potentially also providing a bank of commonly used and referenced resources.
- **Implement an expanded slate of advanced workshops or more tactical-type presentations.** Given the longstanding problems with the content area of the conference, it has become increasingly clear that some kind of advance workshopping for presenters and conference participants (in crafting proposals, writing papers, designing research agendas, crafting reviewer comments, etc.) would be beneficial for this community, ideally beginning many months before the conference or submission process begins.

Fig. B
Key 2021 NCHPEP Attendance Figures

Item	Numbers	Category
a	2,242	Total low-end estimated aggregate number of individuals in attendance at all 51 NCHPEP 2021 Events ⁵
b	2,280	Total estimated aggregate number of individuals in attendance at all 51 NCHPEP 2021 Events ⁶
c	1,767	Total estimated aggregated attendance of individuals in attendance at all NCHPEP 2021 events excluding the Plenary and Keynote Sessions (47 events) ⁷
d	475	Total aggregated attendance of individuals in attendance at the 2021 NCHPEP Keynote and Plenary Sessions ⁸
e	118.75	Average attendance of 2021 NCHPEP Keynote and Plenary Sessions ⁹

⁵ This “low-end” estimate is assembled from the attendance figures taken by Alliance Team during the NCHPEP 2021 events held March 1-5, 2021. It is an estimated figure because one event did not have attendance figures recorded, meaning that the actual attendance to all of the events was slightly higher. See Figure B, Item B for our “high-end” estimate of the total overall attendance.

⁶ Based on the Alliance’s Team-generated attendance figures, an average virtual event at the NCHPEP 2021 conference drew 37.6 participants (Fig. B, Item F). If we assume that there was one event that Alliance Team was not able to record attendance for drew attendance at the average conference rate, this means that 37.6 (38) additional people than the 2,242 identified in Fig. B, Item A attended the events. Taken together, we estimate individuals attended the March 2021 events in an aggregated total.

⁷ Using Alliance for Higher Education in Prison team-generated attendance figures and keeping in mind that one event did not generate attendance data, this number represents a very close estimate, based on the available data, of all who attended the March 1-5 events, excluding those who came to the Plenary and Keynote sessions.

⁸ There was one keynote and three plenary sessions held during the Week of March 1-5, and Alliance Team were able to generate counts for each event. These figures can be treated as accurate.

⁹ This figure takes the Alliance Team-generated attendance figures generated for all the Keynote and Plenary events and then averages them.

f	37.6	Estimated average attendance of 2021 NCHEP Events, Excluding Keynote and Plenary Sessions ¹⁰
g	215	High End Attendance to a Single NCHEP Event (Dr. Bettina Love, Keynote Session)

Fig. C
Key 2021 NCHEP Registration Figures

Item	Numbers	Category
a	1,017	Total Individual Registrations for the NCHEP 2021 Conference ¹¹
b	5,019	Total Aggregate Registrations for all 2021 NCHEP Events ¹²
c	3,980	Total Aggregate Registrations for all 2021 NCHEP Events Excluding the Keynote and Plenary Sessions
d	259.75	Average Registrations Generated for Each Keynote and Plenary Session Event
e	84.68	Average Registrations Generated for All NCHEP 2021 Events, Excluding Keynote and Plenary Sessions

¹⁰ Again, one event went without recorded attendance figures during the conference, so this average needs to be taken as a close estimate.

¹¹ The Alliance’s internal data shows that at least 1,030 people registered for the conference. However, as many as thirteen of these seemed to do so after the conference concluded; on this basis, 1,017 is likely more accurate.

¹² All participants in the conference needed to register for events in advance; as a result, the registration figures generated by the conference can be treated as more reliable than the attendance figures. This number assembles all of the registrations generated for all the NCHEP 2021 events, including the Keynote and Plenary Sessions.

Fig. D
Key 2021 NCHEP Additional Figures

Item	Numbers	Category
a	51	Total Virtual Events Hosted During the Conference
b	47	Total Virtual Events Held During the Conference Excluding Keynote and Plenary Sessions
c	6	Minimum Number of Daily Virtual Events Hosted by the Alliance (Monday and Tuesday)
d	18	Maximum Number of Daily Virtual Events Hosted by the Alliance (Thursday)
e	10	Average Daily Number of Virtual Events Hosted by the Alliance During the Conference
f	3	Total Number of Plenary Sessions Hosted by the Alliance (Danielle Sered; Simon Balto, DeAnza Cook, and Marisol Lebrón; Reginald Dwayne Betts)
g	1	Total Keynote Sessions (Dr. Bettina Love)
h	17	Total estimated number of formerly incarcerated presenters at the conference ¹³
i	18	Total estimated number of currently incarcerated presenters at the conference ¹⁴
j	111	Exit Surveys Completed (11% of registered conference total) ¹⁵

¹³ It would be very difficult to know how many presenters at the conference are formerly incarcerated, since many choose not to self-identify. The same holds for the speakers; this is again the Alliance’s estimate based on the publicly available and self-identified information the conference speakers offered.

¹⁴ It is worth noting that the 2021 NCHEP would have featured a much higher number of currently incarcerated students had not COVID been a factor in ensuring access inside facilities by the time March 1-5 events took place.

¹⁵ The response rate for the Exit Surveys in 2021 (11%) may seem, at first glance, substantially lower than the return rates of roughly 20-25% in years like 2017-2019. But a few things are worth keeping in mind. Unlike past years, during in-person conferences, there really is no way of knowing whether registered participants actually attended any of the events, which means that the response rate for this year’s Exit Surveys might have been much closer to “average” than it might seem. In any case, it still behooves the planning committee to consider ways to incentivize and perhaps

THE 2021 VIRTUAL NCHEP EXIT REPORT

April 7, 2021

Introduction

As the National Conference on Higher Education in Prison continues to evolve together with the dynamic and often unpredictable terrain of contemporary politics and life, it makes sense for the conference planners to keep in mind what has historically worked in making the conference a valued event, while also remaining flexible and expansive in their visioning of what the conference might yet become. With the many lessons gained from hosting the 2021 NCHEP online comes a new set of opportunities and clear areas for improvement that can ameliorate the conference experience overall.

