

HIGHER EDUCATION COVID-19 RESPONSE: ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT, RETENTION AND THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The student experience — from recruitment through program completion — is at the very core of an institution’s mission. Forward-looking enrollment management is key to ensuring a positive student experience that integrates high-quality academics, student services and information technology. From an institutional perspective, enrollment is also critical for securing financial stability. The current environment in higher education has created challenges in the management of recruitment, retention and student experience while also providing institutions with the opportunity to strengthen operations and analytics.

In a [recent whitepaper](#), 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 it begins to explore opportunities for fundamental transformation. The following are examples of enrollment management actions that leaders should consider as they navigate through each of these phases.

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">• Commit to frequent, transparent communication to faculty, staff and students• Pursue proactive, responsive customer service in financial aid	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use new retention and yield analytics• Engage in holistic enrollment management (including graduate students, noncredit students, and more)• Evaluate and document new policies and procedures for flexible, ready deployment in the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assess and invest in the new student experience paradigm• Realign institutional strategy around a student-centric and future-oriented perspective• Realign academic programs to new demands and modalities• Refocus the financial aid office on outreach and fundraising

Triage: Proactive, Responsive Financial Aid

As uncertain economic times put added pressure on students and their families, the opportunity exists for the financial aid office to reflect the best values of the institution and its commitment to access through a compassionate appeals process and proactive planning. As students’ financial situations change, aid offices will continue to see a dramatic increase in appeals for the current and future terms.

Financial aid officers should be equipped to have empathetic conversations with their students. Out of necessity, these conversations will be virtual in the short term, and aid officers need training in best practices for dealing with difficult conversations. [Financial aid](#) will likely be the first stop for students navigating their immediate futures, and aid officers should be prepared to listen to student concerns and to assist remotely.

In addition to being compassionate and responsive, the financial aid office must be proactive. Establishing pre-set guidelines around institutional and/or federal funds for appeals will help allay student concerns about the timeliness of new funding, especially as the end of the semester approaches. The financial aid office should also maintain (or create) a dynamic, interactive relationship with the governmental affairs unit to gain a better understanding of current and future federal funding options while also providing real-world student narratives that congressional liaisons may use to make the case for additional student aid.

Stabilize: Build New Retention and Yield Models

The primary questions asked of enrollment managers (around retention as well as the size, composition and preparedness of the incoming class) were already difficult to answer before the onset of COVID-19. A proliferation of educational options for students and new flexibilities in recruitment recently sanctioned by National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC) had already increased the unpredictability of these factors. However, the current pandemic has introduced a host of variables to the modeling of retention and new student yield.

For example, student visits (often a fairly good indicator of yield) were taken online this spring, if they occurred at all, removing one critical metric for assessing a student's intent to enroll. The current economic downturn has created financial uncertainty for American families, and barriers to travel have intensified concern about the recruitment of non-resident and international students.

This season may prove to be an anomaly, but it also presents an opportunity for schools to re-examine and innovate their yield and retention planning. Since assumptions based on student behaviors of the past will prove to be insufficient this year and likely less reliable going forward, this season should be viewed as a chance to expand institutions' predictive modeling capabilities. Multivariate regression studies on a wider variety of applicant/student data, conducted at various points in the student lifecycle and measured against results, will give enrollment managers and provosts a richer context for decision making. Some ideas for actions now and going forward can be explored in this [admissions piece](#).

Transform: Assess and Invest in the New Student Experience Paradigm

Practically overnight, most colleges and universities have adopted remote learning — a remarkable achievement. While mandated by the response to COVID-19, institutions should not lose sight of the fact that, for some, there will be no going back. That is not to say that the entire set of course offerings will remain online, but some will (and indeed some should) in order to meet new student expectations, overcome capacity limitations, diversify enrollment and achieve other strategic objectives.

To ensure this evolution is sustainable long term, institutions should journey-map their current online student experience and assess their technology infrastructures to identify gaps in the student digital ecosystem. Learning from emerging best practices and the most successful experiments from the recent shift to remote learning, schools may create a consistent experience that blends high-quality residential and online delivery.

Another student-centered transformation could occur in the financial aid office, where cloud-based tools can automate some back-office functions. Evaluating roles and responsibilities with new technology in mind, financial aid directors may be able to deploy more resources to areas of greater value such as student outreach, financial literacy and recruiting. For students and parents, the college search process often begins with the question of affordability. Getting financial information out as early as possible in the recruitment cycle is in the best interests of students and institutional yield.

Now is also an ideal time to conduct an organizational assessment and redesign the enrollment management and student support enterprise in more student-centric ways. Consider starting with transfer students who will increasingly need timely credit evaluation and recognition of credits from other universities. Going forward, a probable increase in distance learning options sector-wide will support this trend. The ability for all students to have their credits evaluated quickly and reflected on their student record, will result in more accurate advising, shorter runways to degrees and increased student satisfaction.

Authored by: Steve Hahn, Lauren Halloran, Alex Faklis and Kristine Dillon

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