# Double Disruption

For the past few years, we've been focused on the late 2020s—when the bottom would fall out on enrollment, our standard tactics and strategies would falter, and a battle for sheer survival would ensue. Then COVID-19 hit.

By Janelle Holmboe

We knew disruption was coming. Higher education enrollment managers have been talking about it for nearly a decade. The looming demographic crisis was pushing us to strategically think ahead and urge our presidents, and our boards and our faculty, that the model must change, that we must adapt, and that not all colleges and universities could be winners in the hyper-competitive environment we were about to enter.

And that was all *before* we were hit with a global pandemic.

COVID-19 has, in many ways, accelerated the reckoning so many enrollment leaders were preparing for, causing us to rethink strategies, implement quick tactical changes, and ultimately make our best guess at student and family behavior. On the best days, this has challenged admission professionals to be nimble and creative, pushing many out of their comfort zones and into a new (virtual) world. On the worst days, this has caused efforts to increase access to falter, further threaten higher education, and introduced even more uncertainty into an already uncertain endeavor.

The scale and impact of this uncertainty is almost impossible to comprehend. Over the course of three months, all the predictive and analytic tools relied on by enrollment managers stopped providing valuable insight. The already shaky calculation of student behavior became even more precarious. Budgets demanded projections but all the information being received by enrollment managers made accurate projections impossible.

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Ian Parent, associate director of admissions at Southern Oregon University, highlighted the impact the uncertainty has had on influencing student and family choice. From his vantage point, he said, "The biggest challenge right now is the uncertainty surrounding how COVID will be impacting society this fall. We cannot definitively inform new and returning students what life will look like on campus when classes begin."

That same uncertainty is felt by Mosadi Porter, associate dean, admissions and outreach at Lone Star College–University Park (TX). "The most challenging thing is the uncertainty of it all. We can come up with the ideas but can't really make progress until we get the next bit of information," she said.

Embedded within the uncertainty felt by enrollment leaders is the economic and personal upheaval many of our recruited students were and are experiencing. In the midst of losing their senior year traditions this past spring, graduating students were also grappling with economic uncertainty impacting their families, fears about cross-county travel, and dissatisfaction with a senior year that had suddenly gone remote. And as we came to find out over the spring semester, research confirmed what admission officers across the country were feeling—this uncertainty was causing students and families to change their college plans.

According to a survey conducted in May 2020 by Junior Achievement (JA) and the PMI Educational Foundation (PMIEF), roughly half (49 percent) of class of 2020 graduating seniors said their plans for after high school had changed as a result of the pandemic. Forty percent of the graduating seniors surveyed indicated that they work and of those, nearly half (49 percent) said they or their families depend on their income for living expenses.

And surveys weren't able to capture what so many admission professionals were feeling anecdotally: A longing for a college start that was "normal" and that met the expectations these talented young people had been working so hard to achieve.

At first, one of the reassurances for enrollment offices was that all of us were in the same position. We were all equals on this terrible playing field, where no college or university had a competitive advantage over another. When people were asked to shelter at home and admitted student events were canceled, the impact on the campus visit and recruitment experience was unilateral.

Now that we've shifted tactics, we find standing out in a sea of virtual programming is challenging, and the loss of in-person and high-impact events doesn't affect all institutions equitably. Small, residential colleges in particular rely on face-to-face recruitment to introduce students to the campus culture and its distinctive benefits.

Lisa M. Hill, senior associate director of admissions at Goucher College (MD), said it's tough to fully convey a college's culture solely online. "Colleges like Goucher rely on in-person on and off-campus recruitment events to establish relationships and connections with students. Now that recruitment travel and in-person visits have either been suspended for the immediate future or limited in focus, we must reimagine our traditional events within the virtual world…. How does one convey community when the majority of traditional events are now being offered online?" she queried.

Hill also noted another difficulty—Goucher can't tell potential admits what to expect in the coming year as the school weighs what's best for student safety. "How do we strike the appropriate balance of doing the right thing, in regard to health and safety measures during a global health crisis, while not over promising what the campus will look and be like once the crisis has passed?" she said.