Attendance and Participation

Takeaway

The Tenth Annual National Conference continued the conference's impressive growth in terms of attendance, drawing well over a thousand registered participants for the events held March 1-5. Measured purely in terms of registration figures, this continued a now-longstanding streak of NCHEP growth, building on the 278 who registered and participated in Dallas in 2017, the 440 or so who attended and participated in Indianapolis in 2018, and the roughly 553 who registered for and attended the conference in St. Louis in 2019.¹⁶ Several of the March 1-5 events, the keynote and plenary sessions in particular, drew hundreds of audience members by themselves, and 215 attended Dr. Bettina Love's keynote session on Tuesday, March 2, making it perhaps the best-attended single event in the history of the entire conference. On its own, it nearly approached the numbers who attended the entire Dallas conference a few years ago. On a typical day during the conference, events ran from 11 a.m. EST to 8 p.m. EST, and culminated with either a keynote or plenary session that ran from 7-8 p.m. The Alliance hosted, on average, 10 virtual events per day, and hundreds—sometimes many hundreds of guests—made their way into the presentations.

Of course, a crucial caveat to all of this is that the 2021 conference was held online, and—as organizations around the country by now well appreciate—it is hard to know just how much of an anomaly attendance figures for events held in 2020-2021 will be once the pandemic returns things to “normal,” whatever that may be. On the one hand, in-person conferences present a number of obstacles to achieving these sorts of numbers, and expectations for this kind of continued growth might warrant some caution. From a purely logistical standpoint, hosting an in-person conference presents a much bigger challenge in terms of

shorten the completion process of the Exit Surveys, so that conference participants can continue to provide valuable feedback on their experience.

¹⁶ See the 2017-2019 NCHEP Exit Reports, each with registration figures included, on the Alliance for Higher Education's website at <https://www.higheredinprison.org/national-conference#archives>

attendance than does an online one, since “access” to a virtual conference really boils down to (for many) an internet connection and the necessary supporting hardware and software, such as an operational camera and microphone. On the other hand, even the high numbers in attendance and registration produced by the conference on paper warrant some further consideration, given that the conference generated thousands of registrations for its more than fifty events, but a far smaller figure tended to actually make their way to the event and “attend” virtually. This suggests that while access was in many ways increased by the move online in terms of attendance and registration, the attendance and registration figures in general for this conference need to be carefully considered in light of its “virtual” format. A more measured approach should slow any easy rush to judgment on their overall lessons or insights.

Key Points

On paper many of the attendance and registration figures look impressive, but figures from the 2021 conference need to be approached critically.

- **The Biggest NCHEP Yet? Maybe. (It Depends).** While the virtual format did seem to increase access, making the 10th Annual Conference the “biggest” one yet, there is a clear set of both advantages and pitfalls to “virtual” attendance that makes even basic categories of “registration” and “attendance” unique and worth re-thinking for this conference experience. Put simply, virtual vs. in-person events raise important questions about (for example) what kind of community the higher education in prison community wants, and how the NCHEP can be used to better foster and support that community in turn.
- **What does it mean to “attend” an event?** Attending the conference in the past, for example, has traditionally involved putting oneself physically in the shared space of the community at a conference hotel, within the space of meals, and at events like the open mic hour, for example. Nothing quite comparable to that experience occurred with the 10th Annual “virtual” conference. Yet we can also agree that both experiences—the virtual and the in-person—generate unique kinds of knowledge, insight, and help foster certain kinds of belonging with the community. Both have their advantages and pitfalls.
- **What does “Amplifying Access” mean?** Many of the panels and presentations did work (and worked quite well, as participants noted in their Exit Surveys) in the virtual format, and participants took clear advantage of the easy access to them afforded by an internet connection and the appropriate supporting computer software and hardware. At the same time, an in-person conference affords a different kind of access, the kind that comes with follow-up conversations in the hallways afterwards, the circling-back-around that often comes at the dinner table, or from sharing a space in a session or activity.
- **A “hybrid” NCHEP future?** In the end, perhaps the community is best served by taking the mixed lessons on attendance in 2021 to heart. Both in-person and online conferences have their respective virtues, and both best exist together, where their many strengths can be used to mutually reinforce a better-quality overall experience. Perhaps NCHEP planners can blend some of the lessons of the past with those of 2021 to create a more hybridized environment moving forward.

Foundations to Build Upon

The conference has made progress on these areas in recent years, but there is always more to do to increase

the diversity of the conference, as well as to promote greater access and flexibility to things like scheduling. Participation by students, program members, and teachers and community members who are formerly and currently incarcerated continue to be a vital part of what makes this conference exceptional.

- **Field Diversity.** Most who attended (according to Exit Surveys) were Program Directors and Program Team Members, Teachers or Educators, and then Students, a good number of whom had direct or lived experience. This representation can always be expanded and enriched moving forward with support, for example, for especially people who are formerly and currently incarcerated to, whenever possible, attend, participate, or somehow play a role in the conference.
- **Flexibility in access and especially scheduling.** All conferences present scheduling conflicts, and the November in-person conference has long conflicted with many people's schedules (as would virtually any event at this scale). However, as one participant noted in a point that went often-repeated, the "virtual option for this conference is much more beneficial than an in-person event." Planners might again aim to strike an appropriate balance where the in-person and virtual conference benefits might better reinforce one another. Again, both have their advantages and disadvantages, and it is misleading to assume that somehow a virtual conference by itself increases access for the field.

