Stepping in and up to meet community needs: How community-based college access and success programs responded to COVID-19

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Abstract
The current study uplifts the efforts of community-based college access and success programs (CAS) to support the college preparation, matriculation, and persistence of underserved students during COVID-19. Fifty-eight CAS across the United States completed an online survey that gathered information about organizational demographics, COVID-19 challenges, responses to challenges, and communication with constituents and funding needs during COVID-19. Results suggested CAS faced multiple challenges due to COVID-19 that affected the organization, staff, and constituents. Results also revealed organizations of varying sizes, locations, and demographics responded to challenges by revising existing programming for students, creating new programming for students and caretakers, and updating staff policies to meet ongoing and emergent needs despite limited resources. CAS are essential service providers for students who are under- and mis-served in formal education systems. Recommendations are provided for how such organizations can be invested in and better prepared for future disruptions.

Keywords
college access, college success, community-based programs, economically-marginalized youth, first-generation college students, youth of color
The losses associated with COVID-19 have touched every member of our global society in various ways. For US high school students, especially those at the tail end of their secondary school careers, those losses have not only included both archetypal and commemorative school experiences (e.g., school days, learning, social connections, sports, arts, and celebrations) but certainties about college admissions, enrollment processes, and sustainability (e.g., Rich & Saias, 2020). High school students who have more resources accessible to them (parents who have applied for and attended college, accessible school guidance counselors who can shepherd them through admissions changes, supplementary college preparation and admissions support, etc.) have had to contend with the exasperation and disappointment of these losses. First-generation, economically marginalized, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students, on the other hand, have unfortunately faced weightier consequences. As these students already face additional hurdles in their pursuit of college degrees (overburdened school counselors, institutional racism and classism, etc.), the loss of resume-building opportunities as well as changes in policies and procedures may make applying for and matriculating into higher education institutions even more challenging (Kovacs, 2021). Thankfully, as they have for decades, community-based college access and success programs (CAS) have stepped up to continue supporting students and their families through the college preparation, application, and enrollment process during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the purpose of this study is to capture and uplift the work CAS has done amidst the pandemic to support the long-term educational futures of students and their families. In addition, the study highlights steps CAS did and can take to prepare for future disruptions, and advocates for additional support for such community-based organizations.

1.1 Higher education challenges for under- and mis-served students

Historically, student success in college was seen as a direct result of individual attributes, skills, and motivation. If students were unable to graduate college, this prevailing belief suggested it was a failure of the student rather than a failure of the institution. Over the years, however, and particularly as a result of efforts by Black students throughout the 20th century (Kendi, 2012), higher education institutions have begun being called out for their long-standing racist and classist practices that lead to disparate student outcomes (Milem et al., 2005; Willison et al., 2016; Yosso et al., 2009).

Despite the increased recognition that most higher education climates are, at best, unwelcoming and, at worst, harmful to first-generation, economically marginalized, and BIPOC students, institutions have struggled—or chosen not—to adjust. For example, to this day most retention programming at higher education institutions is based on Tinto’s (1975, 1993) theory of college student integration. This theory states students are more likely to complete their degrees if they integrate early, both socially and academically, into their college communities. Based on this premise, retention programming almost solely emphasizes institutional integration, with little attention to maintaining the connections between students and their existing cultures and communities of support, both of which have been found to be essential for the psychological well-being and academic persistence of first-generation, economically marginalized, and BIPOC students (Rendón et al., 2000; Valentine et al., 2001). Perhaps as a result of this narrow approach to retention programming, graduation rates for underrepresented students have remained largely unchanged for the past four decades, with Asian and White students obtaining bachelor’s degrees at rates nearly 1.5 times greater than Black and Hispanic students (Shapiro et al., 2017), and economically advantaged students graduating at rates four times greater than their economically marginalized peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).
1.2 | The need for and structure of community-based college access and success programs

Although the histories of individual CAS vary, they predominantly originate from a desire to address the long-standing educational disparities and lack of institutional support for historically under- and mis-served students. The majority of these organizations began with the aim of targeting college access, providing support to economically marginalized, first-generation, and/or students of color who were not being effectively guided in their post-secondary preparation and planning by supports within secondary school settings. More specifically, many CAS arose in communities within high-poverty school districts that lacked the resources (i.e., personnel, postsecondary relationships) to provide adequate counseling to students about higher education opportunities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Such a lack of school-based support is typically less consequential in wealthier communities, as parents or relatives often have their own experience with the college application process or can afford private college coaches or tutors to guide students. However, in economically-marginalized communities, families often rely almost exclusively on overtaxed resources in their schools for college preparation (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). With such formal systems of support unavailable, many CAS grew out of grassroots community efforts to provide culturally-relevant support services in out-of-school settings (Smith et al., 2012).

1.2.1 | What community-based college access and success programs do

Although all CAS have the shared mission to support the postsecondary access and success of under- and mis-served students, considerable variability exists in their structures. This variability is largely due to the fact that most CAS grew out of community-specific needs and therefore have different foci. For example, some CAS start working with students in middle school to help them gain admission to more competitive high schools so they will be more likely to receive college scholarships and attend more selective postsecondary institutions. Others focus predominantly on financial coaching and support so students can attend and graduate from college without unnecessary debt. Still, others emphasize holistic student preparation and exposure to college campuses so students are prepared to navigate postsecondary climates (Case, 2021).

Despite the variability across CAS, certain similarities do seem to exist. To support postsecondary access, most CAS provide some form of SAT/ACT tutoring, college application workshops, college visits, and support applying for and understanding financial aid packages (Reed, 2017). Such programming is often undertaken to avoid under-matching, a phenomenon in which underserved students with impressive credentials either do not apply for or are not matched with competitive postsecondary institutions. As a result, these students attend either less prestigious institutions or choose not to attend at all (Hoxby & Avery, 2012), leaving them with lower earning potential in the long run (Jump, 2019). To support college success, CAS often provide in-person or virtual mentoring/coaching, remind students about financial aid and other important deadlines, and foster peer connections, all to ensure that once students have enrolled in a college or university, they have the support they need to persist (Case, 2021).

