



ALLIANCE

FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON

Eleventh Annual National Conference on Higher Education in Prison

2021 Exit Report
November 11-14, 2021
Denver, Colorado



Introductory Note

Thank You And Welcome

Thank you for your interest in the 2021 National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (NCHEP) and in our planning for future conferences. We are pleased to share this Exit Report for the 11th NCHEP with you. We hope it will continue to inspire efforts within the annual NCHEP to expand equity, excellence, and access nationally to higher education in prison programs.

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

The annual NCHEP Exit Report has evolved, since 2017, to serve as one of the primary ways in which the Alliance for Education in Prison reviews, assesses, and prepares the groundwork for planning the NCHEP. The “Exit Report” offers a recurring opportunity to reflect on the current state of the field of higher education in prison, and to make observations about the field’s future trajectory. It provides an important sense of history and context for the conference, while enabling a sense of accountability in planning as the field continues to evolve.

The history of the Alliance’s Exit Report for NCHEP also dates back to 2017, when the Alliance first started collecting and reporting on data assembled from the conference experience in a systematic way. The Alliance’s Information Manager, Jesse Gant, took the lead on the formulation of the first report; Mary Gould, the Alliance’s Director, worked in a supervisory capacity and served as the first report’s lead editor, developer, and co-author. In 2018, Jesse Gant and Mary Gould continued their collaboration, taking the additional step of both shortening the report and making it--for the first time--“public.” They published the 2018 Exit Report to the Alliance’s website for all to read, and this practice continues.

Expanding the accessibility of the Exit Report has been a longstanding goal ever since. In 2017, the first draft of the Exit Report totaled more than 100 pages in length; it was, Jesse Gant and Mary Gould agreed, too long for most reader’s patience and time. With some adjustments and re-thinking, the format changed in 2018, and the changes initiated then have remained relatively constant in the years since. This 2021 report, now part of a multi-year effort to spur further Alliance staff collaboration, marks the fifth time the Alliance has worked to publish an NCHEP Exit Report.¹ Each year, the Alliance has multiple kinds of readers in mind for the Exit Report. This includes (and in no particular order):

- **The annual conference planners**, for whom the report operates as an official debrief on the conference experience. Who actually plans the conference has evolved much in recent years. Initially, the Alliance turned to a planning committee drawn from a community of volunteer stakeholders. As the Alliance built up its staff capacity across 2019-2021, it turned to a new model for planning and hosting the conference. This new practice is based on an “NCHEP Planning Team,” which works in close consultation with the community through community conversations and input solicited through nchep@higheredinprison.org, social media, and the Alliance’s other communications channels,

¹ As we’ve seen, the Alliance prepared its first report (on Dallas) in 2017, and followed that report with additional ones in 2018 and 2019 for both the Indianapolis and St. Louis NCHEP conferences. In 2021, the Alliance produced an exit report for its first “virtual” conference, “Amplifying Access,” held in March, and with this report (2021 Denver), that makes five now in total.

including its website and newsletter.² In 2021, for example, the NCHEP Planning Team hosted weekly planning conversations on Zoom to enable any of the stakeholders in the field to weigh in on the conference planning, and these weekly calls drew in dozens over a period that spanned from March to October 2021.

- **The staff and Advisory Board of the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison** The annual Exit Report is also carefully considered each year to be of special value to new staff, any Alliance staff members not affiliated or linked formally with the NCHEP planning team, and/or Alliance advisory board members who are new to the organization and are looking for an understanding of what the NCHEP is and means.
- **Conference participants and guests.** We also want anyone who participates in the conference to have an ability to read our assessment of how the conference experience went. Participants can always write to us at nchep@higheredinprison.org to weigh in further on the conference or this (or other) Exit Reports.
- **Our virtual audiences.** In 2021, the Alliance hosted its first-ever “virtual” follow-up conference (technically the third iteration of an NCHEP space the Alliance hosted in 2021).³ From November 17-19, the Alliance offered space on Zoom for anyone on the field to continue the conversations opened in Denver in a virtual setting, anticipating that not all of the community’s stakeholders could (or felt safe) in traveling to Denver.
- **Anyone involved with the planning or conference experience across the broader higher education in prison stakeholder community.** Truly, anyone interested in the field of higher education in prison should find this Exit Report useful, as we try very hard to share important information, perspectives, and lessons learned throughout its pages.
- **Anyone in the community (higher education in prison stakeholders, or not) who wants to learn more about the NCHEP and/or the field of higher education in prison.** We also offer this report to anyone who wants to help us with the annual conference planning, whether that planning is for the conference’s in-person or online audiences. You might be a member of an organization looking to partner with us. You might be interested in the planning process. You might be looking for a professional development opportunity. Whatever brings you here, we hope the clear and straightforward approach adopted within helps.

The Alliance’s goal throughout has been to make its annual conference Exit Report clear, accessible, informative, and practical for the many readers and thinkers active in this community.

² The NCHEP Planning Team for the Denver Conference was chaired by Valeria Dani, while Steven Abundis, Jesse Gant, Lauren Reed, and Mary Gould worked in support.

³ The “Amplifying Access” digital conference in March 2021 kicked things off. Then came the Denver in-person conference, followed quickly by the Denver “virtual” follow up conference. These three distinct NCHEP events were all hosted by the Alliance’s NCHEP Planning Team in 2021.

How is the annual NCHEP Report put together?

Between 2017 and 2019, the Alliances' Information Manager, Jesse Gant, collaborated with Director Mary Gould to produce the Exit Reports on the Dallas, Indianapolis, and St. Louis conferences. In 2020 and 2021, additions within the Alliance Staff helped animate changes to the conditions and terms of the Exit Report's annual production. First, as the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic introduced great turmoil, the 2020 conference originally scheduled for Denver was cancelled. In its place (eventually, after great volatility throughout the spring and summer of 2020) arose the March 2021 *Amplifying Access* virtual conference, which then also operated/doubled as the 10th Annual National Conference for Higher Education in Prison. Despite postponing the in-person component of the 2020 Denver conference, and the shift to a digital conference in early 2021, the Alliance continued to produce Exit Reports. Unlike in years past, however, the Exit Reports for both the *Amplifying Access* and the subsequent Denver 2021 11th Annual conference started to draw in a much wider baseline of staff and community collaboration, especially as the Alliance added input from Valeria Dani, the Alliance's Community Engagement Director and Lauren Reed, the Alliance's Communication and Community Engagement Coordinator. Both served to help lead the planning and administration of the spring 2021 *Amplifying Access* conference.