Adjustments to Plan For

There seems to be great promise in remaining flexible and accommodating in light of the lessons learned from the 2021 Conference.

- Virtual conference support can dramatically increase conference attendance, registration, and participation, at least in some ways. Clearly, hosting presentations online amplifies access for many members of the community. Especially for participants and attendees who are currently incarcerated, there are some remarkable possibilities for attendance online that are obviously not possible from "inside" facilities without an internet connection. For those who routinely have conflicting November schedules (when the NCHEP is traditionally held in-person), it is also the case that a virtual format opens doors. At the same time, perhaps the many thousands who have found time for the conference the past couple years can see their experience enhanced by the move to a virtual format for at least some conference aspects as well.
- Similarly, those simply pressed for time or wanting to see an event (but not at the time it is offered) expressed advantages in being able to (for example) view the recorded events later on or have some access to a streaming or "live" event while they work or multi-task in some other role. Future planners would be well-served to keep these possibilities alive for the future, as clearly the 2021 NCHEP made some forward progress in being a more inclusive event to larger numbers of people.

Logistics

Takeaway

For the past several years, the National Conference on Higher Education in Prison has presented a rather daunting logistical challenge. To host several hundred people, providing all of them with meals, hotel, and lodging, and all while making sure that their conference experience is both positive and equitable, means that the Alliance has had to work hard in collaboration with the planning committees to ensure that adequate resources and energy are in place to host (and host well) an event of this size. In some ways, 2020 changed a

great deal. In many other ways, perhaps the changes unleashed remain underway and are still evolving, making it hard to take their full measure right now. In any case, the logistics of a good conference remain the same: they come down to helping provide the community with the space, time, and support necessary for new inquiry, connections and ideas in the field to advance. Despite the many challenges that have come with hosting this event, participants from 2017-2019 have consistently ranked the conference's logistics—food, meals, transportation to and from the hotel, technology, rooms, etc.—as a strongpoint, one of a host of measures that explains the conference's continuing popularity. With everything that happened in 2020, and with the transition to an online format, this track record faced a unique set of obstacles in 2021.

Unprecedented Challenges

The move to a virtual format presented some of the most substantial logistical challenges in NCHEP's recent memory. The Alliance Team acknowledges it fell short on the communication of several key conference aspects, particularly in the timing of its announcements regarding the conference schedule, the last-minute changes that came with the switch from Crowdcast to Zoom, and more. At the same time, the Alliance had no experience with planning a virtual event until this one, and the transition to a virtual format did present a number of obstacles that could not have been fully anticipated. For the most part, conference participants remained quite patient, flexible, and even generous in light of these challenges. As a participant noted in the Exit Surveys within a question about the conference's logistics, "I thought it was very well organized, easy to access." Indeed, none of the major areas of assessment surveyed revealed strong statements of overall participant dissatisfaction.

It is clear, nonetheless, that the conference logistics presented some hurdles for participants, as well as for Alliance Team and planning committee members. Barely a majority (50.9% of exit surveys) said they were "Extremely Satisfied" with the conference logistics, for example, while 42.7% said they were satisfied. Taken together, of course, that is well more than 90% of the conference participants who completed surveys expressing satisfaction with their experience. To see even higher rates of satisfaction in the future with an online or virtual event, a few clear steps can be taken:

Key Points

The key step probably comes down to having a firmer sense of what platform the virtual event will use to host or supplement the conference presentations, while also finding the right communications approach for messaging information that is relevant and timely. Communications logistics must find the right balance between providing good information while also not overwhelming the digital channels people use in places like their social media accounts, email addresses, listserv subscriptions, and more. The Alliance website should be approached as an important ally in shaping this digital and logistical ecosystem.

- **Research, compare, and test (and then test and practice some more, if possible) a platform as early as possible in the planning process.** The Alliance Team and its planning committee would be wise to invest heavily (and as early as possible) in platform considerations with a conference like this. Know which platform (and why) will be used to host and administer the virtual side of the conference, inclusive of everything from the submission of papers and registrations to, of course, the hosting and potential recording of events.
- **At the same time, keep in mind that growing numbers of Americans are comfortable (and getting more so) with Zoom and other day-to-day teleconferencing services.** Zoom ended up working fairly well for the conference at both the level of the daily events and the keynote and

plenary sessions. It has the additional benefit of being fairly cheap and readily accessible. Crowdcast temporarily won the endorsement of the Alliance Team for the event's keynote and plenary sessions, but within days of the conference launch it had to be abandoned because of the discovery of many technical and logistical shortcomings. Virtual conference services can also have very high price tags attached because often "technical assistance" is required as part of the package offered. At the same time, clear steps and support decisions and infrastructure need to be made to ensure that practices like "Zoom bombing," surveillance, privacy concerns, and more are upheld with the move to online presentations.

