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College Access after COVID

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Commentary:

College Access after COVID



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College admissions was thrown for a series of losses over the last two years, requiring colleges to rethink everything from on-campus tours to high school visits to testing policies to how classes were run, and if they were run. For a profession known for making changes at a glacial pace, admissions offices took on a nimble approach to admissions that college access advocates hoped would benefit their clients.

In many ways, that's exactly what happened. Improvements in online tours and communications tools led to a greater individualization of the college recruitment process, an attribute especially important to many individuals in groups underrepresented at college. Their individual needs and histories are often vastly different from that of the "typical" college applicant, requiring more time, consideration, and assessment than colleges are used to giving an application. With COVID throwing so many traditional practices out of kilter, the time had come to consider if perhaps there was a better way to go about college admissions for underrepresented students, if not applicants

as a whole.

COVID is still with us, but a vast number of policy makers and colleges feel circumstances are right to return to normal. Most college admissions offices are still holding on to what they see as improvements to the process COVID required them to make, but these changes are, as a whole, taking a back seat to business as usual.

That's unfortunate for two reasons. Many of the changes made due to COVID raised the value of nontraditional applicants, an issue college access leaders have long advocated. It's sometimes hard to explain just where the lines of demarcation among "typical" applicants and "nontraditional" applicants were created, but it was clear that many of the COVID-related changes to admission were levelling the playing field, if only a little. With many colleges now convinced the coast is clear, the admissions approaches benefitting nontraditional students are now relegated to a lower status – and, arguably, the students they serve as well. This return to "normal" then, is likely to have an effect on efforts to expand opportunities for



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nontraditional students, and slow college access efforts.

This change is also unfortunate for reasons admissions offices have known about for at least 12 years. Well before COVID, admissions offices were looking at a steep decline in the birth rate, starting as early as 2025. Admissions offices have weathered these dips before, but it's never easy, especially when the decline is as steep as this one is. Combined with the number of students who are now turning to technical training to meet their postsecondary needs, it would be difficult to see why four-year colleges would be returning to a series of admissions practices that narrowed both diversity and access.

Still, early discussions suggest that's exactly what's happening. One general rule in the world of commercial sales is that the best way to maintain market share in a declining market is to expand the pool of clientele—in other words, if a cereal company can anticipate a decline in the number of typical clients, a reasonable first step is to reach out to those not in the typical pool, and convince them of the value of your product. This requires a different approach to recruitment of clients for many reasons, not the least of which is the need to first convince them that cereal in general is a good thing, then tell them why your cereal is the best option among all cereal options.

Colleges don't seem to be taking this approach. Discussions with admissions

officials suggest strategies for meeting the need for more applicants will be focused on increasing retention and completion of current students, and increasing accessibility for transfer students.

Improvement in these areas is sorely needed, but will it be enough to maintain enrollment and current levels in the face of such a significant drop in the number of traditional college-bound students? Would a college not be better off to engage in these practices, while also increasing its efforts and tightening its outreach message to better target the interests and needs of students who aren't considering college at all, or who have, but need more help getting there? Many colleges and states are trying to improve college enrollment numbers with more generous offers of aid, largely paid by COVID grants from the US government. This is a good first step, but even those generous grants will ultimately fade—and money does not address a student's interest in, or ability to do, college for four years.

COVID has taught admissions offices a great deal about what to do to make things work when things aren't what they used to be. The effects of COVID may suggest the college-going environment has returned more to normal, but long-standing birth-rate data suggests another unusual admissions environment awaits soon. As was the case with COVID, colleges would do well to consider a way to weather that storm. Increasing the size of the interested applicant pool is a logical first step. 