Like the *Amplifying Access* report, this report on the 11th Annual Conference in Denver again grew from an expanding effort within the Alliance to enrich opportunities for staff and especially NCHEP Planning Team collaboration. Jesse Gant, once more, took the initial lead in writing up the first draft and did the major development of this Exit Report. Valeria Dani and Mary Gould, meanwhile, worked as co-writers, commentators, and at times contributors. In the meantime, NCHEP planning team members Lauren Reed and Steven Abundis, the Alliance's Project Coordinator, also contributed in a host of ways. Lauren and Steven served not only as conference participants, planners, and hosts, but as Exit Report readers, researchers, and commentators. This report would not have been possible without the contributions everyone on the NCHEP Planning Team made to the conference.

Each year, the many Alliance collaborators involved in the making of the annual Exit Report build and draw their discussions from a wide range of materials. These materials are produced well before, during, and in some cases well after the conference concludes. Especially important are the annual Exit Surveys, which are typically distributed in the days and weeks following the conference, and are usually due within a week or two of the conference's conclusion. In 2021, for instance, the participants in the 11th Annual Conference at Denver were initially given until Friday, November 26th to complete their surveys (the 11th Annual conference concluded at around noon on Sunday, November 14).⁴ The annual surveys once again included a range of questions that helped the Alliance account for the quality of participant experiences. In addition to the annual exit surveys, however, the Alliance also considers the following materials in the production of the Annual Exit Report:

1. **Participant experiences in planning, attending, and or/reporting on the conference.** Each year, the conference at various stages produces a wide range of materials, ranging from emails, to texts, to Zoom calls and transcripts, and more. The Alliance carefully considers this material in helping to contextualize discussions, and not only throughout the conference's planning, hosting, and

⁴ The initial deadline was eventually extended, and we should be clear that participants were given until early December to complete their surveys. In recent years, the Alliance has also begun incentivizing the time participants spend on the surveys with gift cards. This has helped, additionally, with the problem of late survey submissions and the need to extend the deadlines each year.

assessment processes, but against the broader backdrop of the history of the conference (other Exit Reports included) as well.

2. **Feedback from conference participants.** Traditionally, the strongest and fullest statements of conference feedback from participants come through the annual Exit Surveys, but for a host of reasons, a wider range of records and information were also available for generating feedback related to the 11th Annual Conference. The Denver conference featured, for example, a new web-based application, and this “App,” administered by Whova, generated a number of conference interactions that offered a rich source of feedback. Text Messages exchanged between staff and community members and as parts of group threads have also become increasingly important to the conference experience over the years; the Alliance, of course, only shares these materials after securing permission to do so. A large range of meta data collected during the various planning and hosting processes, including registration, planning, the submissions and review process, and more, also help shed light on the conference experience. At every turn, we will strive to cite the specific words and documents referenced in the report, but as the Exit Surveys are anonymous, we cannot (and would not) share the specific names of individuals offering feedback without their permission.
3. **Personal experiences witnessed, discussed, or shared.** Of course, the Alliance NCHEP Planning Team, staff, and Advisory Board are also fortunate to be in many conversations face-to-face during the conference, and these conversations, too, can make their way into the annual exit reporting, particularly when team members have personal experiences or stories that speak to the question of how participants experienced the conference.

When the Denver conference concluded, Jesse Gant made the initial sweep through these materials to produce the first draft of this report, and with that draft, Alliance staff also began to weigh in and offer feedback. The report then came together collaboratively beginning in November and was published in February 2021.

What does the Exit Report consist of?

The 2021 Exit Report, like past reports, has again been designed to assemble a mass of information into several more manageable and accessible sections, designed to offer clear takeaways and lessons. It again adopts a structure first offered in the 2018 Exit Report, when Jesse Gant and Mary Gould settled on some agreements for best practices for this report. Thus:

- **An Executive Summary** will offer the “brief” version of the 2021 Exit Report. We might think of it or approach it as the required or essential reading, or the section that features the most condensed, essential conclusions about this year’s 11th Annual Conference. Anyone wanting quick and easy access to the essential facts and takeaways of the conference might turn here first.
- **The body of the 2021 Exit Report** offers the fuller, more complete version of the year's report. We might think of it as the year’s highly recommended reading, or the experience most useful for gaining greater depth of knowledge on the 2021 conference experience. We recommend this section especially for Alliance staff and advisory board members, as well as anyone in the field who wants to know more about how to plan a conference (or how to help the Alliance plan this conference).

- **An Appendix** will serve as a home to any additional reference material we include for this report.

What is the Executive Summary?

The first piece of the report to draw your attention to is the “Executive Summary,” which was produced with the intent of providing readers with a short, readily accessible, visually appealing, and to-the-point version of the longer 2021 NCHEP Exit Report. The Executive Summary is designed to display the most essential conference data, and is offered especially for the Alliance Advisory Board Members and Staff, though members of the community looking for a “quick” update on the conference and the Alliance’s takeaways from it might also find it quite useful. The Executive Summary is designed for portability and accessibility; it works as a prompt for group discussion, and as a quick “brief” on the essential 2021 Exit Report takeaways.

What Makes the Exit Report itself distinct from its Executive Summary?

As with years past, the 2021 NCHEP Exit Report (the report body) is distinct from its Executive Summary, and it is distinct in the sense that it offers a fuller, far more detailed portrait of the conference experience. It requires a greater investment in your time, but we believe it is also a fuller portrait of the conference experience. As such, it will be an especially important document for all of the Alliance staff, Alliance Advisory Board Members, but also anyone who wants to think seriously about the planning, direction, and continued evolution of this conference and field. Because the report amasses and synthesizes so much information, we continue to strive for key lessons and takeaways, all presented in clear language, easy-to-read formatting and design, and practical elements like “how to” and “next steps” sections.

What’s in the Appendix?

The third part of the 2021 Exit Report presents important data sets as reference materials as an “Appendix.” These materials should also be useful to the higher education in prison community. Members of the 2021 NCHEP Planning Team, for example, will want to pay close attention to sections where “tips” for the 2022 (or future) conferences are explicitly stated. They draw from the conference-participant Exit Survey feedback and from anecdotal evidence provided by 2021’s planner and attendees. The appendix materials also offer an important list of handy “to do” items useful in planning the next conference.

What are the key findings of the 2021 NCHEP Exit Report?

This year’s Exit Report reveals a field, in many ways, standing at an important crossroads in its history. Vital questions are still on the table for this conference and field to answer.

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Valeria Dani
Jesse Gant
Mary Gould
Lauren Reed

The NCHEP Planning Team
2021 Exit Report
February 2021

Executive Summary
2021 NCHEP Conference
November 11-14, 2021
Denver, Colorado

2021 NCHEP Planning Team

Steven Abundis
Valeria Dani
Jesse Gant
Mary Gould
Lauren Reed

Introduction

The 2021 conference in Denver revealed that the field of higher education in prison stands in many ways at an important crossroads. On the one hand, there were many positives to build from. Participants overwhelmingly expressed their thanks to the National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (NCHEP) Planning Team for planning and hosting a strong, high-quality conference experience. The Denver NCHEP was also quite possibly the largest NCHEP of all time, and despite the many logistical challenges that came with hosting the in-person conference in the midst of an ongoing global pandemic. At the same time, nevertheless, the conference also exposed that more and more of its stakeholders find themselves at odds or in tension on several vital questions.