- **Have a policy that is clear and announced up front regarding aspects like the recording of sessions.** In worst case scenarios, and in points that drew comment in the Exit Surveys, participants were told that their sessions would be recorded only minutes before they appeared, and without any supporting contract or terms of usage clearly delineated. Some called this "highly unprofessional" in the conference feedback. The Alliance team lacked a coordinated plan for recording sessions and had to pivot during the conference to enact a plan that addressed requests from participants to record sessions.
- **As with all things, aim for inclusivity.** As accessible as the online environment can be for many, it's not accessible to all. Some with auditory differences, for example, cannot hear the audio made available during a teleconference unless there is interpretation or closed captioning provided. Others, without reliable access to quality Internet speed might not be able to stream or participate in video discussions.
- **Similarly, as with all things, aim for clarity and transparency.** It might seem like the entire world is online and working across multiple time zones, but for many participants making the adjustment to both online and the Eastern time zone presented difficulties and unforeseen challenges. It makes sense to consider these issues in the conference logistics, making sure communications are in place to repeat (whenever possible) the applicable time zones and scheduling details of major events.
- **Broaden pathways to engagement.** Zoom, for all its many merits, frustrated some of the conference participants for being too limited in its capacity for engagement. Some, for example, wanted a more "breakout room" style approach, and to an extent Zoom can do that. However, when it comes to sharing documents, offering people break-out rooms, sharing images or even moving images, it is a limited technology.
- **Communications/Messaging Logistics Matter.** Participants in the conference engage in a number of ways and rely on the Alliance and the Planning Committee to provide clear, instructive, and well-timed communications that also get "to the point." This is both a communications and logistical concern, particularly perhaps in an online or virtual environment. It is worth having a stronger Communication Plan in place for the conference messaging to ensure that as much information is available, and as early as possible, in the planning process.
- **Community Matters.** We are obviously living in a time of dramatic change. Readers can probably relate to being in a very different place with teleconferencing technology today (in early 2021) than they were a year or even just months ago. But as the experience with COVID has also demonstrated, there are both real advantages and real limitations to the kind of community that can be fostered and

sustained online. It is striking, for example, that many of the Exit Surveys featured a pronounced longing for the in-person conferences of the past. Many expressed the sense that there was something missing about this year's event that stood out in stark contrast to the connections made during the in-person events of previous years. In addition, Exit Surveys again repeated the refrain (a common one made down through the years) that the conference could do more to foster networking opportunities. On some level, the Virtual format is strong in that it enables informal chat opportunities. But it is also limited, as people tend to pick up a lot of different kinds of information when they talk together in a commonly shared space.

Foundations to Build Upon

This all being said, there are some clear foundations to build on from NCHPEP 2021.

- **As much as the platform issue and slow communication caused confusion, the event still “worked.”** The majority of the participants expressed support for the conference and the Zoom platform, and there's a lesson to be taken from their comments. Namely, keeping things simple, accessible, and familiar might be the way to go for the bulk of conference events, especially if all of these details can be announced early on, tested, and offered with full support to those who are maybe less familiar with how these technologies work.
- **The overall success of the 2021 NCHPEP on the logistical front bodes well for making the transition to a hybrid conference format in the near future.** The Alliance and its future planning committees can build from the clear momentum established by this conference to explore ways of making all future NCHPEP conferences, at least in part, “virtual” to some degree. At the same time, the NCHPEP can continue to leverage the institutional memory of the Alliance in hosting the in-person conference, something it has prepared a strong foundation for since 2017.

Adjustments to Plan For

Even with strong foundations in place, there are a few things to anticipate:

- **Resources are not unlimited.** Zoom might be free or cheap for many users at the moment, or at least offered at lower cost compared to other services, but there is no guarantee this will continue. As more and more services become privatized and “fee-based” in the United States, particularly in tech, the responsible thing for the field to do would be to anticipate this, and not become reliant on these technologies and their associated costs if at all possible. At the same time, of course, building in-house tech support and some sense of self-determination for the field independent of these predatory practices and rising costs sheds additional perspective on how vexing the continued issue of resource scarcity is for the field.
- **Technology (and cultures of technology) will continue to evolve.** It makes sense for the field to remain flexible and adaptive as we all make the transition out of the pandemic to environments where face-to-face interactions are again more common. There is no doubt going to be some fatigue with these technologies and some goodwill to be earned in getting back to basics with our interpersonal communications and interactions. It again makes sense to ensure that people have many different kinds of options and platforms for how they want to engage this work.

- **Attrition and Technology-Fatigue.** And in light of this last point, there were clear signs all over the Exit Surveys that people are fast-approaching the moment when being online will be seen more as a detriment than as a positive. The Surveys noted time and time again that being on Zoom or being asked to attend another webinar are fast-losing whatever luster they perhaps initially had as a solution for easing community connections across time and space in COVID times.

Communications

Takeaway

Those who have been following the NCHEP for the past several years may notice some common refrains in the feedback from 2021, as points again echoed some of the very popular communications aspects of the conference that have resonated with the conference audience over the years. Comments emphasized points like, “I found the communication to be excellent.” They drew attention to certain aspects like the daily emails that have been a part of the conference planning and experience for years. “I liked the morning email with the day’s schedule,” one said, with another noting, “the daily reminders were great.” As with years past, these very same comments also had their detractors, as some lamented how many emails were sent, their pace, and the sheer level of detail they included. Much about the conference communications continued to draw positive comments this year. In addition, participants highlighted the Alliance for Higher Education newsletter and website as becoming increasingly important as an epicenter of news for the conference, and it seems that many now regard the Alliance website as among the primary sources of information available about the conference. A strong majority of the conference participants could also agree that the Alliance website has become increasingly important to planning and participation in the conference.

Again, Many Communications Shortcomings Animated the Feed Back in the Exit Surveys

These comments, however, while again pointing to an altogether successful conference, can also serve to mask some points about the more measured criticisms participants offered of the communications surrounding the conference. Most of these comments touched on either one or more of the following:

- **The timing and sense of delay in communications around the conference schedule.** As one participant put it, the schedule seemed “late in being shared.”
- **The timing and sense of delay around the registrations.** Again, conference participants wondered why the messaging around registration happened so late in the process, i.e. within weeks of the conference “launch.”
- **A lack of clarity (at times) fused with an overall sense of confusion regarding the “standard time” used to schedule the conference.** Communications in the future can be both clearer and more insistent that there is, for example, a “standard” time zone being used to schedule the conference events. While this may matter less when it comes an in-person conference, where the time zone local to the event can be assumed as the standard point of reference, for those viewing or participating in any online or virtual aspect of the conference, particularly “live” events, the time zone consideration obviously matters more, since a webinar held at 9 p.m. in New York or Georgia will occur just after dinner for many on the East Coast, while those in California or Washington will likely still be at their workplaces, or just leaving them.

