

Enrollment Innovation During Covid-19

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For the past few years, we've used this column to update you on critical issues impacting the state of higher education, and there is no bigger issue for all sectors of higher ed than the area of enrollment.

The most recent data from the National Student Clearing House, which analyzes data from 3.6 million students from 629 colleges, indicates that undergraduate college enrollment is down 2.5%. Community college enrollment decreased by 7.5%. Private four year institutions dropped 3.8 percent for non-profits and 1.9 percent for for-profits, while public four-year schools saw .4 percent change.

From the broader viewpoint, the most worrying statistic is that of community colleges who historically have thrived in enrollment counts during tough economic times. The fact that Americans didn't turn to higher education during this very tough year raises more questions than it reveals. Most notably, what has happened to the state of higher education and where do we go from here?

As we look to 2021, we asked presidents of 10 higher education institutions – four private, three public, two community college, and one for-profit – for their thoughts leading into the new year. We summarized our discussions with these presidents and note the two biggest concerns consistent across all institutional leaders, perhaps unsurprisingly, are budget and enrollment.

- **Budget** – All expressed concern over budget pressures. The presidents agreed that challenges from a shrinking college age population created tension before the pandemic. “The pandemic,” one stated, “made it at least 500 percent worse.” Another added, “Privates now have to worry about fewer unrestricted contributions and auxiliary revenues, publics have fewer state dollars available, and community colleges are lacking students able to pay and offset lower revenues from local and state sources.”
- **Competition in a shrinking pool** – “I no longer feel like we have friends in higher education because everyone is ‘fighting’ for every possible student – and dollar,” said an experienced private college leader.
- **The Biden Agenda** – All expect the election will pave the way for a dramatic shift in higher education policies. “Higher education will be a priority again with community colleges and Historically Black Colleges to be the biggest beneficiaries,” one said. The new First Lady is a lifetime community college instructor, and an HBC is one of four colleges in Biden's home state. Biden has frequently pledged to make community colleges free and to address overall affordability for veterans, single parents, low-income students and students of color. He is expected to undo the Trump Administration's modification of policy on Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. A for-profit president said, “Expect tougher scrutiny of for-profit colleges and the return of Obama administration regulations that were wiped away.”

All are hopeful that the President-elect's pledge to double the maximum amount of Pell Grants will happen but agree that this and Biden's hope for debt forgiveness for those with family incomes under \$125,000 could be a tough to sell to Congress in its current state.

- **Testing** – Interestingly, this topic was raised by three leaders but from different perspectives. For two private colleges, “test optional” has led to an early surge in inquiries and applications. For a regional state university and community college, testing out of classes and experiential learning testing took on new meaning.

- **Toxic climate** – All raised concern about issues of race and the toxic political environment caused by the presidential election. “Once outspoken leaders on these topics, most college presidents now hunker down and go silent because of the risk of controversy,” said a 10-year president. “One misstep on these topics can lead to controversial publicity that can negatively impact enrollment and donors.”
- **Technology** – “During the first eight weeks of ‘stay at home,’ students were remarking that they may never go back in person,” said a 30-year president. “However, the longer hybrid, remote and online were in place, the more we heard from students missing the in-person experience. They badly wanted class dialogue, out of classroom work groups, and the overall residential experience. We consistently heard that a wonderful in-person professor doesn't translate to that kind of quality in a different format.”

Technology was also discussed in terms of student recruitment. Because of restrictions on crowd sizes, most institutions are now using virtual open houses, short videos, personalized web distributions, texting and calling. “It's like trying to sell a house online,” one president said. “You make it look the best you can, but it's hard for students to know if it will truly feel like home.”

Many institutions are offering private tours to combat this, but pandemic-related travel restrictions in some states are continuing to pose a problem for colleges looking to show off their campus as part of their recruitment strategy.

This pandemic has affected every aspect of the student experience over the last year – from the first inquiry to Commencement ceremonies offered virtually. In the classroom and in recruitment, we have to change our mindset about what it means to truly connect with students and inspire them to choose higher education as a viable pathway to face and embrace the future, no matter the delivery.

Good News

The U.S. Department of Education has announced plans to reduce the number of financial aid applicants selected for verification. Approximately 30% of aid applicants were selected for this cumbersome process in the past. This percentage will be reduced to 18% making the application process for aid easier for families and reducing the workload for financial aid offices.

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