Porter is in a similar dilemma. Her institution, Lone Star College-University Park, is the sixth of the seven colleges in the Lone Star College System, a system which has the largest Hispanic student population in the nation. Many of the students are first-generation and benefit from in-person touchpoints. "One of our strengths is the face-to-face component of recruiting in the high schools and the community," said Porter. "The students and families cannot get the same level of energy and personalization that they get in person." This is also concerning when working with students who lack sufficient college planning support in their high school.

The suspension of in-person meetings is certainly a loss, but colleges and universities are making it work in the virtual environment by shaping their approaches to their school's needs. Parent said that Southern Oregon

University is finding ways to meet and guide students in a virtual space. "We replaced our office phone numbers with Zoom phone numbers so we can be reached easily while working from home. We have added a link so people can easily schedule a virtual visit with an admission counselor," he said.

Parent said he and his team have tactics for reaching out to larger student groups. "Each Friday, we host a virtual information session, which is led by an admission counselor and two student ambassadors. On Fridays we do an Instagram 'Ask Me Anything' led by an admission counselor. We also have Instagram 'Ask Me Anything' events led by student ambassadors. We created an online Raider Reception event for admitted students. Raider Reception events were previously held in person in key recruitment areas for us. Viewing of the program is up over 290 percent, as compared to the seven events we held last year," he said.

At University of New England (ME), vice-president of university admission Scott Steinberg has also found success with virtual events—ones his team develops pay special attention to showcasing staff and faculty outside the admission office. "[Our team] has moved much of our prospective student engagements to virtual environments, with an ongoing series of events incorporating admission staff, but also colleagues from student affairs, academic affairs, financial aid, the deans, and our president—as well as current students."

Steinberg said he believes in the importance of going outside the admission office for successful recruitment. "The most important factors in successful recruiting and connecting with students in this new environment include: providing multiple channels, platforms, and times to engage; connecting students with other areas of the university beyond admission; and including current students," he said.

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The National College Attainment Network's (NCAN) analysis of Federal Student Aid (FSA) data reflects the troubling impact on the nation's neediest students, finding the steepest decrease in FAFSA renewals is from returning students from low-income backgrounds. NCAN notes that through April 15, the total number of completions from returning applicants or families earning less than $25,000 was down more than 8 percent. Returning applicants with incomes between $25,000 and $50,000 have seen a 4 percent decrease, while those with incomes greater than $50,000 have declined only 1 percent this cycle. We are seeing in real-time how precarious college achievement truly is for our most at-risk students and families.

For students who don't have computers or internet access or share one device with the rest of the family, enrollment leaders are finding personal outreach to be an important supplement to virtual activities. For many, this is a throwback to the early days of admission, before predictive models and demonstrated interest, when phone calls and personal relationships were the recruiter's greatest tools.

Porter said it's essential to reach out to this student group. "Try to maintain contact as much as possible. This is not the time for us to wait for the students to come to us," she advised. "With everything going on, reaching out to us for certain things may not be at the forefront of their minds. By us reaching out to them, we show them that we care about them and their future." This may be a tall order for resource-strapped admission offices, but the colleges and universities that do this best will be the ones well-positioned for the next disruption.

The challenges our industry faced prior to COVID-19 are still out there waiting for us. We still face demographic headwinds that will make the recruitment landscape more competitive over the next decade. We still face a business model that looks increasingly unsustainable. We are still seeking ways to make education more efficient. And though it remains to be seen if COVID-19 will accelerate the closing of small, tuition-dependent institutions, Steinberg said its impact will echo across the recruitment landscape in the years to come. "COVID-19 will have a lasting impact on prospective student recruitment. It is causing colleges and universities to reflect on what we are doing and why. Some of the changes we are making to recruitment—for example, increased virtual engagement with prospective students and families and changes to standardized testing policies—will likely carry on once the worst of COVID-19 has passed," he said.

This perhaps is the most sustaining lesson enrollment leaders can take from this strange, uncertain season. That we must learn from this experience and emerge from this crisis better—with a skill set that is sharper, more adaptable, and more impactful. Only in doing so will be ready to navigate our institutions through the coming storms.

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