- **Similar points around the communications in general surrounding the conference.** In rare instances, it seems communications issues actually prohibited participation in the conference. “Long periods of silence followed by communications with short notice for action time-frames ultimately prevented me from participating as a presenter,” noted one of the Exit Survey respondents.

Key Points

A trend away from email continues, while the imperative for a more broad-based communication approach persists. The Alliance for Higher Education newsletter and website are becoming increasingly important as epicenters of news and information for the conference. A strong majority of the conference participants could also agree that the Alliance website has become increasingly important to planning and participation in the conference itself. At the same time, people still want email to be a source for news about the conference in the future. In terms of social media, Facebook dominates the social media landscape of the conference participants. The platforms conference participants engage most after Facebook are Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Snapchat, and TikTok (in that order). TikTok is a relative newcomer in that matrix, as 2021 is the first time it has appeared in both the Exit Surveys and Exit Reports.

Foundations to Build Upon

The Alliance and the NCHEP conference planning communities over the years have together developed a robust communications approach with the conference, combining key aspects like the Alliance website, newsletter, and more to help support the conference. At the same time, Alliance and the planning community have also built a strong track record with clear communications surrounding the conference in places like email and social media.

Adjustments to Plan For

Greater advance planning and care to the design of the conference Communications Plan will need to be better hard-wired to all aspects of the conference planning, particularly if the conference moves (as it should) to a more hybridized format involving both online and in-person features. At the same time, communications preferences among the conference participants are ever-evolving, and need to be monitored and weighed in order to provide multiple points of access for engagement.

- **Communications challenges are amplified in many ways with a virtual or blended component to the conference.** This is especially the case in that these elements raise the stakes of producing timely and clear communications for participants who (as a result of virtual accessibility) may be tuning in from across multiple national (or even international) time zones. With a virtual component, participants inside (currently incarcerated) facilities may also have a greater ability to participate, but again it often comes down to clear communications to ensure that actually happens.
- **There is no easy, all-encompassing answer to what makes strong conference communications. At the same time, there are a bedrock of good principles to always include, consider, and build from.** Communications should be clear, timely, and broadcast in advance. Key lessons should be repeated and underscored. All important information should be accessible and made readily transparent throughout the conference planning process.

Content

Takeaway

As much as the year 2020 presented some substantial challenges to the planning committee, Alliance Team, and broader processes related to hosting the NCHEP, perhaps there is some reassurance to be gained in knowing that some of the biggest problems facing the conference (and this is true for really any conference advancing a common field of inquiry around a question like how to extend access to higher education in prison) again stemmed from the *content* of the conference. In many ways, these concerns transcend the events of 2020 and speak to more structural and, in many cases, more profound and even vexing problems at the heart of the field of higher education in prison. Since 2017, the Alliance and the conference planning committees have made much of the shortcomings of the conference content in areas like the Exit Reports. The experience of 2020 and then hosting the conference in 2021 again amplified several of them, including:

- **The 2021 Conference Experience once more shined a bright light on the recurring, perhaps chronic or even systemic problems with the NCHEP paper proposal, submission, and review process.** This is a complex, even historic concern with the conference that is, by now, many years in the making. On the one hand, it stems from the ongoing struggle of the field (as well as that of the Alliance and its planning committees) to install strong, meaningful and useful guidance and standards around things like the conference proposals. Clearly, the community could well use some more advance support and mentoring, writing workshops, pre-submission review and probably other measures to help this process along. On another, it seems the problem also builds from the many troubles the community has (and for a number of reasons) in engaging these processes each year the conference is held. No small task either way you cut it, or from whose perspective you assess it, the proposal, submission, and review process step nonetheless implicates the overall content of the conference in a number of ways. The processes involved shape everything from the annual conference theme, to the conference call for papers, to aspects like the submissions process. These, in turn, generate things like the proposal abstracts, paper titles, the design of research agendas and the use of citations within the proposals and more. Once these proposals are made to the conference, moreover, yet another process unfolds through the reviewer process, and here again the field has some reckoning to do.
- **The Review Process in Particular Did Not Work.** In 2020, a year that we can again acknowledge brought substantial challenges to many in the community, it was unfortunately also true that many in the community who submitted proposals ended up being treated rather unfairly by the reviewers assembled by the planning committee and Alliance Team. We might well remember that many participants are presenting papers to a professional conference for the first time and might well wonder what advantage there is to be had in having, for example, faculty or directors at prominent institutions in the field offering their uncritical or just flatly negative feedback to these, in many cases, emerging scholars. This year, the field's difficulties with reviews manifested itself in a number of ways, such as through (in some cases) reviews simply going unfinished, reviews going only partially completed, or reviews (in the more distressing cases) just being done inadequately or even unhelpfully to those who made the proposals in the first place. On top of that, there is no doubt that

a confluence of cancellation and rescheduling attempts in the summer of 2020 by the Alliance also added to some of the confusion over what was to be done with the papers submitted to the conference, which then played out in areas like the logistics and communications (notably the scheduling) surrounding the conference in turn. The bottom line is that for the conference content to develop in a way that is meaningful for participants, the field needs to come to terms with how it is falling short on the content aspects of the conference, for it is a problem that existed before COVID and stands to exist long into the future as well. The good news is that none of the problems with the conference cannot be fixed without some dedicated care and attention.