Central to most CAS are relationships. CAS staff often prioritize the development of safe, supportive relationships so their first-generation, economically marginalized, and/or BIPOC students have a trusted touchstone they can turn to about college. In addition, many CAS work hard to foster relationships with their students’ caregivers with the understanding that families indeed play a crucial role in student success. Furthermore, many CAS also focus on developing relationships with universities and the broader community to connect students with support from multiple sources. Such relationships are prioritized based on the understanding that the students served by CAS are more likely to face discrimination at college than their more affluent White peers (e.g., Hynes & Doyle, 2009) and may, therefore, require additional support. As such, most CAS staff are trained to recognize discrimination that jeopardizes educational equity and see themselves as responsible for breaking through obstacles their students face in formal education systems as a result of systemic racism and classism. In doing so, CAS
continue to be a vital community resource in extinguishing the inequities in college admissions and increasing the persistence of vulnerable students while there (Baldridge, 2019).

1.3 Impact of COVID-19 on postsecondary access and success

In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, schools, colleges, and organizations had to make dramatic shifts in their programming. Organizations and schools alike struggled to maintain contact with their students and families as their typical reliance on in-person communication was no longer possible (Obrohta, 2020). Previously ignored inequities related to technology access also became spotlighted. Across the country, as schools and universities moved online in March 2020, students from lower-income areas were unable to engage in learning opportunities or complete their coursework as a result of unreliable internet or lack of access to devices. On the other hand, wealthier students and families had all of the resources they needed to continue learning—reliable wireless internet, laptops, and access to private tutors that could make up for lost time and material (King & Gaudiano, 2020).

Furthering the divide, COVID-19 highlighted the differences in school and family resources across racial and economic lines. Because more than 90% of public school funding comes from state and local taxes, with local property taxes making up the most significant portion, the underfunding of minority-serving school districts in high-poverty areas was magnified as these schools struggled to respond to the pandemic (Semuels, 2016). Whereas better resourced schools were able to seamlessly transition to online learning because of well-established infrastructures (Miller, 2020), students in lower-income districts were left without resources to provide virtual educational support and activities (King & Gaudiano, 2020). As a result, almost immediately educators started seeing lower attendance in their primary and secondary classrooms amongst their economically marginalized students (e.g., An, 2021).

For colleges, COVID-19 rapidly turned the admissions process upside-down. Colleges, especially at the administrative level, tend to make changes gradually with a lot of forethought and preparation (Smith, 2020). However, they did not have time to prepare for the pandemic and the havoc it would wreak on the typical application process. With a significant portion of students lacking standardized test scores, admissions offices had less quantitative data to compare students (Gold, 2020). Furthermore, students’ grade point averages became even further unstandardized as some schools switched to pass/fail courses starting in the Spring 2020 semester. Extracurricular activities, as well, became less informative for admissions personnel as the pandemic diminished opportunities for students to participate in new or ongoing activities. As a result, some colleges were left asking applicants to submit whatever materials they had or to complete previously unrequired materials such as video responses to questions. These changes again highlighted inequities. Students who relied on their schools for reliable internet access and computers were left scrambling to find ways to submit materials; students who could not access their college counselors due to typical high caseloads in high-poverty schools (EdTrust, 2019), were unable to receive guidance on how to navigate changes to college admissions. Within this context, CAS became even more important for the first-generation, economically marginalized, and/or BIPOC students they served, as they helped combat the longstanding and acute challenges the pandemic revealed. Research is just beginning to explore the efforts of these community-based organizations in protecting students and families from the pandemic and the lessons that can be learned from those efforts. The current study is an attempt to continue and grow this line of inquiry.

2 CURRENT STUDY

The purpose of the current study is twofold: first, we aim to name and uplift the efforts CAS undertook to support students and families throughout the pandemic; second, given that pandemics on the scale of COVID-19 are predicted to become more likely in the next several decades (Penn, 2021), we also seek to identify lessons that can
be learned from those efforts so youth-serving organizations are better prepared to respond to future programming interruptions. As such, the study was guided by three main research questions: (1) What challenges did CAS face as a result of COVID-19? (2) How did organizations respond to those challenges? and (3) How can organizational responses be used to inform youth program preparation for the future?

3 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 | Procedures

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (IRB-2020-595), organizational participants were recruited from the publicly available membership lists of the National Partnership for Educational Access (NPEA) and the National College Attainment Network (NCAN). NPEA is a membership organization aimed at bringing together individuals, organizations, and institutions that support educational access and college and career success for underserved students. NPEA’s membership list currently includes 167 organizational members. NCAN seeks to close postsecondary attainment gaps for all students by providing member organizations with professional development, networking, and resources. More than 450 community-based nonprofits, public and charter schools, foundations, and youth mentoring programs make up NCAN’s membership list.

The research team, which was comprised of faculty, doctoral students, and undergraduate students, reviewed the membership lists and selected member organizations that met four inclusion criteria, including that the organization: (a) is community based, meaning it is not affiliated with a particular school or college; (b) has a mission to support college access and/or success; (c) provides direct services to students; and (d) had a publicly accessible email address on their website. Organizations that were members of both NCAN and NPEA were included only once. A total of 181 organizations met inclusion criteria.

Once the recruitment list was finalized, the first author sent a recruitment email to all of the organizations. The recruitment email included a description of the study and a link to the online survey. The email also stated that organizations that completed the survey would be compensated with a $25 gift card. Two rounds of follow-up emails were sent to those organizations that had not yet participated, each approximately one week apart.

3.2 | Organizational participants

A total of 58 organizations participated in the study. These organizations were diverse in their locations, sizes, populations served, and services provided. Organizations were located in 25 states, with the greatest representation of organizations in California (n = 8) and Illinois (n = 6). On average, the organizations served 2333 students annually, however, the size of student populations ranged tremendously across organizations, from 2 to 20,000. Considerable variability also existed in the ages of students served, ranging from elementary school students through adult learners. However, in keeping with the composition of most college access and success programs, the majority of programs indicated they served middle school, high school, and/or college students. With the exception of two organizations that described serving predominantly white students, all of the organizations in the study specifically served students of color, with 33 stating they served Black/African American students, 32 stating they served Latinx/Hispanic students, and 8 stating they served Asian students. Several other organizations described themselves to be “open to all students” (n = 5), “minority-serving” (n = 8) or as serving “diverse” (n = 12) students. In addition, almost all of the organizations described serving predominantly or exclusively “lower income” students (n = 49), with the remaining organizations indicating they served “low to middle income” students (n = 4), were “open to all students” (n = 2), or were “open to all students but predominantly served lower income” students (n = 3).
Virtually all of the organizations indicated they provided a variety of different services to students, including financial ($n = 28$), mental health/socioemotional ($n = 24$), career ($n = 37$), academic/tutoring ($n = 28$), or college advising ($n = 49$). Other services provided by the organizations included “fitness/coaching,” “internship placement,” “academic classes/summer school,” “test [i.e., SAT/ACT] preparation,” “college tours,” and “mentoring.” Regarding services provided to caregivers, 19 organizations indicated they provided no specific caregiver services. However, the remaining organizations described providing a range of services to caregivers, including everything from sharing resources via program websites or texts, to conducting workshops on the college application process and financial aid, to providing full wrap-around services including transportation, childcare, mental health support, food, and more.

