

THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION®



Rethinking Admissions and Enrollment

How colleges are adapting to the shrinking of higher ed

Rethinking Admissions and Enrollment

Colleges were plenty worried about an enrollment crash even before the pandemic hit. Undergraduate enrollment has since fallen, with community colleges taking the biggest hit. The much-discussed “enrollment cliff” still lies ahead, with the number of high-school graduates projected to decline sharply after 2025. On top of that, the future pool is likely to include more low-income and

first-generation students, who need broader types of support.

All of that has led colleges to look for creative ways to boost enrollment and retention. They’re sharpening their identities, casting a wider net for prospective applicants, and improving the student experience. This collection features many of *The Chronicle’s* best reads on a topic that’s on everyone’s mind.

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SECTION 1



Challenges



The Shrinking of Higher Ed

In the past, colleges grew their way out of enrollment crises. This time looks different.

By KARIN FISCHER



NEARLY 1.3 MILLION students have disappeared from American colleges during the Covid-19 pandemic, raising alarms that the enrollment emergency projected to arrive a few years from now is already here.

High-school seniors uninterested in studying online chose to defer. Working parents strained by the demands of full-time pandemic child care put their studies on hold. International students couldn't get visas. Those in majors with hands-on practicums or lab work found they couldn't register for courses required for their degrees.

Enrollment numbers continue to look bleak as the pandemic drags on, even though in-person classes have become the norm and consulates have reopened. College attendance among undergraduates has fallen almost 10 percent since Covid emerged in early 2020; this spring, enrollment dropped 4.7 percent from the year before, according to the [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#), a deeper-than-expected decline.

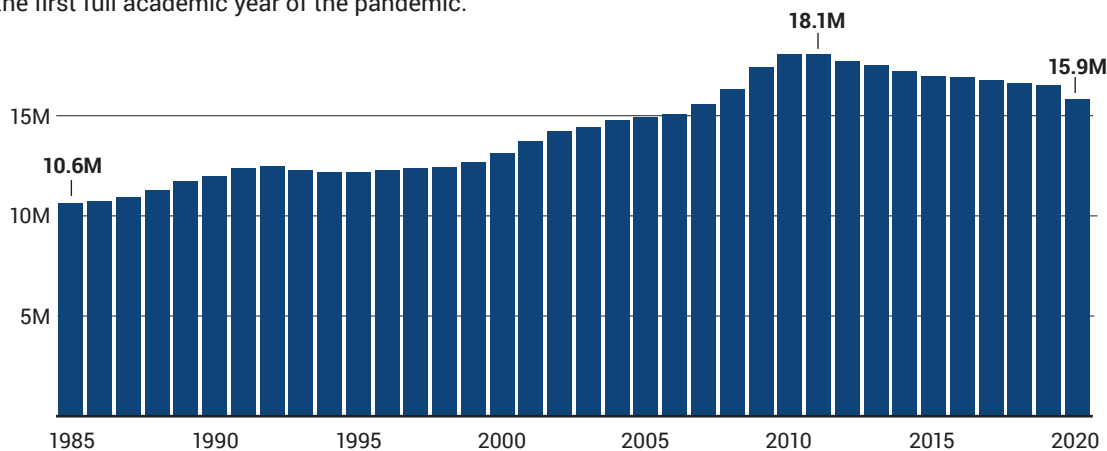
The persistence of the enrollment contraction has sparked fears that many students are not simply missing but gone for good. [Research](#) shows that if students stop out, they may not continue with their studies, and that's particularly true for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. "We have to act now," said Courtney Brown, vice president for impact and planning at the Lumina Foundation. "This is a crisis moment."

The pandemic enrollment slide has heightened worries at colleges about finances, especially among those dependent on tuition revenue to meet their bottom lines. Even before the Covid outbreak, the financial resiliency of a third of American colleges was poor, according to a new report from [Bain & Company](#).

Inflation is driving up colleges' operating costs, and a volatile stock market is eating into endowment returns. Small private colleges, regional public universities, and rural institutions all face strong headwinds, according to the bond agency Fitch Ratings. Federal stimulus funds

A Decline in the Making

Undergraduate enrollment peaked in 2010-11 and began a slide marked by a sharp drop in students in the first full academic year of the pandemic.



Note: Data reflect degree-granting four-year and two-year public, private nonprofit, and private for-profit institutions. Source: U.S. Department of Education

that helped many colleges avert closures are running out. The [outlook](#), said Emily Wadhvani, senior director and sector lead for higher education at Fitch, is “weak getting weaker.”

Of course, doomsday scenarios have been floated before. Time and time again, in recent decades, American higher education has grown its way out of crises. Colleges have expanded access to underrepresented groups, added academic programs and amenities to attract students and charge them higher tuition, and struck private-sector deals to tap new markets.

This time looks different. Higher ed may have reached the limits of Houdini-ing its way out of decline by getting bigger, and the prolonged pandemic downturn could be just one indication.

Public confidence in college is [sinking](#), and students and parents think tuition is too high. Skepticism is mounting toward the idea that a college education should be the [prerequisite for well-paying jobs](#), and in a tight labor market clamoring for workers, some people are landing them without a degree. Already, nearly seven in 10 high-school graduates immediately go on to pursue, although not necessarily complete, some sort of postsecondary education, and the remainder may be difficult to recruit. The students left out of higher education have been notoriously difficult for colleges to reach and serve. And then there’s the looming [demographic cliff](#) created by the sharp drop in birth rates that began in 2007.

“There really is an arithmetic problem here,” said Anthony P. Carnevale, director of the Center for Higher Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University. “There aren’t going to be enough students to go around.”

IN MANY WAYS, the pandemic’s effects on enrollment have been specific and unique. Higher education is typically countercyclical; that is, people enroll in college when the economy goes south, to get skills or because they

can’t find a job. Despite a small recession in 2020, enrollment has fallen throughout the pandemic, bucking that tendency.

Although the trend line has been consistently downward, there has been variation in who is missing from college. In the first year of the pandemic, enrollment drops were greater among men and traditional-age students. A big chunk of the gender disparity, at least at the two-year-college level, [researchers have found](#), was because of men’s higher enrollment in hands-on programs like welding and auto mechanics, which were harder to teach online or in socially distanced ways in the pandemic’s early months.

This spring, the patterns were reversed, and enrollments of women and students older than 25 fell more sharply, as the number of new freshmen picked up.

Nonetheless, the pandemic offers “painful” [lessons](#) for colleges’ continuing efforts to attract students, said Nathan D. Grawe, a professor of economics at Carleton College. Enrollment losses were particularly deep in areas with larger low-income and minority populations, groups colleges have lagged in admitting. “Covid damaged the relationship between colleges and underrepresented groups, and it could make it harder to recruit,” Grawe said.

Likewise, community colleges and less-selective four-year institutions, already struggling for students, sustained a greater hit during Covid. Grawe said he is heartened by some early signals about fall enrollments, such as a rebound in applications for federal financial aid, but only cautiously so. “Even if you have success in recruitment,” he said, “you’ve only won last year.”

Grawe knows better than most the daunting demographic challenges facing American colleges. In a pair of books, [Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education](#) and [The Agile College](#), he has outlined the impact of an abrupt drop in high-school graduates, beginning just a few years from now, in 2026. Certain types of institutions and certain regions of the

country will feel the scarcity of prospective college students more acutely. Grawe projects that over the following decade, the pool of applicants for two-year and regional four-year institutions could contract by 10 percent.

Still, the demographic cliff has been looming for years, ever since birth rates fell during the recession of 2008-9. Like the dust on the horizon stirred up by a horseback rider in a classic western, future population bubbles and busts can be seen far out, as groups of students move through elementary and secondary school, said Patrick Lane, vice president for policy analysis and research at the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, or Wiche, which also studies enrollment trends. “These effects show up in the data and stick around for a long time.”

Given that, should colleges have been better prepared for an enrollment contraction?

If higher ed was caught unprepared, the reason might be rooted in the past. This isn’t the first time demography has appeared to hold colleges’ destiny. In the past, higher ed has always managed to grow its way out. This time, were colleges overconfident that past solutions would work again?

THE DECADES following World War II saw an energetic expansion of higher education: Teacher-training schools became full-fledged colleges, community colleges sprang up across the country, and grand state-university systems, like those in [California](#) and New York, welcomed waves of students, first returning GIs and then the children of the baby boom.

But by the early 1980s, the last of the baby boomers were moving through college. The group of students then coming of age were from a period in which birth rates had dipped; they would later be dubbed Generation X.

Because of the Gen X baby bust, Wiche [projected](#) that the number of new high-

school graduates in the United States would drop by one-quarter between 1979 and 1994. In certain Northeastern states, the fall-off was predicted to be far steeper — by more than 40 percent in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York, and by nearly 50 percent in Rhode Island.

Earl Cheit, an economist who served as dean of the business school at the University of California at Berkeley, warned that American colleges were on the brink of a “[new depression](#).” Other forecasts suggested that between 10 percent and 30 percent of colleges could be forced to close by the mid-1990s, thanks in part to declining tuition revenue.

“The tone of the Golden Age of the 1960s was one of euphoria, of expansion, of new endeavors,” the influential Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education wrote in a sobering 1980 [report](#). “The new tone of the advancing demographic depression is now more one of concern and even despair, of concentration on contraction.”

“Excellence was the theme,” the Carnegie authors added. “Now it is survival. Institutions were trading up; now they are trading down.”

Let us save you the suspense: The collapse did not occur. While the number of high-school graduates did decline, college enrollments did not. Over the next 15-year period, in fact, they climbed by 23 percent, according to data collected by the [National Center for Education Statistics](#).

The Gen X enrollment crisis was averted by two factors, according to Paul E. Harrington, director of Drexel University’s Center for Labor Markets and Policy. First, more women, including adult learners returning to school, enrolled in college. In the late 1970s, men and women attended college in roughly equal numbers. By the mid-1990s, women accounted for [55 percent](#) of enrollments.

The period also coincided with a historic shift in the American economy, away from one driven by manufacturing. It had previously been possible to earn solid, mid-

dle-class wages without a college degree — or even a high-school diploma. In New Britain, Conn., then the “[hardware capital of the world](#),” the high school held “exit” ceremonies in the 1960s for teenage boys who left before graduation to take skilled-trades jobs in local factories; by their early 20s, many of them had saved enough to buy a house, Harrington said.

In the new service-and-knowledge economy, the salaries of college graduates began to rise, while earnings of those with a high-school diploma or less fell. In 1980, young college-educated Americans made 23 percent more than their high-school-graduate counterparts, and by the end of the decade, the college-earnings premium had doubled. By 2019, recent bachelor’s degree graduates out-earned young high-school grads by 77 percent.

The changing economy provided a clear financial incentive to go to college. Even as the number of high-school graduates declined, the share who enrolled in college right after graduation shot up, from 51 percent in 1980 to 61 percent in 1990. “The opportunity costs for going to college kept falling,” Harrington said, “while the gap between those with a college degree and those without kept growing.”

IF HIGHER-EDUCATION experts were skittish about a potential dip in enrollments entering the 1980s and 1990s, it was because they had only recently experienced a contraction. In that case, the culprit was the draft.

With the Vietnam War raging, the most sure-fire route to a deferment from mandatory military service was to enroll in college. As a result, college numbers swelled in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, with young men who might have otherwise entered the work force. A pair of researchers, David Card of Berkeley and Thomas Lemieux of the University of British Columbia, [estimated](#) that conscription avoidance raised college-attendance rates by 4 percent to 6 percent during that period and

the share of draft-age men with a college degree by 2 percent.

In early 1973, President Nixon ended the draft, reducing college’s attractiveness as a safe haven. But as the bulge in enrollments moved through the system, the supply of college-educated workers exceeded demand for them, at a time when manufacturing employment was at its peak. That oversupply depressed graduates’ wages, further dampening the appeal of a higher education. For the first time in decades, enrollments fell.

John R. Thelin, a professor emeritus at the University of Kentucky and author of *A History of American Higher Education*, said declining enrollments weren’t the only pressures colleges, and their financial model, faced. High inflation and skyrocketing oil prices hit college budgets hard. Thanks to campus expansions, institutions had hundreds and hundreds of new buildings to heat and light. Some colleges found themselves in the red.

Nor did college leaders feel confident that elected officials, in Washington or in the statehouses, would help alleviate their financial distress. Widespread campus protests over Vietnam, civil rights, and free speech had soured public opinion. The Carnegie Council, in a retrospective report with resonance for today’s college leaders, said the unrest had “shattered confidence on campus and support in the community.” Some officials, like Gov. Ronald Reagan of California, had even successfully run for office vowing to “clean up the mess” on campuses.

But the U.S. Congress ended up taking action that helped reverse the enrollment decline. In 1972, lawmakers approved the creation of a direct, need-based student financial-aid program. The Pell Grant helped expand access to a new group of students who might previously not have been able afford college — by 1976, nearly one in five students got an award. “Financial aid became key to admissions,” Thelin said.

And admissions, along with other campus student services, began to become

more professionalized during this period, focused on strategies to attract, recruit, and retain students. Having stumbled into an enrollment downturn, colleges became more deliberate to dig themselves out.

ENROLLMENT DECLINES haven't always been the chief cause of colleges' financial distress.

During the recession of 2008-9, student numbers actually rose; at some community colleges, demand was so great that they offered classes [before dawn](#).

But college budgets took a body blow: Endowment returns bottomed out. As unemployment rates rose, fewer families could afford private-college tuition. In public-college systems, spending per student [plummeted](#), falling, on average, 18 percent between 2008 and 2011. Nearly a decade and a half later, support has never rebounded to pre-recession funding levels in more than half the states, according to the [State Higher Education Executive Officers Association](#).

Again, for many colleges, the answer was to grow, this time online and overseas. Online education had typically been seen as the realm of for-profit institutions, but now more nonprofit colleges pushed into the space, hoping to leverage national, or even regional, reputations to reach a fresh crop of students. Some, notably [Purdue University](#), struck deals with private companies to expand their reach, while others sought outside help in administering their virtual-course offerings.

By going online, they hoped to take the college classroom to students who lacked the time or flexibility to make it to campus.

The other new market was international students. American graduate programs had long drawn the best and brightest from around the world, but the recession coincided with a new global demand for undergraduate education. The hunger was especially great from China, which had a burgeoning middle class with the means to pay for a top American degree.

Between the recession and the pandemic, international enrollments [soared](#) by 76 percent, to nearly 1.1 million. Two-thirds of that growth was at the undergraduate level, where the majority of students pay the full costs of their degree.

The influx of international tuition revenue was a life-saver, at least for some colleges. Research published by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that as states spent less of their budgets on higher education, [international enrollments rose](#). At public flagships and other research-intensive institutions, a 10-percent decrease in state appropriations over a decade and a half was accompanied by a 17-percent increase in foreign enrollments. At some institutions, international students accounted for 40 percent or more of new tuition revenue.

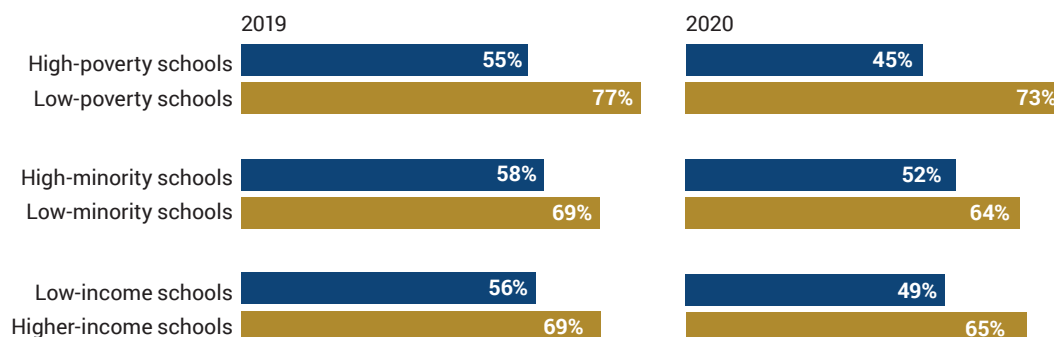
NOT ALL COLLEGES benefited, however. Bachelor's and master's-level institutions did not see tuition gains from enrolling international undergraduates, according to a [study](#) by Brendan Cantwell, an associate professor of education at Michigan State University. And a [2015 analysis](#) by *The Chronicle* found that over a 10-year period, just 10 percent of colleges absorbed 70 percent of the international-student growth.

Likewise, not all colleges have the high profile or the special niche to attract students to online programs, said Jeffrey Selingo, a senior fellow with the University Design Institute at Arizona State University and a former editor of *The Chronicle*. "These are not levers that all colleges can pull."

And international enrollments, which fell sharply during the pandemic, had already begun to soften [before Covid struck](#). Because of fierce global competition, the establishment of good universities in students' home countries, and an [unwelcoming American political climate](#), few experts expect foreign-student numbers to return to the days of double-digit growth.

Growing Inequity

The gap between the share of students who enrolled in college right after graduating from high-poverty high schools and the share who did so right after graduating from low-poverty high schools grew to 28 percentage points for the Class of 2020.



Note: High-poverty schools: 75 percent of the student population is eligible for free/reduced lunch. Low-poverty schools: Less than 25 percent of students are eligible for free/reduced lunch. Low-income schools: At least 50 percent of students are eligible for free/reduced lunch. Minority schools: At least 40 percent of the students are Black or Hispanic. Source: National Student Research Clearinghouse Center

With brand names and mega-universities like Southern New Hampshire University, which have a broad reach and sophisticated strategy for attracting students, already [crowding](#) the online-education market, there may not be space for new entrants. [Government scrutiny](#) of colleges' deals with third-party online-program managers could increase.

Women, too, may be tapped out as a growth market. After all, they now account for 57 percent of the students at American colleges and an [even higher share of the degrees earned](#).

Looking around, what's the next new thing?

"Colleges are mining strategies of earlier generations," said Thelin, the higher-ed historian, "and they're running out."

The pandemic could extend colleges' challenges beyond the looming demographic cliff. A [2021 study](#) of public-school enrollments by Wiche found that while high-school-graduation rates actually went

up early in the pandemic, primary- and middle-school grades saw steep enrollment declines. There were 4 percent fewer sixth graders in the fall of 2020, for example, than in the previous year. It's unclear if such declines are permanent or temporary, but they could affect the pool of future college students. Learning loss during the pandemic could also have an impact on college readiness.

Much like the 2008-9 recession, Covid appears to have caused a [baby bust](#), accelerating already declining birth rates. That could affect the college pipeline well into the next generation. "Ten, 15 years from now," Lane, the Wiche vice president, said, "we'll be coming back to the pandemic."

To stop further backsliding, colleges will need to recruit and retain the very students they've historically struggled to attract, including students from low-income and minority backgrounds. College-graduation rates for Americans in the [lowest income brackets](#) have barely budged over the last

50 years. The share of Black, Hispanic, and Native American adults with a high-school diploma or less is **much higher** than for the population as a whole.

Although nearly half of all undergraduates are now students of color, **achievement gaps** remain, especially for Black students. During the pandemic, the share of students coming from high-poverty high schools or those with large minority populations **dropped sharply**, and many of these students have been **slower to return** to college.

Anthony Carnevale, of Georgetown, noted that colleges could face an additional handicap in recruiting minority students if the U.S. Supreme Court further limits, or even strikes down, affirmative action. The court **agreed to hear arguments** in two cases that could have major implications in how colleges consider race in admissions.

So who's left to enroll? This year, Selingo invited three college presidents from three very different institutions — a large public university, one of the nation's few work colleges, and a women's college with a diverse, low-income student body — to share their predictions for the next five years on a podcast he co-hosts called *FutureU*. All

three answered the same way: a focus on nontraditional students.

Adult learners are a huge potential pool of students — some 39 million Americans alone have attended college but **left without a degree**. Enrolling even a portion of these students could help soften the impact of the demographic cliff, or make up pandemic student losses.

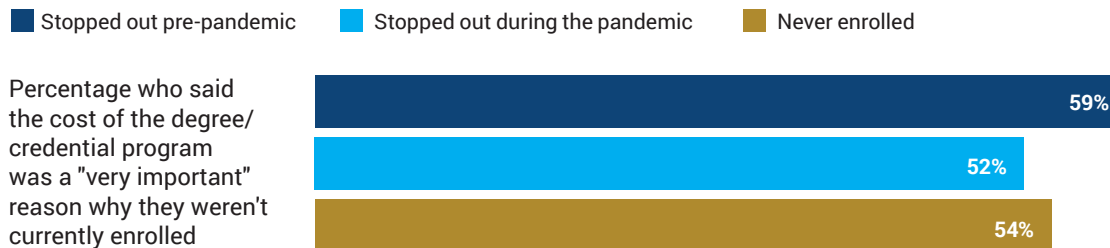
Some of these former students may be open to returning. A **recent survey** by Gallup and Lumina found that 56 percent of one-time students who stopped out before the pandemic would be open to re-enrolling. In addition, 40 percent of adults surveyed who had never attended college said they would consider going to college, with most interested in an associate degree or certificate.

But interest is one thing. Action is another. In the Gallup-Lumina survey, adults cited work and family obligations as major hurdles to returning to college. And many colleges lack the administrative structures to re-enroll and retain adult learners, although a number of states and nonprofit groups have begun efforts to help **support nontraditional students**.

Major efforts to enroll adult students have struggled. An **online-only community**

A Significant Barrier

More than half of adults who had never been to college or who had stopped out before or during the pandemic said cost was a factor.



Source: Gallup/Lumina Foundation, State of Higher Education 2022 Report

college in California meant to serve the 2.5 million state residents between ages 25 and 34 without a degree had awarded certificates to just 70 students through its second year of operation.

THE BIGGEST BARRIER to attracting new students or luring back those who have left, though, is cost. More than half of the respondents in the Gallup-Lumina survey said it was why they had not enrolled. A third of current students who have considered dropping out also cite cost as the cause.

For colleges that have not been able to tap new markets to expand their enrollments, their growth strategy has been tuition. Over the past four decades, the average cost of an undergraduate education has increased by 175 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Cantwell, the Michigan State professor, said tuition increases may no longer be feasible. Families are maxed out — only a third of the youngest Americans, including current college students and recent graduates, said it was possible to get an affordable education beyond high school,

according to a survey by New America; less than half of millennials and Generation X-ers agreed. With inflation rising, small tuition increases will no longer cover colleges' increased costs, Cantwell said. "It's just off the table."

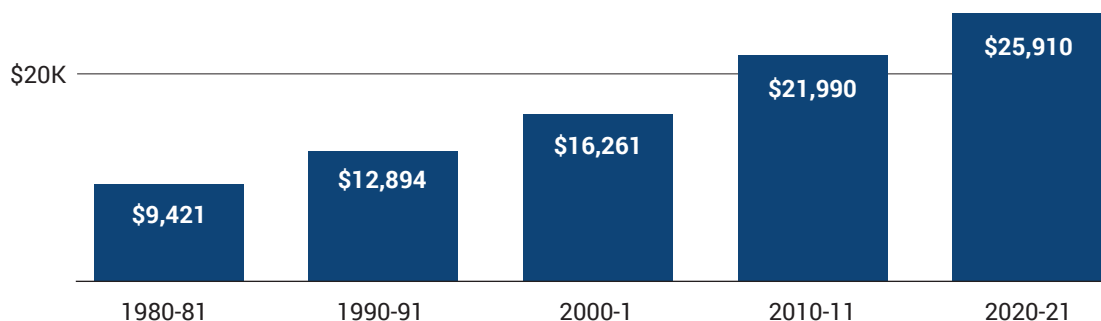
The New America survey found that a majority of Americans would like the government to pay more of the costs of college. But the future of political proposals to help defray costs is uncertain, and Carnevale points out that efforts like free college wouldn't help maintain or expand access and enrollments at all colleges — just at public institutions. Recent legislative proposals have focused only on making two years of community college tuition free.

Meanwhile, Carnevale said, elected officials may be sending a mixed message on college. Infrastructure legislation passed by Congress last year will create nearly eight million jobs, at least temporarily, that don't require a college degree. And every time a ribbon-cutting ceremony is held for a new infrastructure project or work-force-training program, a local reporter will ask the assembled politicians whether people need to go to college to get a good job, he said.

The answer is, as it has been since the

Skyrocketing College Costs

The average cost for college — tuition, fees, room, and board — is up 175 percent since 1980.



Note: Average-cost data are adjusted for inflation in 2020-21 dollars and reflect degree-granting four-year and two-year public, private nonprofit, and private for-profit institutions. Source: U.S. Department of Education

decline of the manufacturing era, that a college degree is the most sure-fire way to economic security. Of the 35-million job openings in the next decade, according to [estimates](#) by Carnevale and his Georgetown colleagues, 40 percent will go to workers with college degrees, and another 30 percent to people with at least some postsecondary training.

When it comes to “good jobs,” defined by the Georgetown center as those paying a salary of at least \$45,000 at midcareer, three-quarters of those held by college graduates qualify. Only a third of workers with a high-school diploma or less have a good job.

Yet, that message is not getting through. Two-thirds of respondents in the New America survey said it was possible to find a stable, well-paying job with just a high-school diploma or GED.

In fact, Americans may be hearing the opposite message — that college is not the golden ticket to a good job in the new, high-demand labor market. [Governors](#) in Maryland and Colorado have told state agencies to drop four-year-degree requirements in hiring for state jobs. Under a [new law in Arizona](#), public-school teachers no longer need to have earned a degree, just be enrolled in college.

And a new national advertising campaign is urging employers to look beyond the “[paper ceiling](#)” of a bachelor’s degree when hiring. Instead, job seekers could gain necessary skills through apprenticeships, boot camps, credentials, and certifications.

Of course, colleges, particularly two-year institutions, offer [badges, microcredentials, and other short-term training](#). But they face competition from companies, nonprofit groups, and other educational providers.

The rise of alternative educational models is “challenging the connection between higher education and the economy,” and not just in the United States, said Simon Marginson, a professor of higher education at the University of Oxford and an expert on global and comparative education.

“Our understanding of the relationship is shifting.”

That shift could be away from college, just as institutions need to attract new students.

F HIGHER EDUCATION cannot grow, does it shrink?

That will not be so easy to do. You can’t unbuild buildings. Administrative structures — many of which have been put in place to support the nontraditional students who are seen as a way out of enrollment woes — are difficult to dismantle. Although colleges have hired more adjunct instructors in recent years, the strictures of tenure work against making cuts in the faculty ranks.

Over the past decade, in fact, there has been a mismatch between faculty hiring and enrollment trends. Even as the number of students enrolled in public colleges declined, by 6 percent, faculty ranks increased by 3 percent, according to a *Chronicle* analysis of [U.S. Department of Education data](#). Private nonprofit colleges gained students — enrollments between 2009 and 2020 increased by 9 percent — but hiring increased faster, by 18 percent.

While community colleges lost nearly a third of their faculty work force during that period, the enrollment decline was even steeper, 35 percent.

Administrative overhead has also increased over time, with colleges adding nearly 110,000 administrators over a decade. In 2010, there were 78 full-time undergraduate students for every full-time management staff member. By the fall of 2020, the ratio had dropped, to 38 undergrads per manager.

College boards hire presidents and chancellors for their ambitions, not to make subtractions, said David F. Labaree, a historian of education and a professor emeritus at Stanford University. “You don’t compete by cutting costs. You compete by adding special services and new programs and fancy dorms,” said Labaree, author of [A Perfect Mess](#), about American higher edu-

cation. “As a university president, you don’t make your name and fortune by preparing for the decline.”

But at least one campus leader is volunteering to be the president of retrenchment. At Henderson State University, in Arkansas, Charles Ambrose, the president, cut 25 degree programs, eliminated 57 administrative positions, and laid off 67 faculty members, 44 of them with tenure, after declaring [financial exigency](#). The college will focus its curriculum around academic programs with demonstrated student and employer demand.

“We’re now having to deconstruct the things that we once invested in because they don’t offer returns to students,” Ambrose said in an interview.

Ambrose acknowledges that Henderson State’s situation was dire — the college wouldn’t have been able to make its next payroll without the emergency measures. But at many other colleges, he said, the financial model simply is no longer sustainable, especially at small private and regional public colleges like his.

“This next generation of leaders isn’t going to have the option of kicking the can down the road,” he said, “because we’re out of cans.”

Yes, there are a privileged few institutions that can still keep growing. Highly selective colleges will be touched less by the demographic contractions in Grawe’s analysis, their pedigree and profile attracting applicants from across the country and

around the world. And large public universities, the flagship institutions, will be able to pull in students. You can already see the bifurcation this fall, as some colleges worry about meeting enrollment targets, while for the others, the headache is how to [house all their new students](#).

Thelin has seen it at his own institution, the University of Kentucky. Even though overall college-going rates in the state have declined slightly in recent years, the student body has grown over the past two decades. There is one more lever to pull, after all, and the growth market is students who might have gone to college elsewhere. “It’s almost like social Darwinism,” Thelin said.

Back in the beginning, in the 19th century, American higher education grew wildly and unchecked. Many colleges were founded by religious groups, and every denomination had its own institutions. In a frontier society, colleges stood for legitimacy and civilization, and communities sought them out, to put themselves on the map. By 1880, Labaree said, Ohio had more colleges than in all of France.

It’s in American higher education’s DNA, then, this growth mind-set. And now the growth may have reached its peak.

Karin Fischer is a Chronicle senior writer who covers international education, colleges and the economy, and other issues.

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AYNKLO FOR THE CHRONICLE

COMMENTARY

Will Your College Survive the Demographic Cliff?

*National trends are interesting — but enrolling
students is a local challenge.*

By **JON BOECKENSTEDT**

LONG BEFORE I took my first admissions job and found myself worrying about the number of high-school graduates, I was aware of the demographic cliff and what it meant. Or, it might be more accurate to say, I was aware of the demographic cliff and the rumors of what it was going to mean.

I graduated from high school in 1977 and spent my freshman year at Iowa State University in Wilson Hall, a part of “The Towers” residence halls south of the main campus, four 10-story buildings that were a cross between the midcentury-modern aesthetic and unadorned 1950s Soviet-style functionality. The rumor on campus was that they had been built on the cheap in the 1960s for short-term purposes only, and had been scheduled for demolition numerous times, only to be saved in order to house the rapidly expanding population of young people going to college. [The rumors about the buildings live on](#), it seems, much like the ubiquitous favorite “legend that won’t die” of campus tour guides everywhere: The library is sinking because the architects forgot to account for the weight of the books.

Most members of my freshman class were born in 1958 or 1959, and the children born in the [biggest year ever for births in America](#) — 1957 — were sophomores or juniors. Once the surge passed, it was believed, our beloved home, with its warped windows, popcorn-plaster walls, and inadequate heating, was destined to be destroyed.

I recently saw on Google Maps’ Street View that, almost 45 years later, Wilson Hall is still there, along with its twin, Wallace, although the two older towers (Knapp and Storms) were demolished in 2005. So much for predictions.

And yet the predictions keep coming. On campuses across the country, and also in the media, the enrollment consequences of the sharp drop in birth rates starting in 2007 are being debated. Many have relied on the excellent work of [Nathan Grawe](#), an economics professor at Carleton College who is very bearish on the future of the market. His book [Demographics and the Demand for](#)

[Higher Education](#) is widely cited as the gold standard when looking 10 years into the future. Some, using Grawe’s analysis, see severe enrollment declines that will [disrupt how colleges operate](#). Others think that the threat has been exaggerated and that the industry will escape mostly unharmed. It seems clear, looking at the data, that a demographic cliff is coming. But it won’t affect all colleges in the same way.