When the conference planners this year asked “What is to be done?” (through its theme and call for proposals) the field’s responses were in many ways telling. A good cross-section of the participants answered by framing the field’s greatest needs in terms of reform, citing need (for example) for better program management, increased funding, better workplace management practices, data collection, improved public health protocols, and more. Another cross-section, however, representing a seemingly smaller community also active in the work, answered the very same set of questions but in very different terms, instead describing the field’s most urgent needs in terms of more sweeping change, noting (for example) abolition, ending the carceral state, confronting capitalism, dismantling white supremacy, and more as priorities. The disparity in the responses raises some difficult questions for a field that seems, perhaps, torn in at least two directions, or, perhaps, growing more complex and diverse. Given its clear tensions, how will Higher Education in Prison navigate the many challenges ahead? What are those challenges, exactly? Who will determine their character and scope? Under what needs, priorities, and terms? What is the scope of NCHEP in playing a role (or not playing a role) in how the field answers these and other questions?

Fig. A.
Future NCHEP Conference Adjustments to Make

Strengths

There were many aspects of the 2021 NCHEP that worked well.

- The conference remains well-attended, diverse in outlook, and popular. The NCHEP retains its status as the key national convening space for the field of higher education in prison.
- The Keynote and Plenary sessions were well-received, and did an excellent job of foregrounding the political interventions the NCHEP Planning Team hoped to stage with this year's conference.
- This year, the conference made strong use of additional digital components and platforms that generally enhanced the participant's experiences. These components also improved the accessibility of the conference (though at greater Alliance cost, both in terms of monetary cost and staff hours).
- Several strong foundations are in place in terms of the Alliance's communications—the Alliance website, newsletter, emails, and social media channels have all proven quite effective in messaging important aspects of the conference. In 2021, this strong track record was further enhanced by the addition of a conference app.
- The formats of the sessions adopted at this year's conference did offer one important silver lining: participants found that the open conversations, workshops, roundtables, and virtual sessions added to their experience. Many felt that these formats created a more collaborative set of spaces and opportunities throughout the conference.

Areas to Improve

There were also several areas to improve.

- The conference "content" remains the most vexing issue facing the conference and the field. There are serious elements to address at nearly every stage of the planning, from the selection of an annual theme, to the issuing of a call for proposals, to the submissions and review process, on down to the actual presentation of proposals at the conference itself. "Content," in many cases, is not being taken seriously within a conference that continues to prioritize presentations that highlight individual programs, or where (for example) discussions of field-level politics spur little reflection on praxis or the day-to-day operations of the field writ large.
- It does not appear that COVID will be going anywhere anytime soon. Planning for future conferences will likely need to take into account the special health protocols that come with hosting public events in the time of widespread illness and disease. Climate change may also begin to play a factor here on issues like access to fresh water, breathable air, and more and the impact that travel engenders. Planners should plan with contingency and upheaval in mind.
- The conference this year exposed some daunting challenges in terms of both its short-range and long-range sustainability. Not only is the conference becoming more expensive and complex as an event to host, but these difficulties are increasingly falling the hardest on the Alliance Staff, and

particularly the NCHEP Planning Team.¹ It is not exactly encouraging to hear people at the conference marvel at how such a small team can handle planning and hosting an event of NCHEP's size. The reality is that, in addition to the cost of the conference as a whole, it also costs many staff hours over the course of the year. This is an especially important point to raise in light of the recognition that the NCHEP Planning Team hosted two NCHEP conference events and a virtual addendum this year, beginning with the March "Amplifying Access" events, continuing with the November Denver events, and concluding with the special "digital" sessions that came in the week following Denver.

- It is worth giving the conference's various dependencies on technology a thorough re-assessment. While there can be little doubt that certain solutions opened doors in the case of greater access and ease, it was also true that technologies frequently failed or proved too complicated to use and ended up getting in the way when there were likely easier solutions to be had. Some aspects, such as the hotel's mishandling of the film screenings or sound during the keynotes and plenary sessions, for example, were well beyond the scope of what the NCHEP planning team might have taken into account with their planning. But others were well within the NCHEP team's grasp, and produced more mixed results. Is it necessary, for example, to use a digital check-in process for registration, given that it seemed to slow the process down this year? Are we certain that the conference experience was enhanced by the digital events hosted in the week following?
- There are concerns that the financial aid process was administered unfairly this year, and this also needs to be addressed. The NCHEP planning team risks the trust of the community it serves if allegations of unfair treatment persist.

Fig B.
Key 2021 Denver NCHEP Figures

Item	Numbers	Category
a	505	Registered online at least a week before the conference
b	30	Registered online in the week before the conference
c	9	Registered online at the conference
d	544	Total Number of Conference Participants Registered
e	93	Total Number Who Registered but did not check-in at registration
f	451	Overall conference participants (low-end estimate). This figure is based on online registrations, on-site registrations, and check-ins.
g	500	Overall conference participants (high-end estimate). This figure assumes additional

¹ The 2021 conference did draw upon the largest Alliance Planning Team ever assembled to host the conference. In 2018, only two Alliance Staff members planned the annual conference for Indianapolis (Jesse Gant and Mary Gould), while in 2019 the Alliance Planning Team expanded to include Lauren Reed. As the conference grows more complex and expensive, however, there are clearly some things to work through on how the conference is planned and staffed (and can be made sustainable) for the long haul.

		community participants who did not register or check-in at the conference but attended sessions and other events. The Denver conference had an unusual number of late or on site registrations, community guests, and other volatility (confusion at registration desk, for example) that makes it difficult to know how many actually participated.
h	475	Official Conference Attendance Estimate. This figure averages figures F and G. We are inclined to believe that there's a very good chance actual participants were much higher.
i	110	Total Number of Formerly Incarcerated Participants (Based upon available information and not accounting for participants who did not register or chose not to answer questions during registration)
j	62	Estimated number of higher education in prison programs, organizations, funders or other organizations with representation the 2021 NCHEP
k	114	Exit Survey Responses Completed*. *All 2021 conference participants were asked to complete exit survey responses on a voluntary basis once the conference concluded. Approximately 21% of all conference participants contributed.
l	42 in-person (9 virtual)	Total Concurrent Sessions. There were 3 open conversations, 27 workshops, 12 roundtables, and 9 virtual sessions held at the conference this year.
m	145	Total number of participants who presented at concurrent sessions as either panelists or moderators ²
n	8	Total presentations accepted as emerging scholar presentations
o	\$224,595.00	Total Cost of Hosting the 2021 NCHEP (including printing and design, catering, audio/visual services and tech support, honoraria and supplies; not including financial aid packages, service and administrative fees)
p	\$126,452.00	Total Cost of Financial Aid Program
q	\$152,325.00	Total funds raised for Conference Sponsorship, including the Financial Aid Program from Foundations
r	\$2,410.00	Total funds raised for conference Sponsorship/Financial Aid from conference attendees
s	\$93,924.00	Registration Fees Generated
t	\$22,379.00	Total Fees and Administrative Costs on Funds Raised (Registration Fees, Financial Aid, and Conference Sponsorship)
u	\$258,659.00	Total Fees Raised (Sponsorship, Financial Aid Program, and Registration)

