

# ENROLLMENT MANAGER

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## WHY AFFORDABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY ARE THE CORNERSTONES OF A PROACTIVE ENROLLMENT STRATEGY

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With national college enrollment rates falling for five semesters in a row, two common terms heard in enrollment strategy discussions are affordability and accessibility. But for the learners we serve, these terms are much more than just buzzwords. They represent the difference between dreaming of a college degree and the reality of earning one.

Like many services, the cost of attending college in the U.S. has skyrocketed over the past 20 years. In 2003, the average in-state tuition was \$4,202, but today that number is nearly three times higher, at an average of \$11,541. The price of out-of-state and private college tuition has also more than doubled within that same 20-year timeframe.

Meanwhile, college graduates' earnings have not quite followed this same trajectory. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, in 2003 the national average starting salary for graduates with a bachelor's degree was \$39,296, and it

was \$55,260 by 2020. While that number has obviously improved over the past two decades, it also indicates that the price of the average college tuition is drastically outpacing the starting salaries that the average college education makes possible.

Making tuition more affordable is crucial for ensuring that potential students will see their education as a worthwhile investment. To achieve this, educational institutions must find ways to offset the rising costs of providing an education by finding new sources of funding that can reduce their reliance on tuition revenue. They must also strive to limit unnecessary expenses while still investing in the needed technological, environmental, and personnel improvements that will continue to enable the delivery of a first-class education.

Fortunately, there are a variety of ways for creative and resourceful institutions to meet these needs. This can include increasing the amount of revenue raised from donors and alumni, pursuing federal appropriations and grants, offering student work programs as a form of financial aid, expanding nontraditional programs to provide alternative educational options, and forging new partnerships with regional, national, or even international education partners to offer programs for learners from other schools or in other geographic areas.

Publicly communicating the institution's commitment to affordability is also crucial. One unmistakable way to do this is to freeze tuition costs for a

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**The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reports college enrollment decreased by more than 680,000 students between Spring 2021 and Spring 2022. This represents a drop of more than 4% in that period.**

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## AFFORDABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY ARE THE CORNERSTONES CONTINUED:

specified amount of time. This makes it clear to students, staff, and the regional community that the institution is taking its own financial responsibility very seriously.

While streamlining costs and increasing revenues will help keep college tuition affordable for more learners, even the most reasonably priced education can't help students if it isn't also accessible. To increase access, educational institutions must ask themselves critical questions about who needs to learn, where these learners are located, and how they can more easily access learning materials when they need them.

Often, this strategy requires thinking far outside the traditional enrollment box. For example, schools can partner with employers, nonprofits, governmental agencies, small business associations, and other community groups to develop and offer customized programming that meets the nontraditional learning needs of their members. Partnerships can also be forged with educational institutions in local or distant geographic areas whose offerings are complementary, such as trade schools, community colleges, ESL centers, MBA programs, and more.

Digital solutions will continue to be a key component of higher education going forward, long after the COVID-19 pandemic has ended. Although many institutions scrambled to adapt their traditional classes to online versions out of sheer necessity during the pandemic, the lessons learned from this unplanned detour into digital teaching will help educators create even better and more intentional online and blended offerings in the future. This is incredibly important for serving the needs of non-traditional learners whose careers, mobility, health, or childcare challenges make it impossible to attend in-person classes on a consistent schedule.

Accessibility also means having access to crucial support, especially when it comes to students' mental and emotional health. A recent Boston University study of 350,000 students at more than 300 campuses finds that the mental health of college students across the U.S. has

consistently gotten worse over the past decade, with students reporting a 110 percent increase in anxiety and a 135 percent increase in depression between 2013 to 2021. Because of this, learning institutions must prioritize expanding their mental and emotional support services to better serve the health needs of their students. This will help reduce attrition and ensure that more students are able to finish their studies and complete their degrees.

By dedicating themselves to making education more affordable and accessible, colleges and universities will do more than just create new solutions to stop the current enrollment crisis. They will also create new opportunities for students to obtain an education that could change their lives — an education they might not otherwise be able to afford, access or achieve.

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## IT'S TIME TO REVIEW YOUR FINANCIAL AID AWARD POLICY

**John W. Dysart**  
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The Dysart Group

Financial aid packaging has begun for the Fall 2023 cycle, and it is a good time to review your packaging strategy if you have not already done so. The following are some questions to consider as you begin awarding new and returning students for the coming year.

**What have been your new student recruitment trends over the last three years?**

## IT'S TIME TO REVIEW YOUR FINANCIAL AID AWARD POLICY CONTINUED:

- If your new student enrollments have increased, you may have a packaging strategy that is effectively supporting your admission plan.
- If the number of new students has declined, you may need to consider changes. Enrollment drops associated with corresponding declines in the number of applications for admission and acceptances are indications of bigger recruitment plan issues. Enrollment declines in situations where the number of admission applications and acceptances have remained steady, or increased, is likely an indication of a financial aid strategy that is not supporting your recruitment efforts.
- Declines in applications for admission could be an indication that your merit scholarships and grants are not sufficiently attractive for prospective students and their families.

### What have been your retention trends over the last three cycles?

- Retention is critical for colleges and universities and financial aid may play a role in your ability to retain students.
- Downward retention trends may be an indication that your award policy is not providing appropriate access, especially for students with high financial aid.

### Review the trends in accounts receivable.

- Approximately 6.6 million students left college with outstanding balances.
- It is not unusual for colleges and universities to end cycles with 1-2% of annual charges still outstanding at the end of the year. If your institution is dealing with higher percentage rates, it may be an indication that your financial aid packages are insufficient.

- Outstanding balances, even modest ones, contribute to attrition.

### Evaluate your trends with financial aid appeals.

- If you are not already doing so, make sure you count the number of new and returning students who file appeals of their financial aid packages each cycle.
- Be sure to perform separate counts for new and returning students.
- An appeal rate for either population greater than 2% might be a sign that your packaging approach is too conservative for the market you serve.

### How is your Financial Aid Office incorporating recent increases in the Federal Pell Grant and increases in state grants into your packaging strategy?

- We have realized increases in the Federal Pell Grant and some states are increasing the state grants for college students.
- Are you using these increases to increase institutional net revenue?
- Are you using the increases to provide for more generous financial aid packages?



It is important to review your financial aid packaging policies every year to take into consideration your enrollment and retention trends and constantly evaluate the impact of your award policies on retention and net revenue. As financial aid packaging starts for the new cycle, ensure you have evaluated your current approach.

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**THE DYSART GROUP** is a higher education consulting firm specializing in enrollment management. We have provided consultation services to nearly 200 colleges and universities throughout the United States with extraordinary results.

We have worked collaboratively with colleges and universities to significantly grow enrollment. Our institution-specific recommendations have helped increase the number of admission applications as much as three-fold. Improved communication strategies and new tracking metrics have resulted in higher folder completion rates and increased the number of students accepted for admission. New student enrollments have grown by as much as 70% in a single cycle while discount rates have been controlled. Proven strategies have increased retention rates by as much as 7% in one year.

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