The truth is that higher education is well placed to predict the future. We have a long view on our markets second only to the funeral industry. And sometimes demographic patterns turn out as planned. In my generation the [drop in high-school graduates](#) happened right on schedule; that spike in births in 1957, caused by World War II veterans reaching their late 30s and early 40s during the mid-1950s, signaled the beginning of the end of the baby-boom generation. The tally of 4.3 million births in 1957 wasn’t matched again until [50 years later](#), in 2007.

If it’s true that all politics is local, then in some sense so is (almost) all college enrollment.

But the drop in high-school graduates (down 21 percent from 1975 to 1992) did not coincide with a drop in college enrollment. [In fact, just the opposite happened](#). At first, undergraduate enrollment continued to increase, until about 1985, when it fell slightly. But starting in 1986, things quickly picked up, and enrollment increased from 10.3 million in 1986 to 17.3 million 2011, a remarkable 68 percent, even though the population of high-school graduates over that time increased only 31 percent.

What happened? [High-school graduation rates increased](#). America, still interested in investing in education, increased finan-

cial aid, knocking down the largest barrier to a college degree. Programs focused on the special needs of those age 25 and older popped up all over the country. Colleges opened branch campuses to make education more convenient. Universities began to recruit [internationally](#), and those efforts paid off: The number of international students doubled from 1985 to 2010, and grew by 730,000 more students by 2019. For-profit higher education expanded, and began enrolling many students who were not well served by traditional colleges. Concerns about the budget ramifications of drops in enrollment at the undergraduate level were softened by an astonishing [increase of 95 percent](#) in graduate-education enrollment from 1986 to 2020.

Fast forward. History repeats itself, and now we're looking at another demographic cliff.

The raw numbers aren't perfect, but they are a good place to start. The basis of most of our foresight comes from federal data and from data produced by the [Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education](#). Both data sets generally show the same thing: The number of public high-school graduates is expected to peak in about 2025 or 2026, and then fall off. [The commission says 3.5 million in 2025](#); federal data say 3.4 million in 2026. Then, both data sets agree, we'll see a steady decline as far out as the projections go. The federal data say 3.2 million in 2030, and the commission says 3.3 million in that year but, for good measure, projects all the way to 2036, when the numbers drop to 3.2 million. The last time we saw numbers like that was — get ready — 2015.

The numbers are less troubling than some suggest. But the national numbers don't tell us very much. If it's true that all politics is local, then in some sense so is (almost) all college enrollment.

Before you think about anything else, [consider this](#): A majority — 56.2 percent — of students at public four-year colleges attend an institution less than an hour's drive away from home, and nearly 70 percent attend within two hours. So if your college

is in Connecticut, a booming population in Florida or Arizona might be interesting, but it probably won't solve your future enrollment challenges. If you want to see how reliant your college is on regional migration and how it's changed over time, take a look at the Iped's freshman-migration data I visualized here at [highereddatastories.com](#).

NATIONAL NUMBERS of high-school graduates are really not that important to most colleges. It's better to look at the number of graduates in your state or region. When you do, you'll see that New England and the Great Lakes states have been dealing with falling numbers for a while; in other regions, the decrease will come later and be more temperate. Where you sit is where you stand, both literally and figuratively.

But that's not all. As many people have noted, it's not just the numbers that are changing; it's the mix of students. That means we're not looking so much at a demographic cliff as we are at a demographic perfect storm. This new phenomenon will be a lot different for several reasons, and not just because we've already exercised many of our mitigating strategies. We made lemonade from lemons a long time ago, and there is not much juice left to squeeze.

This year white public-high-school graduates [will no longer be a majority](#) in the United States, and will drop to about 42 percent of all graduates in 2036, the farthest year out we can predict. Among the many dubious reasons people may have for being concerned about the drop in white students, there is at least one legitimate one: Who goes to college in America is driven by several factors that tend to overlap strongly, and those factors affect market viability: [parental attainment of a college degree](#), [parental income](#), and [student ethnicity](#).

College attendance by ethnicity lines up in the exact same order as parental attainment and parental income: Asian, white, Hispanic, and African American. And the

data tell us that the 10-percent decrease in white graduates **won't be offset** by small increases in Asian populations or even larger increases in Hispanic populations.

Again, this is not new information. Almost a decade ago, the Human Capital Research Corporation provided sortable data from the Census Bureau's 2011 American Community Survey. Breaking down the numbers of children by age, ethnicity, parental attainment, and — especially — income **shows** what demographers have known for a long time: **Wealthier families have fewer children**. That data predicted many colleges' difficulty in enrolling students who can afford to pay the full cost of attendance. Discount rates, but especially concerns about net revenue, **are obvious at many private colleges**; the recent **decline in median family income** won't help ease that concern, and whether the trend might be driven by Covid-19 is irrelevant.

Finally, we can't focus exclusively on the future and ignore the present. **The public is losing confidence in higher education**, a trend long in coming and slow in developing. **The last time college enrollment increased** in the United States was 2014-15, and it too has been on a slow, steady decline since then, even before the pandemic. Of course, 2020 threw us a sucker punch, when enrollment dropped by almost 700,000 students (4 percent) in one year, and estimates suggest **2021 saw an additional 3-percent decline**. It's true, of course, that almost all of that drop is explained by decreases in community-college enrollment. But that may be the bellwether that signals bigger problems ahead.

It's possible that the change we fear is already here. It's also possible — but considerably less probable — that this fall will mark the beginning of the rebound, and in 10 years we'll be wondering what we were worrying about. There are far too many critical points between now and then to know for sure, but it's clear that the most prudent approach is to plan for the worst and hope for the best. Check that. Plan for the worst, and do everything you can to foster the best for your campus.

If you're in Vermont, you will naturally think about this differently than if you're in Florida or Arizona. If your campus is 85-percent white, you need to ask yourself how students in the future will consider you relevant. If your curriculum hasn't changed in 40 years, it may be time to modernize it. If you've relied on international students — especially from China — to contribute substantially to the bottom line, it might be wise to consider other options.

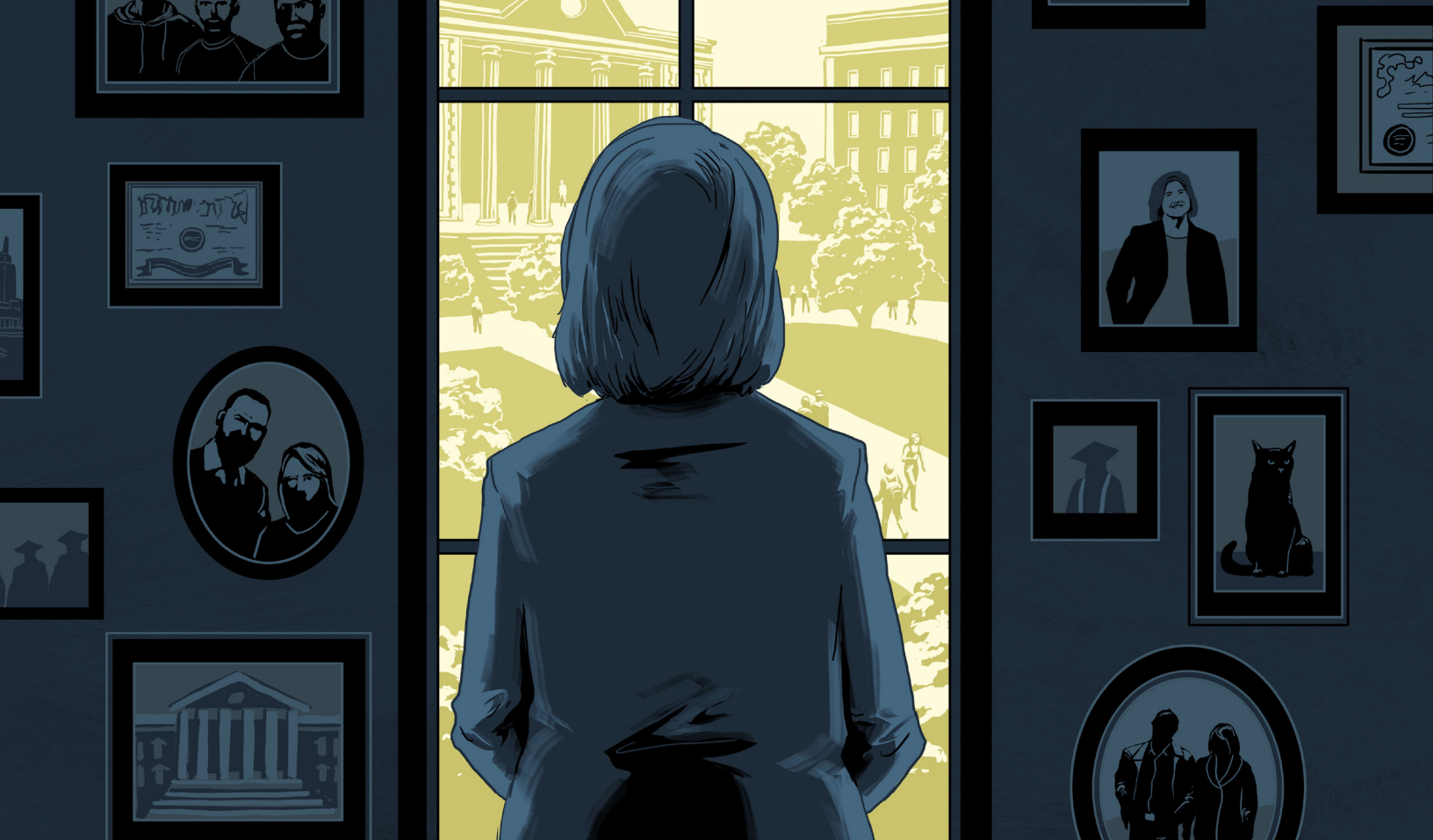
And if you haven't thought about this at all, well, there is no time like the present.

If your campus is 85-percent white, you need to ask yourself how students in the future will consider you relevant.

We are at a critical moment: Declining enrollment even in one sector (say, community colleges) is troublesome because of downstream effects. Declining revenue and wavering state support, coupled with fewer high-school graduates, fewer families that don't need financial help, and an increasingly negative attitude from the public toward higher education, may take us to a long-rumored tipping point. While there are no guarantees, the colleges that are aware of how those trends will affect their specific states and regions, are dealing with those issues, and are looking realistically toward the future are likely to be the ones best able to survive.

Jon Boeckstedt is vice provost for enrollment management at Oregon State University.

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PAT KINSELLA FOR THE CHRONICLE

COMMENTARY

Inside the Admissions Pressure Cooker

The anxiety is palpable.

By **STEFANIE D. NILES**

I AM SITTING in my office listening to the muffled sounds of staff members work the telephones, trying to reach admitted students and encourage them to file the FAFSA, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. This is a familiar autumnal soundtrack for me, having worked in admissions for 25 years, and I've

been around long enough to remember when students actually answered their phones.

Many things are different today — not just how we communicate. I feel more pressure now than at any time in the past. That pressure comes from within — the ever-present desire to achieve that of-

ten-elusive enrollment goal of just the right number of students who are academically talented, are diverse, and bring with them enough revenue to maintain the institutional operating budget.

The pressure also emanates from the Board of Trustees, the president, the faculty, other offices on campus, and even tuned-in alumni, all of whom understand that our institution's future hinges on our ability to continue to attract, retain, and graduate strong, capable students.

I heard David Kalsbeek, then chief enrollment officer at DePaul University, speak at a College Board colloquium probably a decade ago, and I still regularly reflect on a prophetic statement he made: "It is important to remember, in times like these, that there have always been times like these." However, I'm beginning to doubt, in 2021, if that maxim still holds.

I feel more pressure now than at any time in the past.

At this time of year two years ago, we were furiously reading applications so we could relax and enjoy holiday gatherings in the coming weeks. We had no idea how quickly we would need to pivot (or how soon the word "pivot" would come to dominate our vocabularies).

Today, Covid-19 lingers as we sit on the cusp of other potentially monumental changes. [Data recently](#) released by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center show an almost 8-percent decline since 2019 in undergraduates enrolled. These were supposed to be the relatively good times — the years to prepare, from a position of strength, for 2026's dreaded "[demographic cliff](#)."

We face an increasing number of prospective students with mental-health challenges. We're trying to communicate with

students on TikTok and other platforms in a communication and social-media market crowded with strongly competing messages. With [changes](#) in the National Association for College Admission Counseling's Code of Ethics, competition is even more fierce, as colleges offer added incentives to entice potential applicants and troll for transfer students. More students are questioning the value of a college education, and the cost of that education continues to rise. Today, many colleges are financially out of reach for large swaths of the population. The [abrupt decline](#) in standardized testing is yet another major change confronting admissions.

On top of that litany of external challenges, college admission offices also are dealing with internal issues, especially the "pandemic shuffle" — an increasing number of staff members opting for jobs with greater certainty, less required travel, or more opportunities for remote work. The challenges seemingly have never been more intense.

AFTER MORE than a year of Zoom meetings and webinars, I finally packed my bags this past September for NACAC's yearly conference, in Seattle. My colleagues — normally an energetic, exuberant crowd — were jubilant over being together in person. And yet I would categorize the mood as mixed.

DJ Menifee, vice president for enrollment at Susquehanna University, agreed. "I think the anxiety in the air [at the meeting] was in relationship to the sluggish start to the application season," he told me. Robert Alexander, dean of admission, financial aid, and enrollment management at the University of Rochester, said every conversation with colleagues at the conference touched on concerns about admissions teams — "they're nearly burnt out."

Others, however, were more upbeat, anticipating a return to more-normal operations bolstered by promising early admissions numbers this fall. Scott Schultz, vice

president for enrollment management at Baldwin Wallace University, summarized the dichotomy well:

“I think there is a definite divide between the haves and have-nots ... If you are selective, you are generating more applications and students than ever. The majority of institutions are facing the early stages of a reckoning, struggling to build a funnel as test-taker records dry up, and knowing they do not have the brand recognition and value add to justify their cost ... If there’s not anxiety, it’s probably because someone isn’t paying attention.”

More students are questioning the value of a college education, and the cost of that education continues to rise.

On my campus, at least, we are paying attention — and there’s ample anxiety to show for it. Even among our faculty members there appears to be a growing realization that it is an “all hands on deck” kind of year. A few weeks ago, I had an energizing conversation with a professor who wanted to discuss how she could advocate for more faculty involvement in the admission process.

However, not all of my enrollment colleagues at other institutions are hearing the same overtures. One told me that some faculty members had refused to consider renaming a major to appeal more to digital natives, calling it a “sellout.” That sort of obstinacy could prove detrimental in these challenging times.

Ashley Browning, vice president for enrollment at Hollins University, told me about her experience in communicating up the chain of command:

“The pandemic has accelerated challeng-

es which before Covid-19 felt more distant or hypothetical. In our cabinet meetings, there is greater urgency around the various levers a tuition-dependent university must engage to offer a high-quality academic experience for students. For me, it feels like the pandemic has reinforced for my cabinet colleagues the interconnectedness of our work; the weight that sometimes felt unduly shouldered by undergraduate admission pre-pandemic now feels more like a shared responsibility.”

So what’s the bottom line? As Ken Anselment, vice president for enrollment and communication at Lawrence University, put it in an email, “The job is only getting harder. And the recent discoveries of new variants of Covid-19 (hello, Omicron) only make an uncertain future even less certain.”

In short, enrollment challenges are here to stay. While a small number of institutions have seen a minimal pandemic-related impact as they continue to successfully enroll their desired number and composition of students, a majority of chief enrollment officers probably spend fitful nights (as I often do) weighing the potential benefits of employing new outreach strategies in a Covid-weary market. Most of us can agree — from faculty colleagues to cabinet members — that the challenges of today carry a weight and complexity that’s different from the past.

Perhaps more-appropriate guidance for today would be what one of my graduate-school professors cited about how to market an institution: “Tell your story. Tell it often, and tell it well.” The institutions that know what they do best and whom they best serve — and that capture the attention of a distracted public in a crowded, noisy market — will be those that most successfully weather the storms ahead.

Stefanie D. Niles, the president of Cottey College, formerly served as vice president for enrollment and communications at Ohio Wesleyan University.

Originally published December 9, 2021

The Missing Hispanic Students

Higher ed's future, and the economy, depends on their coming back to college.



By SARAH BROWN

THE NUMBERS already didn't look good: Doña Ana Community College had lost nearly one fifth of its enrollment from the spring of 2020 to the spring of 2021. About three-fourths of the roughly 5,300 students at the two-year institution in southern New Mexico are Hispanic.

Then Monica Torres, the college's president, had an institutional-research official look at the data more closely. Doña Ana was down 40 percent among first-generation students, low-income students, and student parents — the college's most vulnerable populations.

"That's like hair-on-fire time," says Torres, who became president in 2018. This spring, the college's total enrollment is down another 5 percent.

Torres grew up in Las Cruces, N.M., a city of 100,000 people, about 40 miles from the Mexican border; Doña Ana's six campuses are spread throughout the city and county.

"You're not just talking about individual students and the opportunities they're losing," Torres says, "but you're talking about the impact on the community." If local residents don't go to college, research suggests that they'll be worse off financially. They won't be qualified for many of the region's future jobs — in emerging fields like solar energy and defense manufacturing, and high-demand fields like home health care and education. The economy will struggle.

Colleges' undergraduate enrollment is down [across the board](#), at every type of institution, among nearly all demographic groups. But the number of Hispanic students leaving college after a year or two, or deciding not to start, is especially concerning.

After [two decades](#) during which Hispanic students have been the fastest-growing demographic group enrolling in college, the Covid-19 pandemic has threatened that [progress](#) — among a population with the lowest degree attainment of any [racial or](#)

[ethnic group](#) in the United States. Hispanic undergraduate enrollment fell 7 percent from 2019 to 2021, according to [the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#).

Percentage-wise, Black and Native American students saw larger enrollment decreases than their Hispanic peers during that time, wrote Nathan D. Grawe, a Carleton College economist and enrollment expert, in a recent *Chronicle* essay. But the change in the trend among Hispanic students was most striking — because their attendance had been *increasing* pre-pandemic. Black students' college-going rates dipped following the 2008 recession and never recovered, Grawe noted: "Temporary disturbances can produce lasting effects."

The number of Hispanic students leaving college after a year or two, or deciding not to start, is especially concerning.

For colleges — especially community colleges, which enroll more than half of Hispanic students — any enrollment drop is an alarming, immediate problem. Much of the country is staring down a "[demographic cliff](#)," as the number of high-school graduates is projected to decline after 2025, leading to fewer prospective college students. In most states, Hispanic students are a rapidly growing share of that pool.

While colleges have stemmed the bleeding by using federal Covid relief funding for student support, that money will soon run out.

As the pandemic enters its third year, colleges and community leaders nationwide are on a quest to make sure Hispanic

students come back and stay on track. They're clear about the stakes: The future of higher ed, and the nation's economic success, depends on it.

ALTHOUGH COLLEGE-GOING among Hispanic students has **grown dramatically** in the past 20 years, they are still **less likely to go to college** than white students. An achievement gap persists, too.

About **51 percent of Hispanic students** graduate from four-year public universities within six years, compared with 70 percent of white students. Student-loan default rates are 2.5 times higher for Hispanic students than for white students.

"If we were going to close gaps, there was really no room to lose enrollment of Latino students," says Wil Del Pilar, vice president for higher-education policy and practice at the Education Trust, a nonprofit advocacy group. (Hispanic and Latino/a are not the same, but some people use the terms interchangeably; the federal government uses "Hispanic" to track college enrollment.)

But for many Hispanic students — who are more likely than their peers to be low-income and **first in their families to go to college** — educational plans over the past two years have taken a backseat to family responsibilities.

Early in the pandemic, as blue-collar jobs in manufacturing, service industries, and retail vanished amid economic shutdowns, many Hispanic families suddenly found college financially out of reach, and students put their college plans on hold. Hispanic students are less likely than others to take out loans, preferring to pay for college as they go, says Deborah Santiago, who leads Excelencia in Education, a nonprofit group that supports Hispanic educational attainment.

Even as jobs have come back, many Hispanic young adults who planned to go to college have continued to stay home. They've guided siblings through virtual school. They've cared for older relatives. They've worked to help pay bills.

In general, Santiago says, Hispanic students are more likely to hold pragmatic views about college, believing that its purpose is to help them get a job. For many of those students, the opportunity cost of higher education — given what they'd be forgoing in immediate income, in an economy with rising wages — doesn't seem worth it, she says.

Michele Siqueiros, founder and president of the Campaign for College Opportunity, a California-based nonprofit group, doesn't blame students for sitting out right now. Her own daughter, Alexandra Cuevas, took a break from college last fall. "I'm a college advocate, obviously, and I fully supported her — take the time off," Siqueiros says. "Because she can see that this is just so different of an experience."

"If we were going to close gaps, there was really no room to lose enrollment of Latino students."

After graduating from high school as Covid hit, Cuevas says she decided to start at the two-year Pasadena City College instead of a four-year university. It made sense financially and otherwise, she says, since classes would be online.

But Cuevas struggled. She found it tough to register for classes and use a learning-management system for the first time. Most of her courses were asynchronous, and she wasn't building relationships with her professors. "I felt really disconnected from actually going to school," she says. By the end of the fall 2020 semester, Cuevas says, she was "at rock bottom." She tried to make it through the rest of the academic year, but after failing several classes, she knew she needed to step away from college.

For others, the trauma of losing family

members to Covid-19 put college on the back burner. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Hispanic or Latino people have been twice as likely as white people to [die from the virus](#). Students living in multigenerational households have feared exposing family members.

In a crisis, it's understandable that people have made decisions to try to survive, Santiago says. But the hundreds of thousands of students forgoing college could harm the Hispanic population's economic prospects for years to come. Research has [repeatedly shown](#) the long-term benefits of going to college. On average, college graduates are healthier, happier, live longer, and earn [\\$1 million more](#) over their lifetimes than people who have only a high-school diploma.

The question is, once the pandemic subsides, how many Hispanic students will actually come back?

OF THE 50 STATES, New Mexico and California have among the largest [proportions of Hispanic residents](#). From 2019 to 2021, New Mexico lost 14.6 percent of its college students, and California lost 10.1 percent.

More than 40 percent of the California State University system's students are Hispanic, and most of Cal State's 23 campuses have lost enrollment during the pandemic. The trend could hurt [the Cal State system's ambitious 2025 initiative](#) to increase graduation rates and eliminate equity gaps. "We're really concerned about it," says Jeff Gold, assistant vice chancellor for student success initiatives at the system office.

Community colleges, though, have seen the most precipitous drops. In the fall of 2021, California's community-college system sank [below 2 million students](#) for the first time in decades. Between the fall of 2020 and the fall of 2021, [nearly half](#) of the 318,000 students who dropped out were Hispanic.

While enrollment has been falling in New Mexico for years, partially a result of the [outward migration](#) of prospective college students, Doña Ana's student popula-

tion had stabilized, and [even grown a little](#) right before Covid hit. Then, suddenly, things changed.

Doña Ana offers a lot of programs that require hands-on learning, like welding, nursing, and automotive repair. Those courses didn't translate well online, and the college's limited number of in-person classes had to shrink to accommodate social distancing. Many students are also parents, and they've struggled with school shutdowns and lack of child care.

For many Hispanic students, educational plans over the past two years have taken a backseat to family responsibilities.

Doña Ana has tried to accommodate students, Torres says. The college set up Wi-Fi hotspots in its parking lots, opened up campus computer labs by appointment, gave out iPads to students, and trained faculty in teaching online.

"I feel like this is a social-justice issue," she says. As the college's president, she also has to be realistic: Every percent drop in enrollment represents a loss of roughly \$100,000 for the college in revenue from tuition and fees. "We can't continue to lose enrollment at this pace," she says.

While Texas, which is tied with California for second-largest share of Hispanic residents in the 50 states, hasn't seen as large a decline in college enrollment, the majority-Hispanic city of El Paso has struggled. El Paso Community College has lost 15 percent of its enrollment since the spring of 2020.

"For a town like El Paso, there's a significant economic impact," says Carlos C. Amaya, interim vice president for student

and enrollment services. El Paso's economy is **rebounding from the pandemic**, but for that to continue, the city will need a work force that's prepared for those jobs.

The University of Texas at El Paso has also seen enrollment decline each of the past two years — by 5 percent and 3 percent, respectively, **after two decades of increases**. About 80 percent of the campus's students are Hispanic. Covid-19 "hit our community very, very hard," said Gary Edens, vice president for student affairs.

Edens is hopeful that most of the students who've dropped out during the pandemic will come back. "It was never a, 'I don't want to continue my higher education,'" he says. "It was, 'I have to put a pause on this because life issues are happening right now.'"

IN STATES with smaller but rapidly growing Hispanic populations — including Washington, Wisconsin, and Massachusetts — college leaders are worried, too. Their near-term strategic plans depend on enrolling and graduating more Hispanic students.

At four-year public universities in Washington State, the share of undergraduates who are Hispanic grew from 6.5 percent in the fall of 2010 to 12.2 percent in the fall of 2019; at community colleges, that share went from 8.1 percent to 10.4 percent. Meanwhile, the share of white students has fallen every year, and by 2019 they represented fewer than half of students enrolled in the state's public colleges.

But from the fall of 2019 to the fall of 2020, when Covid hit, those colleges lost nearly 5,100 Hispanic students — a 14-percent drop.

Eastern Washington University, a regional public institution, has struggled with enrollment for years. In 2019 the university **announced plans** to try to reach 25-percent Hispanic students by 2023, which would meet the federal definition of a Hispanic-serving institution. HSIs, as they are known, are eligible for millions of dollars in competitive grants.

After years of mostly steady growth in Hispanic undergraduates, Eastern Washington saw a double-digit decrease from the fall of 2020 to the fall of 2021. Over all, the university's undergraduate headcount **dropped 21 percent** from 2019 to 2021.

Eastern Washington's HSI task force wrote in its latest report that the burden would be on the university "to keep pace with the needs and expectations" of Hispanic students. If not, the task force wrote, it's not just enrollment that would suffer; so would the university's graduation rate. A university spokesperson didn't respond to a request for comment.

Marquette University is also striving to become an HSI. The private university has made progress since starting its HSI Initiative in 2016; 15 percent of its students were Hispanic in the fall of 2021. But while that share has increased, the growth in the number of Hispanic students has stalled in the past two years, and enrollment **overall has declined**.

Jacqueline Black, director of Hispanic initiatives and diversity and inclusion educational programming at Marquette, told *The Chronicle* in November that in a difficult financial climate, the university often couldn't provide enough aid for families that are more likely to be low income. "Our admitted pool is much more diverse than the students that matriculate," Black said. "We're simply not able to keep up with the need."

Northern Essex Community College, in Massachusetts, is faring better than some two-year institutions in the Northeast. After a 7.5-percent drop in Hispanic students in the fall of 2020, enrollment ticked up a year later.

Northern Essex became the first Hispanic-serving institution in the Northeast two decades ago, says Lane Glenn, the college's president. Forty-three percent of students are now Hispanic — a share that's been rapidly growing as the white-student population plummets. Glenn says the college has hired more bilingual faculty and staff members, expanded its academic support programs

with legislative funding, and created a network of student ambassadors to help guide students in online courses.

Glenn isn't breathing a sigh of relief yet, though. The decline in Hispanic men's enrollment is a huge concern. And even if those students do get to campus, the achievement gap is vast: There's a roughly 30-point difference in retention and graduation rates for white women, who have the highest success rate, and Hispanic men.

When Covid first hit, many college leaders downplayed enrollment concerns, saying students would simply take a gap year and come back. Glenn knew that wasn't going to happen at Northern Essex, where most students are low-income and vulnerable. "I was going, 'Oh, my God, this is going to be a disaster,'" he says. "Our students, they don't come back. Or if they do come back, they come back later. And if they do, they typically have more obligations, which makes it harder for them to complete."

"Some of the students we lost last year, we'll never get back. And I cry about that."

UNDoubtedly, the nation's Hispanic population is [continuing to grow](#), and within that group are many young people who haven't tried college before. So there is reason for higher ed to be optimistic that Hispanic enrollment can recover, experts said.

But after the disruption of the pandemic, colleges can't just assume that Hispanic students will show up. They will have to be more intentional, says Santiago, of Excelencia in Education.

In interviews, college administrators emphasized how the loss of Hispanic students would affect the local community and economy. But it also affects colleges' bottom line.

"Institutions have to be pragmatic," Santiago says. Colleges that serve lots of low-income Hispanic students often don't have large endowments or foundations to supplement their budgets if there's not enough tuition revenue. "You cannot get to your en-

rollment numbers and your national goals without a tactical plan for Latinos," she says. "You can't work your way around it."

To appeal specifically to Hispanic students, experts say colleges should make sure they involve students' families, with Spanish-language programs for parents who don't speak English; improve the on-campus environment and experience, both inside and outside the classroom; and adjust course schedules to accommodate part-time jobs or other obligations.

"Some of the students we lost last year, we'll never get back. And I cry about that."

Across the country, many colleges are using variations of a four-pronged approach to recruit, retain, and re-engage Hispanic students: outreach, financial aid, support services, and clearly connecting college to career.

Doña Ana, for instance, is changing its approach to recruitment. Traditionally, staff members have gone to local high schools and community events. "We need something that I think of more like a community organizer, rather than a traditional college recruiter," says Torres, the president. Her vision for the college's new "outreach coordinators" is based on the *promotoras*, a network of community health workers, mostly Mexican American women, who educate their communities and connect them to resources.

Doña Ana's [Avanza program](#) aims to support students with young children and students who don't speak English at home. The college has also identified roughly 500 students who left between the fall of 2020 and the fall of 2021. Doña Ana first tried to reach them by email, Torres says, but those efforts largely failed — so staff members are trying text messages instead.

Long Beach City College, where 60 per-

cent of students are Hispanic, has scaled up its data collection. Before the pandemic, the two-year college didn't systematically track which students needed particular kinds of support — for instance, how many students were housing insecure, says Mike Muñoz, the college's president-superintendent. Today, Muñoz says, "I know I have 70 students who are sleeping in their cars every night. I have that number. It's real."

During her time away, Cuevas, the Pasadena City College student, got the mental-health treatment she needed, developed better habits, and found a part-time job. When she decided to come back this spring, she says, her academic counselor in the [Puente program](#), which prepares students to transfer to four-year institutions, helped her chart a path forward.

While a handful of professors were helpful when she was struggling, she doesn't

"I know I have 70 students who are sleeping in their cars every night. I have that number. It's real."

feel like the institution did much to support her. And when she re-enrolled, she says, she was required to take a "probation workshop" before registering for classes, since she'd failed several courses. The workshop was tone-deaf, she says, and sent the message that if she just worked harder and stopped procrastinating and built some "grit," she'd be successful.

"It just felt like it was shaming and blaming students for not passing their classes and their circumstances," Cuevas says.

A spokesman for Pasadena City College said the institution had recently renamed and restructured the mandatory probation workshop; it's now called the "student success workshop." This year, the college

also began providing every student with a "student success coach" to guide them through their college experience.