Key Points

It is time to re-think the core content areas of the conference, and all the associated systems and processes used to develop that content year-to-year. While recognizing that no conference can go off without something akin to a proposal, submission, and review process, much can nonetheless be done to ensure that they help conference participants generate content for the conference that continues to help the field grow and develop.

Foundations to Build Upon

There are strong content foundations in place for the conference, but all aspects need to be engaged under new terms and perspectives.

- **The Conference Theme.** Over the past several years, conference participants have shown that the conference theme is gaining momentum as something participants recognize and try to integrate and engage within the space of the conference. Theme can be an important part of a great conference--strong themes should set the tone, establish a clear and compelling problem facing the field, and provide many ways for the imaginative minds in the field to address it and take it on in the space of the conference. The problems around theme, then, involve not only participants recognizing and engaging a theme to make it meaningful and substantive, but also the conference planners, as the planning committee and Alliance Team each year need to administer and aid the collaborative production of a conference theme that will set the terms for the conversations to come in the field through the year (and ideally many years) to come. In 2021, strong evidence from the Exit Surveys showed that “Amplifying Access” was on the minds of many conference participants, and many took it in the directions they saw fit for conversation. Yet there is much more that can be done each year to ensure that the conference theme is better interwoven into all aspects (and discussions) that take shape at the conference.
- **The Conference Tracks.** A similar set of points follows about the conference tracks. The tracks for 2021 were again built on conference tracks that have been in place now for a couple years, and by and large these have not generated much by way of negative feedback. All told, the tracks seem to do their job: they assemble all the ongoing major lines of inquiry and discussion underway in the field of higher education in prison into categories that make intuitive sense for proposals made to the conference, and they then have a greater utility in allowing the reviewers of the proposals to break down their job into smaller groupings of like-minded researchers who, presumably, also share common lines of research and interests. One problem, however, is that certain tracks tend to dominate the conference conversations, and as a result, the field is at risk of under-developing some important conversations. Take, for example, the energy and attention that once again drew dozens of proposals this year in the track of “Collaborations and Partnerships.” On the one hand, the sheer

volume of proposals made to this track teaches important lessons--that collaborations and partnerships on campus, with facilities, within campus, within facilities, with the broader community, etc.--matter a great deal to this field, and that's not a point up for debate. However, when a track like "The Politics of Higher Education in Prison," inclusive of topics like "Abolition," once again (for the third straight year) draws less than five proposals overall, there is perhaps a problem. With few conversations occurring at the level of the broad politics of the field, and with most instead taking place at the level of day-to-day practices, the field is at risk, arguably, of losing its way. All conversations need to be enlivened in this field, not just some. Make what you will of why "politics" has not been a focus, but it is clearly undercutting the possibility for some conversations, while making others vital to the field, ironically, hard to access in a year that promised amplified access.

- **Participants are noticing that vital conversations are waning:** "I like the direction of abolish and defund but I think we need to provide what we want in its place such as mental health and student empowered services. I think we would do better by having potential solutions for all of the problems we are trying to address and of course speaking on language." We might read this statement as powerfully capturing this tension within the conference content in a host of ways. One way to read it is as an implicit acknowledgement of how important collaborations and partnerships are for this field. Institutions, leaders, and teams all need to be collaborating and partnering in ways to promote the spread of mental health and the other services mentioned here. But without a rigorous political discussion for the field, one that would also presumably more forcibly confront the language issue also noted above, we can also read this note as an expression of what the conference did not, by and large, talk about outside of the keynote and plenary sessions. In a year like 2020, that politics for the field drew so few papers should concern and trouble everyone in the field. Even in spaces like Dr. Bettina Love's Keynote, some communities expressed skepticism about abolition's applicability. As one participant put it, "The keynote speaker really turned me off. She was a powerful speaker but seemed very off-topic for me. I am aware that racial inequality is a HUGE problem in the U.S. but I heard nothing about education -- at least, I heard nothing in the 30 minutes I listened before I stopped." Finally, another participant said it was "disappointing" that the Plenary Session on "policing" didn't make any explicit connections to the conference theme. Reading these two comments, should planners take them as evidence of a shortcoming of the conference planning, or as a window into the politics of its participants? Perhaps with a more invigorated political discussion at the conference, participants might have come to different conclusions about the policing panel, perhaps not.
- **The Keynote and Plenary Sessions.** As the notes above help preview, the Keynote and Plenary Sessions remain vital for the conference in terms of steering and in many ways guiding key conversations. Without the discussions on policing, abolition, restorative justice, and abolitionist teaching in places like the Keynote and Plenary Sessions, for example, the political discussion in the field would have again largely fallen by the wayside in comparison to others that traditionally draw more attention at this conference. The point here is not to say that proposals or topics presented outside the track of "politics" are somehow not political in their nature, or that they do not have political implications. Instead, the point is that without things like the politics of higher education in prison centered forthright as a conversation the field is having, all of the other conversations in the

field are undermined.

