

Enrollment

Solutions

MULTIPLE STRATEGIES ARE CRITICAL TO SOLVING THE ENROLLMENT CRISIS.

By Kate O'Hara and Judith Witherspoon with Jim Anderson

We must now shift our focus back to the creation of new strategies to offset this enrollment cliff. However, this doesn't mean we should ignore the lessons we have learned throughout the pandemic.

New recruitment strategies are critical.

Prior to 2020, institutions were preparing for the impending enrollment cliff, based on the declining high school student population. Community college reliance on dual enrollment initially served to mitigate some enrollment loss, but the onset of the pandemic drastically changed the landscape. During that time and since, community colleges have faced multiple challenges to enrollment, including a move to online learning, safety concerns, and vaccine requirements. We must now shift our focus back to the creation of new strategies to offset this enrollment cliff. However, this doesn't mean we should ignore the lessons we have learned throughout the pandemic.

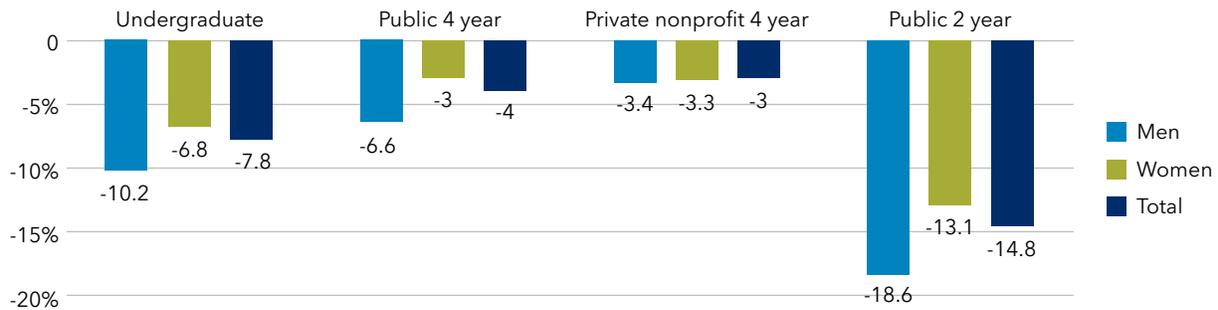
While improvements to college operations may have been inevitable, the pandemic forced institutions to adapt quickly to support students. For instance, technology has vastly changed the way staff and faculty interact with students across the institution. At Bristol Community College in Massachusetts, the implementation of Slate, a customer relationship management (CRM) program, significantly reduced the amount of time it takes for a student to be admitted.

Students can securely upload enrollment documents, eliminating the need to make the trip to campus. Virtual advising and financial aid appointments offer a convenient way for students to meet with staff based on their schedules. Online learning has also allowed enrollment managers to reach a new market of students who need flexible options to complete their programs of study.

Enrollment is a shared responsibility.

Every employee across the institution has a role to play in the recruitment and retention of students. While admissions and advising are central to enrollment efforts, the role of academic affairs leadership is a critical piece of a strong enrollment strategy. Academic deans have become fluent in labor market data and are using this information to revise curriculum and create programs of study that meet industry needs and help students find gainful employment after graduation. Certificate programs have become much more appealing to students who are looking for a quicker path to a credential. To meet this demand, academic affairs leaders are creating stackable credentials that allow students to easily continue on to a degree program after completing a certificate. In addition, faculty and deans are leveraging their partnerships with industry and workforce to create new recruitment channels that can then be shared with admissions teams for enrollment support and onboarding. Strong partnerships between admissions teams, faculty, and industry are needed to increase enrollment and degree completion for non-traditional students.

Percentage change from Fall 2019 to Fall 2021



Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

Stop-outs are a reality, and institutions must proactively engage with students to help them re-enroll.

Many students must balance work and family commitments with their academic careers. Others face housing, transportation, and food insecurity that can interfere with their ability to focus on classes. Given these multiple demands and barriers, it is inevitable that students may need to take time off from school. When students stop out, it may be difficult for them to return. Institutions should create multiple on-ramps and off-ramps for students to provide the flexibility and access needed to successfully complete their programs of study. Increasing completion rates also reduces the risk of student loan default for borrowers who stop out. On a national scale and based upon Edamerica’s research, approximately 70% of students who default did not complete their program of study.

While some community colleges and systems were conducting re-enrollment campaigns prior to the pandemic, many more are focused on this population now. The chart above, drawing from National Student Clearinghouse data, illustrates how many students stopped attending during the pandemic and the outsized impact the pandemic had on community college enrollment.

As noted in the recent report by the National Student Clearinghouse, approximately 39 million students nationally have some college but no credential. Investments in re-enrollment programs and outreach initiatives have proven to be very successful, as evidenced by the ReConnect program in Tennessee and the State University of New York (SUNY) Re-enroll to Complete project.

In August 2021, Bristol Community College launched its Student Success Center to help the nearly 3,000 students who left the college during the pandemic. The college hired six success coaches who have personally reached out to each student to provide support and encouragement and to let them know the coaches were here to help when they were ready to return. As a result of these efforts, close to 100 of these students enrolled in classes in spring 2022, with many more engaging to return in the summer or fall. While the impact on enrollment is evident, the most important lesson learned through this work was that students appreciated how much Bristol truly cared about them.

Institutions may opt to create and deploy re-enrollment programs with internal resources or choose a partner to provide that service. Edamerica has developed a college-branded solution which deploys

high-touch, results-driven outreach campaigns to stop-outs. This service allows institutions to gather active student responses, create a data-informed ecosystem, and streamline onboarding and readmission.

Partnerships between community colleges and universities maximize opportunities for students.

Cooperation between two-year community colleges and four-year institutions has become more critical over time, and the need has accelerated throughout the pandemic. In 2010, the National Center for Education Statistics surveyed 1,650 public and private Title IV eligible institutions and found that 83% reported courses within the program were taught at the college campus, 64% reported courses were taught at the high school campus, and 48% reported courses were taught through distance education.

In Southeastern Massachusetts, CONNECT is the consortium of six public colleges and universities in Southeastern Massachusetts: Bridgewater State University, Bristol Community College, Cape Cod Community College, Massachusetts Maritime Academy, Massasoit Community College, and the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. In this unique collaboration, the institutions work together on shared initiatives to advance student achievement and improve outcomes across the entire region. Most recently, the schools have embarked on a joint media campaign to promote transfer. They also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) honoring Massachusetts higher education institutions’ long-term commitment to sharing resources and collaborating on the development of a regional offshore wind energy sector.



Kate O'Hara is vice president of student services and enrollment management at Bristol Community College. Judith Witherspoon is senior vice president of Edamerica. Jim Anderson is vice chancellor of enrollment management at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.