Some colleges hope to eliminate administrative barriers permanently — like the practice of dropping students from classes if they owe a fine. The Cal State system is examining that [as part of an effort](#) to re-enroll students who have stopped out. "We need to be able to pay our bills," Gold says. "But at the same time, we need to look at these policies and figure out, can we be more accommodating to our students?"

At some institutions, Hispanic enrollment [appears to be rebounding](#).

The College of Lake County, in the Chicago suburbs, saw a double-digit enrollment decline in the 2020-21 academic year. More than 40 percent of students are Hispanic. But things looked better for the two-year institution in the fall of 2021: Hispanic enrollment was up.

The two-year college has hired a new team of [college and career navigators](#) to embed in local high schools, focusing mostly on schools with large Hispanic populations, to help guide students smoothly into their community-college courses, says Erin Fowles, dean of enrollment services. The college has also hired two bilingual therapists and a coordinator to oversee activities and programs that are relevant to the Hispanic community.

Wichita State University fared even better, with a 25-percent jump from 2020 to 2021 among Hispanic first-year students. The Kansas institution saw enrollment grow by [3.5 percent](#) overall in the fall of 2021, and is closing in on 15 percent Hispanic representation. That bucks the trend in Kansas, where four-year college enrollment [declined 8.6 percent in the past five years](#).

Wichita State is now the most racially and ethnically diverse university in the state, says Bobby Gandu, assistant vice president for strategic enrollment manage-

ment and admissions. It's also more affordable than many other public universities in the region — even for students coming from outside of Kansas, he says, thanks to tuition-discounting efforts.

There's a [new donor-funded scholarship program](#) for students from underrepresented groups, and the university is doing more Spanish-language advertising and programming. The number of Hispanic students at Wichita State has doubled in the past 11 years. "We've really just tried to demonstrate to the Hispanic community, both in Kansas and outside of it, that we can be a good destination for these students," Gandu says.

Administrators across the country say that federal Covid relief funding has been essential to enticing students to stay in college or re-enroll after a break.

Institutions have used the money for everything from clearing small debts like library fines and parking tickets to offsetting the cost of child care. Some students who've been struggling because of Covid are getting what amounts to free tuition.

Long Beach City College is using the money to offer "student success completion grants." Say there's a student who took a full load of courses one semester, but planned to drop out or go part-time to pick up extra hours at work. LBCC will offer

[financial aid](#) — up to \$2,000 a semester for students who take 15 units — to encourage them to persist and graduate on time. LBCC is also providing child-care grants to its large population of student parents.

The college has streamlined its process for requesting emergency aid, providing students with an easy link to the application in Canvas, the college's course-management system. Students can specify what they need help with, whether it's mental-health services, tech support, or transportation. While enrollment was down last fall, it was a much smaller decrease than other two-year institutions in the region, Muñoz says.

But [after September 2023](#), relief money will no longer be available. What will colleges do then?

"Here we are, sitting in early 2022, and those funds are just about exhausted," says Renay Scott, acting provost and vice president for student success at New Mexico State University, where half of the students are Hispanic.

"I sometimes feel like we're paddling just to stay afloat," Scott says, "versus paddling to get somewhere."

Sarah Brown is news editor of The Chronicle.

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STEPHEN BRASHEAR FOR THE CHRONICLE

Oscar Joya, here at the ice-cream shop where he's worked since 2018, has dropped out of the U. of Washington twice.

The Problem Nobody's Talking About

Men have trailed women in degree completion for decades. Why aren't colleges doing anything?

By KELLY FIELD

EVEN BEFORE the pandemic forced tens of thousands of Americans to quit college, Oscar Joya struggled to stay in school.

In 2018, when he was a sophomore, he'd dropped out of the University of Washington to earn tuition money and focus on his mental health. One quarter off stretched into two, until Paul Metellus, the student-success coordinator in the college's Brotherhood Initiative for men of color, helped Joya stitch together the resources he needed to re-enroll.

"He was always on my case, in the most positive way," recalled Joya, who is the youngest of four children of Mexican immigrants, and the first to attend college.

But he continued to struggle financially, and in the spring of 2020, in the midst of the first Covid outbreak, a long overdue tuition bill caught up with him. Unable to pay the balance, and barred from registering from classes until he did, Joya dropped out again. This time, he was certain he wouldn't be back.

"My debt was too large, and it was way too unrealistic for me to return," Joya said.

For decades now, men have trailed women in college completion. Barely 40 percent of men earn a bachelor's degree in four years, compared with just over half of women, federal data show. Even fewer Black and Hispanic men graduate on time — 21 percent and 32 percent, respectively.

But the pandemic, which has led to a disproportionate enrollment decline among male students, is expected to deepen the divide. Nationwide, male enrollment has fallen 8.6 percent over the past two years, while female enrollment has dropped by 6.5 percent, according to the [National Student Clearinghouse](#). There were nearly three million more women enrolled in college this spring than men.

If this trend continues, it will have enormous consequences for the economy and society at large, affecting everything from unemployment rates to marriage patterns.

Yet it remains to be seen if colleges will respond to the growing gap in degree

completion with the same urgency with which they've responded to recent enrollment losses. Historically, efforts to elevate men as an endangered class have met with resistance from both the right and the left, with conservatives accusing colleges of trying to "fix" men, and liberals arguing that men don't need saving.

"People believe that men are already in positions of privilege, so why would we invest time and money in trying to help them?" said Charles Robbins, who created a male-student-success team at Stony Brook University a decade ago this month.

"While that basic premise is true," Robbins continued, "the reality is that if there was any other cohort of students that was not doing well, everybody would be up in arms, asking, 'Why aren't we doing anything?'"

ONE REASON men aren't often seen as needing a leg up is because for most of the history of higher education, men earned a majority of the degrees.

In fact, as recently as 1972, men [accounted for](#) 56 percent of the bachelor's degrees awarded by American colleges.

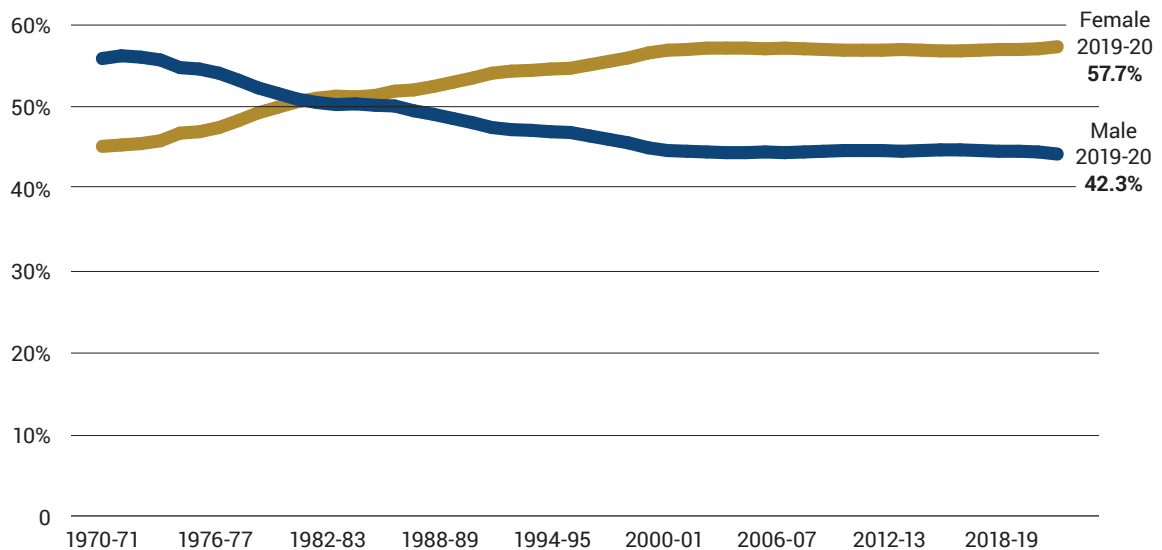
But by 1982, women were leading in bachelor's-degree completion, a position they've held ever since. Women [now account](#) for more than 60 percent of the associate and master's degrees awarded in the United States, 58 percent of the bachelor's degrees, and 55 percent of the doctorates.

It's not that fewer men are graduating college than 50 years ago. Graduation rates have risen for both sexes since the '70s — they've just accelerated much more quickly for women. In 1970, 20 percent of men and 12 percent of women between the ages of 25 and 34 had a bachelor's degree; in 2021, 36 percent of men and 46 percent of women had one.

This gender imbalance, which cuts across race and socioeconomic class, and is not unique to the United States, has been attributed to a variety of factors, both

More women than men have received bachelor's degrees every year since 1982.

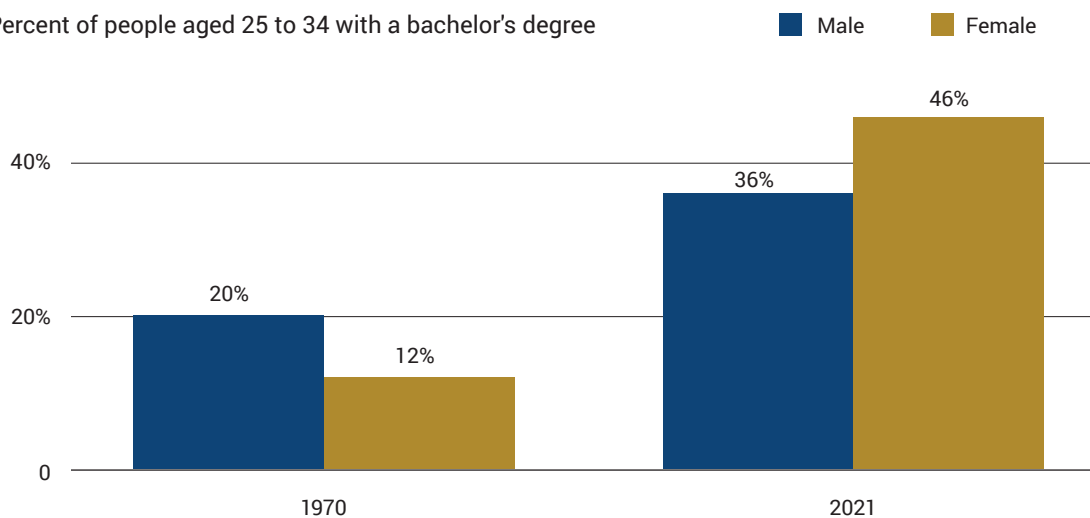
Percent of bachelor's degrees conferred



Source: NCES Digest of Education Statistics

Women have outpaced men in rising graduation rates.

Percent of people aged 25 to 34 with a bachelor's degree



Source: Pew Research Center

sociocultural and academic. Some trace the gap to the early grades, where boys lag in literacy skills and are much more likely than girls to be disciplined or referred to special education. Others point to gender stereotyping and cultural messaging, which tell young men (particularly white men) that they hold all the power and shouldn't have to work hard — or seek help — to succeed.

"The message we give to women is: 'You're going to have to work really hard to overcome obstacles,'" said Keith Edwards, a consultant to colleges on male identity issues. "The message we give to men is: 'If you have to go to class and study, there's something wrong with you.'"

When Edwards was director of campus

For decades now, men have trailed women in college completion.

life at Macalester College, he interviewed male college students to learn about their experiences. They talked about studying on the sly, telling their friends they were headed for a hookup, then sneaking off to the library instead.

"They think, 'All these other men are crushing it, but I am struggling,'" said Edwards. "It leads to a lot of mental-health issues."

Popular portrayals of college life reinforce the message that school isn't to be taken seriously, Edwards said. When he asks young men today what shaped their image of college, they immediately point to *Animal House*, a movie that was made before they were born. They picture John Belushi, in a "College" sweatshirt, chugging a bottle of Jack Daniels, then smashing it.

"Men arrive with the attitude that college is about partying, competitive heterosexual sex, not preparing for academics, and breaking the rules," he said.

Colleges also come in for their share of

the blame, with critics accusing them of creating environments that are hostile to young men. They argue that a focus on gender equity and sexual-assault prevention has led to the censoring of speech deemed "politically incorrect," and to the treatment of young men as predators.

"I feel that college is not geared toward us," said Thomas Efrem, a junior at the University of Washington who is part of the Brotherhood Initiative. "There's a lot of rhetoric against the patriarchy — I get it, but it feels like people point the finger at us."

Efrem said that when he tries to challenge the conventional wisdom around issues related to gender equality, offering research to support his points, professors and students shut him down.

"There's a lot of narrative pushing, and I don't like that," he said.

Colleges have also come under fire for offering programs and seminars — some student-driven — aimed at freeing young men from the pressures and constraints of traditional masculinity, often referred to as "toxic masculinity." To college's conservative critics, such training amounts to emasculation, an attempt to "reprogram" college-aged men to behave more like college-aged women.

THE NOTION that men are a privileged group that doesn't need help getting through college is what Shaun Harper, an expert in diversity, equity, and inclusion at the University of Southern California, has called the "[Model Gender Majority Myth](#)." Like the "model-minority myth" affecting Asians, this line of thinking assumes that advantage is distributed evenly across a demographic group, in this case, men.

In the college context, the Model Gender Majority Myth refers to the fact that men of color tend to face higher barriers to graduation than their white counterparts.

Of course, most college leaders are well aware of these disparities, even if the

general public isn't. That's why the limited number of student-success programs that exist for men typically focus on Black men, or men of color more broadly.

The University of Washington's Brotherhood Initiative is one of the nation's most comprehensive programs for men of color, offering two yearlong seminars, peer mentoring, internships and research opportunities, and social events to cohorts of 30 students each year.

If this trend continues, it will have enormous consequences for the economy and society at large, affecting everything from unemployment rates to marriage patterns.

Joe Lott, the associate professor who created the initiative in 2016 to provide a road map to college for his own young sons, said the program provides a community for men of color on the predominantly white campus, where just 3 percent of students are Black and 9 percent are Latino. It also equips them with the tools and support to navigate a campus where they may be seen as threatening or less capable than their white peers, Lott said.

"They're in an environment that wasn't created for them," Lott said. "It is easy to internalize messages and act in a way that your environment tells you to act."

When the program started, there was a ten-percentage-point graduation gap between underrepresented minority males at the University of Washington and their white peers. Six years later, that gap has

nearly closed for program participants.

But cohort-based programs for men remain relatively rare on college campuses. More common are mentoring programs, which match young men with the role models many lack in an effort to make it easier for them to seek support.

"We joke about men not asking for directions because it's true," said William Cummings, a professor of humanities and cultural studies and chairman of the Status of Men Presidential Advisory Committee at the University of South Florida, which piloted a peer-mentoring program this year. "Women are the power users of all our services. Men just don't seem to think they need help or are uncomfortable getting it."

Mahmoud Youssef, a senior finance major who volunteered as a mentor this academic year, said he would have benefitted from the guidance of an upperclassman when he was a freshman. As an international student from Egypt, he struggled with registering for classes, identifying clubs to join, and even finding stores where he could purchase familiar foods.

Over the course of the year, Youssef helped his eight mentees work through an assortment of academic and personal issues. Most "just needed someone to listen to them, to release things from inside," he said. Still, Youssef said he won't seek help for himself, "unless I 100-percent need it."

"I like to help others, but I don't like to ask for help," he admitted.

AT USF, years of efforts to raise graduation rates have virtually eliminated completion gaps by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Yet the gender gap remains, with women nearly 25-percent more likely to graduate on time than men.

Even so, the mentoring program was a tough sell, especially since the second-most underperforming group, relative to women, is white men, just behind Asian men.

“The fact that white men are not doing well at USF doesn’t cause too much concern,” among many faculty and staff members, said Cummings. Carmen Goldsmith, executive liaison to the vice president for student success, says white men are “even harder for people to get behind, because it’s an even more privileged group” than men in general.

Robbins, of Stony Brook University, faced similar pushback when he created his male-success team and began interviewing groups of men about their challenges.

“We needed to explain over and over again why it was important for half the population to be educated,” said Robbins, who is now the college’s executive director of the Center for Changing Systems of Power.

Campus leaders ultimately opted not to create a dedicated program for men, but to target existing resources toward them instead. They advertised student services in places where men tend to congregate, such as dining halls and sports arenas, and held pop-up advising sessions in the gym, offering degree-progress reports from the side of treadmills.

That outreach, along with efforts to educate faculty, staff, and student leaders about the factors holding men back, have helped narrow the graduation gap between

male and female students from 17 to seven percentage points over the past six years.

But the ongoing pandemic, coupled with low unemployment rates and persistent doubts about the value of a college degree, have made retaining men in college harder than ever. This year, Compton College, in California, hired what it believes to be the nation’s first director of Black and males of color success, in part to help “reclaim” the more than 650 Black men who left between the fall of 2019 and fall of 2021, reducing Black male enrollment to just 269 students.

Meanwhile, at the University of Washington, at least one male student is back on track. Joya returned to campus this winter, after Metellus helped him piece together enough scholarship money to pay down \$8,000 of the \$15,000 he owed the college and work out a payment plan for the rest. He hopes to graduate in 2023, six years after he started.

“Paul and the Brotherhood were always by my side,” he said in an interview shortly before his spring finals. “Without them, I would not be here.”

Kelly Field, a former Chronicle reporter, continues to write for The Chronicle on a freelance basis.

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A Bright Spot for Enrollment Is Showing Signs of Strain

By MEGAN ZAHNEIS



GRADUATE-STUDENT enrollment has been a rare **bright spot** for higher education in recent years, as the number of undergraduates has declined. But a new analysis suggests that institutions' increasing reliance on graduate admissions is based on unrealistic targets, and is putting strain on the staff members who recruit for these programs.

Nearly half of graduate-enrollment professionals are considering leaving their posts, according to a new **report** from EAB and Nagap: The Association for Graduate Enrollment Management. The reasons for that, the paper finds, are clear: Increased workloads for understaffed departments. Just about every department in higher ed is coping with similar challenges, but people working in graduate enrollment are facing distinct frictions.

Nearly half of graduate-enrollment professionals are considering leaving their posts, according to a new report.

For one, graduate enrollments have experienced healthy growth across higher ed during the pandemic, with year-over-year increases of 2.4 percent and 2.1 percent in 2020 and 2021, respectively, EAB/Nagap estimated. But that enrollment bump hasn't been spread evenly across the sector — in fact, one in three institutions saw declining graduate enrollment between 2019 and 2020. And recent data signal a softening in demand: The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center observed a nearly 1-percent **drop** in enrollment in graduate and professional programs this spring from the previous year.

Amid the pandemic, dozens of doctoral programs opted to suspend admissions for a year, forgoing an incoming class in the fall of 2021 in order to devote money to already-enrolled students. But with those programs back to accepting applications, many institutions are looking to graduate enrollment to help compensate for the larger drop in undergraduate enrollment: A full 47 percent of EAB's respondents noted an "enhanced reliance" on graduate programs to pick up the slack.

That increasing reliance, combined with well-documented pandemic-era staff shortages, means more stress on graduate-enrollment staff members, Pam Kiecker Royall, EAB's head of enrollment-services research, said in an interview. Nearly half of all respondents, 49 percent, said they were "extremely" or "very" stressed at work. The eight flash polls EAB and Nagap conducted between September 2020 and March 2022, on which the report is based, revealed that institutions have been "stretching the expertise of the enrollment professionals that were in particular roles to cover more, and sometimes expand beyond their portfolio, and as such, beyond their comfort level," Royall said.

AN 'UNSUSTAINABLE' SITUATION

All of that stretching, on top of the increased demands, has led to stress. In general, Royall said, graduate-enrollment officials are questioning whether the goals they're being asked to meet are attainable. "It was already challenging to do X," she said. That's prompted enrollment officials to ask, "Why did they have to do X plus Y plus Z?" Twenty-nine percent of the 1,216 people from 790 institutions who participated in the flash polls said unrealistic goals were a factor in their work stress.

Those enrollment officers might be trying to sell students on new hybrid or virtual degrees, or programs whose curricula were overhauled during the pandemic, Royall said. And the data show that they are also ramping up their promotional efforts. Two-

thirds of EAB/Nagap survey respondents said they'd beefed up marketing efforts in 2021, including by adding or increasing virtual events and personalized outreach by faculty and staff members.

Such efforts aren't just one-time ways of combating a lack of in-person interaction during the pandemic, respondents indicated. Instead, they're becoming "the new status quo for how you recruit graduate students," Royall said.

Many institutions are looking to graduate enrollment to help compensate for the larger drop in undergraduate enrollment.

Graduate-enrollment staff are also pitching their institutions to more students of color — more than half of respondents said increasing racial and ethnic diversity was a priority for their institutions in 2021. There has been some progress in that realm; EAB/Nagap's analysis of federal data found that 10-percent more Hispanic or Latina/o stu-

dents, 8-percent more Asian students, and 5-percent more Black students had enrolled in graduate school in the fall of 2020 than in the fall of 2019. But demand for those students is high, and enrollment officers must contend with equally high expectations from administrators to recruit them. "When everybody else is trying to convert or recruit for diversity," Royall said respondents wondered, "why are my goals now so extreme when we know it's a difficult environment?"

Taken together, it's not a pretty picture for graduate-admissions offices. There's pressure to either maintain high enrollment or raise flagging head counts, and there are more ways to do so, through targeted and virtual outreach, and fewer people on the payroll to make it happen. Perhaps it's not a surprise, then, that 46 percent of the EAB survey respondents said they were considering leaving their current roles, 14 percent of them for a position outside higher ed. Nor are only mid-career and senior graduate-admissions officers considering career moves, Royall said. Junior staff members are "leaving higher education for something else in numbers that seem unsustainable."

Megan Zahneis is a Chronicle reporter who writes about research universities and workplace issues.

Originally published June 24, 2022

SECTION 2



Strategies



Stopping the Enrollment Slide

How three colleges are trying to arrest their yearslong declines.

By **BRIANNA HATCH, WYATT MYSKOW, and ISHA TRIVEDI**

THE SECTORWIDE DROP in undergraduate enrollment over the past decade isn't happening on every campus. But for some — particularly small private institutions, public regionals, and community colleges — the declines have often been acute. Here's how three such institutions have felt the effects of sliding enrollment, the choices they've made in the past, and how they're hoping to halt the downward trend.

Betting on Sprint Football

Like many small private colleges, Fontbonne University has had to adapt to survive.

A Roman Catholic institution of 955 undergraduate and graduate students in Clayton, Mo., which borders St. Louis, Fontbonne was once a women's college. That changed in the 1960s.

More recently, as Fontbonne has faced enrollment declines, it has tried other tactics. Cutting staff. Adding academic programs. Acquiring (then selling) land. It has even started an unusual football program.

The pandemic had a sobering effect on student numbers: In 2021, Fontbonne's freshman-class size dropped **35 percent**, and overall enrollment fell by 14 percent. Quinton Clay, vice president for enrollment management, marketing, and communications, said that the inability to recruit students in person played a significant role. An on-campus visit "is one of the strongest drawing cards for students and families to choose this institution," he said.

But Fontbonne's challenges are not new: From 2006 to 2016, undergraduate enrollment **dropped** by more than 45 percent, with the number of Black students **declining** by nearly 75 percent for part of the same period. Fontbonne, like other small colleges, is not at the "robust endowment end of the spectrum," Clay pointed out, so

it relies on tuition for much of its revenue. (The university's endowment stood at **\$16.8 million**, according to its 2021 financial statement.) For at least the past two years, Fontbonne's core operations failed to generate **positive revenue**; it relied on **pandemic-related government** relief funds to finish its 2021 fiscal year in the black.

In 2020 the university **submitted petitions** to the Missouri attorney general and gained access to nearly \$5 million worth of donor-restricted endowment funds for scholarships. In 2018 the university laid off **27 employees** — or about 10 percent of its work force — to save \$1.3 million annually. Those reductions were enacted under the previous president, and Nancy H. Blattner, who took over in July 2020, said she doesn't anticipate making any more staffing cuts. Under the previous president, Fontbonne also **bought a former high-school property** for \$20 million to create athletic fields and adult-education classrooms. Fontbonne sold the property in November 2021.

"We're investing all of our resources and energy into the Clayton campus instead of dividing it between two spaces," Blattner said. "That was another president's dream, and he was entitled to that, but it wasn't mine."

Blattner has a different vision. Part of it still involves athletics — but centers on a specific kind of football team.

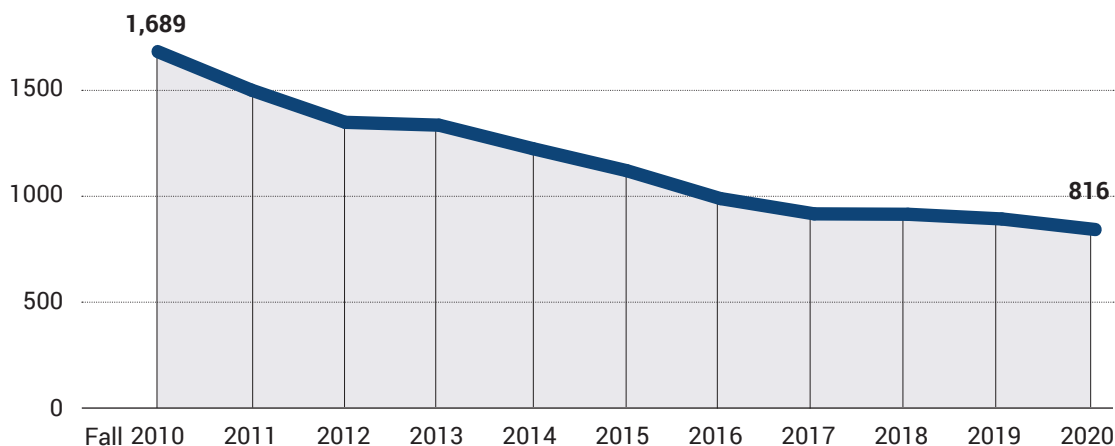
It's called sprint football, a weight-restricted version of the sport, in which players must weigh 178 pounds or less to be eligible. Blattner said Fontbonne would build up to recruiting 80 men to play on its team.

Before Blattner became president of Fontbonne, she led Caldwell University, in New Jersey. Under her leadership, Caldwell joined what was then considered the only sprint-football league in the United States.

"It brought more diversity to campus. It brought a gender balance because, like Fontbonne, Caldwell also began as a women's college," Blattner said. "The student vibrancy on campus around the football team was really exciting. And frankly, it

Enrollment Cut in Half

Undergraduate enrollment at Fontbonne U. in the fall of 2020 fell by more than 50 percent from a decade earlier.



Source: U.S. Dept. of Education

attracted our alums and even some donors that were willing to give to football that hadn't been interested in participating in that way."

She wanted to employ the same strategy when she arrived at Fontbonne, but the sprint-football league that Caldwell belonged to included only teams on the East Coast. "We're a thousand miles away," Blattner said. "So it was really impractical to think we could drive."

So she decided to start her own: the [Midwest Sprint Football League](#). It has six colleges ready to compete this fall, and others have contacted her to join in 2023.

Blattner expects that 40 to 45 men will come to Fontbonne to play sprint football this fall. "Frankly," she said, these students "would not be here for any other reason except they want to continue to do something that they excelled at in high school, but they're simply, through their stature, not able to compete in a D-I, D-II, D-III, or NAIA school on a regular football team."

But sprint football is just one of many ways the university is trying to raise enrollment and revenue.

Fontbonne adopted a test-blind admis-

sions policy for this fall's incoming freshmen, making it the [only college in Missouri](#) to do so, according to FairTest, a group that seeks to curb inequities related to standardized testing. Clay said the university had its second-largest applicant pool for freshmen — but he said it would be "premature" to give specific details on whether that will translate into an increase in enrollment. The policy is about more than enrollment anyway, Clay said. "Removing barriers in terms of students doing the leg-work," especially first-generation students, is "really, really critical and important."

Fontbonne is also restructuring its academic offerings to attract more students. A criminal-justice major is awaiting approval from the university's accreditor. And the university will begin offering an undergraduate nursing program in the fall of 2022.

"We try to meet the needs of what the students are interested in studying, and those things change over time," Blattner said. "It's an evolution."

According to Blattner, the costs for the nursing program and the sprint football team are covered by alumni donations.

(When asked about the specific costs of the programs, Clay declined via email to provide the details.)

Blattner also believes the future for higher education, especially for smaller colleges, lies in partnerships. In the fall of 2021, Fontbonne began offering its graduate program in speech and language pathology at Avila University, in Kansas City, Mo. In 2023, it will do the same with St. Catherine University, in St. Paul, Minn.

“When we’re small, we don’t have to reinvent the wheel,” Blattner said. “We can share what we have with other institutions, and students in both locations can benefit.”
—B.H.

Recommitting to What’s Local

Enrollments at many public regional colleges across the country have been declining for years, and Adams State University is no different. At the open-admissions Hispanic-serving institution in Alamosa, Colo., undergraduate numbers have dropped by nearly 24 percent over the past decade, though overall enrollment has remained steady thanks to the university’s online graduate programs.

Unlike many regional public colleges, though, Adams State is located in an area of the country that’s growing rather than shrinking. [Colorado](#) and [Alamosa County](#) have seen increases in their population, according to the most recent census data. The college’s struggles with low retention and graduation rates, and competition from other public institutions, have made it difficult to sustain the size of its student body. The decline has had other effects: Adams State [eliminated](#) 27 positions to reduce personnel costs by \$2.2 million in 2018. Most of the reductions were voluntary, though nine people lost their jobs.

The college hopes to find a solution by hewing close to the mission it shares with many regional public colleges: to ex-

pand access to postsecondary education, promote equity, and act as “stewards of their local communities,” said Cecilia M. Orphan, an associate professor of higher education at the University of Denver and director of partnerships for the [Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges](#), which classifies Adams State as a rural-serving institution. It is trying to stave off further enrollment declines by recommitting itself to the local community and the students it serves.

“We have an obligation to do things well, not just to our students, which is our top priority, but also to our community, our regional community, which is so dependent on us when it comes to driving the economy, providing workers, being a source of culture, entertainment, education, and the like,” said David A. Tandberg, who was recently appointed to a one-year interim presidency after serving on the university’s Board of Trustees. “So we’ve got to figure this thing out.”

The interim presidency came with the condition that whoever was appointed would not be eligible to become the next president. Tandberg said that limitation is freeing because it allows him to focus on the issues the university faces instead of campaigning for the permanent job.

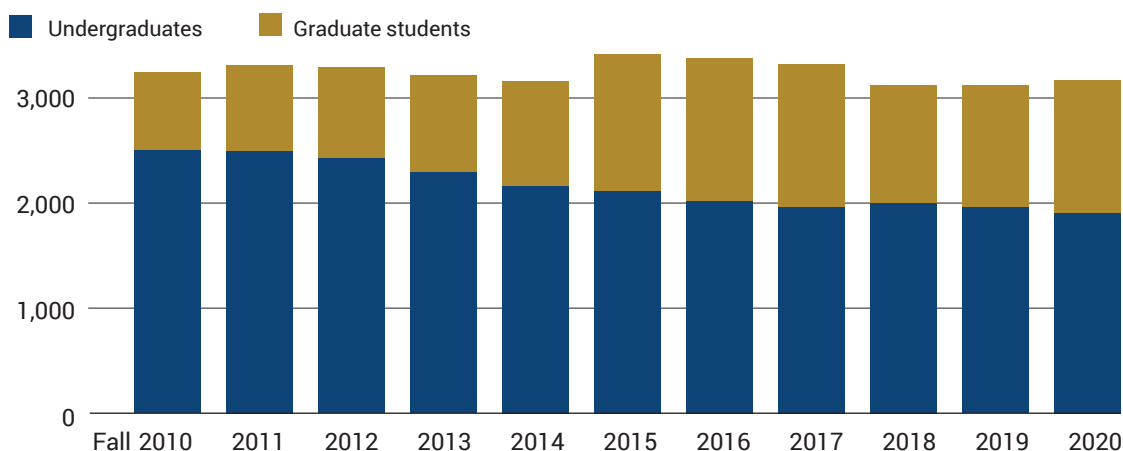
The biggest obstacle to enrolling more undergraduates may be the competition Adams State faces from other colleges. “We’re in a particularly competitive marketplace where the flagship research universities tap into our markets,” he said. “They’re very hard to compete against.”

