

ENROLLMENT MANAGER

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COMMENCEMENT IS ONLY THE BEGINNING OF TRACKING AND MEASURING OUR STUDENT IMPACT

Dr. Katelyn Sanders
Director of Admission
& Alumni Affairs
Bernard J Dunn School of Pharmacy
Shenandoah University

Dr. Scott D. Miller
President
Virginia Wesleyan University

As we end the 2022-2023 academic year, it's worth noting that we are saying goodbye to not just a special class of students, but also to a way of thinking about college itself.

The students who are graduating with four-year degrees this year originally began their college experience in 2019-2020. This means they are the last class of students who chose their school and their major before the COVID-19 pandemic changed the world. Whatever future they thought they were preparing themselves for was drastically disrupted along the way, and as a result they have had to adapt and pivot at every turn.

On the other hand, the incoming class of 2023-2024 is also a special class. They were high school freshmen in 2020-2021, which means they've never had what we would think of as a "typical" secondary education experience. It also means that from this class onward, our colleges and universities will be serving students whose expectations of the future have been irrevocably shaped by their pandemic years.

What does this mean for the enrollment process? We believe there are three key takeaways.

College Is No Longer the Default Choice for High School Graduates

For decades now, the general expectation of many high school students has been that college naturally follows high school, making the process of choosing which college to attend a matter of selecting one from a group of similar possibilities. To stand out from the pack, colleges needed to offer a unique experience, a high-quality education, ample academic and career development support, and other tangible benefits that help differentiate them from all the other schools that a potential enrollee might be considering.

But with college enrollment having dropped significantly during the pandemic, the truth is that high school graduates no longer see attending a four-year college as the automatic next step in their lives, or even on their career paths. Instead, many young people are either enrolling in community college to reduce their student loan debts or they are entering the workforce directly. This means colleges must not only find ways to differentiate themselves from their fellow institutions, but they must also make a compelling case as to why attending a four-year institution is the best option for that student compared to all the other reasonable alternatives.

One way to do this is by making sure the school's offerings are aligned with

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Reversing Negative Enrollment Trends at Small, Private Colleges and Universities

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center Reports that Transfer Students from Community Colleges Dropped 7.5% Compared to Last Year.

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COMMENCEMENT IS ONLY THE BEGINNING OF TRACKING AND MEASURING OUR STUDENT IMPACT CONTINUED:

the students' big picture goals. However, those goals are also currently shifting.

What Students Want to Pursue Is Changing

According to data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, many of the most popular college majors are seeing steep declines in enrollment as students rethink how they want to spend their lives, and their careers.

While enrollment in business programs at four-year institutions has grown slightly from 2021 levels, the other top five majors — biological sciences, engineering, liberal arts, and health professions — all experienced a drop-off.

What's on the rise? Computer and information sciences, which gained 54,000 students, an increase of more than 10% above 2021 numbers. Given the rapid growth in fields like AI and machine learning, and the likelihood that these tools will lead to vast innovations and disruptions across nearly every aspect of work and life, it's no surprise that forward-thinking students are seeking to prepare themselves for success in a technologically transformed world.

Meanwhile, reduced interest in health, science, and engineering could be very challenging, as these sectors are vital to a functional society. Finding ways to attract more students into these fields will be critical to ensure that our existing systems and infrastructures will not just be maintained but also continue to evolve as they integrate new technologies and perspectives.

That said, another reason that some students may be more drawn to business and tech careers in the aftermath of the pandemic is less about what they do want and more about what they don't. After witnessing their high schools pivot to remote and hybrid learning models during the pandemic, and seeing their parents adapt to work-from-home roles, when possible, these students may have little interest in jobs that would require long

commutes to work in a fixed location. In fact, they may be looking for a different way of life altogether.