² This figure is only an estimate, since of course not all panels took shape exactly as advertised in the booklet due to circumstances like illness, missed meetings, or other contingencies..

v	343	Total number of conference registrants who paid a registration fee
w	\$276.25	Average fee paid by registrants (sliding scale with \$300 as full fee)
x	166	Total Financial Aid Awards Requested ³
y	82	Total Financial Aid Awards
z	66	Financial Aid Awarded to Participants Formerly Incarcerated
aa	84	Financial Aid Requests not Funded (accounting for individuals making requests for both)
ab	436	Total number of people who downloaded the Whova app
ac	525	Total number of people added to the Whova App

³ The 2021 NCHEP did not offer a “Fee Waiver Program” as it did in past years because of the sliding scale (\$0-\$300) process for registration, which allowed any attendee to choose the level of registration fee they were able to pay. This process rendered the need for an additional Fee Waiver program unnecessary.

THE 2021 NCHEP EXIT REPORT

2021 NCHEP Planning Team

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Introduction

The 2021 conference in Denver revealed that the field of higher education in prison stands in many ways at an important crossroads. On the one hand, there were many positives to build from. Participants overwhelmingly expressed their thanks to the National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (NCHEP) Planning Team for planning and hosting a strong, high-quality conference experience. The Denver NCHEP was also quite possibly the largest NCHEP of all time, and despite the many logistical challenges that came with hosting the in-person conference in the midst of an ongoing global pandemic. At the same time, nevertheless, the conference also exposed that more and more of its stakeholders find themselves at odds or in tension on several vital questions.

When the conference planners this year asked “What is to be done?” (through its theme and call for proposals), the field’s responses were in many ways telling. A good cross-section of the participants answered by framing the field’s greatest needs in terms of reform, citing need (for example) for better program management, increased funding, better workplace management practices, data collection, improved public health protocols, and more. Another cross-section, however, representing a seemingly smaller community also active in the work, answered the very same set of questions but in very different terms, instead describing the field’s most urgent needs in terms of more sweeping change, noting (for example) abolition, ending the carceral state, confronting capitalism, dismantling white supremacy, and more as priorities. The disparity in the responses raises some difficult questions for a field that seems, perhaps, torn in at least two directions, or, perhaps, growing more complex and diverse. Given its clear tensions, how will Higher Education in Prison navigate the many challenges ahead? What are those challenges, exactly? Who will determine their character and scope? Under what needs, priorities, and terms? What is the function of the NCHEP in playing a role (or not playing a role) in how the field answers these and other questions?

1.

Attendance and Participation

Takeaway

The 11th Annual Conference in Denver was well-attended. As with past years, it can be difficult to know exactly how many did attend, but all the evidence points to what was easily one of the largest of recent

conferences, and which may well have been the largest NCHEP ever held.¹ Not everyone, of course, registers for the conference, and those who do sometimes do not check in. In addition, attendees sometimes make their way to the conference who do not register; some volatility always has to be accounted for in offering a true attendance estimate. Considering all of these factors, however, it seems safe to say that at least 421 and as many as 500 (or more) attended. Probably the safest estimate given the available evidence from our registration figures and more is that at least 475 were present for the events in Denver. Like in past years, the vast majority of the participants stayed at the conference hotel. Some participants also arrived early; at least 58, for example, came to Denver on the Wednesday before the conference began (Nov. 10) for a special meeting with the Southern Higher Education in Prison Collective and the Higher Education in Prison Cohort Program. For many, no matter when they arrived, the NCHEP stood out as the only in-person conference they had attended since the outbreak of the coronavirus led to the first shutdowns and quarantine orders in March 2020. In addition, at least 110 formerly incarcerated individuals (representing 24% of the conference attendance in total) had roles at the conference as presenters and participants.²

Key Points

- On questions of attendance and participation, the Exit Surveys indicated high levels of satisfaction. Only rarely (less than 1% of the overall responses, for example) did participants express issues in terms of extreme dissatisfaction, meaning that out of 114 completed Exit Survey responses, it is reasonable to say that expressions of negative attendance or participation experiences were limited to an individual or, at most, two or three individuals at a time.
- As to when people attended the conference, most people did on Thursday, November 11, Friday, November 12, or Saturday, November 13, with the bulk being in attendance on Friday (the busiest day) and Saturday (the second-busiest). Only 49.1% of survey respondents indicated that they stuck around for Sunday's events.
- Most participants in the Exit Surveys self-identified as “advocates” for the field (47.8% of survey responses) while Teachers and Professors also constituted a fairly large group of responses. This pattern has held fairly constant since the first Exit Reports started assembling data in 2017, even as a good number reported being new to the conference this year.

¹ The conference in Denver was certainly bigger than the 2018 conference held in Indianapolis, which drew roughly 440 participants. The conference in St. Louis drew 540 participants, which would make it more than the 475 that we estimate attended in Denver. However, there were an unusually large number of people who attended the Denver conference, we are quite sure, without registering at the front desk. Many came, for example, as guests to the participants. It is hard to say, but these numbers alone would have approached the figures in attendance in St. Louis. If you factor in the attendance as well that came with the virtual events in the week following the conference, there is little doubt that 2021 was the “biggest NCHEP” yet. We have to take into consideration the effects the pandemic had on travel and attendance as well, and are assuming that in the absence of a global pandemic the attendance numbers would have exceeded those of 2019.

² Even with the conference's growth, this figure has remained relatively constant. It is usually the case, since 2017, that roughly a quarter of the conference attendance will be those who have been formerly incarcerated.

- A solid 76.1% of completed Exit Surveys indicated high levels of satisfaction with the registration process, the highest scoring experience of any surveyed in the attendance and participation category.³
- Most were happy with the conference's location. Though several noted that they wished it had been held closer to downtown Denver, and was more "walkable," the feedback this year suggested positive experiences with the conference location.
- People were also fairly active while they were at the conference. Most reported having attended at least 5-10 distinct conference events between Thursday, November, 11, and Sunday, November 14. Most people dedicated several hours to the conference each day they were in town.

Foundations to Build Upon

- NCHEP continues to draw the interest and attention of the Higher Education in Prison Community. It is a large, diverse, well-attended conference.
- Attendance and participation this year were greatly enhanced through the addition of a few digital components; namely, the conference app, but also the flexibility that came with some of the conference's key events being streamed online.