Tandberg, who was previously senior vice president for policy research and strategic initiatives at the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, said the university needs to create better partnerships with local community colleges and high-school districts. High-school students, he said, need absolute clarity on what it takes to go to college. That means removing the bureaucracy that often comes with applying.

“In the San Luis Valley, we can literally

Stemming the Slide With Grad Students

As undergraduate enrollment at Adams State U. fell sharply over the past decade, the number of grad students grew by nearly 70 percent.



Source: U.S. Dept. of Education

tell every student that is going to graduate from high school that they're admitted to Adams State," he said. "All you got to do is complete. I don't care what your grades are. You're admitted to Adams State."

Increasing enrollment, though, is only one step. The university has a 59-percent retention rate and a 38-percent graduation rate, which it is seeking to improve by better supporting students, many of whom are the first in their families to attend college. Recently, Adams State has bolstered its student-success efforts and changed academic offerings. It has created broadly focused "metamajors," reshaped the curriculum, and made the experience for students more inclusive.

As the student body has grown more diverse — 36 percent of Adams State undergraduates are Hispanic, and half come from underrepresented groups — it became clear to faculty members that the curriculum needed to reflect the students, said Matthew Valverde, an associate professor of voice and the project director for Title V grants at the university.

With funds from the federal government and buy-in from the faculty, the Adams Experience kicked off in 2020. The project includes a first-year seminar, e-portfolios, capstone projects, reflections after courses, and more, to help students find their community on campus, understand the real-world uses of their education, and have a place to display to potential employers what they have done in college. The Adams Experience also created more internships for students and a peer-mentoring program.

"We're really focused on, once the students are here, holding onto them and making them feel uplifted and feel affirmed," Valverde said. "And of course, to learn a lot and have a really good experience all over our campus and throughout the Valley."

The university has also created "metamajors" to bolster some of Adams State's programs that weren't recruiting well and give students more interdisciplinary options, said Colleen M. Schaffner, chair of the psychology department and director of

the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. Schaffner oversaw the development of two metamajors in the social sciences, one focusing on prelaw and the other on forensics.

Ideally, the two new majors will enable fewer students to enter the university undeclared and ensure more of them don't lose credits toward their degree if they switch majors. While it's too soon to determine how these changes will affect retention, Schaffner has seen encouraging signs, like students in metamajors being in more-frequent contact with their peers in the program. The changes have also helped attract some students to the social sciences, she said.

Ultimately, Adams State will be judged on how well it achieves its [mission](#), "to provide equitable access to education for all," which is part of what drew some administrators and faculty members there — faculty members like Charles Nicholas Saenz.

"Being Latino myself, I was really excited about that idea of working at an institution that was not just about research, but really leaning into educating the next generation and providing a public service," said Saenz, a professor of history and president of the Faculty Senate. "It wasn't just about generating wealth but actually cultivating an entire population to succeed." —*W.M.*

'A Center for Serving the Community'

It's no secret that the enrollment plunge of the past two years has hit community colleges particularly hard.

Enrollment in the sector had [decreased](#) by more than 16 percent as of the spring of 2022, with students of color accounting for most of the drop, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. More recently, as inflation and the cost of living have risen, people who might otherwise attend community college are focused on finding jobs to cover their immediate

expenses. That's why many of the institutions are making support services more available and conducting outreach to keep their enrollments up.

Take Quinsigamond Community College, in Worcester, Mass., for example. Quinsigamond experienced an 18-percent drop in head count from 2014 to 2021.

The enrollment decline, said Luis G. Pedraja, Quinsigamond's president, has resulted in lost revenue for food vendors and the campus bookstore. The college also laid off at least 12 part-time and full-time employees at the Children's School, Quinsigamond's early-childhood-education lab school, during the summer of 2020, though they were later rehired, according to the Massachusetts Teachers Association.

To combat the decline, the college has focused on retaining its existing students by bolstering support services: hiring a career-success counselor, making additional mental-health resources available, and spending more on its food pantry.

"We feel like we've gone from just being an educational facility to being more of a center for serving the community in general through social services, as well as education," Pedraja said.

The food pantry has expanded both in size and in the volume of donations it receives since it started, in 2018, said Terry Vecchio, dean of students. It serves 451 students, making it one of the most heavily used pantries in the area, she said.

Vecchio said the pantry had received grateful letters and emails from members of the community and from students who have said that the pantry's services allowed them to focus more on their academics instead of worrying about where to find the next meal for themselves and their families.

"It wasn't unusual for our students to be struggling prior to Covid," she said. "During Covid, it was much more challenging for students to get their basic needs met."

The pantry has also served as a central resource for other services and referrals the

college can provide. Staff members have offered access to a law office that helps students with housing or immigration law, or to financial-literacy classes to teach students how to manage their money. Vecchio doesn't anticipate that funding for the pantry will disappear if or when enrollment improves; the needs that the food pantry seeks to meet existed before the pandemic and have only been exacerbated since it began.

"This is not an issue that is going to go away for college students," she said.

It's too soon to tell if Quinsigamond's efforts have had an effect on retention. Between the fall semesters of 2019 and 2021, the retention rate held steady at 50 percent, though that represented a four-percent-age-point drop from the previous two years.

To be sure, Quinsigamond is also pursuing more-traditional avenues to bolster enrollment, including conducting targeted outreach through advertisements at barbershops and the local department of motor vehicles.

But the focus on providing social services to shore up enrollment is an "excellent" use of resources, said NT Izuchi, president of Quinsigamond's Faculty Senate. He's watched food insecurity run rampant since the pandemic hit, he said.

"I've been in the classroom for about three decades, said Izuchi, a professor of computer systems and engineering technology, "and I've never seen the type of challenges we've seen in the past two and a half years."

In some ways, community colleges in Massachusetts seeking to reverse their enrollment drops are fighting an uphill battle, said Nate Mackinnon, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges. Many residents, he said, choose to leave the state when they reach

their 20s because of the high cost of living.

"It's not the fault of community colleges in Massachusetts or anywhere else in the country," Mackinnon said. "Rather, it's very much a result of external forces that our students are faced with, decisions they have to make, in terms of how they prioritize their time and energy."

But community colleges aren't without choices, either. Mackinnon said that many of the state's community colleges are making funds for short-term certificate programs a priority.

Quinsigamond has invested \$2.7 million in Massachusetts work-force-development grants in programs like the college's free "fast-track skills academy" which provides job training in as few as 75 hours. The program trains students for careers in about a dozen fields with high employer demand but a low supply of candidates, like clinical medical assistants or back-end software development.

"It's apparent right now that we have quite the gap between ... skilled employees in high-skilled industries and the available labor pool," Mackinnon said. "That's where community colleges can really fill the void." —*I.T.*

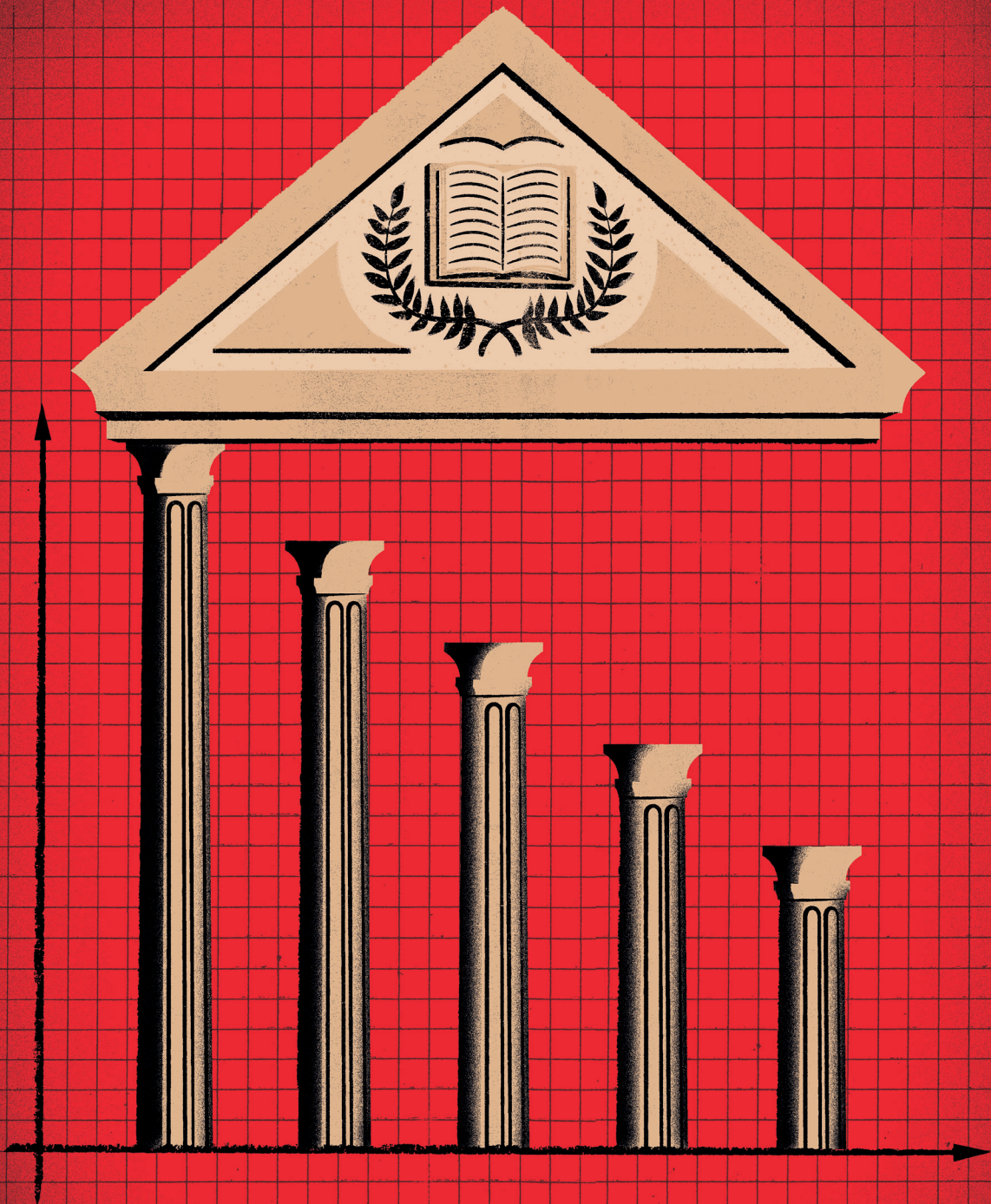
Dan Bauman, a Chronicle staff reporter, contributed to this report.

Brianna Hatch is a reporting intern for The Chronicle.

Wyatt Myskow is a reporting intern for The Chronicle.

Isha Trivedi is a reporting intern at The Chronicle.

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Higher Ed's Evolutionary — Not Revolutionary — Pandemic Response

The sector is slowly adapting to recent enrollment declines.

By **NATHAN D. GRAWE**

AT THE ONSET of the pandemic, some higher-education analysts feared a second catastrophe: widespread college closure. Drawing on work done before the pandemic, [Robert Zemsky](#), a professor of higher education at the University of Pennsylvania, estimated that 20 percent of institutions would find themselves facing potentially existential risks.

Last week's report of enrollment data in the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's [Current-Term Enrollment Estimates](#) for the fall of 2021 would appear to align with dire predictions for higher education: Compared with the fall of 2019, enrollments are down 938,000. While last academic year's losses were concentrated in the for-profit and public two-year sectors, the Clearinghouse reports meaningful

contraction in all subsectors in 2021. Cue the [previously predicted](#) visions of mass closure.

And yet, [only a dozen or so institutions](#) have announced plans to [close their doors](#) since April 2020. Assisted by generous government aid and faster-than-expected vaccine development, the path taken by higher education seems more about serial adaptation than widespread closure. Still, the enrollment estimates from the Clearinghouse (along with its [Stay Informed](#) reports from last fall) point to worrisome attendance patterns that will demand continued transformation if higher education is to continue to disprove predictions of demise.

THE ONLINE UNIVERSITY

Since Clayton M. Christensen and Henry J. Eyring's *The Innovative University* (2011),

higher-education watchers have anticipated an era of transformation that would rewrite educational practices resulting in hundreds if not thousands of shuttered colleges. With the pandemic initially forcing students into distance learning, the stage seemed set for revolutionary change.

Work-from-home trends in the labor market speak to the potential for digital realignment. [Gallup reports](#) that even as vaccinations and warmer weather led case rates to plummet this past summer, the share of employees working remotely at least part of the time never fell below 40 percent. Perhaps more relevant for the future college graduates who are current college students, two-thirds of white-collar employees worked at least partially at home, and 40 percent did so exclusively. Having tasted greater locational flexibility, nine in 10 remote workers told Gallup they would prefer to continue the practice after the pandemic.

However much the outside world may be changing, higher ed is only undergoing a muted progression toward this new digital world. According to National Student Clearinghouse estimates, after a 3-percent rise last year, fall-2021 enrollments at primarily online institutions saw a major reversal, resulting in enrollments 6 percent lower than prepandemic levels. Despite the impression one might get from widespread media campaigns, online institutions like Southern New Hampshire University and the University of Phoenix are not absorbing the entire market for college students.

Primarily online institutions may still demonstrate leadership in a key dimension: enrolling younger male students. While primarily-online-institution enrollments of women in all age groups were lower in 2021 than in 2019, those of men ages 18 to 24 increased — and enrollments of those under age 20 are up a healthy 13 percent. Still, given the [gender distribution and total number of students attending](#) these institutions, even if the attendance changes of this youngest group of students were applied to the entire primarily-online-institution-attending population, they would result in an increase of

fewer than 30,000 attendees — hardly what one would expect if creative destruction was remaking the landscape of higher education.

Of course, none of this precludes the broader (if less disruptive) application of new technologies. [Recent research](#) by economists at Arizona State University and the University of Michigan, for instance, suggests that we should expect continued expansion of online course-taking among on-campus students. They find that ASU students' willingness to pay for on-campus social activities is about twice that of their willingness to pay for in-person classes. In other words, the in-person learning community matters more than in-person classes, at least at Arizona State.

Even at institutions where courses are taught in “traditional” settings, the technological experience during the pandemic can't be ignored. The tools used for distance learning will support virtual guest lectures, [asynchronous student support](#), and more. And outside the classroom, many [institutions](#) are [adopting remote-work policies](#) — both because remote work makes sense for some positions and because [staff members increasingly value flexibility offered by other employers](#). Such technological adaptations are important even if they represent more evolutionary than revolutionary change.

SELECTIVE INSTITUTIONS STAY ON TOP

As foreshadowed in [Common App data](#) from this past spring, the Clearinghouse report suggests that the pandemic amplified the benefits of being a selective institution. While institutions at all levels of selectivity experienced enrollment setbacks in 2020, a fall-2021 enrollment rebound at “highly selective” institutions more than erased those losses resulting in a net gain of 2 percent. “Very competitive” colleges mostly held their own, losing just 1.7 percent over the past two years. During the same time period, however, “competitive” and “less selective” institutions saw two-year enrollment losses of 5.5 percent and 7.5 percent, respectively.

The National Student Clearinghouse's deep dive into first-year enrollments shows that losses disproportionately affected college entrance, as opposed to persistence. For example, over the past two years, first-year enrollments at competitive and less-selective colleges fell 13.4 percent and 10.1 percent, respectively. The pandemic was apparently more likely to delay college entrance than the disruption of existing enrollments. After a national decline in first-time enrollments of nearly 10 percent, many will be disappointed by the lack of rebound in the fall of 2021: For the public and nonprofit sectors, last week's report showed [little to no change from the year before](#).

Several temporary, pandemic-related forces most likely explain the relative enrollment success of more-selective institutions. First, disruption in traditional college-search practices very likely benefited more-established "brands." Unable to visit many campuses in person, prospective students made application and matriculation choices without the benefit of much of the personalized information available to past applicants. Limited information probably nudged students toward flagships and other institutions that students know (or think they know).

Second, cancellation of SAT and ACT tests, coupled with concerns about equitable access to tests once reinstated, led approximately 1,000 colleges — including many of the most selective — to join the ranks of the test-optional. While students face a modest cost of submitting scores to all institutions, in the case of a selective institution, a student may choose to withhold an application rather than submit a low score. With the barrier of test scores removed, it is not surprising that applications for fall-2021 admission to more-selective institutions [increased](#). While conceived as a response to the pandemic, resulting test-optional policies seem to have worked much like broader access initiatives, generating greater interest and enrollment as seen in the Clearinghouse report.

Should we expect expanded demand for selective colleges to continue beyond Covid?

Pandemic-induced enrollment patterns look much like the anticipated effects of ongoing [demographic change](#). In particular, a rising share of parents with college degrees suggests rising interest in selective four-year institutions given past college-going patterns. As a result, we might expect the interest in selective institutions to remain high for reasons unconnected to the pandemic.

Even at institutions where courses are taught in "traditional" settings, the technological experience during the pandemic can't be ignored.

But should we expect the pandemic experience to magnify that trend? Probably not. Even today, amid the Omicron surge, we see a return to traditional patterns of college search. The campus visit is back, albeit with masks. Prospective students once again have the opportunity to learn through in-person experience about the potential fit of a previously less-known institution.

On the other hand, last month's [announcement](#) that Harvard will remain test-optional through 2026 suggests that this pandemic-inspired adaption may already be the new status quo among more-selective institutions, boosting their applicant pools. Regardless, it seems implausible that this or any other pandemic circumstance will alter long-term enrollments at highly selective institutions. Test-optional might increase application counts, but, by definition, highly selective colleges reject many more students than they accept. Were they inclined to raise enrollments by 5 percent, they simply would do so — test or no test. Strategic consider-

ations, not temporary pandemic circumstance, drive such decisions.

DIFFERENCES BY DEMOGRAPHIC SUBGROUPS

The Clearinghouse's disaggregation of enrollment data by gender and race/ethnicity offer two reasons for concern. In 2020, sharp declines in enrollment among men initiated discussions of the long-established trend toward gender imbalance. After reaching gender parity in 1979, the share of postsecondary students who were women exceeded 57 percent in 2019 — a trend that was further amplified by the pandemic. According to the recent Clearinghouse reports, losses to male enrollments seen in 2020 persisted into 2021, affecting men in every race/ethnicity subgroup. Because enrollment losses were larger among men than women at public and nonprofit four-year institutions, these institutions experienced a continuation of the longstanding gender tilt.

Labor-market conditions often influence enrollments. Unprecedented job openings and high starting wages might partially explain lower college enrollments this fall. While that may be so, it does not explain the observed differences by gender. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that between March 2020 and September 2021, the employment losses among women and men ages 20 to 24 differed by less than 100,000 — a difference far smaller than those seen in enrollments. Apparently, colleges have also lost men to nonemployment.

Regarding race and ethnicity, a first reading of Clearinghouse analysis of enrollments during the pandemic suggests that Native Americans were most affected, down 15 percent. Enrollments by Black and white students fell 12 percent, while Latinx and Asian enrollments declined 7 percent and 6 percent, respectively. This reading, however, ignores prior growth trends. Relative to growth rates heading into the pandemic (reported last year by the Clearinghouse), enrollment patterns changed most among Latinx and Native American

students and least among whites.

Perhaps disproportionate losses seen among male, Latinx, and Native American students represent temporary setbacks caused by short-run pandemic realities. For example, some researchers cite the hands-on, experiential nature of many two-year college curricula as an explanation for the particularly large losses of male enrollments at these institutions. The economists [Diane Schanzenbach and Sarah Turner](#) find that declining enrollments in two-year programs teaching assembly, repair, and maintenance explain nearly all of the gender difference in community-college enrollments. Alternatively, perhaps the curtailment of co-curricular campus experiences has fallen more heavily on some student groups than others. These explanations suggest potential for enrollment rebounds once the pandemic fades. We can hope.

Perhaps disproportionate losses seen among male, Latinx, and Native American students represent temporary setbacks caused by short-run pandemic realities.

But perhaps we should do more than hope. A quick glance back to enrollment patterns following the Great Recession cautions that temporary disturbances can produce lasting effects. In the five years leading up to the recession, [U.S. Department of Education](#) data show that college attendance rates among Black high-school graduates rapidly closed in on the nation-

al average. In 2010, the gap in the three-year average stood at only 2.6 percentage points. In the fallout of the recession, it was perhaps unsurprising when some of those gains were lost. After all, Black households experienced [larger economic fallout](#) during the recession. But matriculation rates did not recover along with the economy. Instead, a near decade-long skid reopened a 10-point college-attendance gap in 2019.

At this point, while it is too soon to know whether enrollment setbacks experienced by male, Latinx, and Native American students are temporary, it is not too soon to devise plans to avoid new trends that could mar the next decade. And it is well past time to tackle the re-emerging gap experienced by Black high-school graduates.

HISTORY RHYMES

Even though the pandemic had an extraordinary effect on how we lived our lives these past two years, we should not be entirely surprised if it does not rewrite the future. Experience with past calamities teaches us that people are resilient and prone to revert to accustomed behaviors.

Consider the 1918 flu. [According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), that virus infected one-third of the earth's population, killing approximately 10 percent of those it afflicted. Certainly, the 1918 flu was a foe as consequential as the virus we face, and it motivated many of the same public-health efforts witnessed today. Still, most of us had to learn anew the concept of social distancing, because, as much as the flu dominated activities in 1918 and 1919, when the threat had passed, behaviors largely reverted to earlier patterns.

Even as headlines remind us that the present pandemic is not over, evidence of regression toward the mean is visible. Students learn in classrooms and share cam-

pus sidewalks with prospective students. Recent [evidence from the Common App](#) offers hope that the enrollment rebound that didn't materialize this fall may come as soon as next year. Through mid-December, unique applicants to returning Common App members rose by 13 percent from the same period in 2019-20. (However, [applications for federal aid](#) have been flat year over year, which raises questions of whether the early Common App data will be representative of applications as a whole.) What's more, growth in first-gen applicants was particularly strong — up 23 percent, year over year. Underrepresented-minority application numbers also rose about twice as fast as other applications. These results are consistent with [disproportionate growth in federal aid applications](#) seen in low-income and high-minority communities. While we are still early in the 2021-22 admissions cycle, this data provides hope that worrisome demographic patterns may reverse.

In time, perhaps we will see the pandemic as a blip in the trajectory of higher education. Perhaps its effects, while transitory, only speed our path toward inevitable ends, such as deeper use of technology and holistic admissions practices, leaving the long-term future unchanged. If so, and the pandemic does not rewrite the future of higher education — if it requires only repeated and fundamental revision of nearly every campus practice to respond to a countless series of temporary crises, that will have been challenge enough.

Nathan D. Grawe is a professor of economics at Carleton College. He is the author of Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018) and The Agile College (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021).

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RICARDO REY FOR THE CHRONICLE

The Student Success Challenge

A better college experience can improve retention and graduation rates.

By **BETH MCMURTRIE**

JUAN ESTEBAN SILVA MENENDEZ had one semester left until he would be armed with a bachelor's degree in biomedical sciences and on his way to a career in dentistry. Then his mother was diagnosed with uterine cancer early this year, during a trip to her native Colombia, and his life began to come apart.

At first, Menendez thought he could power through. When he got a few low C's, he didn't sweat it, since he often stumbled in the first few weeks of class. He knew he would get check-in emails from Adrienne Pollard, in the University of South Florida's Office of Academic Advocacy. Her dashboard signaled which students were struggling academically, prompting her to send friendly messages along the lines of, Hey, I see that you're having some trouble in this class; here are a few resources you might want to check out.

Menendez ignored the messages, as he had done before. "I grew up with: your problem, you fix it, do not ask for help," he says of his traditional upbringing in Colombia and later the United States. Universities, to him, were like government offices: uncaring bureaucracies.

But as his family pressures increased, Menendez found himself shaking uncontrollably. Sometimes he would step out of class to throw up. Finally, in March, he sent Pollard two emails and left a voice mail for good measure. She got back to him within hours, setting up a meeting the next morning. Within days he had a case manager and access to a host of services, including mental-health counseling. Equally important, Pollard explained how to petition to withdraw from several of his courses without any academic or financial penalties, and finish in the fall.

For more than a decade USF has been working to catch students like Menendez before their problems snowball. That takes more than adding a layer of support to the existing university structure. Rather, USF — along with a growing number of large, diverse public institutions — is trying to

engineer a better student experience by improving communication across offices, reorienting jobs, and creating new entities, like the Office of Academic Advocacy. This kind of change isn't easy, nor does it come without challenges, but it has shown results: USF has boosted its four-year graduation rates by 33 percentage points since 2009. Even so, getting the right help

Raising graduation rates takes a culture shift — and a lot more.

to every struggling student is hard.

Although the services that helped Menendez had been at his disposal all along, he says he was either unaware of them or didn't think they applied to him. The byzantine university bureaucracy — both real and imagined — had blocked his path. Without a guide, he believes, he probably would have wrecked his GPA and damaged his chances for graduate school.

"Ms. Pollard served as the first domino in a Rube Goldberg machine," he says. She was "like a cool aunt who comes in and says, everything is going to be fine. I've got you. She was an authority figure I could look up to and not feel afraid."

UNIVERSITIES, large public ones in particular, have traditionally treated college like a self-serve buffet. Students chose which courses to take and what services to tap into. They were expected to navigate complex systems, from financial aid and course registration to housing, advising, tutoring, and career planning. They were left to find friends on their own in classes, clubs, and residence halls.

Unsurprisingly, many ran into problems.

They were locked out of course registration for unpaid fines. They racked up more credit hours — and thus more bills — than they needed to graduate because they switched majors late in their academic career, or enrolled in the wrong prerequisites. They struggled needlessly in their classes because they weren't aware of academic-support services or thought they were intended for others. They failed to connect with classmates on sprawling campuses where they might not see the same faces in a series of unconnected courses.

Decades into what has become known as the student-success movement, many of those barriers remain. One recent study of student transcripts found that a third of those who had completed the academic requirements of college but never earned their degree were missing a major-specific course, and one in 10 were derailed by small problems, such as a financial hold because of a parking fine. These stumbling blocks disproportionately affect students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students, and students of color.

Why do universities struggle to do something that's clearly in both the public interest and their own?

Those barriers also carry a substantial collective cost. While the vast majority of students enter college expecting to graduate in four years, fewer than half do and less than 65 percent graduate in six. Those figures are even lower for Black and Hispanic students. Given the growing cost of a degree, and the fact that it is shouldered by a student body that is increasingly low-income, racially and ethnically diverse,

and first generation, these rates remain indefensibly low, reformers argue.

Public universities are under increased pressure to fix those problems. The Florida Legislature is one of more than two dozen state legislative bodies to use performance-based funding, measuring its institutions on how quickly they get students through college, among other things. Grant makers, too, are calling on universities to close retention, graduation, and equity gaps. And as many states expect their college-aged populations to drop, holding on to students once they're enrolled is a matter of institutional survival.

Timothy M. Renick, who runs Georgia State University's National Institute for Student Success, where he advises about 40 colleges, says speaking of reforms in terms of money saved clarifies the existential nature of what's at stake for students and for colleges. He recently gave a presentation to a college in the Midwest that is enrolling a more diverse student body even as it faces a graduation gap of 20 percent between white and Black students. "That's a moral issue they're facing," he says. "But also a revenue issue."

Why do universities struggle to do something that's clearly in both the public interest and their own? Why, decades into the movement, do so many universities have ad-hoc advising systems, overly complex academic programs, and uncoordinated support services?

The answers are as complicated as the problem. Large universities, student-success experts often say, were structured more to support the people working at the institution than the students they serve. Severe staffing shortages and deepening student needs — both driven by the pandemic — have presented significant challenges during the last couple of years. There's also a cultural reason: a sink-or-swim mentality, born when college served a smaller, more elite population, that continues to linger.

"Higher education was originally designed to train the elite, and in many ways

“Higher education was originally designed to train the elite, and in many ways a lot of our policies and procedures and the way we think about challenging students is that same kind of narrative, of the cream will rise to the top.”

a lot of our policies and procedures and the way we think about challenging students is that same kind of narrative, of the cream will rise to the top,” says Viji Sathy, associate dean of evaluation and assessment in the Office of Undergraduate Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and a longtime advocate for a more inclusive approach to teaching. “That’s really problematic when the landscape of higher education has changed dramatically.”

Given how difficult it can be to change that dynamic, it’s helpful to look at institutions, like USF, that have made significant strides. The university’s experiences illustrate how engineering a shift in culture, priorities, and systems can take years, requires clear and consistent direction, and is accelerated by external drivers. Success also brings its own tensions and trade-offs.

USF’s strategies reflect the latest thinking on student success, namely that universities must take a holistic approach. They must quickly identify the students most in need of help and offer a range of supports that enable them to overcome obstacles and earn a degree as expeditiously as possible.

Such changes are not only necessary, but increasingly anticipated by today’s students, says Bridget Burns, chief executive officer of the University Innovation Alliance, a collection of large, diverse, public research universities that has made

significant inroads testing out such interventions.

“Students have more exposure to user-centered design in the real world than ever before,” she notes. “We have more things offered to us that are designed around our needs in everyday society, and so they are highly sensitive to bad design in a way that no prior generation has been.”

But some professors question whether a focus on time-to-degree ignores other measures of academic quality, such as having a sufficient number of full-time faculty members and advisers available to mentor students. And they worry that instructors may feel pressured to pass struggling students or encourage them to stick with majors that don’t fit if it means racking up excess credit hours. Tracking students raises the specter of Big Brother monitoring their every move through card swipes and clicks in the learning-management system.

Colleges may also make substantial investments in predictive- and learning-analytics systems without having the staffing, or the willpower, to confront the problems that they surface, experts say, such as getting students the academic support they need.

“Unfortunately, you don’t really change entrenched systems that have been created over hundreds of years by waving a wand and saying, It’s going to happen next year,” says Adrianna Kezar, a professor of lead-

“Unfortunately, you don’t really change entrenched systems that have been created over hundreds of years by waving a wand and saying, It’s going to happen next year.”

ership and director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California, and a longtime researcher of student-success strategies. “There’s always been this idea that we have to do this urgently, instead of doing it right.”

ONCE NICKNAMED “U Stay Forever,” USF has won state and national recognition for significantly raising its four- and six-year graduation rates while largely eliminating completion gaps by income, race, and ethnicity. It has done so by bringing different divisions under one umbrella to better coordinate their operations; using analytics to identify those students most in need of attention; promoting a campus culture in which faculty and staff are encouraged to remove barriers to graduation, and students to seek help; and creating a network of services and structures to jump on problems as they surface. While USF admits students with higher GPAs and SAT scores than it did a decade ago, the university attributes much of the increase in graduation rates to these efforts.