### 3.3 Measures

The online survey sent to organizations included the informed consent form as well as the survey questions. The informed consent form described the study as intending to “explore how community-based college access and success programs are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.” The form additionally informed participants that: (1) their participation involves filling out a one-time online survey that should take no more than 15 min to complete, (2) no more than minimal risks are anticipated from study participation, (3) their data would be stored on a secure online server accessible only to the research team members and findings would be presented only in aggregate with no organizational names used, (4) they can discontinue participation at any time without penalty, and (5) they would be incentivized for their participation with a $25 electronic gift card. Participants were also provided contact information for the PI should they have questions at any time during survey completion, which several organizations utilized. Thirty-four open- and close-ended questions then gathered information from participating organizations on five topics: (1) organizational demographics, (2) challenges faced as a result of the pandemic, (3) how they responded to those challenges, (4) how frequent and in what ways the organization has communicated with students and caregivers since stay-at-home measures were announced, and (5) whether the organization has sought new funding or distributed existing funding differently as a result of the pandemic.

#### 3.3.1 Organizational demographics

Seven questions gathered data about the organization’s name, the number and demographics of students served annually (e.g., “How would you describe the race/ethnicity of students you typically serve?”), and the types of services they typically (i.e., before the pandemic) provided to both students and caregivers. To gather data about student services, the survey asked respondents to indicate which of five listed student services they offered (financial, mental health/socioemotional, career, academic/tutoring, and college advising) in addition to providing space for respondents to describe additional student services not listed. One open-ended question [e.g., “What type of services or resources do you typically (i.e., before COVID-19) offer to the parents/caretakers of students (if none, write N/A)?”] was used to gather data about services provided to parents.

#### 3.3.2 Challenges due to pandemic

Three open-ended questions inquired about challenges the organization, staff, and students have faced as a result of the pandemic (e.g., “What challenges has your organization faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic?” “What concerns have staff members expressed regarding COVID-19?” “What concerns have the students you serve expressed regarding COVID-19?”).
3.3.3 | Organizational response to pandemic challenges

To gather data regarding how organizations have responded to pandemic-related challenges, 11 open- and close-ended questions inquired about how the organization responded to organizational, staff, and student concerns (e.g., "How has your organization responded to staff concerns?") and how their services have changed as a result of the pandemic (e.g., "Have new services emerged for students due to the COVID-19 pandemic?").

3.3.4 | Communication with students and caregivers

Six open- and close-ended questions (three about students and three about caregivers) were used to gather information about how the organization was communicating with students and caregivers during the pandemic, the frequency of those communications, and the predominant content of those communications. To understand how organizations were communicating, respondents were asked to select all of the communication modalities they had been using from a list of seven modalities (e.g., N/A, email, phone, social media, text messages, video chat, and letters/mail). Respondents were then asked to indicate how frequently their organizations used each of those modalities on a 5-point scale from "Once a month" to "Once a day." One open-ended question ("What was the content of the communication with students/caregivers?") was used to understand the topics organizations were communicating with families about.

3.3.5 | Application for and distribution of funding

To understand if and/or how organizations had adjusted how they apply for and distribute funding as a result of COVID-19, seven open- and close-ended questions asked about three topics: (1) availability of emergency funding to students before and as a result of COVID-19 (e.g., "Has [emergency] funding been available for student use during the COVID-19 pandemic? Please elaborate"); (2) changes made by the organization about how students are able to use emergency funds as a result of COVID-19 ("Have you made any changes to how students can use the funding as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic? Please elaborate"); and (3) whether the organization has applied for and been successful in securing additional funding (e.g., "Has your organization sought additional funding to support your efforts in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?").

3.4 | Data analysis

Once data collection was finalized, close-ended questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics and frequencies and open-ended questions were analyzed utilizing thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a flexible approach, allowing for the inductive or deductive analysis of qualitative data to identify common themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Given that no a priori theory was being used to guide the analysis, the first, second, third, and fifth authors utilized an inductive approach following the five phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the authors familiarized ourselves with the data by reading and rereading the open-ended responses for each question in their entirety. After we felt sufficiently comfortable with the data, we generated initial codes for notable features of the data and collated the data relevant to each code. Third, to provide a detailed account of data relevant to each question, we pulled together all of the codes and exemplar data relevant to that question. Once gathered, these codes and exemplars were checked to ensure they made sense in the context of the entire data set. Finally, we selected examples from the data that vividly captured the nuances related to the codes for each question.
To explore whether results differed depending on organizational characteristics (size, location, and population served), the second author divided the organizations according to organizational characteristics (e.g., 600 or fewer students \(N = 30\) vs. 601 or more students \(N = 28\); those that served at least some college students \(N = 38\) vs. those that exclusively served younger students \(N = 20\); east coast \(N = 18\) vs. west coast \(N = 9\) vs. midwest \(N = 21\) vs. south \(N = 10\)) and then, drawing on principles of encompassing comparisons (Tilly, 1984), examined whether the codes differed across organizational type.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Challenges due to the pandemic

Every organization, regardless of their size, location, or populations served, reported significant challenges as a result of the pandemic for the organization as a whole, as well as for their students and staff. Many of these challenges were interrelated. While state and federal orders and guidelines required programs to change their programming to continue serving students and families, organizations also reported needing and wanting to broaden or reconfigure services to meet the increased and emergent needs of their students and families. However, making such changes put significant strain on staff members and the organizations.

4.1.1 | Challenges for students and families

All of the organizations shared they were especially concerned about the challenges their students and families were facing. These challenges were significant and diverse, spanning from finances to technology to physical and mental health to educational possibilities.

Financial challenges
Likely influenced by the economic status of the populations they served, many organizations described the increased financial challenges their students and families were facing due to caregiver death, caregiver or student job loss, or an inability to access government benefits because of family immigration status. These financial challenges either created new needs or magnified existing needs, which resulted in organizations sharing that many of their students and families were "not having their basic needs met," including facing food insecurity and the "inability to buy essential personal items, medicines, and...pay rent." For students in college, these financial challenges also meant they were unsure about how they would "travel home" from college or whether they would be able to "pay for college given that they and their families cannot work." As a result, organizations described how their students were working more hours to support their families or assuming childcare duties for younger siblings so their caregivers could take on additional work shifts.