Adjustments to Plan For

Several of the above discussions should make it clear that there is much to do and plan for in terms of the content of the conference. In-person, “hybrid,” or fully online, little matters more than improving the overall content of the conference. Here are some places the conversation in 2021 should prioritize:

- **The Proposal, Submission, and Review Process.** While the basic architecture of the process probably cannot be abandoned, the 2021 NCHEP did make some innovative moves that are worth returning to and reconsidering. For example, it accepted every proposal made to the conference. It ended up not returning the negative feedback that populated so many of the volunteer-generated reviews. It gave everyone who wanted space the time and opportunity to do so. Is this approach sustainable? How might it be re-considered moving forward? What are its advantages and disadvantages?
- **The Conference Tracks.** Little indicates that the tracks themselves (meaning, their text or phrasing) are actually a problem for the content of the conference. The problem seems to rest more with the way that some are beginning to dominate the conversation, while (in the process) undercutting the quality of the conference as a whole. How can future NCHEP planners better incentivize and encourage conference participants to take up some long-neglected conversations in this field, such as ones around the politics of higher education in prison, for example?
- **The Keynote and Plenary Sessions** were clearly a major hit in 2021, each of them generating numbers in attendance that were quite strong. Exit Surveys also attest to the point that they, each, made for excellent capstones to the daily discussions, and helped anchor the day’s content in discussions. Some model of this for the future might well be worth keeping in mind.
- **Networking and Community.** Networking opportunities and community interactions also shape the content of the conference in many ways. Clearly, as participants testify year in and year out, the conference content is made better when there are multiple points of access, enabling more than just paper presentations and Q and A sessions. While these are important, of course, to any conference, participants also (and understandably) thrive when they can mix in a bit of fun, creative energy, and senses of possibility and discovery into their conference experience. Networking is one way to do that, but perhaps even the notion of networking itself can be expanded in interesting ways for this conference.

Cost and Financial Aid

Takeaway

The discussion around the cost and financial aid for the conference tends to center on things like the conference logistics (the hotel, meal, and transportation stipends, for example, that the Alliance has historically offered) as well as the many scholarships it has offered, especially to formerly incarcerated students making their way to the conference sometimes for the first time. None of those considerations

applied this year, and so it might be tempting to describe NCHEP 2021 as a “free” event. Many participants, however, likely had to take time off the clock at their jobs in order to attend. Any online event is also going to require the very “un-free” systems of wi-fi access and the broader infrastructure (and workers) that make online access happen. Perhaps it is better to call NCHEP 2021 a “low cost” event, since (unlike recent in-person conferences) there was no registration fee and none of the common logistical or financial aid costs associated with the conference this year. The Alliance, however, did incur several costs as host:

- **Technology and Technology Support Services.** While many Americans might consider “Zoom” as a free and web-based teleconferencing platform, and as a service often offered through their various institutional affiliations, it is not a free service. The Alliance, for example, had to expand and upgrade its subscription in order to host the number of concurrent sessions and the numbers that registered and attended the NCHEP 2021 events, and briefly also explored contracts with similar platforms that would have raised costs even higher. Additionally, the Alliance had to build a registration infrastructure on its website.
- **Art and Design.** The Alliance has been making a concerted effort in recent years to also give the conference a unique look and compelling identity. Here the Alliance again paid a graphic designer to develop aspects like the conference branding, visible in areas like the marketing around the event, the various social media platforms used in circulating information about the event, and of course in places like the Alliance website and elsewhere.
- **Honorarium for Speakers.** Since 2017, the Alliance has been paying its Keynote and Plenary Speakers, as well. This continued with the 2021 Conference. The Alliance would like to express its continued support in paying those who shape NCHEP’s annual Keynote and Plenary sessions with their intellectual work.

Fig. E
NCHEP 2021 Costs

Item	Description	Cost
a	Technology and Support Services	\$5,800
b	Art and Design	\$2,500
c	Honoraria	\$4,000
d	Labor (paid and unpaid)	∅ ¹⁷

¹⁷ Each year, the annual National Conference on Higher Education in Prison relies on ranks of paid, unpaid, and otherwise under-recognized workers, from the many providing the conference with food and clean beds, for example, to those who put in extra hours on the Alliance Team, to those who largely volunteer their time and effort on behalf of things like the annual conference planning committee or the conference submission and review process. It is quite difficult, and probably impossible, to adequately quantify this work and its associated unpaid wages, but the Alliance for Higher Education remains committed to seeing *all* work within the field of higher education in prison compensated for its labors and calls upon the higher education in prison community to similarly build this sense of accountability into their programs and operations as well.

Foundations to Build Upon

Teleconferencing and recording technologies provide many areas of future planning promise for NCHEP. While costs are bound to go up, and while such services are never truly “free,” hosting the conference this year on a platform like Zoom did (for obvious reason) make for a significantly less expensive conference than in the past, when aspects like travel scholarships, meals, transportation, and hotel accommodations pushed the conference costs much higher than they were this year. But perhaps it is also a time to discuss the notion of “cheap” within the field of higher education. While a virtual conference might be the cheaper option when compared to the more traditional in-person conference, what also gets lost? There are a couple other points to also briefly touch on as foundations to build from:

- **Many in the field and across the broader working landscape hold the field/pursuit of higher education in prison in high regard, and are willing to recognize that resources are limited in the field.** This matters or comes to the surface, often, in negotiations that occur around securing the honorariums for the conference’s various keynote and plenary speakers. It is a tricky question. On the one hand, the goodwill with which many of our speakers approach the Conference means that many are willing to do so because they, for example, “see it as a good cause” and as an important venue that they are proud to be a part of. The flipside of that is, of course, that this can (though this is not intentional) tend to lower expectations around pay for speaking, and with it, the risk of an even more insidious assumption, which is that this work is somehow now work, or at least not paid work. The Alliance and its planning communities must reject these ideas, even as they recognize the best intentions of both the Team (in working to secure a “cheap” conference) and the speakers (who again downplay their labor value in sometimes unintended or surprising ways). With these points comes a bigger challenge of the field. As scarcity in resources reigns as arguably the key problem of higher education in prison, how will the long-range sustainability of the conference as a quality event be secured?

Adjustments to Plan For

Technology will continue to evolve and needs to be anticipated as a key cost concern for the conference. The Alliance and its planning committees also see and recognize the significance of workers being compensated for their labors.