Those structures include the Office of Academic Advocacy, which tracks struggling students like Menendez and takes a case-management approach to their support. To meet systemic challenges, such as unnecessary holds stopping students’ progress to a degree, the university’s Persistence Committee brings together representatives from more than a dozen

offices, including financial aid and the registrar, to recommend solutions. A centrally located Academic Success Center combines previously dispersed support services, such as tutoring, making it easier for students to seek help. And students themselves increasingly play an active role through peer-mentoring programs and enhanced residence-life programming.

Around 2009, when the university began focusing its energies on student success, only 29 percent of its undergraduates left with a degree after four years, and 52 percent graduated in six. USF was long known as a commuter campus and often not students’ first choice, overshadowed by the powerhouses of the University of Florida and Florida State University.

A few years later the Florida Legislature introduced performance-based funding, rewarding campuses that met certain metrics on retention and graduation, among other goals. The change in funding served as a sort of rocket fuel for existing efforts, accelerating internal restructuring. In 2018 USF earned the designation of a [Preeminent Research University](#), which brought in additional money. Today USF typically ranks at or near the top of performance-based funding metrics among the state’s public universities. In 2021 its scores earned it an additional \$34.5 million.

Today, USF’s freshman-retention rate stands at 90 percent. Its four-year graduation rate is 62.5 percent, and its six-year graduation rate is 74.3 percent. It has retained ethnic and racial diversity, with a student population that is 36 percent Pell

eligible. The university has also improved graduation rates among transfer students, who make up about half of undergraduates. Of those with associate degrees attending both full- and part-time, the three-year graduation rate rose to 66 percent from 57 percent over the past six years.

USF did bring in more academically prepared classes. A decade ago, the average incoming freshman had a high-school GPA of 3.86. Last fall it was 4.18. SAT scores rose, as well, to 1293 from 1188.

That accounts for some of the retention and graduation gains, says Ralph Wilcox, USF's longtime provost. But the kinds of internal restructuring efforts the university has undertaken — such as enhanced residence-life and tutoring support, early-alert systems, and changes to long-held policies that disadvantaged some students — have been crucial to helping them make it across the finish line.

“If we were simply to admit higher-ability students without providing them the support inside and outside of the classroom,” he says, “we absolutely would not have realized the gains we have.”

Paul Dosal, who has overseen many of these efforts as vice president for student success, uses an analogy common among higher-ed reformers: He wants to see universities become more like health-care systems.

When a general practitioner refers a patient to a specialist, he says, the specialist has the person's complete history at hand. Similarly, he hopes that people on campuses with specific expertise — in counseling, advising, financial aid — will eventually have a “360-degree view” of a student's situation to better understand what they need. “We need to create a network of providers and ensure that our students are referred in a timely way to the best expert for whatever issue that they're dealing with.”

Student Success is one of the largest units on campus. It includes admissions, enrollment planning and management, residential life, health and wellness, career services and undergraduate studies, and

typically employs more than 500 people. Having the ability to better integrate the work of those divisions, Dosal says, is the real challenge. “Creating that network, facilitating the referrals and letting the experts do their job and putting students in front of those experts is where I think we all need to go.”

Renick, of Georgia State University, agrees that for data-driven systems designed to identify struggling students to be effective, they need to be accompanied by people who know how to use them and have the ability to act. And that's often where colleges fall short.

One administrator uses an analogy common among higher-ed reformers: He wants to see universities become more like health-care systems.

Administrators will come to him and say: This predictive-analytics system we bought isn't getting any results. But when he digs in, he finds that the system isn't the problem, follow-through is. He uses an example: The student who gets a C-minus on his first quiz in an introductory course. A predictive-analytics system may flag that as an early warning sign. But will anyone reach out to the student to make sure they are aware that tutoring is available? Is tutoring tailored to the focus of that particular course? Is it available when students need it, not just on a certain day at a certain time?

Or take another data point available to any college: a student withdrawing from a course. How many colleges have a system

in place to reach out to that student within 24 hours to find out why? Probably under 1 percent, Renick says.

ON A HOT and humid March afternoon, members of a campus fraternity perform a dance routine for an enthusiastic crowd along a palm-tree-studded central walkway of USF's main campus in Tampa. Nearby, clusters of students stand around tables promoting their clubs and causes: the campus food pantry, cancer awareness, the India Association, a Christian ministry.

While not back to prepandemic levels, these gatherings mark a return to normalcy — a welcome relief for many, including administrators who keep a close eye on student persistence. Like many other large, diverse public universities, USF, which enrolls about 37,000 undergraduates across three campuses, saw its drop in its first-year retention rate for the class that arrived in 2020.

As they wrestle with what the future might hold for their students, administrators hope to leave as little as possible to chance.

Before they even set foot on campus, incoming students take a survey designed to measure their sense of engagement with USF, as [belonging](#) has been shown to improve student success. Was the university, for example, a student's third choice? Do they plan to work more than 20 hours a week? About half of the incoming class of roughly 6,000 students may be categorized as higher risk based on their responses to at least three of the questions.

Those students are assigned to a peer adviser leader, or PAL, typically just a year or two older. The adviser is given only students' contact information. In past years they have been asked to connect at key points during the semester, including at the beginning of the school year, before midterms, and when course registration starts. (This fall, because of staffing shortages, they will reach out once and work

with students who respond, the university says.)

Peer leaders and their supervisors say that students are more comfortable sharing their fears and problems with someone close in age. Christina Estevez, a marketing major and PAL, says one student confided that she was struggling in her classes because her parents were divorcing and she felt unmotivated. Estevez encouraged the student to meet with an academic adviser and make an appointment at the counseling center. The student did both and slowly found her footing.

Even students willing to seek help can get lost in a thicket of offices and divisions.

But even students willing to seek help can get lost in a thicket of offices and divisions. The Office of Academic Advocacy, which sits in a low-slung building in the heart of USF's main campus, is there to catch those who are struggling before their situations spin out of control. There a staff of nine advocates monitor dashboards daily, to track students under their watch.

Some predictive-analytics programs have come under criticism for using demographic data, potentially stereotyping certain student groups as high-risk. They also use proprietary algorithms so that their clients don't always know what is being evaluated or how. That's one reason some colleges feel ambivalent about using them.

USF largely uses a homegrown system, which looks only at behaviors. Has a student gone several days without logging in to the learning-management system? Do they have a GPA below 2.3? Have they been on academic probation for several semesters? Are their grades in any given class significantly below their classmates'?

“I am constantly surprised at how many students are experiencing challenges, and it’s affecting their academics, and they don’t ever let their instructors know.”

The advocates focus on the 10 percent or so of students — out of the thousands under their watch — with the highest risk scores.

Advocates are not mental-health counselors or financial-aid experts or academic advisers, says Leslie Tod, who was appointed the university’s first academic advocate, in 2013, and now leads the office she started.

Rather, they are a first point of contact and a friendly voice who will listen carefully as a student lays out what is often a series of interconnected problems. “We’re working with students who have dug the biggest hole,” she says. “What we do is free up the time of advisers, housing and so on, so they can continue to do their work. So that the same student doesn’t keep coming back.”

One undergraduate Tod spoke to was visually impaired and on anti-anxiety medicine, but had stopped taking it and was not doing well. She was referred to the accessibility-services office as well as to someone who could help with her anxiety. Another struggled with a learning disability and was told — incorrectly — that she would need to foot the bill for an expensive test to confirm it before receiving an accommodation. An advocate helped sort out the snafu. Students often seek out help, too, when their financial aid runs afoul of some rule they were unaware of.

Pollard, who worked with Menendez, says that far from expecting college to cater to them, students often find it difficult to ask for help, believing that they should deal with their problems on their own. [Research](#)

[shows](#), too, that students who are lower-income or come from underrepresented groups are less likely to seek support or guidance than middle- and upper-income students. That’s a significant risk on a campus where more than a third of students are Pell eligible.

“I am constantly surprised at how many students are experiencing challenges, and it’s affecting their academics, and they don’t ever let their instructors know,” she says. “What we try to do is empower students to advocate for themselves.”

While it may be hard to untangle any one student’s problems, it’s even trickier for universities to attack systemic issues. That requires pulling people together across divisions and departments to work on common challenges and giving them the authority to act.

Jennifer Schneider, the university’s one full-time student ombudsman, sits on the Persistence Committee, created in 2016, where the work of digging into these systemwide challenges often takes place.

Schneider manages about 500 students’ cases a year, often some of the most complicated. In her work, she sees patterns invisible to most of the campus. One of the most common questions she asks her colleagues on the committee: Why do we have this rule?

When homeless students told her how fraught it was to have to get written confirmation from a shelter in order to qualify for a tuition-and-fee waiver, she lobbied to switch to a case-management model. That

way homeless students can get other forms of support as well, including help finding a place to live. “When we listen to students and give them a voice,” says Schneider, “then we can learn.”

The Persistence Committee also advocated raising to \$500 the floor on the size of a debt a student owes the university — say a parking fee or library fines — that would block them from registering the following semester. It did so after concluding that too many students were being stopped for owing as little as \$100. That allowed 1,300 more students to register for classes without restriction in one semester alone, says Thomas Miller, chair of the committee and an associate professor of education.

The lesson USF has learned over the years, in short, is this: To help students succeed, sometimes you need to change the university itself.

TENSIONS between academics and student-success operations can sometimes flare, particularly at large public universities without deep pockets that also have a strong mandate to raise graduation rates. As Timothy Boaz, president of USF’s Faculty Senate, put it, “we don’t have extra money lying around to be doing things that aren’t absolutely essential.”

Some professors worry that an intense focus on retention and graduation metrics without sufficient emphasis on — and support for — strong teaching and academic mentoring could compromise academic quality.

“I think for faculty, student success means, What did our students learn while they’re here? Did they take high-quality classes and put together a coherent program of study that takes them to a better place?” says Boaz, an associate professor in the department of mental-health law and policy. “We shouldn’t be doing things that compromise that side of it in order to meet all these metrics that we’ve set for ourselves related to retention rates and all that kind of stuff.”

Some USF professors feel that their colleges are stretched thin. They need more full-time faculty who can mentor students and more academic advisers to help students pick the best program for them. A faculty-success work group [report](#) released in 2019 provided a long list of recommendations to increase support for faculty members. That includes changing a perceived top-down culture and giving deans more decision-making authority, improving faculty salaries, expanding professional-development opportunities, and creating an office of faculty success.

Valerie Harwood, chair of the department of integrative biology, says that her department has five advisers for more than 2,000 majors. She noted that the number of majors in her department has tripled in the past decade even as the number of full-time faculty members has stayed about the same. “We’ve been expected to do a lot with basically temporary employees. And that’s been frustrating.”

As data-driven decision making has taken hold on other parts of campus, so has it touched academic life.

Wilcox, USF’s provost, says the university has increased the number of full-time faculty — tenured, tenure-track, and instructional — by more than 200 since 2011 using some of the additional money it has received through performance-based funding. As a result, the student-faculty ratio has dropped to 22:1 from 27:1 over the past decade. But he agrees that some of the fastest-growing areas, like business and engineering, as well as Harwood’s department, are struggling.

“They’re not wrong,” he says of profes-

“I am constantly surprised at how many students are experiencing challenges, and it’s affecting their academics, and they don’t ever let their instructors know.”

sors’ concerns about the need for more instructors and advisers. “We’re strained to keep pace with the demands of students and the need for more faculty.” He is hopeful that a recent increase in USF’s annual state funding of \$55 million may help alleviate faculty and adviser shortages.

The data-driven approach to student success also troubles some professors and advisers. [Studies](#) have [documented](#) this ambivalence toward the increased use of analytics, nationally. Some raise questions around the accuracy and validity of algorithms on which the tools were built. Others worry about student privacy.

Diane Price Herndl, chair of the department of women’s and gender studies, says she likes the way analytics can help fix some academic problems. When the administration dug into why some engineering students were falling behind, it turned out the university wasn’t offering enough sections of a required math class, which it fixed by providing the math department more funding. “That is a really, really good strategy,” says Herndl. “A place where this kind of focus on four-year graduation rates really works.”

But she feels conflicted about the student-monitoring and -tracking features that are embedded in such systems. “As a parent, I’m kind of glad to know that if my daughter holes up in her dorm room and doesn’t come out for three or four days at a time, somebody is going to check on her,” she says. “As a faculty member, that feels a little creepy to me. It feels like we’re removing some of the training for adulthood that I want college to be doing.”

USF will need professors’ support as it ramps up efforts to improve teaching and course design. To move their four-year graduation rate to 70 percent from 62 percent, says Dosal, the student-success vice president, that requires more attention to what happens in the classroom. In that, the university is also reflective of a national trend.

Until relatively recently college leaders have been [hesitant](#) to look too deeply into professors’ teaching practices and the design of their courses and degree programs. But as data-driven decision making has taken hold on other parts of campus, so has it touched academic life. Deans and department chairs can track which gateway courses have higher-than-average rates of D’s, F’s and withdrawals, or DFWs. They can pinpoint where bottlenecks exist when students try to register for required courses, and whether the degree requirements in certain majors are thwarting timely graduation. All of these are common roadblocks that slow down students’ progress to a degree.

Organizations like the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education and the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#) have helped focus public attention on the impact that well-structured and well-taught foundational courses can have on a student’s career. And the pandemic has illustrated how inclusive, engaging courses can keep students connected to their college, even in an online environment.

USF has been making inroads into teaching and curriculum design. In one project,

focused on [curricular complexity](#), departments have been reviewing degree requirements to ensure that students aren't being asked to take more credits than necessary and that course sequencing makes sense.

The university has also begun taking steps to increase the use of high-impact practices, such as study abroad and internships, that have been shown to increase student engagement and persistence. And it is working on improving gateway courses with higher-than-average DFW rates.

While professors say they would welcome more resources to strengthen teaching, some worry that academic quality could be compromised by the university's focus on retention and graduation metrics. Boaz says he's heard from professors concerned that their colleagues might feel pressure to raise students' grades. While he has heard no evidence yet to suggest this is happening, he notes the uneasiness is real.

Wilcox, who will step down as provost in August and take a faculty position, says that he does not "police" courses with high DFW rates, but rather holds deans and department chairs accountable for determining the root challenges. If a faculty member needs additional training in course design or effective teaching, they may be encouraged to seek that out. Another tool has been to hire more instructors to reduce class sizes, and to expand supplementary instruction.

Other academic concerns relate to the pressure students might feel to move through college expeditiously even when they might be helped by more exploration.

Tangela Serls, an assistant professor of instruction and undergraduate-studies director in the department of women's and gender studies, says that when she was an adviser in the sciences from 2015 to 2017, she felt that some students would have benefited from extra time to, say, study abroad or do an internship. But her responsibility was to encourage students to finish in a timely manner, without taking on excess credits that might create a financial burden.

"Generally speaking, I don't really see

anything wrong with striving to get students graduated in four to six years," she says. "But I think it's important for us to remember that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to navigating life as a college student."

Dosal, who is leaving USF at the end of June to take a similar role at the University of Central Florida, says that wandering through the curriculum is not an option that low-income students can afford.

In addition to adding on extra tuition costs, a student who spends more than four years in college is losing potential income. "We recognize there are some who oppose the streamlined pathways and still value liberal-arts education and want students to explore as much as they can," he says. "I know there's value to that. Unfortunately, we live in a state and in a time in which it can be expensive for students to do that."

But Herndl argues that this view ignores another aspect of their students' lives. "It's our first-generation students, it's our working-class students, who often have no idea what they want to major in, because they are not exposed to the professional world," she says. "Those are the students we need to give the most latitude. We need to be offering them ways for exploration instead of trying to push them into a major right away."

CAN COLLEGES reconcile the tension between needing students to graduate as quickly as possible and allowing them the opportunity to explore? Renick, the national student-success expert, says yes. But that requires timely counseling, tutoring, and financial advising.

Georgia State found that when students switched majors, it was more often because they couldn't achieve their goals, not because they had a change of heart. With additional support, more students who expressed an early interest in STEM successfully completed their majors.

He is a believer in structured academic pathways, where freshmen are put into

learning communities with a common academic interest or “meta major” like business, health, STEM, and arts and humanities.

“If you allow them to wander aimlessly,” Renick says, “you are going to replicate equity gaps. You are going to disproportionately lead low-income students to drop out with no degree at all.”

Kezar, the USC professor, says colleges would benefit from creating a bigger tent, and bringing everyone into the conversation around student success. She has seen instances where, for example, administrators create guided-pathways programs without sufficient input from faculty members. In others they might hire more advisers, but not consider strengthening the role that professors could play.

“We need more full-time faculty in the first year working with students so that they can talk to faculty about majors and talk to faculty about careers. And we can’t rely on a career center that students rarely ever go to to help them make these choices. We need to be much more actively involved, and faculty are a huge part of that.”

The pandemic threw a curve ball at higher education, making student-success

efforts all the more complicated for many universities. Some, like USF and Georgia State, say their early-alert analytics systems continued to help catch students who might otherwise have simply disappeared from their rolls. At the same time, students’ academic, financial, and mental-health needs have grown exponentially in the past two years.

Burns, head of the University Innovation Alliance, also noted the effects of the staffing crisis throughout higher education. Still, she says, “it’s all long-game work.” And to that end, the pandemic has forced colleges to be quicker, more nimble, and more resilient.

Student-success leaders say that while much work remains to be done, universities increasingly understand that improving the undergraduate experience is, at heart, a design challenge. As USF’s experience illustrates, that’s no easy lift. But it’s far from impossible.

Beth McMurtrie is a Chronicle senior writer who covers the future of learning and technology’s influence on teaching.

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PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE CHRONICLE, PHOTOS BY ISTOCK

COMMENTARY

‘How Do We Rebuild?’

Community colleges try to claw their way back.

By **LEE GARDNER**

WHEN SCHOOLS in Shelby County, Tenn., reopened in March for the first time since the pandemic began, Shanita Brown was optimistic. With Memphis’s children ending remote learning and returning to the classroom, their parents might be able to get back to their pre-Covid-19 lives

— including taking classes at Southwest Tennessee Community College, where Brown is associate vice president for enrollment services.

She hoped for a turnaround. Enrollment at Southwest had dropped 22 percent in the fall of 2020 and wasn’t improving. By the time schools reopened in March, applications to Southwest for the fall semester were

down by 68 percent from a year earlier. But by April, after Shelby County students had been back in school for a couple of weeks, applications for fall had surged — they were still down, but only by 10 or 14 percent from the previous year, depending on the week. “Everyone was of the thought, Okay, well, everything is going back to normal,” Brown says. “We were doing the happy dance.”

But the students didn’t come in the numbers hoped for, to any of Southwest’s six locations in the Memphis area, including its Union Avenue campus in central Memphis, just steps from historic Sun Studios, or its Macon Cove campus on the workaday fringes of town. The college’s fall headcount was down 2.6 percent from the fall of 2020, to about 7,100 students, in early October. The college’s leaders had planned the institution’s budget for the 2022 fiscal year based on a modestly hopeful 1 percent enrollment increase, so “that’s a hit for us,” says Tracy D. Hall, the president. After nearly two years of enrollment and budget setbacks, the institution now faces a projected \$10-million shortfall on a \$65-million annual operating budget.

Community colleges and those they often serve — especially people of color and those in lower-income communities — have suffered disproportionately during the pandemic. While white-collar workers were often able to set up a laptop on their dining-room table and keep doing their job, many blue-collar laborers were let go, or kept working outside the home at higher risk of exposure to the virus. The impact on community-college enrollment nationwide was enormous. (About 60 percent of Southwest’s students are Black, and 7 percent are Latinx; nearly 70 percent are eligible for Pell Grants.)

Meanwhile, life has returned to something like normal on many four-year campuses — the closest four-year public institution to Southwest, the University of Memphis, saw its undergraduate enrollment remain flat between the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2020, according to federal data. (Preliminary figures for this fall show

an undergraduate-enrollment decline of about 4 percent from a year earlier.) But many community colleges are still dealing with the fallout of social inequities as manifested and magnified through the pandemic, and they may be doing so for years to come.

The colleges are dealing with the fallout of inequities as manifested and magnified through the pandemic. They may be doing so for years to come.

An [analysis](#) of U.S. Census data by the Community College Research Center in the fall of 2020 found that 40 percent of households that included members with community-college plans were canceling them, more than double the rate for households with four-year college plans. That’s an “extraordinarily high number,” says Thomas Brock, director of the center and a co-author of the analysis. The foremost reason given for staying away from community college, he adds, was “concerns about the virus — either they caught it, they were worried about catching it, or someone in their household had it.”

Anecdotally, students stopped attending Southwest during the pandemic for what’s become a litany of familiar reasons. In addition to job losses and health concerns, many students ended up caring for a sick family member or are parents themselves and had to help their kids learn from home every day. Some didn’t have access to a computer or reliable Wi-Fi or had to share the one machine available at home. Some students struggled with grief over lost

The Steepest Decline

Even though its enrollment was relatively stable this year, Southwest has still experienced the largest drop in headcount among Tennessee's community colleges since 2019.

College	Fall 2019	Fall 2020	Fall 2021	% Change (2019-21)
Chattanooga State	8,148	7,604	6,575	-19
Cleveland State	3,383	3,101	3,161	-7
Columbia State	6,455	6,056	5,387	-17
Dyersburg State	2,849	2,732	2,778	-3
Jackson State	4,946	4,293	3,938	-20
Motlow State	7,023	6,566	5,852	-17
Nashville State	8,019	7,101	6,647	-17
Northeast State	6,100	5,460	5,205	-15
Pellissippi State	10,800	9,463	8,835	-18
Roane State	6,016	5,329	4,775	-21
Southwest	9,433	7,371	7,177	-24
Volunteer State	9,227	8,884	7,417	-20
Walters State	6,327	5,766	5,379	-15

Note: Data for 2021 are preliminary and unedited.

Source: The College System of Tennessee; Southwest Tennessee Community College

loved ones, stress, or mental-health issues.

Leaders at Southwest have taken many steps, big and small, to bring students back to the college while also grappling with longstanding structural challenges that make life difficult for community colleges and those they hope to educate. As part of that process, it has confronted some of the shortcomings institutions of its kind often face and has begun to ponder changes that in some cases may be long overdue.

AS THE PANDEMIC spread in the spring of 2020, leaders at Southwest did what they could to keep students engaged and enrolled. But one thing the college learned early on is that the challenges of Covid-19 are so steep and complex that simple remedies may not be enough.

Southwest offered students who weren't eligible for either of the state's two tui-

tion-free community-college programs a take-three-classes-get-a-fourth-free deal, supported financially by the institution's foundation. It was intended to encourage students to remain enrolled or return, but only six students signed up. Leaders spent the unused funds on 3,500 laptops to provide free of charge to students who might not have one at home. More than a third went unclaimed.

Southwest allotted part of the \$16 million the institution received from the federal pandemic bailout to erase outstanding debt students had with the college that might keep them from re-enrolling. (Southwest also erased the debt of students who had already graduated to enable them to use their transcripts in their job searches.) Many of the 810 students reached during one calling campaign didn't believe the call was real. "There are so many scams out there now that you have to convince them," says Jeannie Smith, the chief financial officer. Southwest wiped out about \$775,000 in institutional debt, and nearly 600 students re-enrolled for the fall of 2021.

Southwest, like many community colleges, has in recent years put more of an emphasis on "high touch" practices to keep its students enrolled and on track, says Jacqueline Faulkner, vice president for student affairs. Such practices have continued, and intensified, during the pandemic. The college has drafted employees to conduct a series of phone campaigns "to hear specifically, from students, what was the barrier, and often it was extremely small," Faulkner says — getting connected to child care on campus or a free transit card. Such efforts account for "why we have maintained as flat as we are, in comparison to some of our peer institutions," she adds.

For students no longer at the institution "there's no one story," says Cory L. Major, associate vice president for retention and student success. Some may be just a few credit hours shy of graduating. Others may have quit, discouraged by online learning or by college-level work in general. A few

may have transferred to other institutions.

Major started at Southwest in August, and quickly began pulling together data from a variety of mostly incompatible sources to try to parse the financial and academic factors affecting students, like whether they were enrolled in Tennessee Promise or Tennessee Reconnect, the two state programs that make community-college tuition free for, respectively, recent high-school graduates and many older students returning to school. Data indicate that the Tennessee Promise program may have helped students during the pandemic — there are more recent high-school graduates taking advantage of the program enrolled at Southwest now than before the pandemic (see chart). But the Tennessee Reconnect scholarship didn't result in the same boost for older students, and enrollment among those eligible fell.

"It would be a mistake to think, I just need to wait this out."

Major also analyzed students' financial-aid status, their academic standing and degree progress, and other variables. For weeks, he says, it was "a whole lot of spreadsheeting." Now the college can look at its students, the 2019 cohort in particular, Major says, "and track down where that cohort breaks out in terms of students who have already graduated, students who are in the pipeline to graduate, and students who, with some nudging, potentially could be crossing the finish line before this academic year is over."

About 300 students landed in the latter category, and it's there that Major is focusing much of his attention these days. He is finding that some of the students who could graduate this year have been held

Free College Maintained Its Appeal for Traditional-Age Students

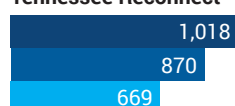
Southwest's net enrollment of students in Tennessee Promise, a free-tuition program for high-school graduates, has increased since the start of the pandemic.

■ 2019 ■ 2020 ■ 2021

Tennessee Promise



Tennessee Reconnect



Eligible students, not enrolled



Source: Southwest Tennessee Community College

back by some minor administrative hurdle — demonstrating satisfactory academic progress for their financial aid or filling out forms. Major and his staff can help with that. Others have indicated they're not interested in coming back if they might have to take classes online. "We're actually beginning to do the same thing with the fall 2020 cohort," he adds.

Even if Southwest can't bring back all, or even most, of the students who stopped attending during the pandemic, "our hope is to get them back in communication with us so that we can document some of those reasons why they're sitting out at the moment, or what their plans are," Major says. But just getting in touch with them can be a challenge. The students the institution serves are often transient in nature, and "in the midst of the pandemic, their life circumstances changed, phone numbers

changed, addresses changed, work situations changed," he says. "The communications flow was severed for some of those students."

While Major reaches out to former students, Brown, the enrollment vice president, does so to future students, a job also made tougher by Covid-19. The best tool Brown and her recruiters have is visiting high schools and other events, to talk up Southwest's programs and walk students and their parents through the application and financial-aid process. "When the pandemic hit and the schools went remote, we lost that," she says. With everything going on, Brown and her staff at first struggled to schedule even virtual events. Applications plunged by two-thirds.

Once Shelby County Schools reopened in March, Brown and her recruiters raced to schedule a calendar of high-school visits,

campus tours, and financial-aid events. The pace hasn't let up, she says: "We're getting in as many schools, getting as many students applied, getting as many informational days on the books as possible."

The pandemic has forced changes in how Southwest operates, and some of them have illuminated new ways of working that may turn out to be desirable — even lasting.

TAKE ADVISING, for example. The advising staff at Southwest talks about "peak season" the way waiters and cooks talk about "dinner rush." In the three weeks leading up to the beginning of a semester, most of the college's students will need to check in with the advising office for help with registering for classes. Before Covid-19, there might be "40 or 50 students in the hallway" at the office's usual 4:30 closing time, says Ronald Claxton, interim director of advising, and "the wait time was, like, an hour to two hours and a half." Being done for the day at 8:30 or 9 wasn't unusual.

When the pandemic sent everything online, staff members scrambled to find ways to continue advising effectively. Many students don't have computers, and advising over the phone proved a challenge. Often, "when you call them, they're in the grocery store or they're somewhere where they can't talk," Claxton says. If they can talk, they're talking on the device they need to use to register. "It's very hard to show them how to do it on the phone," he says.

Eventually, the advising office asked the college's marketing and communications team to come up with a short video advising students on how to register, which is sent out in an email with suggested courses, further instructions, and links. "Very seldom do they call back and say, I'm lost," Claxton says.

With the advent of vaccines and the lifting of some Covid-19 restrictions, the advising staff returned to their offices this summer and geared up for a different sort of peak season. They took in-person

appointments in the open spaces of the computer labs on the Macon Cove and Union Avenue campuses, which allowed the financial-aid office to set up socially distant counseling sessions, too.

Jhona Gipson was happy to be back in her office advising students, even if it was behind a tall plexiglass screen. Working in the office again produced an unexpected benefit: She got to leave for the day at 4:30 once during peak season, which has never happened in her five years at Southwest. Before then, things had gotten a little lonely — and more difficult — working from home, away from her coworkers and the students. "My days were longer working from home than they were on campus, but we were able to reach more people in that way." She knows that online advising was easier for some of her students who are parents, too.

The online format also benefited students seeking help with financial aid. Before the pandemic, they would have needed to come to campus before 6 p.m. Felecia N. Bohanon, the college's specialist in charge of Tennessee Reconnect, thinks that the online financial-aid option may simply work better for students who might not be able to leave work at 5 or can't afford aftercare for school-age children. "Virtual was more convenient," she says.

The online option seems to work for all kinds of students. When the financial-aid team returned to campus in August, Bohanon opened up her schedule for in-person appointments. For the first week, no one registered to see her. She told her supervisor she wanted to add online appointments again, and reserved 8 a.m. to noon for online and the rest of the day for in-person walk-ins. "In the morning when I come in — full," she says. "Afternoon? Nothing." Now her schedule is full every day, but all her appointments are virtual.

The push-and-pull between in-person and online courses continues for students at Southwest, but it may be starting to shift toward the latter. One of the pieces of conventional wisdom about community col-

leges during the pandemic is that students often dislike or fear online learning — a refrain repeated often at Southwest. But more than a year and a half after colleges transitioned to large-scale distance learning, many of the students at Southwest who persisted have begun to favor online sections over the nearly 40 percent of courses being taught in person.

In the early stages of enrollment for the fall of 2021, about 60 percent of students were registering for courses taught on campus. As the start of the semester drew near, that “completely flipped,” says Faulkner, the student-affairs vice president. “We have about 68 percent of our students who are online even though we offered the courses on campus.” She speculates that students may have felt forced into online courses at first, but that they have now grown accustomed to them and appreciate the flexibility they offer.

Professors have adapted, too. After initial pushback from some of the more senior faculty members, says Kendrick D. Hooker, vice president for academic affairs, 100 percent of the instructors at Southwest have completed online teaching training, and most now have several semesters’ experience.

The preference for online courses is not only a matter of convenience but of health. Vaccines or no, many Southwest students simply may not yet feel safe being back on campus. A survey of more than 120,000 community-college students in the spring of 2021 by the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin found that 74 percent of Black students had tried to avoid situations on campus where they couldn’t stay more than six feet from another person, compared with 53 percent of white students who said the same. The survey also found that 62 percent of women were more likely to avoid such situations compared with 55 percent of men; Southwest’s student body is 67 percent female.