Technological challenges
Organizations also described an array of specific technological challenges their students were facing as a result of the transition to online learning. For example, one organization shared, "Many students, particularly those who we prioritize serving (students on Free or Reduced Lunch, students of color, students receiving support for special ed or ELL), don't have reliable access to technology to engage in remote learning and remote advising support." Another organization described how most of their students have "limited to no technology or internet access at home." As a result, organizations shared their students did not have the capability to "complete assignments" or "get support" after stay-at-home orders mandated a transition to online learning. Although technological access was the predominant technology-related challenge organizations reported their students were facing, it was not the only one.
Multiple organizations across locations, sizes, and populations served also described the significant challenges their students were having in the “transition to online learning” due to a host of reasons including “technology fatigue,” “distractions faced in their home such as younger siblings or a chaotic household,” and also because additional support services students had relied on (e.g., tutoring, special education, school counselors, etc.) were not available remotely.

**Physical and mental health challenges**

According to the majority of the organizations included in the study, some of the most significant concerns of their students and families were with regard to their physical and mental health. Many organizations shared students had expressed fears of “getting COVID or someone in their family getting ill and passing away.” These fears were realized for many students, as organizations reported “many [students] have had contact with family members/friends who have had the virus.” For students away at college, these fears also included wondering whether they would be able to return home from college to care for sick family members or return back to college in the fall if their family members were still struggling.

In addition to concerns about physical health, organizations reported their students and families were also facing considerable mental health challenges. For example, organizations described increased anxiety amongst students due to the uncertainty they were feeling about their futures. Organizations, especially those serving older students, also shared they had noticed more depression in their students because of the “boredom” and “loneliness” associated with remote learning as well as the grief many students felt due to lost opportunities such as “prom, graduation, college signing day” and more. As a result, organizations reported they had noticed a significant decrease in students’ “motivation” and “willingness to engage” with both academic assignments and support services.

**Educational challenges**

Given the purpose of the organizations included in the study is to support educational access and success, it was not surprising that all of the organizations described significant educational challenges created by the pandemic for their students. Regardless of whether organizations were serving middle schoolers, higher schoolers, college students, or adult learners, organizations almost unanimously shared their students were both “concerned with how they will finish this year” and “uncertain” about what their educational futures might hold.

For organizations serving high school students, these concerns were largely focused on finishing the school year and continuing to prepare for college even though it was not clear how college as a whole and college admissions, in particular, would change as a result of COVID. For example, several organizations mentioned that circumstances beyond students’ control (e.g., canceled ACT/SAT, difficulty getting letters of recommendation, being unable to demonstrate upward trajectory in GPA due to the elimination of grades) were compounding the stress students were already feeling regarding their futures. In addition, several organizations shared at length about the anxiety students were feeling about their “high school to college transition.” These anxieties were magnified because many higher education institutions had not disclosed their plans for the Fall 2020 semester. As a result, information about “financial aid and other scholarships that students are dependent on to attend” was not available.

One of the many reported fears from students was that “they will not be allowed to move on campus for Fall [2020] semester and may have to consider an alternative to their original college decision.” As higher education institutions also struggled to grapple with the uncertainty of the future, students were left in the dark with no concrete answers. Organizations reported this uncertainty, coupled with the aforementioned financial concerns, forced some students to preemptively decide to “not attend their first choice college, [decide to] take a gap year,... or attend the local community college for fear that they will be paying full fees for on-line learning.”

For students already in college, organizations reported their anxiety tended to focus on their academic progress. Programs reported their “college students have been concerned with online learning and communicating with
their professors" so their academic progress and growth are not impeded. More specifically, the interruption of traditional schooling forced students to "return to disruptive environments and no longer hav[e] a more independent daily routine, [which] is stressful." For graduating college seniors and adult learners, these concerns were amplified by additional worries about finding a job or internship in the midst of a pandemic.

4.1.2 | Challenges for staff

Many of the challenges described by staff were tied to the challenges students and families were facing. For example, virtually all organizations shared their staff members had expressed concern about the "health and well-being" of the students and families they serve, as well as about students' "economic circumstances" and their ability to manage schoolwork while also working more or providing additional childcare for younger siblings. In addition, nearly all organizations also reported their staff were particularly concerned with students' educational futures. Organizations shared specific staff concerns, including "the academic losses that our students will incur as a result of 3 month[s] of distant learning" and that "students who were already coming from underperforming school districts [may get] even further behind." For those staff members working with students in the high school to college transition, they also worried about "losing seniors from the high school to college pipeline as concerns about family finances and job loss become more prevalent."

All of these concerns also seemed to increase staff worries about whether they were doing enough to support their students. According to many diverse organizations, staff members were feeling "frustrated" and guilty they cannot "serve [students] in the same capacity" in a virtual format as they had in the past. These feelings were compounded for staff members because of the difficulties they were having staying connected to and in communication with their students. As one organization stated, "we've lost touch with a lot of students since moving to remote learning," a phenomenon they attributed to the fact that students are "tired of the virtual landscape so they're less inclined to join calls/virtual meetings." As a result of this disconnection, staff members were especially worried they "may not be perceived as 'accessible'" or would miss warning signs because "not seeing [students] in-person means we are not necessarily 'seeing' them fully."

Alongside these concerns about students and families, organizations of varying sizes also reported how staff members shared worries about their own health and well-being. For example, multiple organizations stated staff members were concerned about their risk of contracting COVID-19 and were, therefore, "hesitant to return to the office" because they were not assured of the "safety of [the] office environment." Organizations also described the many concerns staff members had disclosed about their emotional well-being, including the "exhaust[ion]" staff experience as a result of being "on zoom for a large amount of their workday," the "social isolation" staff are confronting as a result of stay-at-home orders, and staff "burnout" because of how much they are working, their efforts to "balance working from home with personal obligations," and their feelings that they are "not doing enough for our [students]."

4.1.3 | Challenges for organizations

Regardless of the number of students they served, responding to student and staff issues created a number of challenges for organizations. For example, several organizations that served both larger (i.e., 601 or more) or smaller (i.e., 600 or fewer) groups of students described that to keep serving students while following federal and state guidelines and balancing staff concerns, they had to overhaul their service delivery model, which required them to change or cancel parts of their programming. Most of the described changes involved taking what was typically in-person individual or group services and quickly adapting them for on-line delivery: "Most of our programming is highly interactive and group based; very little of it translated easily to a virtual format. As a result, we had to
re-visualize how to accomplish each one of our program goals.” Additionally, several programs also described the challenge of trying to implement new programming (e.g., “helping coach students with issues around remote learning,” providing emergency funds, etc.) as a result of emerging student and family needs.