Adjustments to Plan For

- Participants increasingly value having access to a diverse set of experiences when they attend the conference. It is an expectation, it seems, that the conference will be made accessible to recreational options, will be walkable (or at least allow outdoor activity), and will allow opportunities for relaxation and meaningful down-time.
- The conference continues to point to growth. Given that the conference took place in the midst of the ongoing pandemic (and indeed as the Delta variant continued to wreak havoc in Colorado) we might look at the roughly 460 participants who made their way to Denver in order to attend as a solid sign that this conference is, if anything, popular and continuing to grow. Under better circumstances, it is not hard to imagine that the conference would have set (and perhaps did set) an all-time in-person attendance record. Many people did opt out this year citing concerns over safety or the many workplace issues that stemmed from the pandemic in 2021.
- Perhaps it is a point true of all conferences, but Sunday at NCHEP seems to be evolving more and more as a "travel day." Less than half of the Exit Surveys completed indicated that people were

³ Alliance Staff, however, had a very different experience at the registration desk. Whova's process for signing in registrations was often confusing and slow, and for a variety of reasons the work was stressful this year. It was the first time that the technology was implemented, and these more stressful factors should be easy to address (and minimize, hopefully) in the future. Team Members also noted following the conference that anxiety among participants seemed to permeate this year's conference registration process; no doubt, conference participants (and Staff) were unused to working with such large numbers of people after the first quarantine and shutdown orders were put in place back in March 2020. However, it did seem that there was an unusual level of anxiety this year over securing name tags and getting registered for the conference among participants.

willing to stick around for Sunday's events, and NCHEP Planning Team members might well take this into consideration in planning for future conferences.

2. Logistics

Takeaway

The 11th Annual Conference in Denver presented several unique logistical challenges compared to past conferences. While usually an aspect of the conference that draws little attention, many logistical details seemed to stand out in the minds of participants this year, and not always for positive reasons. Several stemmed from the ambitious steps the NCHEP Planning Team took to make accommodation for the Covid-19 pandemic, while others were clearly out of the NCHEP Planning Team's hands. This, please understand, is not an attempt to absolve the NCHEP team from responsibility. But many of the circumstances at this year's conference stemmed from situations that were not fully in our control. Perhaps the silver lining is this: the Alliance can be more insistent on doing front-end work with the hotels before the conference (even in the days leading to the conference) to ensure some certainty with the food and technology (and other logistical baselines) each year.

COVID-19

After a tumultuous early part of 2021, the Delta variant of the virus wreaked havoc throughout the summer, and as the conference dates approached in November, Colorado again ranked as one of the states with the highest rates of coronavirus infections. Yet, fortunately, the conference gave rise to no major known outbreaks in the days and weeks after it concluded. Planning to accommodate for all the variables and unknowns, to say nothing of the many risks, that came with hosting the conference put a heavy burden on this year's NCHEP Planning Team. The Denver NCHEP had already been canceled once (in 2020). Had the Alliance made the decision to again cancel the conference (and without a mandate from the City of Denver), the Alliance would have been on the hook for the full cost of the conference. In light of this, the Alliance Team had some difficult decisions (and divisions internally) regarding how to best proceed. After some difficult discussions, it decided to move forward under the best advice of medical professionals, and in recognition that vaccines and masks do tend to limit the severity of the disease if contracted.

The community expressed fairly deep admiration for the way the NCHEP Planning Team confronted these challenges. When asked if there was anything the planners might have done to enhance the conference's overall safety, many Exit Survey responses simply said "no," or offered thanks for the steps that the Alliance did take. Several noted, for example, the Planning Team arranged to have complimentary bottles of hand sanitizer, masks, Tylenol, a fully-stocked wellness room, and more on hand and accessible to participants. Others highlighted the good sense protocols installed at the conference, such as the reminders to socially distance and to wash your hands. The NCHEP planning team also took great care to ensure that the conference sessions had seating arrangements that allowed for some space as well. Some did ask for the Alliance to step up its role in enforcement of the mask policy; others empathized that of course this is a complicated thing for the Planning Team to mandate, especially in the absence of a state-or city-wide mask mandate. As one participant noted, "I recognize this community is one that discourages policing." Rarer were comments that asked explicitly, for example, for proof of vaccine. At the same time, there were also those that also said, "masks were not necessary" and were "cumbersome."

Food and Meals

Other logistical aspects, including food and meals, were sometimes implicated in these discussions as well. Participants did not appreciate having to handle buffet toggles given the circumstances, for example. It was sometimes confusing what the hotel intended or meant to do with the buffers installed to protect participants and staff.

Indeed, the Exit Survey respondents this year offered their lowest scores on the conference's food. In a stark contrast to nearly every other aspect surveyed, food stood out. A fair number of the respondents either offered middling scores, or statements such as "not satisfied at all." While scores on the lower end were still fairly rare (just 12 surveys offered a score of 1, representing just 10.7% of the overall) they are notable. Never in the history of the conference has food generated this kind of attention. About the only thing that drew strong positives was the sense that the meals were at least well-timed each day.

The Exit Surveys displayed some especially curious comments on things like veganism and vegetarianism. NCHEP team members did float the idea of going with an entirely vegan or vegetarian conference, and with the intent of putting into practice and foregrounding some of the political traditions (including abolition) that the conference in various ways tried to highlight. Those plans were not implemented. But given the reactions participants did offer to the vegetarian and vegan options that were offered, it seems clear change will be slow in coming to this community. While some seemed to appreciate the planning intervention, noting, for example, that it "would be a great climate-friendly move," and that having veganism and vegetarianism recognized as political interventions was welcomed, some community members were clearly not having it. "We should not be forced to eat vegan. Some of us like meat." "I'm a carnivore!" Others offered statements such as these: "Veganism is not a stated Alliance value and I do not think it should be."

Technology

Technology presented yet another major logistical challenge at this year's conference. "IT sucked. Sound in the plenaries was horrible." It might seem counterintuitive to say that technology also factored in this year as part of the protocols and changes that came with Covid, but it is the case that the Planning Team took several steps this year to make accommodations in or with technology, and with the pandemic in mind. This included the use of individual microphones for the Keynote and Plenary Sessions to reduce sharing and potential contact with sharing (and to help with differences in ability with hearing, and to help amplify voices of those with masks, as well).⁴ In a similar way, the entire slate of events associated with the virtual conference following NCHEP might also be considered as being in part driven by COVID.

But Surveys were right to point out the conference's technological woes, for they certainly were real. Much of this, however, truly was out of the Planning Team's hands, and if anything the Planning Team went above and beyond—routinely—to help remedy situations that the Hotel Tech Team should have handled. Nothing that the NCHEP sought to accomplish this year ought to have confused the hotel tech team in the way that our conference events seemed to.