Some students have returned to campus despite their worries. Both of Tarik

Wilkins’s parents caught Covid-19, as did four of his friends, and his grandfather died last year from an illness unrelated to the pandemic. Two of his three classes at Southwest this semester are held in person. He lives with his grandmother, and the loss of his grandfather has made him especially anxious about bringing the virus home to her. “I’ve got the vaccines, I’m trying to take every precaution that I can,” Wilkins, 24, says, “but it’s been nerve-racking, because it’s really been hitting close.”

ONE FRUSTRATION for Southwest’s administration and faculty is that the recent drops in enrollment have undone years of progress. In 2014, shortly before Hall took over as president at Southwest in 2015, the college commissioned a consultant’s report on improving its performance. One of the things that college leaders heard overwhelmingly from students, community partners, the local school district, and even employees is that students faced too much red tape, Hall says. “It was just difficult to get in and out of Southwest.” She got personal feedback early in her presidency when she went into local stores wearing college paraphernalia. “I’d hear all these bad horror stories from people about how they felt about Southwest,” she says. “It got to a point where I’m like, Oh, let me take off my nametag, because I just need some eggs.”

The report led to institutional soul-searching, and reforms. With the help of Achieving the Dream, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving community-college success, Southwest’s leaders set to work in 2016 on improving its enrollment and graduation rates. The institution adopted a case-management system, where every incoming student was assigned a “care team” — a specific person in enrollment, in financial aid, in advising, and on the faculty to form “their circle of support,” Hall says. Instead of calling an office and asking for help, students call and ask for the person they know by name.

Southwest made headway. Enrollment rose by 10 percent in 2017, and about 3 percent the year after. The college's three-year retention rate climbed above 50 percent for the first time in institutional memory. "And then Covid," Hall says. "And so now it's about, how do we rebuild?"

While some processes and services at Southwest have changed, others still might need changing. The preference some students are showing for online courses during the pandemic may signal a need to rethink how, and when, classes are offered. What programs the college offers and how it offers them are already under consideration as part of an academic master-planning process now underway, says Hooker, the vice president for academic affairs. More than a third of Southwest's students were 25 or older in 2018, and many are parents or working or both. "We can't just say that from 8 to 12 that's when classes are available at Southwest," Hooker says. "We can no longer say that, based upon seat hours, you can come to school two nights per week, and at the end of the semester, you've only earned three [credit] hours." Southwest has already instituted special three-week accelerated courses, he adds, to help students "actually see that they're making benchmarks along the way toward completion of a degree."

The college's move to remote learning at the beginning of the pandemic has given it online capacity that could come in handy once things return to something like normal. Derrick Jones, 22, signed up for online sections of his criminology courses this fall rather than in-person sections not because he's worried about contracting Covid-19, but because they work better with his job on the night shift for an area law-enforcement agency. "Working 12-hour shifts, when I come home, I don't immediately want to have to get prepared for a class," he says. "I'm not saying I'm glad Covid happened, but I am glad that it brought more opportunities for people like myself who work a lot and have different schedules compared to the 9 to 5."

Advising may need to be changed, too. Some students are comfortable speaking up on their own behalf to an institution, "and then for others, culturally, there is less of an impetus to be able to be a self-advocate," says Pamela L. Eddy, a professor of higher education at the College of William & Mary and an affiliate faculty member at the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at North Carolina State University. "We often see the people that might need the most help asking for it the least."

The college's pandemic shift to remote learning has given it online capacity that could come in handy once things return to something like normal.

Community colleges need to make the most of the opportunities they have to check in with their students, says Linda L. Garcia, executive director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement: "In the advising session, are we asking students, 'Okay, what are some possible challenges that you are afraid to experience? Let's talk about those fears. Let's talk about those challenges.'" Advisers should demystify the college process as much as possible, including the advising — Garcia recommends providing an advising syllabus that includes information on available support services. Such information can also help faculty members, especially part-time instructors who may not be familiar with the support options, "to also ask that question, What will help you be successful in my course?" she says.

Even as he works to reconnect with students who left college during the pandemic, Major, the associate vice president for retention, knows the importance of intervening with current students early and often. He recounts a recent conversation with a student who had signed up for online classes for the fall but at midterm was struggling. The student planned to drop out. “When I asked him if he looked at his syllabus for his classes,” Major recalls, “he said, ‘I’ve heard that word before. What is that?’”

The syllabus revealed that most of the student’s coursework was still outstanding, and he had plenty of time to make a passing grade, with some in-person tutoring and other assistance from the college’s academic success center. “But because it says ‘F’ at midterm, he’s ready to quit college,” Major says. “We’re having to reshape ourselves and our practices, our infrastructure, to put our interventions in students’ way, as opposed to having them come and opt in for help.” With spring registration starting in November, Major’s office is preparing to connect with current students who don’t register for next semester: “We’re not going to wait.”

SOUTHWEST’S LEADERS are focused on their students and staff, but they can’t ignore the policies governing their institution, or the bottom line.

The state and the federal governments have made changes during the pandemic that have made life easier for students, but sometimes those changes have meant more complexity for administrators. For example, the state waived some of the requirements for Tennessee Reconnect, the free-community-college program for older students. They no longer had to take six credit hours each semester or maintain a 2.0 grade-point average to remain eligible. But because of the way the college’s financial-aid-management software is set up, anytime Tennessee Reconnect students are enrolled in less than six hours of courses, the system classifies

them as ineligible, says Bohanon, the financial-aid specialist. She spent about a month going through the records of almost 2,000 students, manually approving their aid one at a time. But the flexibility allowed many students to stay enrolled.

The federal government’s decision to [relax](#) financial-aid verification requirements removed one of the most common hurdles confronting students enrolling at Southwest. “It’s such a cumbersome process,” Brock, of the Community College Research Center, says of verification, which requires students to provide several additional forms, including tax documents, and parental signatures. “For a lot of students, particularly if they have complicated relationships with their parents and have to provide all the parents’ data, it can be an insurmountable barrier.”

Covid-19 made the process even more onerous by making it virtual. Students — who often lacked computers or reliable Wi-Fi at home — needed to upload documents, and many of them were baffled “‘JPEG? PDF?’” says Sherita D. Robertson, director of financial aid. “You hear all the time, ‘What are you talking about?’”

The U.S. Department of Education’s decision to temporarily halt verification for most information was cause for relief, says Robertson. She’s seen the verification process get so frustrating that “a student will just say: Okay, forget about it. I’ll just find a job,” she says. Without verification, “It was easier with us onboarding students.”

The full effect of recent years’ drops in enrollment on Southwest’s financial health remains to be seen. Like other community colleges operated under the Tennessee Board of Regents, Southwest receives about half of its funding from the state and the other half from tuition and fees — Tennessee is one of [13 states](#) in which community colleges receive no local support. The plunge in enrollment has led to a \$10-million budget gap. If enrollment continues at this diminished level long enough, it could carry ramifications for the level of state support the college receives as well. Ten-

nessee awards support based on performance metrics, including enrollment and graduation rates, calculated on three-year rolling averages — and the pandemic has already begun squashing those averages.

Worries about longer-term budget impacts may be premature. Despite the performance-funding model, “any immediate, substantive impacts in state funding to the community college sector are so far undetected,” wrote Steven Gentile, chief policy officer for the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, in a statement to *The Chronicle*. “There’s a grace period, if you will, or a glide slope, for times where enrollment is significantly interrupted,” says Lou Hanemann, chief of staff for the commission. In fact, the state’s community colleges could receive more money from the state next year if a request for an additional \$90 million in recurring funds is approved by the commission and the General Assembly. That would mean a 4.6-percent increase to Southwest’s state support, or about \$1.2 million.

In the short term, the \$16 million from the federal government’s Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund — half of which was earmarked for students — has helped the institution weather Covid-19 and stave off the worst financial impacts of its pandemic shortfall. Southwest has not had to lay off any employees or face any other serious privations, but the federal dollars are “one-time funding,” says Hall, the president, “so we have monies to sustain us for this year and perhaps an additional year, but we have to really tighten the belt.” College leadership is currently looking at ways to make cuts to the budget that will “sustain and stabilize the institution but not weaken it, and that’s difficult,” she adds. “We want to have a stable institution. The needs of Memphis have not stopped. They’ve increased.”

“After Covid” remains maddeningly

indefinite, but that may be what it takes to start to restore Southwest’s enrollment to what it once was. Brown, the enrollment administrator, has spoken to scores of parents and students at recent events, including many who were still on the fence about returning to college. “Some of them say it’s just not safe to come back,” she says. “How do you work with that — ‘I don’t feel safe’? We have online learning, but we also heard students say, ‘I don’t think I’ll do well with online learning.’”

Southwest and other community colleges may just have to wait out Covid. Even if the virus doesn’t completely go away, the risks may get lower and people may become more accustomed to living with it. “I really think that’s going to be the biggest thing, is time,” Brown says, “and people feeling it’s safe to completely return to, we won’t call it normal, but like the new normal.”

If there’s one thing community colleges should not do, says Eddy, of William & Mary, it’s go back to normal. “It would be a mistake to think, I just need to wait this out to come to a time where we’re going to have more openness,” she says. After a decade of gradually declining enrollments, the pandemic has brought community colleges to an inflection point where they have a chance to — may even be impelled to — make some changes, many perhaps overdue.

Eddy is hopeful about how community colleges will fare. After all, they are meant to adapt to their communities, and “I think we’re going to see some institutions come out and be real leaders in rethinking and reimagining what’s possible.”

Lee Gardner is a Chronicle senior writer who covers the management of the university and how leaders navigate change.

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COMMENTARY

The Small-College Enrollment Playbook

Five steps colleges can take to rebound from shrinking classes.

By **AARON BASKO**

I **STARTED** my enrollment career as an admissions counselor at Rivier College, a Catholic institution in New Hampshire with an enrollment of 800. I fell in love with the impact I could have on an individual student's journey — the effort of one person in a small environment is magnified and concentrated in a way that is hard to describe if you haven't experienced it.

Shortly after I left Rivier, it “upgraded” from college to university, following the “[bigger is better](#)” trend in higher ed. Since

then, I've spent two decades working at small and midsize institutions on the East Coast, watching as larger ones absorbed many of the features that were once the small college's hallmark. Flagship universities created honors colleges to give top students small classes and access to professors. Midsize public institutions focused on beautifying their look and feel to advertise (as we did at one of my former institutions) “a private-style education at a public price.”

All this has placed a heavy burden on

small colleges to prove their worth, and they are struggling to do so. In the early days of the pandemic higher-ed [watchers](#) predicted a wave of small-college closures, and while the worst [hasn't come to pass](#), signs of small-college stress are plain. Mills College, in Oakland, Calif., is being acquired by Northeastern University. Philadelphia's University of the Sciences is planning to merge with Saint Joseph's University. Sierra Nevada University is taking steps to become part of the University of Nevada at Reno. Alabama's Judson College shut down at the end of its summer term. (Higher Ed Dive [tracks](#) recent closings and mergers.)

The global pandemic has further endangered many small colleges. [A recent Chronicle analysis](#) of data from the National Center for Education Statistics looked at the top 10 gainers and losers of enrollment for each state in 2020. Of the 100 schools that saw the largest percentage losses in enrollment in that sample, only three had over 2,000 students (two of those were community colleges). The pandemic's impact has also emphasized the line between "haves" and "have-nots." Data from the National Student Clearinghouse [indicates](#) that while private nonprofit institutions declined only 0.7 percent in their enrollment for the fall of 2021, that number is skewed by the most selective institutions, which grew by 4.3 percent. Enrollments at less-selective colleges shrunk by 1.8 percent to 2.5 percent in all other categories.

Is this higher education's new story line? David gets squashed by Goliath and the online Philistines?

That doesn't have to be the case, but for small colleges to thrive, they need to find a way to recover momentum in their enrollment quickly. A few small institutions have done this recently. Millsaps College, in Mississippi, brought in new enrollment leadership this year, [and saw](#) a 56 percent larger incoming class for fall 2021 compared with the fall of 2020. Emory & Henry College, in Virginia, [just enrolled](#) its largest class in its 185-year history, up 63 percent from last year. Or my most recent insti-

tution, Sweet Briar College, where in two years the incoming class increased by 80 percent and total enrollment by one-third. That's what I think of as a rebound — a dramatic pivot that jump-starts a college's momentum in the right direction.

How can small colleges achieve this kind of a pivot? Here's what I have learned from working in the trenches.

REINVEST IN THE CORE

When you realize that your college's existence is in question, you need to reassess who you are and what needs to change. Colleges tend to have a deeply embedded sense of their own mission and way of doing things, and sometimes nothing except a crisis will allow that culture to change. In good times, inertia reigns at many institutions. Indeed, colleges are not known for being entrepreneurial or nimble — and yet that is what it takes to walk away stronger after a crisis. You need to reinvest in a small number of areas that are true to your mission but also distinctive in the marketplace, and then innovate in how you present these distinctive qualities and their value.

When your college's existence is in question, you need to reassess who you are and what needs to change.

What three programs can you lead with? What about your location makes you special?

As the enrollment leader at one college where I worked, I had my team focus on the five things we thought everyone in the world should know about us, and then we

did everything possible to get those five things into the public mind-set. Marketers call this positioning. At another institution, we decided that the faculty were our story and our marketing focused around 10 amazing faculty profiles that demonstrated our value system. There is a lot of talk about “not trying to be everything to everybody,” but actually adopting that approach can be scary. It is this kind of focused message, however, that allows a college to rise above the noise.

PLAY YOUR OWN GAME

Most institutions are working from the same 1980s’ playbook — increase headcount, raise tuition a little each year, add new programs in hot fields, and partner with community colleges for transfers. These tactics were built to favor larger institutions. Small colleges need to take a different approach. What is everyone else doing that is not working for you? At one college I worked at we had our best recruitment year ever when we quit traveling and focused almost exclusively on inviting students to campus. We dropped vendors that warned us peer institutions would get ahead of us unless we bought some new functionality. We purchased names of prospects in rural areas that we thought were under-bought. If big places are doing something very successfully, that should automatically make you question whether it is a fit for you.

Here is where you can also use size to your advantage. At a smaller college, you can make the recruitment experience personal for every admitted student. I had one staff member who would go to her admitted students’ soccer games and theater performances to let them know she cared about them as a person. Another counselor on my team was so in tune with her students that they (and their parents) would text her at all times of day. Remember students’ birthdays. Remember what is going on in their lives and ask about it.

Most colleges are fishing in an over-

crowded pool with the same bait. Go fish upstream by sharing with the market what you truly do best. Play your own game.

INVEST IN YOUR PEOPLE

At this moment, the fate of most small colleges rests on the shoulders of some of the most underpaid and undertrained members of their staff — their admissions counselors. Admissions is an area critical to the health of an institution but garners very little respect. I remember a colleague saying, “Admissions? Oh, you are the people who put out the balloons when students visit campus.” Ouch.

By and large, admissions people are energetic, creative, dedicated, self-sacrificing, and motivated. They sometimes burn out from travel or low pay, but most often I see them leave because they don’t feel respected. That is okay for the large institutions that can afford to “churn and burn” employees, but it’s not okay for small colleges — especially in this market.

Is this higher education’s new story line? David gets squashed by Goliath and the online Philistines?

Turnover is costly — it takes nearly a full admissions cycle for a new person to be fully trained. In the meantime, opportunities are lost, relationships with schools are broken, and morale and momentum are derailed. Motivating an admissions team to superior performance is not difficult: They are demotivated by fear and pressure, but easily motivated by positivity, recognition, and by sensing the institution is proud of them. Have the college’s leadership team mentor them. Encourage their ideas and

creativity. Above all, listen to them. A little investment in their professional development will pay you back in results.

GROW YOUR INFLUENCE

One of the greatest assets that an institution can develop over time is a set of relationships with people who influence the college decision for students. When presenting to school counselors, independent counselors, or community organizations, share that their work is important to you. You are looking for needles in haystacks and they know the haystacks much better than you can. Colleges have to buy thousands of names from testing services because the yield on them is so low, but someone who is recommended to you by an influencer is highly likely to choose to enroll. Not only that, but an influencer can continue to recommend students to a college year after year.

Having a network of recommenders is like a goose that lays golden eggs. At one school, we set a goal to identify 1,000 contacts who could give a positive recommendation for the college and ask them to do so in the next year. Make it exciting and fun for people to be part of your story. The whole campus can be engaged in this effort. Coaches, alumni, parents, students, faculty, and staff all have within their networks people with this kind of influence. Pool these lists of influencers so that the college can communicate with them and engage them in the mission in an organized fashion. Reaching out to influencers to make them champions for your institution is one of the essential moves for keeping your pipeline healthy.

GET SOME HELP

When the situation demands it, find someone knowledgeable who can tell you what you are doing wrong. This could be a consultant or an outside enrollment professional, but you need someone who understands enrollment, and someone from

whom you can accept painful truths. Early in my career, I was put in charge of all visit experiences at my college. Within a month, an outside consultant came in to review our operation. My vice president warned me of the report: “You are not going to like what it says about our visit.” But it turned out to be the most important tool I ever received for making needed changes.

I kept that initial report, and two years later was able to show a side-by-side comparison that assured our team that we had one of the best visit programs in our market. That change contributed to an over 60-percent increase in applications and nearly halved our acceptance rate in just a few cycles.

A fresh eye is especially important if your enrollment team is homegrown and does not have significant experience at other institutions. The good news is that many enrollment professionals are willing to help others with their experience. We are often put into situations where we think competitively, but most of us are also happy to share our hard-won knowledge. A bit of advice on this front: Put together an advisory board, ask for help from enrollment managers in noncompeting markets, and look for those with diverse experience who can see the market holistically.

This is a challenging time to be in higher ed, particularly if you are a small, tuition-driven institution. But all is not lost. A “rebound” is achievable via good practices, good people, and reaching out to win over others to your values. Institutional success is obtainable even in the face of [demographic](#) and cultural headwinds, and small colleges do not need to be ruled by fear of the future. As a small college, you have a place in this ecosystem that is uniquely your own, and you can embrace it and thrive. You can play your own game.

Aaron Basko is associate vice president for enrollment management at the University of Lynchburg, in Virginia.

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ISTOCK

Public Colleges Are Going After Adult Students Online. Are They Already Too Late?

By LEE GARDNER

THREE STRUGGLING CAMPUSES of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education plan to pursue an increasingly popular strategy in higher ed: building a new “virtual campus” that will educate working adults who have some college credit but no degree.

In an [interview](#) with the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Dale-Elizabeth Pehrsson, the president of Clarion University of Pennsylvania, described the online operation, which would not go into operation until next year, as an attempt to “aggressively compete” with [Southern New Hampshire University](#) and other online providers that have “stolen” students from Pennsylvania.

The Pennsylvania virtual campus, as described by Pehrsson in an interview with *The Chronicle*, would combine existing undergraduate and graduate online courses from Clarion and Edinboro Universities and California University of Pennsylvania, three campuses of the Pennsylvania system in the western part of the state that are in the process of [merging](#) into one entity. It would also join a handful of similar moves by public-college systems in recent years to reach the 36 million Americans with some college credit with no degree — an especially attractive market for public colleges facing enrollment challenges, given the waning number of high-school graduates in many parts of the country.

But competing with the established national players in online education presents a tall order. The so-called [mega-universities](#) have a huge head start and deep pockets, two advantages public universities are unlikely to overcome easily, if at all.

Clearly some public systems are undaunted. The University of Massachusetts, for example, last year [announced](#) its intention to partner with Brandman University, the online arm of Chapman University, in California, to build up UMass Online to better serve working adults across the

country. “Quality, affordability, and flexibility in higher education are needed more than ever to address the troubling lack of economic mobility,” Marty Meehan, president of the University of Massachusetts, said in a statement. The deal still awaits final approval.

In Pennsylvania, the competition for students between institutions like Clarion and Edinboro and Southern New Hampshire got more intense last year when the latter signed an [agreement](#) with Pennsylvania’s 14 community colleges. The deal guarantees a tuition discount for community-college students transferring to Southern New Hampshire to complete bachelor’s degrees. “Prior to that, they were always on our radar as a competitor,” says Pehrsson, “but now it’s become a little bit more personal.”

There’s nothing personal to any competition, says Paul J. LeBlanc, president of Southern New Hampshire. He rejects the notion that his institution has stolen any students from Pehrsson’s institution, though “perhaps the students who she has in mind looked at their options and thought maybe we were the best fit.” Either way, he welcomes more efforts to educate adults, because “the need is enormous.”

A HEAD START

When Pehrsson says she plans to compete with Southern New Hampshire, she means to do so on a modest scale. Southern New Hampshire enrolled 139,000 undergraduate and graduate students online in the fall. The new Pennsylvania consortium hopes to reach 10,000 students over five years, Pehrsson says, which would double the current online enrollment among the three universities.

Even that may be difficult given the level of competition for online students, says Robert G. Atkins, the chief executive of Gray Associates, a company that consults colleges. “If you want 5,000 students, you’re

Mega-universities have spent more than a decade building and honing well-funded and sophisticated operations that function on a scale few start-ups can hope to match.

going to have to fight for every one,” he says.

Mega-universities have spent more than a decade building and honing well-funded and sophisticated operations that function on a scale few start-ups can hope to match. They spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year marketing themselves nationwide to students. Southern New Hampshire alone spends \$139 million per year on advertising. While state colleges have the benefit of a recognizable regional brand, the amount they would need to spend to win students throughout their states or beyond could easily run into the millions of dollars.

Even with their local brands, public colleges will have some catching up to do in their own backyards. Google-search data compiled by Gray Associates indicates that Pennsylvanians searched for Southern New Hampshire nearly 124,000 times during 2020, more than three times more often than they searched Clarion, Edinboro, and California Universities of Pennsylvania combined over the past 12 months.

Mega-universities have also developed recruitment and admissions operations designed to make things as easy as possible for working adults to enroll. An inquiry on one of their websites elicits a phone call within minutes. They expedite transcripts and transfer credits within days. They have classes starting every few weeks. “The traditional marketing and admissions process of a public institution is not well suited to online,” Atkins says. “Unless you adapt your schedule to respond to the students, you’re really not competitive.”

At the moment, all details of the virtu-

al campus in Pennsylvania are still to be determined. There’s a business plan in the works that the system Board of Governors is expected to review at its April meeting.

POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES

Just because competing with the mega-universities might prove a huge challenge doesn’t mean no one should try it, says Michael B. Horn, a senior strategist at Guild Education, a company that consults for colleges.

There is room for a handful of state universities to make a significant push into online education, he says. The need for adult education is so huge that even the mega-universities just scratch the surface. Public colleges have regional brand recognition that’s hard to match and can offer students access to local alumni networks that are impossible for job-hunting graduates to get from national players.

Public colleges also have a potential advantage in their tangible presence in the state. “If you get a Pennsylvania college’s name on your diploma, that’s very different than an online college’s name on your diploma,” Atkins says. While most working adults study online to avoid having to travel to campus, having a physical campus to come to for some classes or events can provide an added appeal for some students — especially if that campus happens to be right down the road.

One way for public colleges to get into contention online is through a partner, as UMass did with Brandman. By joining

The need for adult education is so huge that even the mega-universities just scratch the surface.

forces with an existing provider, Horn says, “you can leapfrog some of that investment” needed to create a program from scratch. Purdue University tried something similar when it [bought](#) for-profit Kaplan University in 2017 to create Purdue Global, although the arrangement has suffered [financial losses](#).

Creating a program from scratch can be costly. The state of California spent \$120 million to create Calbright College, an online-only community college that opened in the fall of 2019 to offer certificate training for working adults. But the college has lost millions of dollars while enrolling fewer than 1,000 students, and legislators [voted](#) to eliminate its funding from the state budget for fiscal year 2021, though it ultimately [survived](#).

States don’t necessarily have to sink \$100 million into an online start-up to do

it right, Horn says. “But I think you have to have a roadmap where if the experiments you’re running start to pay off,” he adds, “you can at some point make a significant investment.” If the Pennsylvania virtual campus hopes to compete with Southern New Hampshire and other big national online players, even on its own turf, it’s going to take a substantial investment from the state, and Pennsylvania hasn’t “shown an appetite to put a lot of dollars, as of late, into the higher-ed system,” Horn says.

“You need a running start at this,” Horn adds. “You can’t start from a standstill and patch it together with duct tape.”

Lee Gardner is a Chronicle senior writer who covers the management of the university and how leaders navigate change.

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AUDREY MALO FOR THE CHRONICLE

COMMENTARY


Why Good Enrollment Managers Are So Hard to Find

It's perhaps the toughest job in campus administration, but one that you may come to like.

By **AARON BASKO**

ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT is no easy business. Consider this comment I heard recently from someone with decades in the profession: “At the last national conference I attended, I was sitting around with a group of senior people. As we were swapping stories and lies, we suddenly realized that every one of us had been fired by at least one institution. This job is not for the faint of heart.”

Most colleges live or die on tuition revenue. Their financial strategy is still circa 1960: Raise tuition a bit, and enroll a few more students. But that strategy has come under increased pressure. Even before the disruptions of Covid, the whole field was bracing for the “[demographic cliff](#)” set to strike in the middle of this decade. Given that students have more choices than ever, thanks to online and for-profit education, public sentiment has turned against a



four-year degree as the only path to a good future. No wonder that, beginning around 2018, surveys of college presidents noted enrollment as the top “up at night” issue.

Onto this stage walks the enrollment manager — a misunderstood figure who falls somewhere between the jolly, bow-tie-wearing dean of admission and the number-crunching institutional researcher. Your job as enrollment manager is not just to enroll more students than last year, but also to make sure they are better in every measurable way and want to pay more for their educational experience. You do so by leading a largely underpaid labor force of inexperienced college graduates, who travel around to events that everyone knows are mostly ineffective.

Today’s enrollment manager — typically the job title is “vice president,” but that may be preceded by “associate” or “assistant” — needs to be able to:

- Inspire audiences like a professional speaker.
- Negotiate with CFOs on financial-aid policy.
- Mobilize a vast array of professors and coaches.
- Predict future trends.
- Recruit a new class (no matter what PR nightmares the institution might create).

Most of all, enrollment managers must live in denial of the fact that their future largely depends upon the whims of 18-year-olds, who seldom check their email and don’t set up their voice mail.

Is it any wonder that good enrollment managers are so hard to find?

Most come to the profession from a background entirely in admissions or in financial aid. Very few sources of formal training are available to enrollment managers, which means we learn by doing. Consequently, we become adept at either technical analysis or leading by instinct, but usually not both. The work is so specialized that almost no one on the campus understands what we really do — yet the sales

aspect of the job seems familiar enough that others think they can do it. Innovation is required — yet taking risks can have serious consequences. All of which helps explain why good enrollment managers are scarce.

The [Great Resignation](#) has hit higher education hard, but the lack of enrollment leadership goes beyond that. When I started in this field, 25 years ago, the adage was “three years or 30” — meaning most people would leave the field after just a few years of road-warrior work. Across the five institutions at which I have worked, I could count on one hand, with fingers left over, how many of my colleagues continued on to senior enrollment positions. Some have stayed in higher education, but they have either moved to other administrative roles or crossed over to work for consulting and ed-tech companies.

I don’t blame them, and have considered those moves myself. At least in those fields, you finish projects and have down seasons. In enrollment, the cycles never stop, so there is no end point and no such thing as an off-season.

“The truth is that the tools enrollment officers are given to do their work are deeply flawed,” says Angel B. Pérez, chief executive of the National Association for College Admission Counseling. “You can’t bring in a more diverse class without increased financial aid, and institutions never receive enough state and federal funds to offer enough. The more financial aid you offer, the less tuition you take in. Until we tackle the issue of higher-education finance, the pressures of financial sustainability will always win over the desire to uphold institutional mission and values.”

OK, so those are the downsides. But you can learn to find success in enrollment management and, as tough as it is, even learn to like it. And you won’t be alone: Across the country, you will find plenty of others facing the same pressures. I have been fortunate to have had some terrific mentors in the field, so for those considering this career path, I offer some of the wisdom they have taught me.

You need a safety net. As an enrollment manager, you know the importance of building relationships, but you have probably focused your efforts on customers (students and families) or those who influence them (school counselors). It is just as important to surround yourself with people who will help you succeed.

Because enrollment is such a competitive business, it can be very isolating. You don't have the natural sense of open collaboration of many areas of higher education. That makes it even more critical to build professional relationships. As I found out in a recent job transition, a network makes all the difference. You need mentors with more experience than you, other enrollment managers with whom you can compare notes, and two or three key consultants or vendors whom you really trust.

People in your network will give you perspective — when you are having a bad year of results and need help figuring out why, when you're in the wrong place and need help finding a better fit, or when you just want to commiserate about how hard this work is. You will need to be there for them as well.

No one can do everything well. Certain institutions seem to believe they can hire an enrollment manager who excels at every skill necessary in the field. We should all work to disabuse them of such an unrealistic expectation that sets everyone up for failure. You have gaps in your learning and things that just don't come naturally to you. Recognizing that is important. On some aspects of the job, you can fake it until you make it, but don't wait until you crash the ship to admit you need help.

Identify the areas where you need to surround yourself with other great people. I have an amazing consultant who helps me with financial-aid leveraging, and does it better than I ever could. I outsource my search purchases with another good partner because it is painstaking work and easy to make a mistake. Recognizing your weaknesses allows you to focus on your strengths and have the most impact.

Choose your boss wisely. No one affects your potential success as much as the person to whom you report. Whether that is a president, a provost, or a vice president matters less than your relationship with that person.

Chances are, no one on the campus fully understands what you do. That's OK, but if people don't trust you to do it, you are sunk. Look for a boss who communicates openly with you and, if necessary, is willing to go to bat for you. Most administrative offices are internal-facing. They have the luxury of playing campus politics. Enrollment is external-facing. Get too distracted by some internal flap, and it will be very hard for you to succeed externally.

Most colleges live or die on tuition revenue. Their financial strategy is still circa 1960: Raise tuition a bit, and enroll a few more students.

I have had several really good bosses. They are probably what kept me in the profession. What they have shared is a certain humility and positivity. They have been willing to listen and learn from me, even as I was listening and learning from them. They are interested in helping people succeed, and they care more about the quality of an idea than where it came from. If you don't find those qualities in your potential boss — no matter how good the job looks — run in the other direction.

Seek out new ways of doing things. The market is constantly shifting, with changes in technology, best practices, and student

Enrollment managers must live in denial of the fact that their future largely depends upon the whims of 18-year-olds, who seldom check their email and don't set up their voice mail.

preferences. If you have only ever used one system, it is easy to keep doing the same thing and not adapt. I have been fortunate to work at five very different institutions — public and private, religious and secular. Breadth of experience is a critical source of innovation. It helps you to consider a wider variety of strategies and to panic less when something goes wrong.

New enrollment managers, and those being groomed for that role, need to see how things are done elsewhere. Spend a week or two shadowing a colleague on another campus. Serve as part of a consulting team on a review project. Create an enrollment-management exchange with another institution.

Conferences alone are not going to cut it. You need to actually get under the hood and see how totally different strategies can be just as valid as your own. The more you know, the more your campus will benefit.

Find your why. I took a circuitous route to get to the enrollment field. But I've realized that, in all my choices, I have been seeking more or less the same thing: Sure, I want me and my institution to succeed, but I've also realized that it is deeply important to me to bring out the best in a team and be part of a team that brings out the best in me. I still keep track of four guides whom I mentored almost 20 years ago, and I find joy in helping people step up into roles they don't think they can do.