For established organizations that served 600 or fewer students, devising new programming to address developing needs was both desirable and feasible. These organizations spoke of feeling as though it was their responsibility to broaden services to provide funding and basic necessities or to increase informational and mental health resources for their students and families. For newer organizations serving 600 or fewer students and the majority of organizations serving 601 or more students, however, introducing new services was not possible for a number of reasons, including because they decided to “stay within our lane,” “lack[ed] infrastructure across the state to do so” or could not put changes into place as a result of funding concerns. As one organization stated, “while we also wish we could help better address the challenges families are experiencing, so many of these things (job security, health, etc.) fall out of our area of expertise”; another noted, “we don’t feel best positioned to help students with basic needs (food, shelter, and tech), or with mental health needs as those things require either resources or training that we don’t have.” Further, organizations noted they were unable to add additional services due to limited funding (e.g., “the main barrier to offering new services is funding”) or staff bandwidth (“staff capacity makes it challenging to create a full range of services”). The latter was particularly noted for organizations that served 600 or fewer students, which depended heavily on services from volunteers.

Beyond the hurdles organizations faced responding to student and staff challenges, organizations also confronted a range of challenges to their survival and stability. Many of these challenges were financial in nature. Within the data, staff members from organizations that served a bigger population (i.e., 601+ students) mentioned more financial limitations and their concerns about being able to continue their work. Organizations spoke about “suspended or canceled spring fundraisers,” “loss of grant funds,” and “concerns about finances due to state and institutional budget cuts.” These concerns were amplified because of how reliant these organizations are forced to be on donations and grants. For example, one organization spoke about their “fear that we won’t be able to deliver the numbers we promised in grant applications,” which was related to concerns in other organizations about their “ability to retain grants and funding that help us survive as a small non-profit organization.” Another organization shared, “[our] traditional funders have lowered their available monetary contribution limits or changed their focus during COVID-19. This has created salary cuts, budget constraints, and overall concern.” As a result, even amidst their efforts to support students, families, and staff members, organizations were also facing “financial uncertainty” that could not only jeopardize the “financial health of the organization” but also determine whether they will have to “reduce [staff] salaries” or “layoff” staff members. Some of these particular financial challenges seemed to be further complicated by the difficulties organizations experienced communicating their financial realities to board members. As one organization mentioned, there is a “disconnect between our moneyed boards and the harsh realities of what is happening in our community.” As a result of this disconnect, some organizations described feeling unsupported by their boards as they attempted to navigate these unprecedented circumstances.

### 4.2 Organizational response to pandemic challenges

Despite all the barriers organizations were facing to continue providing programming, almost unanimously organizations across locations, sizes, and populations served described putting forth tremendous effort to respond to pandemic challenges. These responses were multifaceted, including everything from the previously alluded to changes and additions to programming, to increased communication with students, families, and partners, to revisions of organizational practices and policies, to securing additional funding. For the most part, such efforts seemed to be supported by organizational boards. However, that was not always the case. As one organization shared, “The board...do not seem to see the urgency of the moment. Staff has to constantly bring issues up and the board has responded in what the staff has seen as a tone-deaf fashion;” another noted, “besides an email regarding
a [Paycheck Protection Program] PPP loan, we have not had much response [from the board] on how [concerns] will be addressed to save staff jobs and ultimately our work with students." Nonetheless, even organizations without board support took it upon themselves to meet the demands of the moment, even without the financial security or staff resources to do so.

4.2.1 | Responses involving changes to programming

As previously mentioned, all of the organizations described making significant changes to how their programming was delivered, moving from predominantly face-to-face services to exclusively virtual services. Such a transition to digital service delivery required considerable creativity on the part of organizations. Organizations described using a variety of technologies (Zoom, Google Hangout, Facebook Live, Twitter, blogs, etc.) to reimagine how they could continue connecting with their students and families in an authentic and accessible manner. For example, one organization noted they started "providing one-on-one services by phone, email, and Zoom. We're also conducting a weekly Twitter Tuesday chat, Webinar Wednesday, and Facebook Live Friday." Another organization mentioned they "created a website/blog that pushes out content daily for students. We created Instagram accounts to reach students with information and drive them to the website. We have been using Instagram Live to provide virtual engagement opportunities for students to ask questions. We continue to provide counseling via phone, FaceTime, Zoom, and other forms of technology." In addition, organizations also described transitioning tutoring, wellbeing checks, counseling sessions, fitness activities (for programs that infuse sports into their mission), workshops for students and families, college advising, ACT/SAT prep, and FAFSA completion all to a virtual format.

In transitioning their services online, many organizations not only sustained their services, but also "expanded our support" by increasing the frequency or duration of existing services. In particular, several organizations mentioned they "super bolstered our social services," either by expanding the hours of in-house counselors or collaborating with "partner mental health agencies to produce content around mental health and taking care of one's self in this uncertain time." Other organizations also mentioned they worked with college admissions personnel to "hold webinars with...schools that we know our students have been accepted to, to help ease [students'] anxieties."

For some organizations, making such changes was fairly straightforward, as they already used certain virtual tools as a supplement to their in-person programming. However, for the vast majority of organizations, the transition to virtual programming was extremely laborious. Organizations described having to purchase new digital apps or platforms, train staff, students, and families on how to use unfamiliar technologies, redesign curriculum to be effective through a virtual platform, and purchase new technology (i.e., laptops and mobile hotspots) for staff and students so they could access the virtual services.

4.2.2 | Responses involving new programming

When asked how they have responded to COVID-19 challenges, one organization shared, "we're us[ing] the resources in our facility to respond to the needs of our students by doing all the things families need us to do." In reviewing the new programming organizations put into place, that statement seemed entirely accurate. In addition to creating new programming to support the educational access and success of their students (which is the aim of all the organizations), organizations also spoke to the creation of a host of wrap-around services designed to enable their students and families to survive and thrive during the pandemic.

New educational programming

Without exception, organizations created new educational support programming for students in response to stay-at-home orders. The nature of these services varied across organizations, though those variations were not based
on organizational characteristics. For example, some used existing staff to create new opportunities for online academic tutoring, study sessions, tips on how to “make the most from remote learning,” and classes (e.g., “an online coding program”); others partnered with other community organizations to bring historically unavailable services (e.g., online tutoring) to their middle, high school, and college students. In addition, organizations described a variety of creative additions to their programming to help support their own and other students, including “educational care packages that contained grade-appropriate learning materials,” “curriculums for younger siblings during our online class times such that older sibling could fully engage,” and “launching a statewide college advising hotline to serve any high school student in the state.”

