

COVID-19 IMPACTS

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE GRAD ENROLLMENT MODEL

Following the Great Recession of 2008, graduate program enrollment across the country increased significantly given the dismal job market and growing unemployment. Many leaders in higher education consider graduate enrollment growth as a cyclical trend aligned to the downturns in the global markets, but as our world has been turned upside down by COVID-19 it is evident that past enrollment trends and behaviors are no longer applicable. Institutional leaders must proactively build a graduate enrollment management model that enables student success and financial sustainability.

In a [recent white paper](#), Huron outlined a three-phase framework for higher education's evolution through this pandemic and impending recession. In this framework, the sector enters first into a triage phase, then transitions to a period of stabilization while exploring opportunities for fundamental transformation. The following table outlines both near- and long-term methods for building a sustainable graduate enrollment management model aligned to the three phases of this crisis response.

TRIAGE	STABILIZE	TRANSFORM
<i>Rapid response to urgent pandemic-related needs</i>	<i>Shift resources to mid-term stabilization</i>	<i>Implement change to ensure long-term success</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide frequent and transparent communication with the campus community • Enhance graduate student engagement with the institution through proactive, personalized support • Offer extensions for funding / flexibility to account for increased time-to-degree 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance data-driven decision-making in alignment with student success and institutional strategy • Optimize graduate portfolio by identifying high priority programs • Deploy targeted approach to recruitment & enrollment by engaging active network • Develop partnerships with industries for grad internships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop understanding of long-term job and market needs • Provide flexible degree options • Assess the ability to provide innovative pathways for the “new” graduate student • Adapt graduate program portfolio offerings to future economic demands • Market institutional linkages with employers

Triage: Provide Proactive, Personalized Engagement

The “new normal” for institutions has reinforced the importance of frequent and transparent communication with the campus community. Institutions are currently grappling with an uncertain future for upcoming summer and fall terms. While institutional leadership may still be determining educational delivery modes and policies, one thing that is certain is the need to remain connected with current and incoming students. A proactive and targeted student communications plan includes empathetic conversations regarding health and safety concerns, crisis management response infrastructure, and the ongoing scenario planning to ensure institutional commitment to its students.

In addition to a campus-wide communications plan, there is a need to provide proactive, personalized support for graduate students. Consider the following scenarios when engaging graduate students:

- Coordinate communications across graduate programs to reduce duplicative messaging and allow programs to design customized engagement targeted at their respective populations to deliver detailed plans for course adjustments.
- Provide training and information on how the institution is working to enhance online services, including course delivery and virtual student support services. Ensure personalized engagement.
- Deliver proactive advising for continuing and incoming students to account for modified degree timelines, inability to travel for research or fieldwork, and contingency planning for courses with required in-person components (e.g. Lab

courses, etc.).

- Understand that not all students may feel comfortable returning to campus once it re-opens, so maintain flexible delivery options where possible.

Stabilize: Optimize Graduate Portfolio Offerings

Given the current economic climate and ongoing uncertainty of educational delivery, institutions need to build a stronger connection between institutional enrollment management strategy and resources. This includes deploying a data-driven approach towards optimizing an institution's graduate portfolio focused on assessing return on investment in terms of student success and net tuition revenue. By identifying graduate programs that align with an institution's mission and financial sustainability goals, universities can focus on stabilizing current enrollments and strengthening student outcomes.

In this phase of stabilization, an optimized graduate portfolio focuses on the identification of high priority programs aligned to an institution's mission (e.g. What are we good at?), market demand (e.g. What do students want and need?), and margin (e.g. How can we generate NTR for investment?). After identifying three to five high priority programs, institutions should deploy a targeted approach to recruitment and enrollment, considering the following strategies:

- Engage your network—current students, staff, alumni, and local community—to promote applied master's and certificate programs with career-ready experience and skills. Build partner relationship-building with local companies.
- Promote dual-degree programs (e.g. 3+1, 2+2) and offer incentives for current students to enroll in graduate programs, including small scholarships, highlighting that your institution wants to keep students within its community.
- Focus on local students from previous graduate program pipelines to capture graduate learners who may now want to stay closer to home.
- Enhance experiential learning opportunities for priority graduate programs, including virtual career opportunities and micro-internships.
- Assess the ability to offer alternative post-baccalaureate pathways for high demand programs, including applied master's certificates and accelerated degrees.
- Expand opportunities for undergraduate research to assist in retention and increase interest in post-graduate work.
- Extend central graduate and program-based advising services to current and prospective students to help establish structure around degree planning and course work and provide resources for personal situations, while maintaining a sense of community.

Through an optimized portfolio, focused engagement with its campus community and increased marketing of post-baccalaureate opportunities, universities have the ability to drive fall enrollments within their graduate portfolio.

Transform: Align Program Delivery with Market Needs

As institutions strengthen their graduate enrollment models it is critical to align program offerings, delivery modes, and co-curricular opportunities with market demands. Combined with the unpredictability of the external environment, the behavior of prospective graduate students is changing. Compared to the post-2008 boom of enrollments in graduate programs, young adults have become more anxious about taking on education-related debt. College grads from the last five to ten years have also come of age in the gig economy, expecting flexible degree options and quick payoffs. As institutions look to attract these audiences there is a need to evaluate flexible options for high demand programs including:

- Accelerated time to degree through shortened terms and/or year-round enrollment options
- Stackable credit/degree options and on-demand or non-linear learning opportunities
- Re-imagined modality considerations including blending remote and on-campus learning
- Flexible program requirements including work experience credit

Performing a predictive labor market demand assessment and considering new jobs/markets that will emerge from the current crisis can help adapt graduate program portfolio offerings to align with future economic demands. COVID-19 is already changing the trajectory of student career pathways including a surge in health-related fields and epidemiology. A labor market assessment will also allow for institutions to determine capacity constraints and investment required to support long-term strategy and transformation through a sustainable graduate enrollment model.

Authored by: Alex Fakis, Megan Ouimet and Steven Hahn

Access other educational resources on our [COVID-19 resource page](#). For more information, [contact us](#).