⁴ At the same time, this decision to use individual microphones had some unintended consequences as well. The use of individual microphones meant that they were sometimes removed from breakout rooms because we could not change out the microphones between sessions, making it of course difficult for those with hearing impairments. Safety concerns sometimes mandated a priority over accommodation for abilities with hearing.

The Hotel tech team, in fact, had serious problems throughout the conference, notably during the film screening of the documentary *Since I Been Down*.⁵ Not only was the tech team not able (until nearly 35 minutes into the event) to load the film in any of the formats the Alliance supplied, but it was not able to do so on multiple Alliance-supplied laptops and devices (again on PC and Mac formats). This severely hampered the quality of the event; many participants left and did not see the film, and the NCHEP planning team scrambled under an impossible situation.

Nor was it the only event hindered by the hotel tech team. Sound cut out during several sessions that involved, for example, virtual speakers—such as the one featuring Dr. Gina Dent. While hosting an event is of course complex, the hotel's Tech Team was paid to render services it in the end could not provide up to our expectations. This created several difficult situations for the NCHEP Planning Team and the community. "I have hearing aids and the tech issues were an issue for me," a participant said. "I opted to live stream...but the links didn't always work despite trying them both on my phone and laptop." With Zoom presentations, others also noted that there were opportunities for closed captioning. Some simply could not hear the presenters, and this caused frustration. "Leaving people behind in conversation is not acceptable."

Key points

- COVID protocols were appreciated and welcomed; the conference went off and was successful despite the unique logistical challenges that came with the year
- Community wondered/debated possibilities for greater enforcement of mask policy
- There were concerns that those with masks in the future might automatically be asked to speak into a microphone (it can be hard to hear)
- Buffet style food servings perhaps something to avoid (if all possible) in the future
- Several in the community seem resistant, even indignant, at the idea of a vegetarian or vegan conference
- The one consensus concern about the conference this year was the meals. Roughly 29% of survey responses (more than any other year) expressed only middling satisfaction with the conference food

Foundations to Build Upon

- After hosting three distinct conference events (virtual and in-person) in the span of 2021, it seems fair to say, at least from a logistical standpoint, that the NCHEP Planning Team knows how to run a conference. But in many ways, several more important questions remain unanswered: Who is this conference for? What does it aim to do? The Alliance's NCHEP Planning Team is working toward its own answers, but without the community also engaging these questions, the logistical aspects of the conference seem to be generating undue attention and focus.
- When asked in the Exit Surveys whether they were satisfied with the overall administration of the conference, meaning especially the logistical aspects, a solid 64.9% reported that they were extremely

⁵ The Alliance does intend to host an online Community Conversation in February 2022 that will enable participants digital access to the film along with additional space for virtual discussion. The Alliance wants to make sure that conference participants (and non-participants) in the field have a chance to see and discuss this important film in light of the difficulties technology presented at the conference.

satisfied with how the conference operated, and despite the logistical challenges it presented in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Historically, this strong set of responses means that logistically, the NCHEP has always proven a success, making for an enjoyable experience overall, and for years running.

- But, with all that being said, there were obvious challenges this year. Food, technology, and COVID all gave rise to things that were fairly unprecedented this year, making logistics stand out as the one area for clear improvement in the 2021 conference.

Adjustments to Plan For

- One of the major lessons of the *Amplifying Access* virtual conference held in March 2021 is that technology needs to be vetted, and vetted many many times, before the conference is held to ensure functionality and seamlessness with participant experience. Of course, things may still go wrong even with the right components in place. But once more, the community did not have the experience it might have expected because of several conference technological issues. We might collectively ask as we move forward: Has technology become too pervasive at the conference? If so, how? How do we balance it with the need for better access, equity, and excellence in our events? How can the NCHEP Planning Team move to secure better ownership/expertise over the process and technologies it does employ in hosting the conference?

3.

Communications

Takeaway

The 2021 NCHEP in Denver showcased several efforts by the NCHEP Planning Team to improve upon some of the communications strategies used in past NCHEPs. For the most part, they proved quite successful. The Exit Surveys suggested a high level of satisfaction with the various communications strategies employed not only during the conference, but before and after it as well. Perhaps the most exciting development of the conference on the communications front was the successful use and implementation of a conference app, administered by WHOVA.⁶ “This was a great idea,” several responses noted. “The app was very useful.” “It was great to connect with participants and to be able to see who was here by state.” The app also enabled several experiences unique to this year. “I texted other participants, viewed the schedule and was able to navigate easily,” one of the surveys read. To and from the airport, people also saved costs and formed connections. “Rideshare and meetups were great.” The app was not for everyone, of course, but it was certainly popular and well-used. 87.7% of the Exit Survey respondents reported engaging with it, before, during, and after the conference, suggesting that for many it was a resource heavily used. Positive experiences abounded; several hundred participants at various times were also active on the messaging boards. The app opened new opportunities for networking and recognition. It helped (though less successfully) for things like the Plenary sessions in terms of Q and A. It enriched the conference dramatically overall.

⁶ As an added bonus, the 2021 Denver NCHEP participants will have access to the Whova app until May 14, 2022.

Key points

- The Alliance continues to leverage its own website and newsletter in support of the conference as an effective conference communications tool and resource center. These platforms were overwhelmingly the way by which people learned about the conference (followed closely by the emails the Alliance sent). Individual Alliance NCHEP Team Members also drew recognition in the Exit Surveys as being sources of good information about the conference.
- People have the expectation that they will turn to the Alliance newsletter and website in the future for their conference information. The Alliance has an excellent track record with its clear conference emails, and these too rank highly as part of the information system people seek out and expect with the conference. At the same time (reflecting larger trends) if there is a communication channel that people single out or would like to see eliminated, it's email. "Maybe email a little less?" ran one comment. At the same time, most admitted they found the emails helpful and used the emails largely to inform their time at the conference.
- In terms of social media, Facebook endures as the most popular platform used by the community, followed by Instagram, LinkedIn, and then Twitter. Despite an abundance of controversy in 2021 and for years, there seems to be wide buy-ins by this community to social media. Only 1%, for example, indicated that they remain off of social media. Another 1% (maybe the same respondents?) said they try not to use them.

Foundations to Build Upon

- Several communications strategies are working well with the conference. But we may have reached a tipping point with this year's conference in recognizing the potentials of a conference app. It makes for an obvious place to host vital daily communications, administer key aspects like communications and messaging, and more. At the same time, there is no reason to think that social media, the Alliance website, and the Alliance newsletter do not also factor in how communications in the future will work surrounding the conference. Perhaps the bottom line is this: keep all communications channels open.

Adjustments to Plan For

- How can the app be better used? And how can we ensure that everyone attending has access to it?
- How can we also ensure that all of the existing communications challenges continue to operate at the levels they do? How can these practices be sustained?