Because many of the organizations were intended to support students to and through college, additional college transition programming was also created by organizations that served high school or college populations. For example, organizations described creating digital content to push out information relevant to making a final college decision and how to “compare financial aid packages,” hosting “college decision day town halls for scholars and families” to celebrate milestones, “partnering with higher education institutions to produce a series of conversations around ‘what’s next’” in higher education, and making “personalized phone calls to all Senior scholars to understand where they are in their college decision process.”

Some of the organizations also expanded services for those students who were graduating from college. In addition to creating online celebrations for graduates, several organizations shared they had created webinars and workshops titled “Job Searching in Uncertain Times” and “Preparing for a Tough Job Market” to address student concerns and to “ensure our Scholars are staying on track to succeed in critical professional milestones.” Organizations also described “encouraging graduating seniors to attend virtual career fair[s]” so they can stay on track with their job search.

New socioemotional programming
Beyond the educational and occupational programming organizations provided, most also created new programming to support the social and emotional needs of their students. Organizations described hosting online events intended to “help [students] socialize with others and pass the time.” Amongst these services were creative ideas such as “grade-specific Google Hangout calls, game nights, and study sessions,” “weekly hangouts for students of different grades to continue socializing,” “virtual field trips and community service opportunities for all students,” and instituting “peer mentorship program[s]” to keep students connected with others. Beyond these social activities, multiple organizations also expanded or instituted mental health programming, which several described as “not in our normal scope of work” but nonetheless essential given the increased “anxiety” and “depression” they had noticed in their students. Several organizations shared they had opened up “additional online therapy sessions” and “online mental health workshops” with their in-house mental health providers. Others noted efforts such as sharing “self-care/general mental health tips,” “free mediation and anxiety apps,” and even “a TikTok on what our team does to practice self-care.” One organization also created “various online activities aimed at creating safe spaces for various communities (e.g., LGBTQ college students) still on campus.” Interestingly, organizations that served 600 or fewer students were more likely to report the creation and implementation of new services aimed at “doing more social-emotional work with [the] students.” If the 600-or-fewer serving organization reported not creating or implementing new socioemotional services it was because “we are very holistic already and we have had our hands full adjusting our programming to a virtual format.”

New tangible support
All of the aforementioned new programming is substantial in and of itself. However, almost all of the organizations involved in the study did not limit their pandemic response to changed or expanded student programming. Rather, the majority of organizations also provided tangible support to meet student and family needs that were magnified by the pandemic. Interestingly, no relationship was observed between organizational characteristics (e.g., size, location, and population served) and the provision of tangible support. Instead, organizations of all sizes and types
noted that, if they had the staff and funding to do so, tangible support was provided. Much of this tangible support was financial. Organizations noted that although it was “outside of our normal mission,” they created “emergency” or “flash” grants their students and families could access. These funds seemed to be available to support a range of student and family needs, including everything from educational-related costs such as college “enrollment deposits,” “technology,” and last minute “travel home from college campuses” to everyday needs such as “food,” “gas,” “bills,” and “rent.”

In addition to money, several organizations across types also shared they were providing other forms of tangible support. Given the transition to online education and work, disparities in internet and technology access became especially dangerous for students. As such, in addition to giving students money to purchase necessary technology, most organizations also described loaning or purchasing laptops, tablets, mobile hotspots, and data plans for students. Organizations also shared they either began “providing weekly groceries to our families” or expanded “food banks” so caregivers could “keep their families fed.” Some organizations also provided masks or other personal protective equipment so caregivers could keep themselves and their families safe.

**New caretaker support**

Support for families also extended beyond tangible resources. Several organizations across sizes, locations, and populations served created new programming to support caretakers during COVID-19. Like the student programming, this new caretaker programming varied across organizations but included a range of services. Organizations created online caretaker meetings and webinars to provide “updates on issues surrounding COVID-19” and “support on parenting during this time.” “Virtual parent/caretaker lunches” and “check-ins with parents” were also instituted to “check in with parents about things like basic needs and general welfare, which is not something we would do under normal circumstances.” Many of the organizations ensured all of these materials and meetings were available in both English and Spanish to reflect the language preferences of their caretakers, especially since in-person translation services were not available.

When organizations were not able to provide services or resources themselves, they also described “consciously check[ing]...ins with parents about things like basic needs and general welfare, which is not something we would do under normal circumstances” and then connecting students and families to community resources. For example, one organization mentioned they posted “lists of city-wide resources that our families can utilize” on their website. Included in the lists created by multiple organizations were not just resources related to educational needs but also to “life in general,” including “free internet, how to get food if food security is an issue, how to get help with utilities,” “employment resources,” and how to “navigate legal issue around rent delays and preventing eviction” so families “are aware of the supports available to them.”

**4.2.3 | Responses involving communication**

Much of how organizations responded to COVID-19 seemed to be through communication. In the survey, 94% of organizations across sizes, locations, and populations served reported communicating with students at least weekly since the start of the pandemic, with the majority relying on email (78%), text (74%), and/or social media (68%) to reach students. More than half of organizations (56%) also indicated they were communicating at least weekly with caregivers, predominantly relying on email (38%) or social media (28%). The content of this communication largely reflected the changes or additions to programming mentioned above. For example, one organization shared, “we have been doing a lot of individualized outreach to students and families through multiple methods—primarily via phone—trying to support student postsecondary planning needs, but also to check in on general welfare and access.” Similarly, another organization mentioned they have instituted “increased touch points” with both students and caregivers to ensure the organization is familiar with and responsive to family needs.
In addition to increased communication with students and families, organizations also shared they had more communication with partners, board members, and funders. For example, organizations described their efforts to communicate with schools and higher education partners to stay up to date with decisions and encourage those partners to be “active” and “transparent” in their communication with students and families. Multiple organizations also described their efforts to maintain “open lines of communication with the main decision-makers,” including “board members” and “leadership” to ensure those individuals are “up to date about our [students]” and services. Further, a few organizations also described their efforts to be “proactive” in communicating with their funders “so that if we don’t hit numbers, we have at least shared our...new virtual approach” to hopefully “continue to receive funding.”