As my friend and colleague Monica Moody Moore, vice president for enroll-

ment marketing at Trinity Washington University, puts it: "The admissions professional needs to 'know thyself' — what is their 'why' for the role and how their skills map to the work and intended results. Become a guru on something that moves the needle. Follow the data, but know what motivates the soul."

Finding a campus culture with values that resonate with you can make all the difference between loving this work and dreading Monday mornings.

In the near future, the demand for skilled enrollment managers is likely to continue to far outpace the supply. In fact, the imbalance is likely to get worse, as institutions face increased financial pressure from a shrinking student market. On the one hand, the stakes will be very high for enrollment managers. On the other hand, good professionals will find lots of opportunities if you know your craft and are able to demonstrate results. Those skills will be in great demand.

In the meantime, it falls to all of us in the field to help new and future leaders be ready. We must be willing to mentor, train, and share. We must be ready to discuss the challenges, the reasons we do this work, and the ways we can do it better.

Aaron Basko is associate vice president for enrollment management at the University of Lynchburg, in Virginia.

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SECTION 3



Equity Concerns



DELCAN & CO. + DANIELLE DEL PLATO FOR THE CHRONICLE

Finishing What They Started

Adults with some credits but no degree hold the keys to enrollment and equity.

By **KATHERINE MANGAN**

FOURTEEN YEARS, one baby, a marriage and divorce, and three job moves after Desirée Vanderloop started college, she's finally closing in on a goal that had always seemed just beyond her grasp.

When she walks across the stage next May to receive her bachelor's degree at Morgan State University, she'll join a growing number of returning adult students who are being lured back by programs designed specifically for people like them.

The skills Vanderloop learned on the job

as her interests shifted from pre-med to health-care technology will apply toward her degree. So will 90 of the 102 credits she accumulated, one or two courses at a time, while winding her way through college as a working single mom. An adviser helped her design a degree path that integrated her job skills and studies, saving several semesters' worth of tuition and time.

What's happening at Morgan State reflects an emerging trend in higher ed nationwide as advisers and registrars reach out to former students and help piece

together fragments of launched and abandoned college careers.

The number of people who began college but left without a credential grew to 39 million in 2020, up nearly 9 percent in two years. That represents more than [one in five people in the United States](#) over age 18, according to a [report released this year](#) by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Re-engaging them can help narrow equity gaps, given that students of color and low-income students are far more likely to stop out of college, a trend that was [heightened during the pandemic](#). And [studies have shown](#) that college credentials improve people's job prospects and earning potential over a lifetime.

But diving deeper into this pool of potential applicants could also be a matter of institutional survival for some colleges. As the number of traditional-age college students continues to shrink, contributing to worsening [enrollment slides](#), colleges nationwide are doubling down on efforts to re-enroll those who already have a head start toward a degree.

"These are students who have, for whatever reason, had to stop out — maybe they had a baby or had to take care of parents or had to work full time," said Nicholas Vaught, a student-success administrator at Morgan State. While they may doubt themselves, "we're not viewing them as failures," he added. The fact that they earned college credits, he said, makes them successes.

As a historically Black college that's enjoyed a surge in attention and enrollment in the past few years, the Baltimore institution isn't seeking out students like Vanderloop primarily to fill seats, he said. The focus now is more on equity and making sure more students get the benefits of completing degrees. In [Baltimore](#), 43 percent of white households — but only 16 percent of Black households — have a bachelor's degree or higher, according to a 2021 report from the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity, at Duke University.

Longer term, and more broadly across higher education, though, the number of

Some College, No Credential

Number of people who started college and left before earning a credential (as of July 2020)

39 million

- That's nearly a 9 percent increase from two years earlier
- Nearly 60 percent of this population was last enrolled at a community college

older adults who have stopped out of college will continue to grow, Vaught said, "even as we see the number of 18-year-olds decline."

Despite the pandemic, more than 944,000 people with some college but no credential re-enrolled during the 2020-21 academic year, and more than 60,000 earned their first postsecondary credential, the report from the National Student Clearinghouse noted. Six out of 10 who re-enrolled in 2019-20 either continued to the following year or got a credential within a year of returning.

FOR ALL THE POTENTIAL this population offers, there are challenges. [Persuading people to come back](#) can be tough when college costs are high and decent-paying jobs are plentiful.

It's not always clear that students pulling down good salaries, with many credits left to earn, would be financially better off if they completed their degrees, according to Ben Castleman, an associate professor of public policy and education at the University of Virginia. He advocates focusing colleges' recruiting efforts more narrowly on certain people, like low-wage

workers with relatively few credits left to earn. Even there, it can be challenging.

For many students who stopped out because of work or family responsibilities, money is still tight, time stretched thin, and self-confidence in academic abilities low. They may also still be paying off student loans.

“We know that when students have some credit, no degree,” Vaught said, “that also means some college debt but no degree.”

Then, there are logistical challenges, like small unpaid balances for tuition or library fees that leave students with financial holds that prevent release of their transcripts. Some colleges have dropped such holds, which [disproportionately block](#) low-income students’ access to college.

Despite these challenges, with many colleges “still reeling from [historic enrollment declines](#) during the pandemic,” the Clearinghouse report notes, “the continued health of higher education institutions, and their ability to meet the needs of future students, may depend on their success at re-engaging” these stopped-out students.

Morgan State found that retrofitting existing degree programs to meet the needs of returning adults didn’t work. These students are more likely to bring in credits from multiple colleges, work experience they could get credit for, and complicated lives that need to be factored in when scheduling classes and workloads.

To tailor college more specifically to them, the university this spring started a [College of Interdisciplinary and Continuing Studies](#) as an outgrowth of an applied liberal-studies major begun five years ago. The new college, where Vaught serves as interim assistant dean of academics and student success, offers online classes to students around the country at in-state prices.

Its interdisciplinary focus makes it easier for students from a variety of work backgrounds to advance within their current jobs or pivot to a related but new field, said Nicole M. Westrick, dean of the new college. Students can test out of certain cours-

es through credit for prior learning, which involves evaluating how skills learned on the job could be applied to their degree programs. The university has been learning from institutions that have well-established programs for granting such credit, Westrick said, places like [Central Michigan University](#).

Vanderloop is among the returning students who benefited from that approach. Morgan State applied 18 credits for work she’s done in the health-care field and accepted nearly all of the credits she brought in, she said, “so I didn’t feel I was having to start over.”

Persuading people to come back can be tough when college costs are high and decent-paying jobs are plentiful.

She first enrolled at Eastern Michigan University in 2008. Like so many returning adults, her college career took a bumpy, interrupted route over the next decade. A new mother, she had to stop out in 2009 when her husband’s military post was transferred to Colorado. A few years later, divorced, she moved back to Michigan with her young daughter, hoping to re-enroll at Eastern Michigan. First stop was enrolling at a community college to make up for her earlier poor grades and qualify to transfer.

“As a single mom, trying to get financially back on my feet, I had to prioritize work over studies, and my studies suffered,” she said. “Taking a class here and there, I eventually earned an associate degree” in 2020 from Washtenaw Community College. By then,

she was living in Maryland, where she'd moved for her job at a health-care software company. Learning that Morgan State's program would allow her to graduate by next spring with a concentration in interdisciplinary engineering, information, and computational sciences, she eagerly enrolled.

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, California State University-Dominguez Hills is engaged in a similar recruitment effort. "Once a Toro, Always a Toro" is mostly geared toward re-enrolling students who started at the campus in Los Angeles County, where [two-thirds](#) of students are Hispanic. "The perspective is: 'You didn't leave the family. You took a break and life happened,'" said Sabrina K. Sanders, who oversees the outreach effort. "The sense of belonging is so important to student success."

A [2018 study](#) by the policy research group California Competes found that just half of Latino, Black, Native American, and Pacific Islander adults in that state who attended college ended up earning degrees, compared with two-thirds of white adults. To lower barriers for returning students, the Dominguez Hills program waived application fees, offered online orientations, and scrapped the requirement that students submit a letter of intent to register for classes.

More than 600 students filled out re-entry forms indicating they're planning to enroll this fall. Still, it's hard to predict how many students might change their minds when they haven't gone through the formal, time-consuming process of reapplying for their seats and paying fees.

Someone who's doing fairly well financially may not see the immediate value of returning to college but might be persuaded to return if flexible part-time options, wraparound supports like child care, financial aid, and tutoring are available. "A student earning \$25 an hour on the job and supporting a family might want to ease back into college a class or two at a time," Sanders said.

THE RETURN TO CAMPUS can be complicated. Katrece Harris dropped out of the Cal State campus, where she was majoring in criminal justice, in 2014, when her grades plummeted during a family crisis. "My stepdad passed away, and I was helping my mom and younger brother. Mentally, I wasn't there," she said. "I wasn't focused on school."

She didn't realize that if she'd withdrawn from her courses, she could have avoided being saddled with the low grades that stuck to her transcript. In order to finish her bachelor's degree, she has to regain good academic standing through courses she's taking in an "Open University" run by the Dominguez Hills campus that's available to working adults and others who aren't formally admitted to the university. Credit courses are offered, on a space-available basis, to students who want to take classes for personal development, are academically dismissed, late to applying to the university, or come from another university to complete one course.

Once her academic standing is restored, Harris might qualify to have some of the law-enforcement academy classes she took to become a deputy sheriff for Los Angeles County applied toward her degree.

To earn such credit, students can submit a portfolio, paper, test, or other way of showing department faculty that the skills and trainings they've gained on the job correlate to learning or competencies. But granting academic credit for work experience requires convincing faculty members that the two are comparable. No one wants to "give away" degrees, Sanders said. She understands the need for rigor and standards, but she also feels that flexibility and a chance to prove a student has gained necessary knowledge is crucial. Otherwise, she said: "What are we measuring? Hours in seats or competencies and skills?"

The university's president, Thomas A. Parham, said people who come from less-privileged backgrounds often have to defer goals like college to meet more immediate needs

like paying rent or putting food on the table. “Part of what we want to do, not just on our campus but across the CSU system, is provide opportunities to recapture some of those students, to assess what it is that derailed their trajectory toward completion, and see if we can’t put some services in place that help position them for success,” he said. When setbacks threaten to push them off course again, “We’re working hard to convince them that they really do belong in this educational space and that they have what they need to finish.”

“We’re working hard to convince them that they really do belong in this educational space and that they have what they need to finish.”

This applies, Sanders said, to the single mom with a 1-year-old and no child care during the pandemic who said she “tried and tried but just couldn’t do it.” Likewise, the working student who left college a few years ago when his mother had cancer and needed his support. When the university reached out to him, Sanders said, “the nudge motivated him to come back.”

Advisers who stay with the student and check in regularly, from application to graduation, are essential elements of the strategy at both Dominguez Hills and Morgan State. Deborah Hargrave, an academic-retention adviser at Morgan State, can relate to her advisees. She was 29 when she first enrolled at Morgan State in 1995, married with three kids. She dropped out during her sophomore year to work full-

time, trying again in 2002 for a semester. “Our kids always came first,” she said, and without two full-time incomes, she and her husband couldn’t keep them in private schools. In 2011, at her oldest daughter’s urging, she re-enrolled in Morgan State, earning a bachelor’s degree in sociology in 2015 and a master’s in 2020.

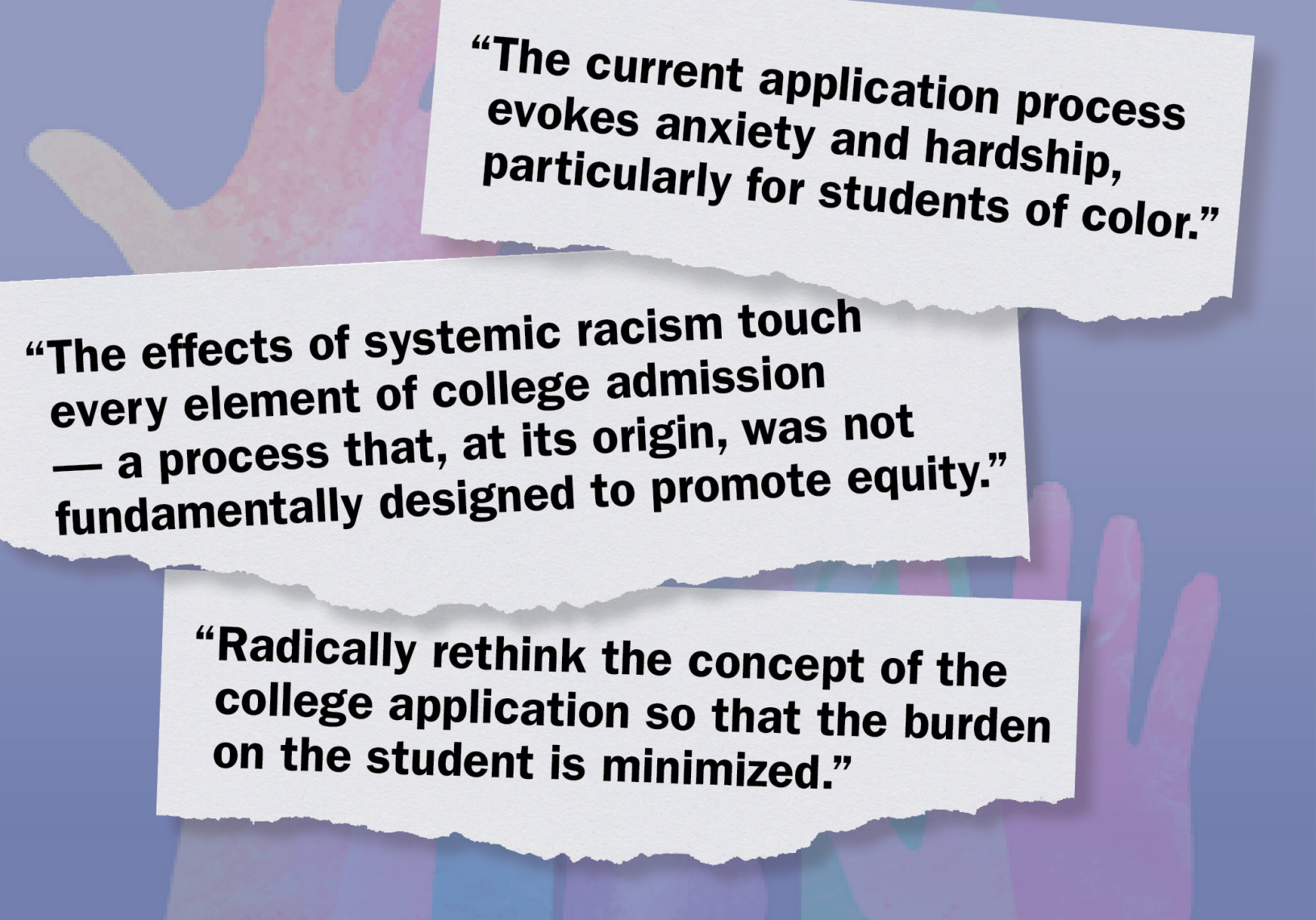
Hargrave remembers feeling self-conscious returning when she was in her 40s, wondering “if the younger kids will look at me funny if I ask too many questions or if the professor is going to be annoyed with me.” Her adviser, a returning student himself, became a longtime mentor. He referred her to financial help and to tutoring labs, “because it had been a moment” since her last chemistry course and the prospect of picking it up again filled her with dread. Like her mentor, she now starts out sessions with her own advisees by asking about their families and jobs and how they’re doing outside their classes. She reminds them they can lean on one another, and she urges them to mentor younger students interested in their career fields.

That kind of personal outreach has given Tara Williams the confidence that she’ll be able to complete her bachelor’s degree more than a decade after she started. She earned an associate degree in 2011 and enrolled at the University of Phoenix six years later to try to finish a B.A. By 2019, with a full-time job, family, and around \$70,000 in student loans to pay back, she said, “I ran out of funds.” She had to drop out.

Now, at age 52, she’s enrolled at Morgan State, hoping to graduate in December 2023 with a B.A. in interdisciplinary organizational development. “I hated that stuck feeling,” she said. “I was determined that no matter what age, I would go back and finish.”

Katherine Mangan is a Chronicle senior writer who covers issues of community colleges, college completion, and student success.

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“The current application process evokes anxiety and hardship, particularly for students of color.”

“The effects of systemic racism touch every element of college admission — a process that, at its origin, was not fundamentally designed to promote equity.”

“Radically rethink the concept of the college application so that the burden on the student is minimized.”

ILLUSTRATION BY THE CHRONICLE, IMAGE FROM NACAC

An Admissions Process Built for Racial Equity? This Report Imagines What It Would Look Like

By ERIC HOOVER

DITCH THE ACT and SAT. End early decision. Abolish preferences for legacy applicants now.

Critics of the admissions process have long demanded such changes in hopes of making the system more equitable for students. Over the last 20 years, a slew of proposed reforms have typically had two things in common: They (a) urged highly selective colleges to stop doing something, and (b) focused on a specific policy or practice in isolation, even though one discrete change alone — like, say, going test-optional — doesn't automatically guarantee more equitable outcomes at a given college.

A [report](#) released on Wednesday by two prominent associations takes a broader view of what's wrong with the admissions and financial-aid system by examining the complex process through the lens of racial equity. "The effects of systemic racism," the report says, "touch every element of college admission — a process that, at its origin, was not fundamentally designed to promote equity."

That last part is key. The admissions realm, forever talking up its lofty ideals but forever entrenched in the relentless competition for revenue and indicators of institutional awesomeness, is a system at odds with itself. But it does, more or less, what it was built to do.

Though no set of bold-type proposals is going to transform the profession, the report offers numerous recommendations for institutional leaders, as well as state and federal policy makers. The report argues that existing admissions and financial-aid processes can be rebuilt to better serve racial minorities, especially Black students. The question: What would those systems look like if promoting racial equity were the main objective?

The report, financed by the Lumina Foundation, was produced by the National Association for College Admission Counseling and the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators. Its findings and recommendations were

drawn from interviews with a panel of more than 20 admissions and financial-aid experts, as well as recent college applicants.

Here are five key ideas from the report:

Examine the consequences of selectivity. Given the effects of systemic racism and the "inequitable system of inputs" the admissions process relies on, the report says, selective colleges should examine why they exclude applicants. That is, which subgroups of students their policies and practices tend to leave out: "Institutional awareness of who is likely to be excluded is essential to an understanding of racial inequity."

Admissions officials should assess whether they could serve institutional goals with selection processes that minimize the effects of racial inequities. And institutional leaders should look for ways to "reconcile institutional prestige and equity goals." One expert quoted in the report boiled it down to a choice: "Either you redesign the whole institution around equity, or you don't."

Simplify the application process. The more complex an application is, the more inequitable it is. Institutions, the report says, "should radically rethink the concept of the college application" to ease the burden on students. The current process "evokes anxiety and hardship, particularly for students of color" (and those who lack access to a school counselor or knowledgeable guide to help them).

A student's performance in school "should be the nearly exclusive focus for taking the step to postsecondary education." Colleges, the report says, should seek ways to incorporate more-nuanced assessments of applicants' high-school performance, and consider minimizing or eliminating external assessments and additional requirements. "We still require them to fit this very traditional box," one panelist said, "even though we say that we want nontraditional students to be part of

higher-education spaces.”

Furthermore, admissions offices should help create a way to simplify and automate the transfer of student information to colleges in which students have expressed an interest. Colleges should either reduce or eliminate application fees — and make fee waivers widely available and easy to obtain.

Further streamline the federal-aid process. Colleges should ensure that their financial-aid materials include a notice that applicants may file their Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, as early as October 1, which would give them more time to locate documents they might need if selected for [verification](#) — and more time to make an informed college choice. And colleges should strive to get aid awards to students sooner.

The report urges Congress to codify the October 1 release of the FAFSA into statute. It also asks the Education Department to extend the 2021-22 [verification waiver](#), which has reduced a major hurdle for many disadvantaged applicants. “Low-income and vulnerable students, who are most burdened by verification, have borne the brunt of this pandemic,” the report says, “and not renewing the verification waiver will make the college-admission process that much more difficult.”

Diversify the admissions profession. Enhancing the racial and ethnic diversity of admissions staffs, the report says, can increase an institution’s ability to “attract and relate to a diverse student population.” Colleges should prioritize racial equity in hiring and retaining admissions officers; conduct antiracism training for staff members; and hold listening sessions with current and prospective Black students, whose feedback could inform their recruitment practices.

Colleges should also take a close look at their prompts for essays required for admission and scholarship applications, especially those concerning challenges that have been overcome. Some students

who participated in the research said they felt that colleges expected them to fit a particular profile, by describing their hardships and struggle. One asked why “minority students have to showcase this resiliency like they are superhuman in order to get into college?”

“The effects of systemic racism touch every element of college admission – a process that, at its origin, was not fundamentally designed to promote equity.”

Confront implicit bias in financial-aid offices. Financial-aid leaders should examine the extent to which implicit biases might affect their aid processes, including the case-by-case decisions officials must make when students appeal their aid awards. Colleges should consider how much rigorous academic requirements for scholarships “can be inherently inequitable for low-income students, who are disproportionately students of color” — and who might have experienced numerous challenges, attended high schools lacking rigorous curricula, and balanced family obligations with their schoolwork.

The report, “Toward a More Equitable Future for Postsecondary Access,” is less a long list of specific prescriptions than an urgent call for a reckoning with history. The admissions process as we know it wasn’t handed down from the clouds; it grew out of entrenched systems that have long worked against disadvantaged students.

Admissions officials should assess whether they could serve institutional goals with selection processes that minimize the effects of racial inequities.

As such, there are some serious caveats here. One: Many of the proposals go beyond the purview of admissions and financial-aid officials, who, the report says, “are often structurally confined from making the changes that they know need to be made to make higher education more accessible and equitable.” As powerful as those gatekeepers might seem from a distance, they can’t fix inequities in elementary and secondary education, or rewrite state and federal policies.

Also, all the admissions reforms in the world probably won’t help the many students who lack sound college advising — or any at all. The report urges postsecondary institutions to play a larger role in the professional development of school counselors and college advisers.

Angel B. Pérez, NACAC’s chief executive officer, has often said that many substantial changes in admissions probably can’t happen without a major overhaul of how higher education is financed, for starters. But he has cautioned admissions officials against

throwing up their hands in the meantime. The report, he told *The Chronicle*, “opens the doors for leaders, institutions, policy makers, and NACAC, among other associations, to ask somewhat radical questions and make moves towards change.”

NACAC, Pérez said, plans to take up the report’s recommendations for cultivating diversity among the next generation of admissions officers: “If the profession is to thrive, and we are to attract more students of color to college, the profession must also be representative of our students today.”

Changing the way a big, complicated, hidebound system works isn’t easy. One reason, the report says, is “the tendency to assume that the system’s current design is fixed or a ‘given.’”

Eric Hoover is a Chronicle senior writer who writes about the challenges of getting to, and through, college.

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Virtual Tours Could Get More First- Generation Students to College. Here's What They Want to See.

By TAYLOR SWAAK

SAM KALDA FOR THE CHRONICLE



THE FALL college-tour season is here once again. And for many prospective students — especially those who are first-generation and unable to travel — that means scouring institutions’ websites and social media to find the right fit.

It also means taking virtual tours.

Virtual tours gained momentum as a way for colleges to introduce themselves remotely to prospective students when Covid-19 shut down campuses last year. But the definition of such tours varies considerably. At some colleges, it might be a three-minute YouTube video or a Google Maps page with building markers. At others, it’s a more interactive experience on platforms like YouVisit, where a user can get 360-degree views as an enrolled student, clad in college apparel, talks about campus history and culture. Still other colleges offer live virtual tours or information sessions students can sign up for.

Yet prospective students using those tools say they often leave much to be desired. And Jeff Kallay, a campus-visit consultant for more than 15 years, agrees.

Too often, such virtual experiences are more about colleges’ touting their “best buildings” and their “best-looking students” than trying to learn about and appeal to prospective students, he says. “It is institution-centric, it is not designed for the end user. ... We have to ask the students what their needs are, and what their wants are, and then craft.”

That will be important even once the pandemic is under control, given changing student demographics. Ffiona Rees, board chair of the National Association for College Admission Counseling, says colleges should invest in connecting with students who are unable to travel for health, financial, child-care, or other reasons.

Especially from an equity standpoint, incorporating virtual tools into recruiting offers “significant benefits,” she says. “Virtual allows students to look at a much broader range of colleges, as far as size, as far as type, as far as geographic location.”

Colleges are taking notice. YouVisit, for

example, is fielding more inquiries daily from interested institutions than it used to field in a week, and has added more than 160 colleges to its client base since the pandemic began, according to a spokesman for EAB, which owns the platform. An [Inside Higher Ed survey](#) of 206 admissions officials in August found 76 percent assumed some or many students would continue to watch videos in place of visiting campuses.

The Chronicle recently interviewed first-generation students about what they’ve liked and disliked about existing virtual tools. Their answers revealed a need for more human interactions, real-time Q&A opportunities, insights into the surrounding community, virtual sessions spotlighting clubs, and translation services, among other things.

Here’s what each had to say:



COURTESY OF YULIANA CARAVANTES

Yuliana Caravantes

Yuliana Caravantes,
high-school senior, 17
South San Francisco High School
Interested in: cardiology

While Caravantes plans to stay in California, not all of her options are nearby — the University of California at Los Angeles, for example, is six or seven hours from home

— and traveling to see them in person isn't an option. Caravantes has a 6-year-old sister and an 8-year-old brother her parents must attend to; her mom and dad also work long hours at a local grocery store. Sometimes, her father rises before the sun to get there at 4 a.m. and works until 4 p.m.

Her college search, then, has been all online. She prefers some virtual tools to others: In her experience, Google Maps "doesn't show you much," she said. YouTube videos might if they're longer than a few minutes, though she wonders if she's getting a complete picture. Platforms like YouVisit, which allows her to roam around a 3D map of a campus, have been the most helpful, especially in discerning the flow and walkability of a campus, she said.

Still, Caravantes would like to see many more elements. She wants tours to note what's off-campus: Is there a downtown area? A grocery store within walking distance? A pharmacy?

"A lot of students, if you're going far away, you're on your own, and you want somewhere where if you need something quick, you can have access," she said.

As a student whose parents didn't attend college and aren't fluent in English, Caravantes said she'd also like to see more virtual resources offered in Spanish or other languages, or with subtitles, so parents could be more involved.

Chi Luu,
high-school senior, 17
Seattle Waldorf School
Interested in: international business

Luu is considering colleges both in state and out of state, including Florida, Oregon, and Texas. She isn't able to visit those campuses in person, though, because of Covid-related safety concerns and financial constraints.

"Even if we don't have Covid, I don't think I would go because my family couldn't just pay for me to travel around the United States to just visit colleges," she said. "We don't have that money."



COURTESY OF CHI LUU

Chi Luu

What Luu cares about most as she's researching colleges is getting questions answered about financial-aid options; her parents can't pay for her college education, and she's determined to graduate with minimal student loans. Unlike her more-affluent peers, "I don't really have the luxury of being like, 'You know what? I like the vibe of this college, maybe I'll apply here,'" she said.

Live virtual tours haven't been particularly helpful, she said. Luu recalled signing up for a one-on-one tour, "expecting someone to be there for me, but it was a prerecorded, 30-minute video ... there was a chat box, but they weren't talking at all," she said.

She's found a bit more success with virtual information sessions, but still feels presenters could be more forthcoming with details about how they support low-income students financially. "There's not much clarity unless I'm the one asking," Luu said. "They'll say something like, 'We give lots of scholarships,' and then move on to the next topic about how great this school is.

"But then I'm like, 'Wait a second. What kind of scholarships? Can you talk more about that? How do you qualify? What are you going to judge me on?'"



Lesly Quizhpi

COURTESY OF LESLY QUIZHPI

Lesly Quizhpi, high-school senior, 17
Baltimore City College High School
Interested in: psychology, public health,
anthropology

Quizhpi is looking largely out of state, to Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania. But the cost of travel, paired with her own commitments — extracurriculars, volunteering at church, and helping watch her 12- and 1-year-old sisters — means an in-person visit isn't feasible.

Going to a college that has a tight-knit community and feels like home is important to Quizhpi. She's been disappointed, she said, when she logs on to live virtual tours and gets a slideshow presentation instead of the chance to shadow a student who's actively walking around the campus and popping into classrooms.

If tours like those aren't possible, Quizhpi emphasized that something as simple as enthusiasm would go a long way. She's still thinking about a recent live virtual tour of one university in which a student ambassador fangirled about one of their annual campus events. "She was talking about strawberry cakes — gluten, vegan, no nuts — and she just kept on going. And it was funny," Quizhpi said.

"She was showing the enthusiasm for us. And it made me really happy."

Quizhpi also said that she'd love to see additional live virtual sessions that feature departments. She often digs through college websites to learn more about what majors are offered through which departments, which professors are teaching those classes, and what their research interests are.

"Students have a variety of ideas of what they want to major in" that can't be addressed in the main virtual events, she said, so "I would find that really useful."

Aldo Ruiz Parra,
college freshman, 18
Pomona College
Interested in: computer science

Ruiz Parra enrolled at Pomona College from Austin, Tex., wanting to "get out my bubble, get out of my comfort zone," he said. Part of what ended up sealing the deal for him on Pomona, in particular, was its virtual "fly-in" program, a two-day event that connects prospective students directly with professors and enrolled students.

When researching other colleges, Ruiz Parra said he had mixed experiences with



Aldo Ruiz Parra

COURTESY OF ALDO RUIZ PARRA

their virtual resources. He thought interactive tools that allowed a student to drag a mouse around a campus map while a tour guide narrated were “super-cool,” though he noted that views were often limited to the outside of buildings. And while some live virtual tours on Zoom were small and engaging, with breakout rooms, others were packed, with participants’ cameras shut off — something that “distracted me,” Ruiz Parra said. None, he added, were tours with a person actually walking around the campus in real time (they were slideshows).

Like Quizhpi, what Ruiz Parra felt was missing the most was a sense of colleges’ communities — a deciding factor in where he would attend.

That’s hard to capture virtually, he acknowledged. But he thinks adding [topic-specific virtual sessions](#), like events hosted by campus club members, could help. “In order to show community, you have to show a small representation of different communities within it,” he said. “And clubs are just that.”

**Freddy Barrera,
college junior, 20
New York University**

Barrera didn’t have the benefit of virtual tours in 2018, when he was in Utah eyeing colleges on the East Coast. And in-person visits were out of the question — on top of cost, his parents, who are undocumented, couldn’t fly with him.

“I wouldn’t have had the courage to go by myself to a different city just to view a college,” he said.

Instead, Barrera recalled watching YouTube videos and student Instagram takeovers, hoping to learn more about campus diversity and which colleges offered support services such as mentorship programs, mental-health resources, and



COURTESY OF FREDDY BARRERA

Freddy Barrera

scholarships. Looking back, he wishes he’d had access to live virtual tours like the one he now helps host at NYU.

During NYU’s live biweekly virtual tours, two ambassadors run through a slideshow highlighting areas on campus they’d typically stop at in person. Meanwhile, two other ambassadors wrangle the chat section, answering participants’ written questions.

The tours are well attended, Barrera said, with about 70 people on average. And he’s noticed the groups tend to be “a lot more diverse” than the in-person tours he hosts.

