

Widening the Lens on Enrollment Management to Accommodate Changing Student Needs

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Expected and unexpected challenges and changes in recent years have dramatically affected enrollment dynamics across the board for colleges and universities. While the “traditional” student will remain a fundamental component of most institutional business models, sole reliance on that population alone will limit viable options for colleges and universities.

As new options for learning appear in the market, colleges and universities can diversify beyond what is currently offered to entice more than just high school graduates seeking an in-person education. The rise of asynchronous courses and increased distance learning opportunities have changed the education dynamic, no longer requiring students to attend class at a particular location during set hours. Some traditional and many post-traditional students — who tend to be older — are looking for flexibility, credentials and experiential education instead of on-campus life and degree programs.

Considerations in analyzing an institution’s enrollment mix

As you research and evaluate enrollment at your institution, think through the following questions to ensure your strategy is rooted in the realities of the current environment:

1. Which students are successful? Which are not? Can we identify why? Achieving a holistic view of the student (including retention efforts and outcomes) will provide greater ability to align future strategy.
2. How do we define success for our students (social mobility, bachelor’s attainment, etc.)?
3. Which market(s) do we recruit in? Has the past year of (part-time) remote learning changed our market — i.e., do we have new competitors?
4. What are our cross-admit institutions and what are our differentiators relative to those institutions?
5. What existing outcomes must we improve to better meet our institutional mission?
6. How do our current program offerings align with labor market and other workforce needs in our community?

As the traditional market becomes a more competitive landscape, recruiting and retaining the desired number of best-fit students will become increasingly complex. Institutions can meet the changing needs of these students by innovating at every level to ensure steady enrollment growth going forward, as well as re-engaging with stopped-out students, creating more transfer-friendly pathways and identifying community-based recruiting partnerships.

The following six considerations are starting points for university leaders to consider for widening their enrollment lens.

1. Aligning Institutional Strengths With Market Needs

In exploring strategic ways to make necessary changes, higher education leaders can look to an institution's strengths — like distinguished faculty, programming and industry expertise — to design new programs that align with local market needs. Typically, micro-credentials, certificates, online programs and other secondary higher education offerings are often consumed by the local communities surrounding campus. Though there are occasions where online or hybrid programs can reach a broader audience, many begin locally and grow to scale. By recognizing both local needs and identifying its unique strengths, a university can develop programs that specifically target those groups, creating the opportunity for new and diversified revenue streams. Potential populations that may show interest in these initiatives include corporate employees, those looking to upskill or reskill, or people simply looking to earn an industry-specific credential.

2. Using Data to Fill Enrollment Gaps

The utilization of data and information has never been more critical. With the wealth of information found in publicly available sources, student information systems, CRMs and other student engagement systems, institutions must find ways to harness the power of this data to identify opportunities and drive data-informed decision

making to impact both the short- and long-term success of students. While data on today's cohort of students can be analyzed to allow for immediate interventions, combining this with historical data will often surface patterns that identify additional impacting factors (e.g., academic preparation at the K-12 level). Though these patterns are more challenging to address in the short term, they are important to identify and incorporate into long-term proactive strategic planning.

3. Prioritizing and Investing in Retention Efforts

Analyzing data on the current student body — including traditional and post-traditional students — will allow leaders to intervene appropriately with specific populations to increase retention, an increasingly critical component for an institution's fiscal sustainability. It continues to be significantly more costly to recruit a new student than retain an enrolled one. Investing in retention infrastructure — including upgrades to programs, staffing and technology — will pay dividends for finances and student outcomes. From a financial perspective, retention infrastructure investments are necessary to ensure that each student's maximum net tuition revenue is realized. From a student perspective, these investments maximize the institution's ability to deliver a positive return on investment (ROI) for students.

As a core focus of an institutional strategy, retention efforts require the entire institution to participate and collaborate in new ways, which can be challenging. A great strategy for motivating the broader campus community is tracking progress toward a small number of very clear targets and sharing that data enterprise-wide (e.g., X% retention, Y% grad rate). Engaging the entire campus requires strong leadership that aims to break down silos and create a culture of innovation in support of student success on every staffing level.

4. Addressing Price Sensitivity

Many students, and especially post-traditional students, have become more price-sensitive when it comes to higher education. Such students are constantly evaluating the myriad choices they have through the lens of affordability and perceived ROI. Despite what leaders may think at first, [affordability and financial sustainability for an institution are not mutually exclusive](#). Balancing both requires a commitment to financial aid and scholarships, evaluation of potential pricing alternatives, assessment of the cost of delivery for academic programs and identification of business models that can more equitably align with student desires. Expanding and communicating the idea of a student's ROI beyond just a degree — i.e. research opportunities, career exposure, life experience — can also help in conversations about price sensitivity when it comes to enrollment.

5. Encouraging System-Wide Partnerships

Coordinated enrollment planning within the institutions of a system can assist in maximizing the benefits for all, rather than functioning with a more siloed and individual institutional approach. [Institutions working in concert with one another](#) can often make an effective recruiting appeal, particularly when marketing to nonresident students. They can also share application information with the permission of the applicant, promote opportunities for student mobility and transfer between campuses, and encourage pathway opportunities for applicants who may have been denied or waitlisted at one institution. Working with other institutions within the system can also ensure diversity in enrollment offerings as well as maintain new revenue streams.

6. Creating Proactive Enrollment Plans

A successful enrollment strategy requires collaboration across a campus community to prioritize and make informed decisions. In determining enrollment goals, institutions will need to align on and balance tradeoffs between financial outcomes (e.g., net tuition revenue or

“NTR”), student profile and institution size — requiring collaboration and early alignment among the chief financial officer, provost and enrollment management leaders. In the case of a system, it is also important to recognize that the balance of these tradeoffs will most likely be different by the institution. In addition to institutional leadership aligning on tradeoffs, academic program leadership needs to identify what programs can grow, which are increasing or decreasing in student demand, and what opportunities exist that can fill a need in the market — keeping in mind the data acquired and research completed on post-traditional students. The creation and adherence to multi-year enrollment plans will allow for course corrections between admissions seasons and reward innovations throughout the student lifecycle, rather than the conservatism required by a focus on the next fall class alone.

Final Thoughts

Higher education leaders need to consider whether they are offering the right enrollment mix and identify what ways they can innovate and put forth strategies that accommodate the wide variety of new student needs. Increased competition and the shrinking of the traditional college-bound student population coupled with repercussions from the COVID-19 pandemic have led to a need to widen the lens on how to better serve existing students and how to attract and enroll new student populations that align with the institutional mission. Through surveying market needs, utilizing data, investing in retention efforts, addressing price, encouraging partnerships and creating proactive enrollment plans, institutions can transform their enrollment practices. At the end of the day, enrollment strategy is only as strong as its alignment with an institution's core competencies and values that drive academic and infrastructure planning.

Key Takeaways

By focusing on the strategy behind current and future enrollment practices, you can position your institution for success as the needs of current and emerging college-bound students evolve.

Think differently.

Expand your horizon for the types of students you can serve in alignment with your institution's mission and market needs. Understand your current environment to develop an enrollment strategy that guides the institutional efforts of recruiting, retaining and ensuring the success of your *entire* student body, and the students you wish to enroll.

Plan differently.

Develop a common campus-wide vision for what the enrollment strategy should ultimately achieve and encourage input, debate and alignment across the institution. A collaborative effort to develop a comprehensive enrollment plan can help proactively prepare for the future.

Act differently.

Take an integrated approach to develop the plan and establish strong working relationships and habits that formally continue during the implementation and monitoring phases.



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