EMERGING CHALLENGES IN THE ACADEMIC WORLD

Several months back, BASG engaged with a North Carolina community college to review their current data storage and data tracking systems and recommend improvements to their data reporting. Their need to prioritize a project of this type arose from concerns about emerging challenges facing higher education in today's world.

What keeps Deans and College Presidents awake nights is the shift in this nation's population and culture which has significantly reduced the number of incoming students arriving on college campuses each fall and brought student Recruitment and Retention to the forefront. A focus on these areas is certainly not something new in the college world; it has always been somewhere on the list of things talked about, addressed in yearly meetings, discussed at every regional gathering, written about by many.

But never has the concern been as elevated as it is today with a new generation of students fast-approaching decisions on what is next after their high school years.

This short article can by no means cover all that must be said or offer a magic bullet solution. What we do know is that the next few years are critical. How colleges and universities face this issue head on, determine a course of action, and what they learn from the past, will paint a truer picture of the future of higher education.

Largely, the major factors driving a significant drop in college participation—particularly in community colleges and smaller traditional brick and mortar colleges and universities—are beyond the control of any individual academic institution. This disturbing trend is primarily driven by a decline in population, a re-focus on college vs. immediate post-high school work, world conditions, and the advent of on-line college programs.

1. A DEFICIT OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

The single biggest reason behind the drop in college enrollment is the reduced pool of high school students. The number of children born in the US has been declining for the last decade and a half. The number of births in the country climbed to an all-time high in 2007, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The national birth rate fell by almost 23 percent between 2007 and 2022, dropping from 14.3 births per 1,000 people to 11.1, according to data from the CDC.

William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institute, added that the United States is also an aging nation. The percentage of women in their childbearing years compared to the overall population is getting smaller as older Americans outnumber younger ones.

2. FEWER INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ARE STUDYING IN THE U.S.

Contributing to the reduction in international students choosing to study in the US are changes to immigration policies, strained relations with countries such as China, the COVID years and the availability of more academic options elsewhere, perhaps closer to home. And students who began their studies at home during COVID are not all abandoning that path and flocking to US colleges and universities. It should be noted that there was an uptick in international students choosing the US last year which is a hopeful sign.

3. THERE ARE MORE OPTIONS OPEN TO A HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE

The rebounding economy, post-COVID, has been stronger than anticipated. While few would argue that this is a positive trend overall, it does mean there are more options available to a high school graduate. Employers scurried to replace the percentage of staff members who simply dropped out of the workforce during or after the pandemic by offering healthy sign-on bonuses and inflated salaries. This trend elevated previously unimpressive jobs to being worthy of a second look.

A percentage of students no longer view college as the “required” first step to a successful career. And they are unwilling to sit on the sidelines for four years to earn a degree that may or may not lead to a decent job but will likely lead to some level of student debt. Marginal students or students not 100% committed to a particular course of study are taking jobs and launching careers in a wide range of ventures.

Trade schools and corporate internship programs often fill in whatever knowledge/experience gap they might have and get them into a job where stability is at least somewhat ensured and there is a potential growth path into the future.

4. THE HIGH COST OF A HIGHER EDUCATION and THE BURDEN OF POST-COLLEGE DEBT

This is, again, not a new issue. But when you add this concern to the list above, it gives students who might do well and might succeed in college one more reason to make another decision. And indeed, the overall reduction in college students can lead to even higher costs absorbed by those who do choose college as their path.

5. THE ADVENT OF ONLINE COLLEGES

They have been around for a while, but their success spawned the creation of a growing list of new institutions that have a lot to offer:

- Schedule flexibility and customization to fit into any student’s lifestyle.
- Decreased pressure.
- Cost effective pricing.
- A wide range of study options.
- Reduced costs such as travel, housing and food plus total freedom to study from any location.

They are the new middle ground, the compromise between giving up on getting a degree and being able to work toward that goal while also holding down a job and beginning a family. They have adversely impacted traditional college enrollment in a significant way.

There is no single all-encompassing answer. There will always be students who will seek out a traditional college and who have the academic credentials and the financial support to make that dream a reality.

The question is how small colleges or community colleges set themselves apart, adapt to the times, and find ways to survive.

Likely they must consider the elements listed above as they consider both how they recruit and how they guide each student from day one to graduation. Suggestions might include:

- Find creative ways to offer flexible learning schedules and programs. Be mindful of work/life balance to allow students to juggle a job and student life successfully.
- Learn from and incorporate what is good about on-line learning.
- Offer compelling programs and courses which have both a practical and an intellectual return for the students, i.e., set them up for success after graduation. More students are looking for a course of study which can lead them into a practical career, rather than a course of study that simply broadens their knowledge.
- Offer more financial incentives or on-campus work programs that can help students offset the cost of education.
- Schedule frequent one-on-one or group sessions with students and really listen to what they like about the institution, and what could be better. Be inclusive, supportive, and available to all!
- Be there from day one to post-graduation – not just in words, but in actions. Have a specific plan for guiding students individually and collectively across the two-year or four-year finish line and beyond.
- Use the tools available today to recruit students; listen and learn where they are getting information and how they are making decisions and tailor recruitment to the world in which these potential students live.
- Take advantage of innovative technology to manage and monitor internal data to allow for good decision making and provide a clearer view of the future.

Like all organizations, Educational Institutions must have accurate, timely and measurable reporting. The more information that is available and the nimbler and more customizable the data is, the better the institution will be positioned to meet the changing demands of their potential and current students.

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