“These virtual options are better at reaching first-generation students and students from low-income backgrounds,” he said. If colleges “really want to promote diversity ... put some action behind it. Keep this channel open.”

Taylor Swaak is a Chronicle reporter covering how innovations in technology are changing the student experience.

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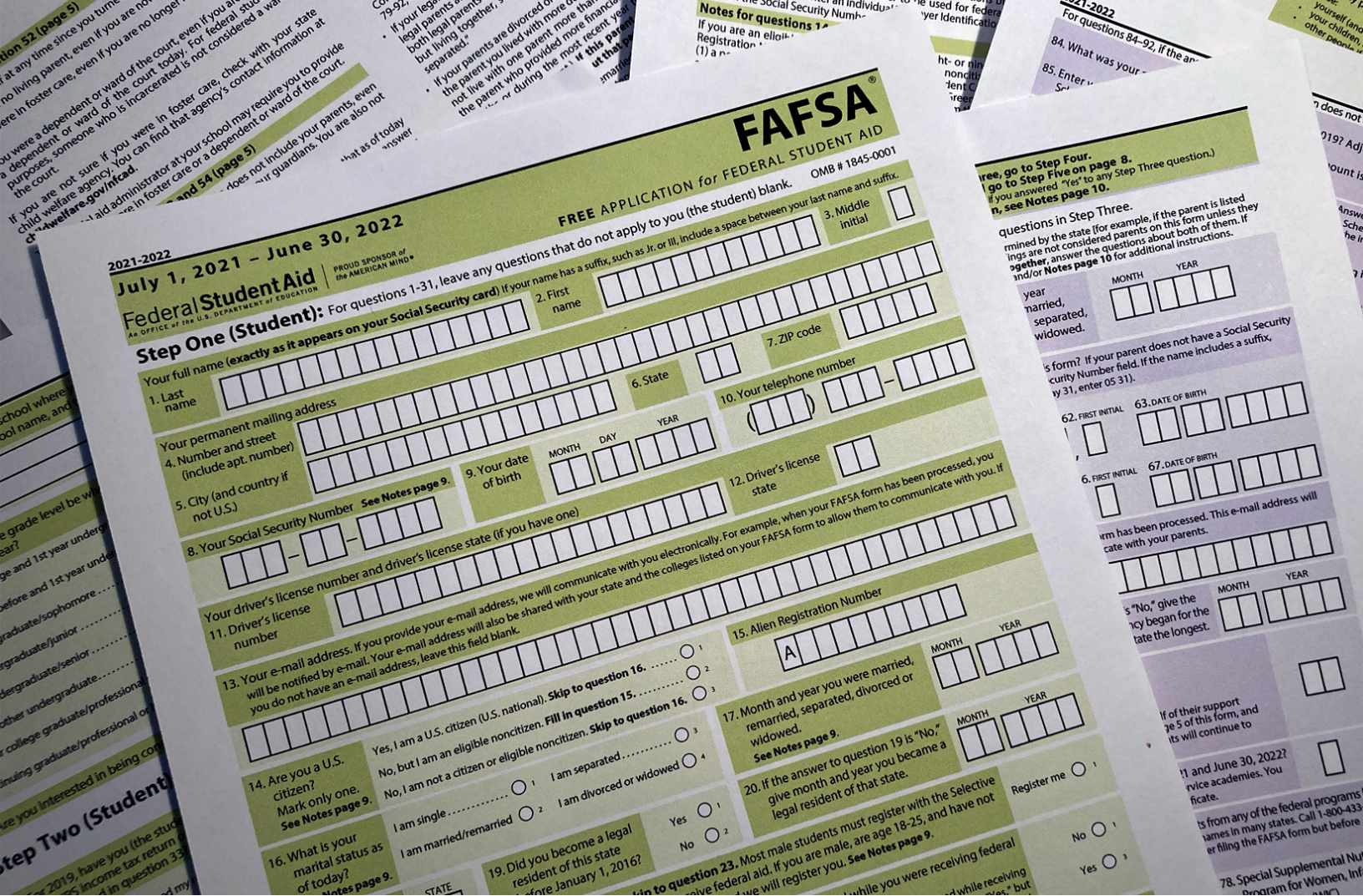


ILLUSTRATION BY THE CHRONICLE

FAFSA Requirements Aim to Boost College Enrollments. Here's Their Impact So Far.

By ADRIENNE LU

IN 2021, nearly **half** of high-school graduates from the Class of 2021 failed to complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid. That means that altogether, millions of students left about **\$3.75 billion** in federal Pell Grants unclaimed, according to an estimate by the **National College Attainment Network**, on top of other need-based aid they could have applied for through the form.

Now, a growing number of states are requiring high-school students to complete FAFSAs in order to graduate. The states hope to both help students take advantage of unclaimed financial aid and nudge some who otherwise may not have considered college to enroll — a goal that’s become more urgent since the Covid-19 pandemic has depressed both college **enrollments** and **FAFSA completions**.

“We’re trying to increase universal awareness of financial aid because that knowledge can shape [students’] col-

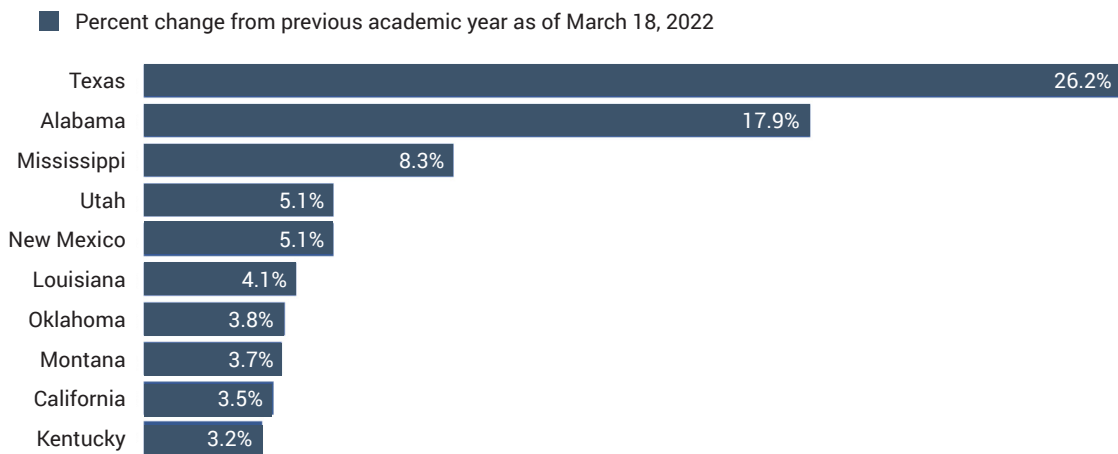
lege-going decisions,” said Bill DeBaun, senior director of data and strategic initiatives at the National College Attainment Network, which has long worked to increase FAFSA completions.

Kenya Fields knows just what DeBaun is talking about. Fields, a school counselor in Terrebonne Parish, La. — the first **state** to impose the graduation requirement, in 2017-18 — recalls one former student with exceptional grades and very good ACT scores, whose parents were commercial fishermen. He had grown up planning to enter the family business, but after completing the FAFSA realized he was eligible for Pell Grants and decided to study engineering in college. Completing the application “kind of opens up a new avenue, a new door,” said Fields.

Unsurprisingly, FAFSA completion rates have grown in the states with the graduation requirement. But while completions are strongly **correlated** with postsecondary enrollment, particularly for students from

The 10 States With the Biggest Growth in Share of High-School Seniors Who Have Completed FAFSAs

Texas and Alabama are requiring students to complete FAFSAs as a requirement for graduation for the first time this year; both have seen significant increases in the proportion of students completing FAFSAs. Louisiana has had the requirement since 2017-18.



Source: National College Attainment Network

lower-income households, it remains to be seen whether the rules will improve college enrollment. Some experts caution that [it will take a lot more than filling out a form](#) to get more students to enroll in — and eventually graduate from — college.

States don't seem to be waiting for evidence to act, however. [Illinois](#) followed Louisiana by imposing the requirement in 2020-21; [Alabama](#) and [Texas](#) are implementing it for the first time this school year; and [New Hampshire's](#) requirement will take effect in 2023-24. (All of those states have opt-out provisions.) More than a dozen states have considered similar bills during the current legislative session, according to the Education Commission of the States.

Some experts caution that it will take a lot more than filling out a form to get more students to enroll in — and eventually graduate from — college.

Nebraska's Gov. Pete Ricketts in 2020 [vetoed](#) a bill that would have required students to complete a FAFSA to graduate, calling it an unfunded and burdensome mandate on students and families not related to the core education mission of K-12 schools, among other reasons. Several states have shied away from mandates in favor of grants and other incentives.

A Tough Sell

There are many reasons why students and families hesitate to complete FAFSAs,

despite the potential benefits. The complex form can be intimidating, particularly to students whose parents have not attended college, although there are efforts underway to [simplify](#) the FAFSA and its dreaded offshoot, [verification](#), in which applicants are asked to submit additional information for further review. Many high schools don't have enough counselors to help students think about their post-high-school careers and guide them through the process of completing a FAFSA. Some students' parents are undocumented and wary of interacting with the government. And some families assume incorrectly that they earn too much to benefit from financial aid.

Fields said conversations with families can be awkward, covering personal issues, including how much cash a family has in the bank, how much a parent receives in child support, and when parents were married, separated, or divorced. It can take a lot of work to persuade some families to complete a FAFSA, particularly for students who are not already on a college track, she said.

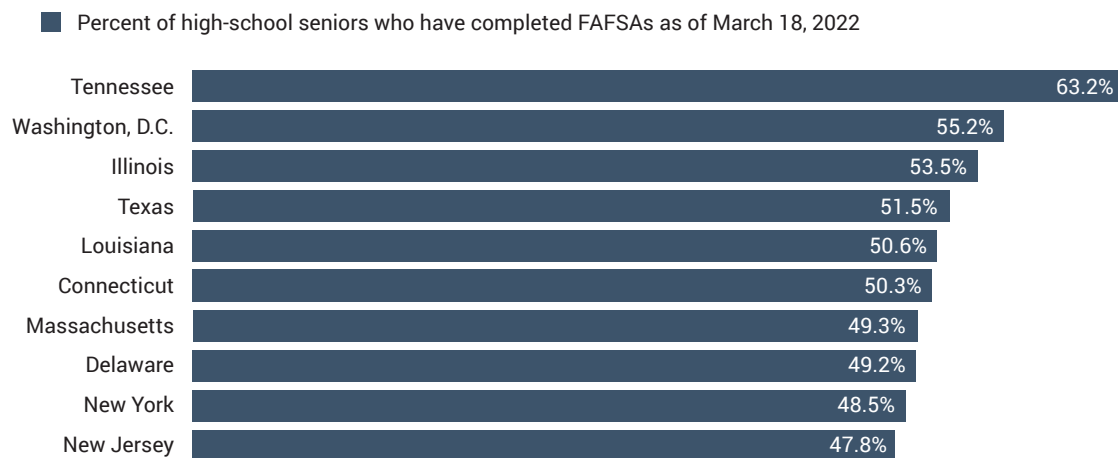
For more-reluctant students, Fields likes to emphasize that FAFSAs can pave the way for financial aid to help with all kinds of postsecondary education, including technical programs. Students who want to become massage therapists, carpenters, or diesel mechanics, she tells families, can all benefit from additional education beyond high school.

So far, the mandates do appear to be increasing FAFSA completion rates. In the first year of implementation in Louisiana, FAFSA completion for high-school seniors grew by [26 percent](#). Texas and Alabama are currently leading the country in terms of year-over-year increases in FAFSA completions.

But if the ultimate aim of the policies is to help more students receive financial aid and enroll in college, researchers caution that more data is needed. Ellie Bruecker, a senior research associate at the Seldin/Haring-Smith Foundation, which works on college access and openness, among other

The 10 States With the Largest Share of High-School Seniors Who Have Completed FAFSAs

Tennessee frequently tops the list because students must complete a FAFSA to apply for popular state scholarship programs.



Source: National College Attainment Network

projects, studied the Louisiana FAFSA policy as part of her Ph.D. dissertation. She found that in the first two years of implementation, schools that had improved FAFSA completion rates the most saw an increase in college-going of less than one percentage point, primarily driven by schools serving the lowest numbers of African American and low-income students. “I would not call this a success at improving college enrollment at this point,” Bruecker said.

Bruecker said that she was not surprised that the impact on college enrollment was so modest. “I think the idea behind mandatory FAFSA is we want students to decide whether or not to go to college, but if you just fill out the FAFSA alone, that doesn’t tell you whether college is affordable for you,” Bruecker said. Filling out the forms does not provide any information about institutional aid students might be eligible for, for example.

While Bruecker does not oppose mandatory FAFSA policies, and acknowledges

their impact might grow over time, she would rather see lawmakers spend limited resources on things like increasing the number of counselors in high schools.

Similarly, Peter Granville, a senior policy associate who has studied mandatory FAFSA policies at The Century Foundation, a progressive think tank, urges states to think about what else they need to do to support schools and students through the FAFSA completion process. He cited Louisiana, which sends trained staff members across the state to instruct school counselors and work with students and families in hands-on workshops to help complete FAFSAs. States could also publicize new FAFSA requirements to take some of the burden off schools or direct additional funds to high schools to support FAFSA completion efforts.

Early Implementation

In Louisiana, Fields said she is thankful for the support the state has provided. That

help was particularly vital after Hurricane Ida devastated the region last August, which shut down Fields's school, South Terrebonne High School, for several weeks and forced some families to move into trailers and tents. Many of them lost the income tax records needed to complete the forms. About a quarter of the school's 200 seniors have not returned since the hurricane.

Many high schools don't have enough counselors to help students think about their post-high-school careers and guide them through the process of completing a FAFSA.

Despite the disruption, South Terrebonne has among the highest FAFSA completion rates in the region. Fields laid the groundwork last year by visiting 11th-grade classes to start to build rapport

with students and teachers. Last fall, she held numerous financial-aid workshops, frequently partnering with the Louisiana Department of Education and two local colleges, Nicholls State University and Fletcher Technical Community College, to encourage and help students and parents to complete FAFSAs.

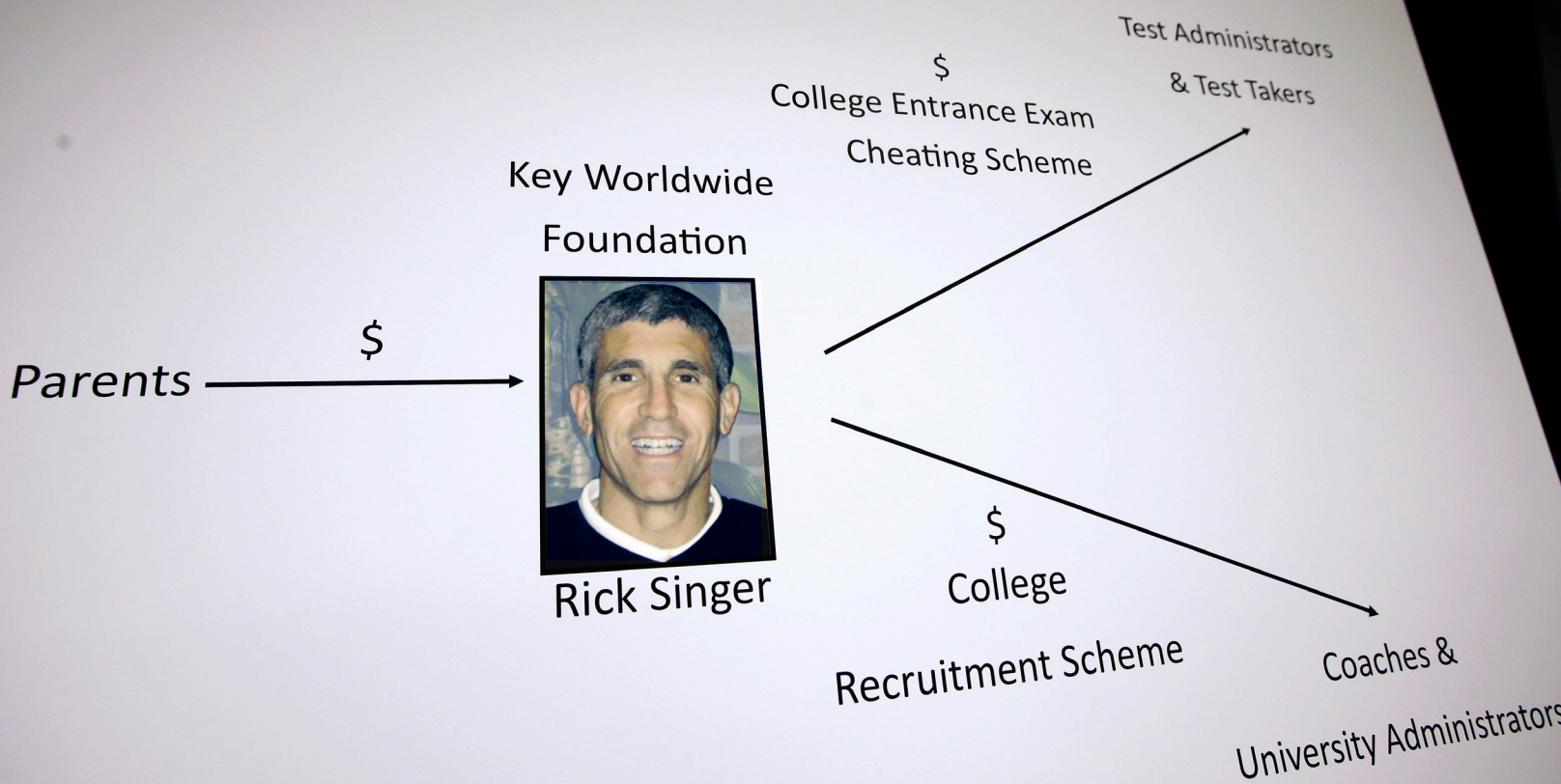
In Alabama, which is in its first year of implementation, Chandra Scott, executive director of Alabama Possible, which works to break down barriers to prosperity, said that the mandatory FAFSA policy is just one of many strategies the state is using to increase the number of students entering postsecondary education, with the ultimate goal of meeting the needs of the state's work force. But she said the requirement has already had an impact in its first year.

"What this policy has done is elevated it for parents," Scott said. "Every high-school mother or father looks over that graduation checklist — they want to make sure their student is checking off every tick box. That's the difference here; it has brought awareness to the families. I feel it's changing narratives in homes."

Adrienne Lu is a Chronicle senior reporter who writes about politics in higher education and students — with a focus on underrepresented students.

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Bribery Conspiracy



STEVEN SENNE, AP IMAGES

How to Stand Up for Equity in Admissions? Experts Share 5 Ideas

By ERIC HOOVER

LOS ANGELES

ON A TUESDAY MORNING in early 2020, Robert J. Massa described a daunting goal: Restoring the public's faith in the admissions process.

At the University of Southern California's Center for Enrollment Research, Policy and Practice's annual conference, admissions officials, college counselors, and policy experts spent two days assessing numerous challenges while nodding at the elephant in the room. You know, the big, ugly one called Operation Varsity Blues.

Massa, a longtime enrollment leader, described how in the wake of the scandal, the profession must grapple with questions about the meaning of merit, the role that wealth plays in the process, and how selective colleges can enroll more low-income and first-generation students. "It's time for a national conversation and assessment of college-admissions practices," he said. "Where do we go from here?"

Massa put the question to a panel of experts, asking them to describe the "action items" they would propose for their own campuses or the system in general. Here are five ideas they shared without once mentioning Lori Loughlin.

Grow

Jonathan Burdick, vice provost for enrollment at Cornell University, said the nation's most selective institutions could better serve the public by expanding their enrollments. But he didn't just mean putting more butts in seats.

Four-year institutions, Burdick said, must expand their definition of a viable student to include more veterans, returning adults, migrant students, and applicants from often-overlooked nations. Citing projections for population growth in Africa, he said U.S. colleges tend to "leave it as a blank spot" on the student-recruitment map.

As long as the nation's most selective colleges serve a relatively narrow band of students, everyone else will continue to

have good reasons for mistrusting those institutions.

Use New Tools

Burdick said he wanted to "reimagine every tool" used in evaluations of applicants.

Sure, any college can assess the utility of its ACT/SAT requirement and decide whether to go test-optional or not. But what about other reliable measures of academic skills and personal attributes? Burdick imagined a future would deliver a more diverse array of assessments that better capture "the whole set of things students are good at."

Data science, machine learning, artificial intelligence. All of the above, he said, could soon play a larger role in admissions work: "We often say this is a purely human process — it's not. It's very, very much an industrial process."

Embrace 'Holistic Financial Aid'

Sure, you've heard of holistic admissions, in which colleges assess various attributes of "the whole student" besides grades and test scores. But does your college practice "holistic financial aid"?

That's the term Youlonda Copeland-Morgan used to describe a highly flexible aid-awarding process that takes each applicant's unique circumstances into account. Colleges, she said, can't meet students' needs by relying on formulas that are too rigid, with fixed loan and work-study amounts.

"We know so much about our students at the point of admission," said Copeland-Morgan, vice provost for enrollment management at the University of California at Los Angeles. "But when we get to the second-most important part of access in the process, we totally ignore a lot of it."

Students who don't get enough aid often struggle. Students who struggle often have a bad experience in college and/or end up dropping out. Looking back, they might well suspect that their college cared more about

enrolling them than ensuring their success.

And that, Copeland-Morgan insisted, shakes the public's faith in colleges. "We have to stand for more than getting students in the door," she said. "If we focus more on the quality of a student's experience, we would at least make a little bit of progress in terms of regaining the public's trust."

Make Equity a Campuswide Question

Copeland-Morgan urged colleges to conduct a "courageous equity assessment." That is, to examine how diverse (or not) your campus is.

"If the admissions office is the only place doing that, it's a problem," she said. "If you're really committed to diversity, you

"We have more power as enrollment officers to lead than we think we do."

should see it in the composition of boards, faculty, and staff."

Whatever the case, Copeland-Morgan encouraged enrollment leaders to own the conversation about campus diversity. It can be a chore to help campus leaders see demographic changes as merely an admissions-office concern, as opposed to a future-of-the-

college concern. But someone has to do it.

One suggestion from Copeland-Morgan: Circulate more information that might help campus stakeholders understand the racial, socioeconomic, and geographic diversity of students your institution serves to better show "the great complexity of the class beyond their test scores."

"Too often we sit on data," Copeland-Morgan said. "We have more power as enrollment officers to lead than we think we do."

Challenge Leadership

Stefanie Niles, vice president for enrollment and communications at Ohio Wesleyan University, seconded that notion.

Nope, your college's mission statement might not say anything about, say, educating students of color. But enrollment leaders are well positioned to explain why it's an imperative.

"We must be willing to challenge our senior leaders," Niles said, "to examine whether our institutions' missions need to evolve."

In the end, colleges can't just talk, spin, or market their way to trustworthiness. "It's not just telling our stories better," Niles said, "but doing our jobs better."

Eric Hoover is a Chronicle senior writer who writes about the challenges of getting to, and through, college.

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He Wanted to Go Away to College. The Pull to Stay at Home Was Strong.

By ERIC HOOVER

ANGEL DIAZ figured he would keep living at home after high school. It was an easy enough path to take, one that would please his mother. Sure, Diaz had wondered what it would be like to go away to college and live in a dorm. The possibility felt both

exciting and frightening. But for a long time, it seemed like a long shot. At the start of his senior year last fall, he believed he would end up enrolling at a community college not far from home.

Diaz, low-key and soft-spoken, grew up in suburban Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C. His parents came to the United States from El Salvador a few years before he was born. His mother cleans houses for a living. He often sees his father, who works in construction, come home feeling exhausted and sore.

Ambition flickered within Diaz, the oldest of two boys, who hoped to become the first in his family to graduate from college, a hope his parents encouraged. When he started high school, though, he was unsure of how to chart a postsecondary course, unsure of the questions he should even ask. Maybe he would just go straight into the work force and not look back.

Growing up, Diaz tried hard in school but struggled with some subjects. He found writing long essays for English difficult. But math? “Way easy,” he says. Numbers lit up his mind.

When Diaz was in elementary school, he participated in a math competition and came home crying because he hadn’t won



Angel Diaz

COURTESY OF ANGEL DIAZ

anything. *Study*, his mother told him. She bought him flash cards — addition, subtraction, multiplication — and every night they went over them together before bedtime. They kept at it until he got all the answers right.

The next school year, Diaz won a handful of medals in the math competition. An award certificate bearing his name found a place of honor in the living room. He credited his mother for having pushed him to succeed.

His mother, who took him to doctors' appointments on the bus. Who took him to playgrounds so he could have fun. Who gave up wage-hours to take care of him and his little brother. Who never left them with a babysitter because, he says, "she wanted to do it herself, to show us how she thinks things are done best."

His mother, who made one thing clear whenever talk turned to college: "She didn't want me to move out."

Familismo. The term is often used to describe the importance of strong ties among immediate and extended family members in Latino culture. A loyalty to one's family, a sense of closeness and obligation to them, can shape a college applicant's thinking about where to apply and enroll, about what's even possible.

Every family has its own story, of course. And let's be clear: Not all Latino students experience the same thing when applying to college. But for some applicants those tight connections can pull them toward one option and away from others. Those connections often fold into other pressing concerns.

Like costs, a big worry for Diaz and his parents, who earned little. Montgomery College, a nearby community college, seemed at first like the most affordable option. Living at home would help him save money. "A safe choice," he says.

It was difficult to see other choices through the fog of his future. Diaz says he didn't get much direction from his school

counselor. Then, in his senior year, he connected with CollegeTracks, a nonprofit group that helps low-income students in Maryland's Montgomery County apply to college and secure financial aid. The organization's advisers helped him think deeply about his interests and goals, the experience he sought. He knew he wanted to work with numbers, maybe major in finance.

"We didn't have to pay for much for me to go to a good school."

At first, Diaz wasn't sure if he could get into selective four-year colleges. In high school he had taken things week by week, just trying to stay on top of his assignments. He wasn't a straight-A student but managed to make the honor roll each quarter. He didn't like reading and writing but pushed through his frustrations in English classes to raise his C to a B a few times. For one assignment he wrote an essay about the time he was in the hospital and his mother had stayed by his side the whole time. Her caring, he says, had shaped him.

Last fall, as many seniors throughout the nation threw themselves into applying to college as forcefully as they could, Diaz didn't have a lot of time to spare, working after school as a cashier at a Harris Teeter supermarket. For a while he put in a total of 22 hours a week, Monday through Friday. This made it difficult, he says, to fit in meetings with his advisers at CollegeTracks.

As Diaz learned about "sticker prices," last-dollar scholarships, and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, he was also memorizing price look-up codes for produce. Bananas, 4011. Grapefruit, 4281. Kale, 4627. The job was fine except for some customers who were rude. He wore comfy

Crocs, but standing for hours was tough.

Finally, Diaz applied to three in-state institutions. The University of Maryland at College Park. The University of Maryland-Baltimore County. And Towson University. He got accepted by all of them.

But how to choose? Diaz didn't know. His mother's wish for him to stay at home weighed on him. He, too, liked the idea of being around his family each day for a couple years while attending community college.

Still, the thought of transferring to a four-year campus down the line seemed like a hassle. Moving out, Diaz thought, would be a natural thing to do when you're 18: "At some point, this is something that's supposed to happen."

"As time goes on, you question yourself. What if I had made this choice instead of that one? But for right now I feel like I made the right choice."

After his financial-aid offers came in this spring, CollegeTracks made Diaz a handout that helped him compare his options, showing the cost of each institution before and after loans. Between the federal Pell Grant and the state of Maryland's need-based [Guaranteed Access Grant](#), Diaz would have most of the cost of attendance covered at each four-year campus.

Diaz had always assumed it would be much cheaper for him to stay home and attend Montgomery College, but in his case it turned out not to be true. "Once I got the news that we would get a lot of financial aid, me and my mom got pretty emotional," he

says. "We didn't have to pay for much for me to go to a good school."

Still, there was the question of fit. Which campus would suit him best?

FOR EVERY STUDENT who visits several campuses twice, who thinks deeply about how the many attributes of one college compares with those of another, who goes over each institution's tangible and intangible qualities with the finest of combs, there's another student who just ... decides. They base their choice on cost. Or distance. Or one quick impression.

The mechanics of the financial-aid process left Diaz little time to reach a conclusion. The generous state grant he received provides up to \$20,000 annually for students attending a two- or four-year college in Maryland (the amount varies depending on where students enroll). But the grant came through about 10 days before May 1, the deadline by which students accepted at many colleges must make their final decision.

Until late April, Diaz hadn't visited any of the four-year institutions on his list. One reason was a lack of transportation: After an accident sidelined one of the family's two cars, his father needed the other car to get to and from work.

When Diaz applied to colleges, he hadn't been completely sure how far each one was from his home. He crossed Towson off the list once he learned that it was about an hour away. That left College Park and UMBC, which both struck him as solid choices. But the former, less than a half-hour drive, was closer to home.

One day a friend gave Diaz a ride to College Park. They walked around the campus and saw students studying, chatting, and laughing. The evident diversity of the campus made him feel comfortable, like he would fit in. And that was enough. He went home without talking with anyone on the campus.

A few days later, Diaz returned to College Park with his parents so they could get a

look around. They were impressed. Then the family sat in the shade of an umbrella at an outdoor table and discussed his future.

They knew that the amount of his state grant — \$19,000 a year for College Park — would decrease if he chose to live off campus. And if he commuted from home each day he would need to pay for gas and parking. It made more sense, they figured, for him to live in a dorm.

Though his mother still had reservations about him leaving home, Diaz says, she was convinced that College Park was the best option. He felt a surge of relief.

Diaz never visited UMBC, a much smaller campus known for its emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. “It would’ve made my choice much harder,” he says of checking out UMBC in person. “If I really liked it, I would’ve had a hard time deciding which one to pick. I didn’t want to add that pressure.”

Besides, by the time Diaz and his parents visited College Park, May 1 was just a couple days away. There was no time left to make the trek up to UMBC.

Diaz says the process taught him about the importance of preparation. If he had started researching colleges earlier, he probably would’ve had more options and more time to weigh them. Then again, he thought, how many options did he really need? He got into a few colleges he considered good. It was a win.

As summer neared, Diaz reflected on his decision: “As time goes on, you question

yourself. What if I had made this choice instead of that one? But for right now I feel like I made the right choice.”

For some applicants, success means having an abundance of options; for others, a handful is plenty, and just one might seem like enough.

On a Monday morning in June, Diaz sat in his bedroom amid Lego cars he had assembled and a small army of bobblehead action figures called Funko Pops — Spider-Man and Captain America, Batman and Green Goblin. In a couple months he would pack up his things and move.

As Diaz thought about life in College Park, he felt excited and nervous. He wanted to make new friends and get involved with clubs, but he hadn’t really thought about which ones yet. The next phase of his life felt close but also far off. He pictured himself in College Park, studying, hanging out, cheering for sports teams.

And Diaz pictured something else: He planned to leave the campus each Friday afternoon to spend the weekend with his family. His mother would cook dinner, maybe *pupusas revueltas*, stuffed with beans, cheese, and pork. For a couple nights a week, he would be home again. And for now that felt just right.

Eric Hoover is a Chronicle senior writer who writes about the challenges of getting to, and through, college.

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