Conclusion

The National Conference on Higher Education in Prison remains a generative and meaningful event for those involved in the work of extending access to higher education in prison. Once more, continuing a growth streak in place since at least 2017, the 2021 Conference drew a remarkable number of participants and registrants to its online events held March 1-5, 2021. Conference participants routinely offered their notes on the conference’s many strengths. These comments ranged from statements like “This was well done,” to “Ya’ll did an impressive job,” to simple ones like “thank you.”

Many also expressed surprise at how well things went given the many challenges that came with COVID and across the many reckonings of 2020. “This was much better than I expected. I want to have the conference in person for sure, but there was quality here, and it was very accessible.” Another added: “I cannot believe how well you did in pulling this off. What an incredible feat. I appreciate that sessions were spread out over a week. Most of the glitches were just minor, and the silver lining to this Covid cloud was that many of my

colleagues who would not have gone in person DID tune in to learn more. Thank you for making it free. Thank you for making it happen.”

Such comments provide, to be sure, some welcome relief and satisfaction after one of the most difficult years the higher education in prison community has ever endured. As careful readers of this report will note, however, and as those closely engaged with this field will instinctively know, there is no time to rest on laurels and good tidings. There is an urgency right now for improving the conference (and the field), particularly in terms of the conference’s overall content. That, once more, will be the challenge facing planners already looking ahead to the next NCHEP, scheduled for November 2021 in Denver, Colorado.

APPENDIX

NCHEP 2021 Tips for Conference Planners

Figure A:
2021 Denver NCHEP Planning Big Picture Priorities

At the Top of the List: Content

Perhaps the hardest questions for NCHEP planners in 2021 will continue to be the ones that have always been a challenge for this field. For a year that brought about so much change, the fundamental challenge remains the same: how to improve the content of the conference? Some of these tensions have been baked into the field for many years. Many have translated into the operations of the annual NCHEP planning committee and the Alliance in turn. Many manifest themselves during the conference. Some persist afterwards. Building a community and building a movement will require—online or not, pandemic or not—hard questions about quality. It will be worth re-thinking all aspects—from the review process, to the submission process, to how to support speakers and presenters, especially those emerging scholars.

Next in Line: Communications and Logistics

One clear lesson from the 2021 NCHEP is that as the world moves toward a more “blended” normal, one where events have both major in-person and virtual components, it behooves planners and organizations alike to get ahead of the many communications and logistical concerns that can come with providing clear, well-organized, and timely communications about basic logistical concerns, like the platform to be used for the conference, as well as how participants might register and so on. These aspects are worth getting ahead of, and sooner rather than later.

How to Re-Build Capacity

The field of higher education in prison finds itself badly bruised and facing an uncertain future in 2021. In this sense, it is not unlike many communities around the United States and the world finding its way forward in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the waves of protests that came with America’s racial reckoning over the course of the last spring and summer following the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and, of course, the contested 2020 Presidential Election in the fall, which culminated with the deadly attacks on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. With so much of the field and the broader world now fast-in-transition, the community of higher education in prison simply cannot afford to avoid asking itself some hard questions. For years precarious and hampered by systemic resource scarcity, at stake right now are basic questions about the community’s character. Will the field of higher education in prison survive this current crisis, or will it implode? How do members of this community see the work of higher education playing a role in the world yet to come?

How to Best Re-Invigorate a Planning Committee? (and Planning Community?)

The faintest glimpses of possibility emerged in early 2020 when the planning committee behind the 2021 Virtual NCHEP first took shape. For really the first time in the history of the conference, the Alliance and the planning committee made some forward progress in their collaboration on things like the conference

theme and the annual call for papers. A strong discussion on the conference theme helped further streamline some early decision-making strategies, and for a brief time, it looked like the Denver conference scheduled for the fall of 2020 was off to the most promising planning start in the history of the conference. Of course, things changed in March 2020, and quickly. Yet what was true then in many ways remains true today. For this field to have a national conference, planners need to step forward, and with vision for what they want this conference and field to be. The Alliance can provide a platform for that work in a number of ways, but it must happen for this field to thrive.

Always Now A “Hybrid” Conference?

It is hard to say, but it is not impossible to imagine a time five or ten years from now when a hybrid conference like the 2021 NCHEP will appear far more “normal” than it did this year. We hear much about a “new normal” appearing on the horizon these days as vaccinations increase, but perhaps some of the most usable lessons from 2021 rest with the recognition that flexibility and adaptiveness remain key, and that technology is ultimately only a tool for that work to be enhanced.

Fig. B The Top Concrete Suggestions for 2021 Denver Planners

1. Invest serious planning energy and creativity into enhancing the quality side of the content of the conference. All aspects of the proposal, submission, and review process warrant a careful reconsideration.
2. Implement things like advanced workshops to support submitters and presenters.
3. Have a clear plan in place for incorporating people who are currently incarcerated into all aspects of the conference: planning, presenting and attending/participating.
4. Have a Communication Plan in place that allows for timely, relevant, responsive and transparent communication.
5. Incorporate elements of “hybrid” access and/or participation.
6. Push the field, in particular the content of the conference, to engage and embrace themes and tracks that are often underrepresented in the content, for example, tracks like “The Politics of Higher Education in Prison.”
7. Create more opportunities for informal networking and workshopping sessions.
8. Short sessions (1hr seemed appropriate in the virtual setting and could likely translate to meaningful for the in-person setting, too).

Thank You For Reading

THANK YOU FOR READING Thank you for reading the 2021 Virtual NCHEP Exit Report. We hope that you will continue to provide feedback and engage in conversations about the National Conference for Higher Education in Prison, the work of the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, and the community of higher education in prison more generally. We invite you to provide your comments, ideas, and feedback on this report here on our [website \(www.higheredinprison.org/contact\)](http://www.higheredinprison.org/contact), where you can also read previous versions of the [NCHEP Exit Report](#).