Finally, organizations of all types also described the steps they had taken to increase communication with staff members. Several organizations shared they had either maintained or increased the frequency of their staff meetings to make up for the casual connections staff members make when working in person. Many organizations also mentioned they had expanded the scope of their meetings with staff members to cover not only “productivity” but also “personal well-being.” Further, some organizations also described increased efforts both to be “transparent” with staff members about organizational decisions and plans and to hear from staff members about how the organization should respond to COVID, including “what staff feel should be paused/canceled, and what they’d like taken off their plate during this time.”

### 4.2.4 | Responses involving organizational practice and policy adjustments

Although multiple organizations described general adjustments they had made to their practices and policies as a result of COVID-19 (i.e., “developing a coronavirus response plan,” “updating protocols for if...staff, scholars, [or] family...are sick,” “extending goal setting and calendar planning,” etc.), most of the adjustments made to organizational policies and procedures seemed to focus on the needs of staff members. In particular, the majority of organizations stated they had worked to provide staff members with more resources while at the same time implementing more flexible work policies.

Some of the resources provided to staff were tangible, including “technology training” or a “budget for each staff member to buy supplies” so staff could “function remotely from home.” Other resources were intended to support overall staff well-being. Organizations described providing staff members with “supports for mental and emotional health,” including “ensuring staff are taking PTO/mental health days,” and hosting “mental health awareness sessions[s]” and “presentation[s] from local expert[s] on managing anxiety.” In addition, several organizations also developed “creative social events” for staff, including “virtual happy hours,” to ensure staff were staying connected.

Beyond these resources, organizations of all types also described changes to organizational policies during COVID, the most common of which was increasing the flexibility of staff work hours. Several organizations shared they had “reduc[ed] staff hours” and “gave staff more days off” to guard against burnout. Organizations also noted they tried to provide staff with more “autonomy” so they could “organize their work schedule in a way that can accommodate for the needs of their families.” These adjustments were often coupled with “more flexibility with expectations” so staff members did not have to worry about being evaluated poorly if their productivity declined.

### 4.2.5 | Responses involving securing funding

A few of the organizations included in the study were able to secure “donations” to support their COVID-19 response. However, for the most part, organizations across all sizes, locations, and populations served described not knowing up front how they were going to fund the adjustments they made to their programming to continue
supporting staff, students, and families during the pandemic. As a result, alongside their efforts to reform student and family programming and respond to staff needs, organizations also shared they were actively and vigorously seeking out funding opportunities. Several of these organizations stated they applied for pandemic-specific funding such as through the PPP grants or the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Others, however, “requested additional funding from funders,” and “applied for all assistance available (grants, etc.)” to cover additional costs and compensate for “loss of revenue.”

5 | DISCUSSION

For decades, CAS have provided community-based, culturally-relevant support so BIPOC, first-generation, and/or economically marginalized students are not only admitted to well-matched postsecondary institutions, but also persist while there. This was no different during the COVID-19 pandemic, which presented CAS with unprecedented challenges in supporting students and their families. To date, the ways CAS responded to the pandemic, and the lessons that could be learned from those responses, have not been examined. As such, the purpose of the current study was to highlight the efforts of CAS in supporting students and families throughout the pandemic and to identify lessons that can be learned from those efforts so CAS and other youth-serving organizations are better prepared to respond to future programming interruptions.

The results of this study indicated that CAS, despite facing many challenges as a result of COVID-19 and regardless of their size, location, and populations served, persisted in supporting their students. To do so, most of the organizations prioritized their core values around building and maintaining relationships, which has been found to be integral to student persistence (e.g., Rendón et al., 2000). Indeed, many of the organizations went to great lengths to continue communicating with and hearing from their constituencies so they could modify programming according to community needs. For example, based on the expressed needs of students and their families, CAS of varying sizes, locations, and populations served expanded educational programming and provided tangible support such as technology and emergency funds directly to families. This community-first approach is in line with the history of CAS, which were largely established as grassroots efforts to provide culturally-relevant support for first-generation and marginalized college students (Case, 2021; Smith et al., 2012).

Although most of the responses CAS made to COVID-19 challenges cut across organizational types, some of the programmatic adjustments differed depending on the size of the organization in combination with funding and staff availability. For example, organizations that served 600 students or fewer were more likely to describe the addition of new socioemotional programming than organizations that served more students. These findings were expected in some ways but unexpected in others. With fewer students to serve, these organizations may have had fewer logistical challenges to individualizing programming based on student and family needs. At the same time, however, the smaller organizations in the study seemed to be particularly susceptible to staff and funding issues as they were often working with smaller budgets and were more reliant on volunteers.

Apart from differences related to offering socioemotional support, findings from the current study largely pointed to consistency across organizational responses. Such findings are in line with research on CAS overall, which suggest that despite variability in organizations, they are largely united in their overarching goal to support postsecondary access for their students through educational programming (such as SAT support), coaching, and mentoring (Reed, 2017). This shared goal appeared to remain the focus of most organizations throughout the pandemic. Even though organizations differed in the ways they approached socioemotional programming, they all spoke to increasing and adapting their educational programming. Some organizations even introduced new programming that was contextually based on students’ needs as a result of the pandemic, though this differed on resource availability of organizations. Results of the study therefore reinforce the fact that although CAS are varied, even in their responses to the pandemic they remained dedicated to supporting the educational and thus long-term career and financial well-being of their students (Jump, 2019).
5.1 Limitations of the current study

Results of the current study should be viewed in light of certain study limitations. First, CAS in the current study were recruited through memberships lists of national organizations related to postsecondary access. Joining these organizations requires an annual membership fee so it is possible that smaller organizations or those that have very limited budgets did not have the opportunity to participate in the study. Though this recruitment strategy was selected for specific reasons, it nonetheless may have resulted in a study sample that had more economic resources, and therefore could make more pandemic-related adjustments. Second, the sample represents only a portion of community-based CAS across the country, all of whom self-selected into the study. This self-selection may have resulted in a sample that was not only composed of organizations that were able to continue functioning during the pandemic but also those who were willing to share their responses to COVID-19 publicly. Finally, the positionality of the authors, and the bias that positionality could introduce into the study, should be acknowledged. All authors are members of a research team that regularly examines the role of community-based organizations (including CAS) in educational and occupational outcomes for first-generation, economically marginalized, and/or BIPOC students. As such, they all believe in the potential for community-based organizations to redress systemic racism and classism in formal educational systems and have a number of established partnerships with CAS and other youth-serving organizations across the country, some of whom chose to participate in the current study. These broader research aims and relationships may have affected how the authors read and interpreted the data, causing us to focus and therefore highlight the positive efforts of the CAS in the study.