Employment Data Is Just One Way to Measure the Success of Our Graduates

Tomorrow's potential college enrollees are likely to be focused on very different long-term goals than earlier generations were, and they will also be open to exploring different pathways to reach these goals. Because of this, traditionally touted collegiate metrics like post-graduation job placement rates are just one aspect of a school's impact on its students, and of its' graduates' impact on the world — and finding new ways to tell that story will be crucial for connecting with new students.

Likewise, sharing alumni success stories will continue to be a powerful way to demonstrate how a school's educational experience affects their graduates for life, as well as what that education enables their graduates to achieve. But again, it will be important to find new alumni stories to share which reflect the shifting priorities of incoming students. For example, stories about alumni who have attained a healthy work-life balance, who have achieved debt-free financial independence, or who have contributed meaningfully to their communities, or the environment, may resonate more deeply with today's students than stories focused on climbing the corporate ladder or achieving individual success.

Future students may also be keenly interested in educational benefits like diverse and thought-provoking social opportunities on campus, robust mental health supports, internships at a variety of organizations including nonprofits and governmental agencies, and other enrichments that extend beyond the classroom. By highlighting the full scope of the four-year college experience, we can paint a more versatile and dynamic picture of its long-term impact on graduates. We can also ensure that the changing future they see for themselves is one that we are actively focused on preparing them for, one highly adaptive step at a time.

Dr. Scott D. Miller is President of Virginia Wesleyan University in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

Dr. Katelyn "Katie" Sanders is Director of Admissions and Alumni Affairs at the Bernard J. Dunn School of Pharmacy at Shenandoah University in Winchester, Virginia.

REVERSING NEGATIVE ENROLLMENT TRENDS AT SMALL, PRIVATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

John W. Dysart
President
The Dysart Group

As we approach the end of another recruitment cycle, most small, private colleges and universities are continuing to struggle with enrollments.

- The demographic cliff is real and a reduction in the size of the customer base is having serious implications for higher education.
- On top of demographic challenges, more high school students are electing not to pursue college degrees. In particular, the number of minority students and males opting out of the college selection process is alarming.
- Inflation and economic downturns make access to college a real problem for middle class families and for students with high financial need.
- More colleges are closing. More institutions are discussing mergers and acquisitions although successful couplings are rare and extremely difficult to accomplish.

None of this is new and none of this is surprising. What is surprising is the number of institutions unwilling to make the appropriate changes to their admission and financial aid operations to address the new market.

Believing that utilization of the same old strategies and tactics is somehow going to work after years and sometimes decades of enrollment decline is delusional.

Update your search plan.

Recent changes with testing agency policies and fewer students taking the standardized tests as more schools implement test optional requirements means that fewer names are going to be available for colleges and universities to search.

These changes will require identifying new sources for prospective student names and likely mean adjustments to search mechanisms and messages.

Update your communication plan.

Student interests and priorities are evolving. Make sure that you take a hard look at your current communication plan to alter messaging. You also need a robust plan for communication across all formats including social media, text messages, email messages, telephone outreach and direct mail.

Review your website.

Updates and enhancements to your website are critical and must occur systematically. Ensure that you include storytelling for success using text and video messages from students, parents, faculty and employers.

Include a detailed focus on outcomes.

Little is more important to students and families than career outcomes. Make sure that your website and communication package emphasizes career outcomes and includes specific examples of success.

Schedule an external audit.

Now is a great time to engage outside professionals to review your current strategies and tactics. Take advantage of an experienced consulting firm to provide state-of-the-art analysis. This can be a beneficial step and can allow for data-driven recommendations when you may not have the time to conduct the review on your own.

If you want improved outcomes, you must make changes to your approach.

**Federal student
loan payments
are scheduled
to restart in
October.**

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Dwyer Education Strategies

195 North Harbor Dr. #4701

Chicago, IL 60601



THE DYSART GROUP is a higher education consulting firm specializing in enrollment management. We have provided consultation services to more than 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.

thedysartgroup.com
(312) 888-3199
thedysartgroup@gmail.com