4. Content

Takeaway

The NCHEP Planning Team took several steps this year to improve the conference content. Historically speaking, the content aspect of the conference has been a huge challenge for the conference’s planners and participants. The steps taken by this year’s NCHEP planning team were informed not only by feedback from the community assembled over the past several years, but from the planning team’s many experiences with planning the conference and working with the many submissions and materials generated from it as well. The results of these steps, however, proved decidedly mixed.

Theme

The processes associated with naming a conference theme each year have evolved to become a particularly interesting site for appreciating the “content” area of the annual conference.⁷ There is an aspect to NCHEP’s politics (perhaps this is true of all conference politics) that involves a particular dynamic worth naming and to some extent spelling out. It involves the push-and-pull that comes with conference organizers getting conference participants (and sometimes the other way around, to be sure) to buy into a conference theme that will, presumably, organize the content and approaches undertaken by participants each year. This is complicated and evolving work.⁸ It asks not only for a theme to be named, but defended and accepted. This, in turn, requires that the theme also be recognized and engaged fully, so that conversations at the conference can take shape around a particular problem or set of related problems. Ideally, of course, this problem or idea or concept (whatever the theme for the year may be) is well-considered; the theme should spark an immediate sense of need or recognition, even urgency. In hearing it, participants might immediately start thinking of ways they might approach it or frame it. Theme should inspire thinking and approaches, in other words. At the same time, again ideally, it should be expansive and approachable enough that nearly everyone in the field, bringing various kinds of expertise and knowledge, might spot ways to add their voices to its discussion. In this way, the conference theme should energize a rich conference-wide discussion.

Theme, then, is vital, political work for the conference and the field in turn. At stake is the ability to get a community to not only recognize a problem or challenge, but to unite around it, and to concentrate on the mobilization of its resources to solve or address it. Quite explicitly, then, the theme is also important in terms

⁷ As a quick reminder on some recent themes explored at the conference, the theme for the Indianapolis conference in 2018 was “Building the Movement,” while the St. Louis conference in 2019 met under the theme of “Beyond the Barriers.” “Amplifying Access” became the theme of the 2021 spring virtual NCHEP, while “What is to be done?” operated as the theme for Denver’s in-person conference in November 2021.

⁸ Part of the complication stems from the important point that no two NCHEPs have been organized in precisely the same way over the past several years. The Alliance has evolved in its approaches with planning the conference many, many times, moving from a community-based planning committee (for example) to the model it currently uses in its staff-led “NCHEP Planning Team,” which now does much of its community engagement through online monthly Community Conversations, open to any stakeholder in the field. In 2021, these monthly conversations occurred from roughly the spring through the fall, offering community members many opportunities to ask questions and offer feedback on various aspects of the planning process as they came into place.

of how the field agrees to take action. Ideally, again, discussions built from the theme should proceed to offer several concrete goals or agreed upon ends in mind for the field with the conference's end.⁹

The year 2020 certainly unfolded in a way that seemed to warrant a more concerted focus on politics at the conference. The circumstances of the year and the one that followed it barely require repeating. 2020 kicked off with, among other things, a global pandemic. The 2020 Presidential election, at nearly the same time, swung into high gear as the Democratic Party waged a bruising Primary contest for the head of its ticket. By summer, the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and more inspired the largest waves of protests staged since the Civil Rights marches of the 1960s. In November, the defeated President, Donald Trump, refused to concede the election or acknowledge its results. No rest followed in 2021. The riots at the capitol on January 6 resulted in several deaths, and though the incoming President, Joe Biden, promised unity, the country remained bitterly polarized as the conference approached. With COVID cases rising, with climate change wreaking havoc around the globe, and with legislation moving forward in several states targeting "critical race theory," November came on with a palpable feelings of intermingled fatigue, hope, rage, backlash, and despair. Workers and workplace leaders noted an exodus of staff; people started referencing a "Great Resignation" underway in workplaces around the globe.

It was in recognition of these fast-changing and dynamic times, and the troubling issues and realities they raised, that the NCHP planning team tried a new approach in asking as its theme: "What is to Be Done?" It was, to be sure, a question meant to provoke. But planners also felt a deep moral and intellectual resonance in the question. They were drawn, as well, to its sense of timelessness and urgency.

So it is notable that the theme was met with only a mild sense of enthusiasm or even recognition in the Exit Surveys. To start, when asked, most in the HEP field did not seem to know much about it. Few seemed to share the sense of urgency and resonance planners felt in hearing the question. While the historical terms of its origin were spelled out in the conference booklet, it was striking to see it drew *no comment whatsoever* in the surveys. Most of the community seemed either unimpressed or without curiosity, further, when the theme was initially announced. While most were aware that "What Is To Be Done" was the conference theme (something like 85% indicated "yes" when asked if they knew the conference theme) most seemed comfortable not engaging it at the conference. The Alliance also asked what came to mind when participants first heard the theme. The answers indicated only lukewarm interest. "I thought it was appropriate." "I thought it was useful and compelling, but also that it to some extent just restated the mission of all us working in HEP." Only a few warmed to the question. "It is the central question." "I liked it. It was proactive and action-oriented instead of...esoteric." Much rarer, but present, was feedback like this: "Absolutely amazing."

⁹ There is, no doubt, a lot of work to be done if the field hopes to get the most out of its annual conference in these terms. A few ideas that the conference planners have considered, for example, including the publication of not only an annual Exit Report, but perhaps a document we might call the Conference "Proceedings," which might, for example, publish some of the speeches delivered during the conference's keynotes. While we can all agree this would be a great service to the conference, it also presents some organizing challenges. It would require, for example, our keynote speakers to present formalized addresses from scripts. It would also implicate a range of other considerations, including logistics and costs, ranging from the potential editing of these materials for distribution, for example, to things like arranging the addresses for printing and distribution. Certainly, this added labor on speakers and planners would also warrant a higher stipend for the speakers and other factors that the conference planners ought to take into account. If the field is serious about energizing the idea of the theme and the broader questions about field-level needs, priorities, and goals, however, it is worth pursuing.

There was also, however, a much more palpable hesitancy alive in several of the comments. “Vague.” “It made me curious.” “What in the world does that mean?” “I thought it would alienate folks who we want at the table.”¹⁰ Some no doubt were alienated by the theme. A respondent indicated that they intended never to “go back” to the conference in the future. There was, too, also palpable and more explicit skepticism. “Boring!” “Not sure that it was totally clear” “I never heard it.” “I wasn’t sure what it was asking.”

One hope for the planners, of course, is that the conference will change people’s minds or thinking on the theme, or perhaps illuminate some aspects that were not clear before. But that did not seem to happen in the case of the Denver conference. For the most part, the conference did not energize around the theme. Many said simply “no” when asked if their thoughts about the conference changed in light of the conversations and sessions held there. “I still didn’t get it.” Others seemed mostly bothered by its presence and insistence. “Too much on abolition.” “I’ll never go back and will not recommend it. It was a rah rah event for NCHEP and a bashing event for people who are white, non-college teachers, and DOC employees.”