5.2 Recommendations

Holding these limitations in mind, results of the study nonetheless highlight the enormous steps CAS took to support some of our most vulnerable students who not only continued facing well-documented barriers to post-secondary access and success but who also faced new challenges as a result of the pandemic. Given the histories and aims of most CAS in the United States, it is perhaps not surprising that all of the CAS included in the study stepped up to support students and families amidst the pandemic. After all, these organizations largely grew out of community needs and were specifically designed to respond to those community needs. Nonetheless, the challenges CAS faced, the steps they took to continue supporting existing constituent needs, and their efforts to respond to emergent needs, was inspiring. What is more, these efforts also point to possible steps CAS and other youth-serving community organizations can take to be better prepared for possible programming interruptions in the future.

All of the CAS reported significant challenges for their students, staff, and the organization as a whole as a result of state and federal stay-at-home guidelines that required CAS to transition from almost exclusively face-to-face programming to all-virtual programming. For some organizations, this transition was exceedingly difficult, as they did not have the infrastructure, technology, or expertise to rapidly and seamlessly go online. Many organizations also had to contend with the technological inequities their students faced to continue providing programming.

Given that both work and school are only predicted to move further online in the future (Govindarajan & Srivastava, 2020), CAS and other youth-serving community organizations may want to consider taking steps to prepare for such eventualities. At the organizational level, programs could consider designing curriculum using a hybrid model (Linder, 2017) whenever possible, which would enable them to plan for both face-to-face and online delivery and move more rapidly between these delivery methods. Organizations may also want to reflect on which of their student and family resources could be moved online either as electronically available documents or videos. Such content could still be delivered face-to-face when possible, as in-person content delivery certainly has its benefits. However, having the content also available online would not only enable constituents to access materials
when face-to-face interactions are prohibited, but would also increase the accessibility of the materials should students or caregivers not be able to attend in-person events due to work or other obligations.

Several of the organizations in the current study also reported that transitioning to online programming was complicated by the fact that many of their staff members lacked training in online platforms, virtual content delivery, and methods for engaging students online. This challenge was not necessarily surprising; engaging with students and conveying information online are, after all, unique and specific skill sets (Kearsley & Blomeyer, 2004) that require training. Therefore, to prepare for possible future interruptions to face-to-face interactions, organizations may consider supporting professional development opportunities for staff members so they can learn these remote instruction techniques.

Moving to virtual programming did not just hold challenges for organizations and staff members. Students as well were challenged by online interactions as a result of long-standing but often overlooked inequities in technological access. As the UN General Assembly (2016) resolution proclaimed, internet access should be considered a human right and therefore addressed at the national level. However, to date, massive inequities still exist in internet and technological access across economic groups in the United States (Vogels, 2021). Given how important technological access and proficiency is for educational success, CAS and other community youth-serving organizations may want to consider applying for grants or soliciting other funds to ensure all of their students have a reliable way to connect to the internet. While providing such resources may be beyond the scope of their missions and will add additional funding burdens in an already fraught financial landscape, providing students and their families with essential technology and internet access may go far in helping CAS support students to and through college.

In addition to the technological challenges the pandemic created for students, staff, and organizations, the majority of the CAS included in the current study also spoke to the significant challenges and resulting efforts they had to make to support the socioemotional well-being of their staff and students. The fact that students experienced profound decreases in their social and emotional health was, in some ways, to be expected—as previously noted, the pandemic eliminated many anticipated activities and celebration, stripped students of their social connections, and introduced new forms of family stress, corroding student mental health across the country. But the pandemic is not solely to blame for the socioemotional challenges of youth in the United States. For decades, adolescent mental health has been declining (CDC, 2021), accompanied by increased reports of isolation (Wang et al., 2017). CAS and other community youth-serving organizations should, therefore, think carefully about the ways their programming promotes socioemotional well-being amongst their students and brainstorm possible ways to centralize psychological health. For example, if organizations are not already doing so, they could consider partnering with local mental health professionals to provide training for staff and workshops for students and families. Internally, organizations could also work to decrease stigma around socioemotional challenges by normalizing discussions about social and psychological well-being.

Beyond students, CAS also reported how staff members struggled with their socioemotional well-being during the pandemic, which forced some organizations to institute new policies and procedures to prevent staff burnout. Though these efforts are admirable, organizations should reflect on how their typical policies and procedures support staff well-being. As individuals involved in a caring profession, staff members at CAS and other youth-serving organizations are especially susceptible to burnout and secondary trauma (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). Organizations should, therefore, establish policies that account for the high emotional burden of staff members. Such policies could maintain many of the changes instituted during the pandemic such as flexible work hours, available mental health days, and socialization opportunities. Organizations could also consider new procedures that centralize staff mental and social well-being.

Finally, most of the CAS who participated in the current study named funding as the most significant challenge created by the pandemic, and the challenge that was most difficult to address. This challenge is largely attributable to the fact that, within the United States, most community-based youth-serving organizations function as nonprofits, which not only requires them to seek external funds to deliver services, but also restricts how they can use
what revenue they do earn through fees or selling products (Zimmer, 2019). As a result of this required business model, and also due to the difficulties non-profits had securing emergency grants in the peak of the pandemic (e.g., Mirabella, 2021), many of the CAS in the current study had to use emergency or personal funds to pay for new or adjusted programming. Given the importance of these organizations in offsetting the systemic racism and classism embedded in formal educational systems within the United States, it is simply unacceptable that these organizations have to constantly function in a financially insecure manner. Therefore, now more than ever, community-based youth-serving organizations should be included in state and federal policy aimed at promoting youth development, which would enable them to receive governmental funds. In addition, as a nation, we should take the opportunity to recognize how essential CAS are to educational equity in the country and invest in them heavily.

6 | CONCLUSION

COVID-19 brought a halt to the functioning of many institutions, businesses, and organizations across the globe. The same is undeniably true for many CAS. However, results of the current study emphasize the invaluable work many CAS conducted during the pandemic. Not only did they undertake efforts that were beyond the scope and expertise of their missions and personnel to address the magnified and intensified inequities the pandemic created for families, but they did so despite not having upfront funding to support mandated programmatic adjustments. Nonetheless, they took on more responsibilities in supporting their constituents, understanding that their support could reduce or eliminate the stress of the pandemic on their students' educational trajectories. However, even as they worked to provide this invaluable support for their students, many CAS continued to report a need for increased funding and personnel to meet the new needs their students had. Now more than ever, these programs need formidable allies and support as they continue showing up for the communities they serve.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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