At the same time, most responses were extremely satisfied with the conference formats (workshops, open meetings, open conversations, etc.) While in general ratings on areas of the conference content were not as high as in other categories like attendance and participation, this is to be somewhat expected. Content has long been a particular challenge for this conference. Many did note that they at least appreciated the collaborative atmosphere of the conference this year, especially compared to the formats adopted in the past.

Key points

- The quality of the content produced at the conference, along with the rising conference costs (see below), remains the most vexing problem facing the conference. The same might well be said for the field of higher education in prison.
- The theme question will remain a challenge. Most people, it seems, are not interested in coming to this conference to work on a collective problem or issue that might advance the field. Far more urgent, apparently, are a narrower set of concerns related to individuals, individual programs, or individual or perhaps statewide institutions and campuses.
- The submission and review process remains a particularly vexing problem as well. People are strapped; we found again that simply getting the reviews of submissions completed this year was a challenge for many people. The quality of the reviews offered continues to be widely varied; some good proposals were rejected at this conference. Some poor quality proposals were accepted.

Foundations to Build Upon

- The formats of the sessions adopted at this year’s conference did offer one important silver lining. Participants found the open conversations, workshops, roundtables, and virtual sessions added to their experience. Many felt that these formats created a more collaborative set of spaces and opportunities throughout the conference.

¹⁰ The context of this comment indicates that the participant had members of the Department of Corrections in mind when offering this feedback. This has long been a question for this conference and the field. Are we in agreement about who “we want at the table?”

Adjustments to Plan For

- How can the conference content be improved? One easy answer is for the NCHEP Planning Team to again return to the troubling set of issues surrounding the submission and review process. Another surely involves finding ways to energize a robust discussion well in advance of the conference on the question of its theme (and why). But perhaps some of the most difficult questions are the ones that have always been a challenge. Who is this conference for? What does it aim to do? How can a theme be used to focus the community on its most pressing needs, priorities, and goals? And how can the content of the conference then be structured to bring the necessary depth and scope to the discussions in response so that meaningful action can be taken in the field in the years to come? *What is to be done?*

5.

Cost and Financial Aid

Takeaway

The annual cost of hosting the NCHEP conference is rapidly increasing, and it raises some troubling questions about the long-term sustainability of the conference. While cost has been a concern raised in every exit report since 2017, for a number of reasons it loomed especially large as an issue for the Denver NCHEP. On the one hand, the Alliance took some meaningful steps this year to promote a “sliding” scale for registration, meaning people could pay whatever they liked for the registration this year, though the Alliance did specify that registrants with the means should pay \$300, a sum not at all unusual for conferences of this scale, and especially with inclusive plans for meals and lodging for the full weekend slate of events. The use of a “sliding scale” for registration was also intended to recognize the material disparities that so often challenge a field riddled with issues of resource scarcity. Unfortunately, however, not everyone with the means paid the asked for fee, and as a result the conference passed on an especially high cost to the Alliance in 2021.

What is more concerning, perhaps, is that participants are not recognizing that the conference cost is rising, and that the conference’s long range sustainability is at risk. When asked if the conference was affordable, 93% of the exit surveys said yes (producing one of the largest majorities in a response of all questions asked). People also appreciated the sliding scale fee for conference registration, noting that it helped them better assess the true cost of the conference and make decisions accordingly (even as their perceptions are misguided). Several noted that the sliding scale was in fact decisive in their ability to attend, and while that may well be the case, for the sliding scale to work it needed to be matched by those able to pay the full price for the conference cost to truly balance out. Others, especially those who had support or could pay to support the conference seemed understandably less concerned with it. Only a handful said that \$300, to them, seemed like a reasonable registration fee and that they would be happy to continue paying it (or a higher rate, per inflation) in the future. Most who came to the conference, in the end, passed on substantial costs to the Alliance.

There was also some concern about the financial aid program. Even though the financial aid process was administered through a masked or anonymous review process, some participants perceived an imbalance in how awards were allocated. As one participant noted, “My application didn't get selected for financial assistance and I've heard from more than one mouth that there was special attention paid to friends of

committee members, which is wrong and dastardly.” The NCHEP Planning Team can certainly take some steps to refine its process and improve it moving forward.

Key points

- Most found financial aid adequate in covering the costs of the conference
- Only additional costs for many came in small items at the airport, sometimes a parked car, baggage

Foundations to Build Upon

- The conference continues to be a low-cost experience for the majority of the community facing financial need
- The sliding scale was popular, presents a challenge logistically and operationally for the Alliance

Adjustments to Plan For

- There is a troubling perception that inequity stains the financial aid program. If the statements above are true regarding “special attention” being paid to “friends of the committee members,” then this is absolutely concerning. The NCHEP planning team needs to be sure it is transparently communicating the process, or it risks losing trust with the community.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that as the conference produced mixed results, its concluding takeaways also display some mixed lessons. On the one hand, there were some clear positives that stemmed from what was, by most measures, an extremely effective conference. A strong majority of those who completed the Exit Surveys indicated that they would plan on attending the conference in the future (81.6%). “This conference blew my mind. There was so much to love about it. Keep doing what you are doing. It was an amazing place to make connections and learn new content.” But there were some concerning developments as well. One reading might conclude that the field is divided on how to proceed, or even on what it means to proceed. Another might suggest that these are the natural growing pains of a field growing more vibrant and complex as the years wear on. A vast majority of responses focused on issues like: “public policy” “practical how-to-stuff” “program development” “Pell” “trauma management” “grants” “funding” “data collection.” A smaller but important set of voices seemed, however, at tension or at odds with these priorities, and emphasized abolition, carceral capitalism, and more. Some participants did not welcome the disconnect visible in the many conversations and approaches. “I had a wonderful experience,” one person noted, but added: “The DOC attendees, who partner with me in my work, were often offended and turned off. That makes my job harder, not easier; it puts the onus on me to make sure they know that I feel that they are not evil people, out to stop us. I will advise them to not attend in the future.” Indeed, perhaps it was this set of responses that did the most to capture the key questions still on the table for NCHEP participants and planners in 2022: “For whom does this conference exist? Is it for academic administrators, program directors and faculty? Or is it for alumni of our programs? It cannot be all things to all people, or you will lose everyone. Please determine a mission that is clearly articulated.” For some, of course, that mission has already been clearly articulated. “St. Louis was much more useful for those of us re-entering prison education work,”

one of the responses read, adding “We need to stick more closely to the topic of the conference, *administering higher education in prison programs*.” The problem, of course, is that administering higher education programs has never been the topic of the conference, and program administrators have never been its sole focus, either. Until the field comes to terms with this, and with it, some decisions about how it wants to answer some of the above questions, it is likely that this disconnect in assumptions will continue to shape the yearly Exit Surveys.