

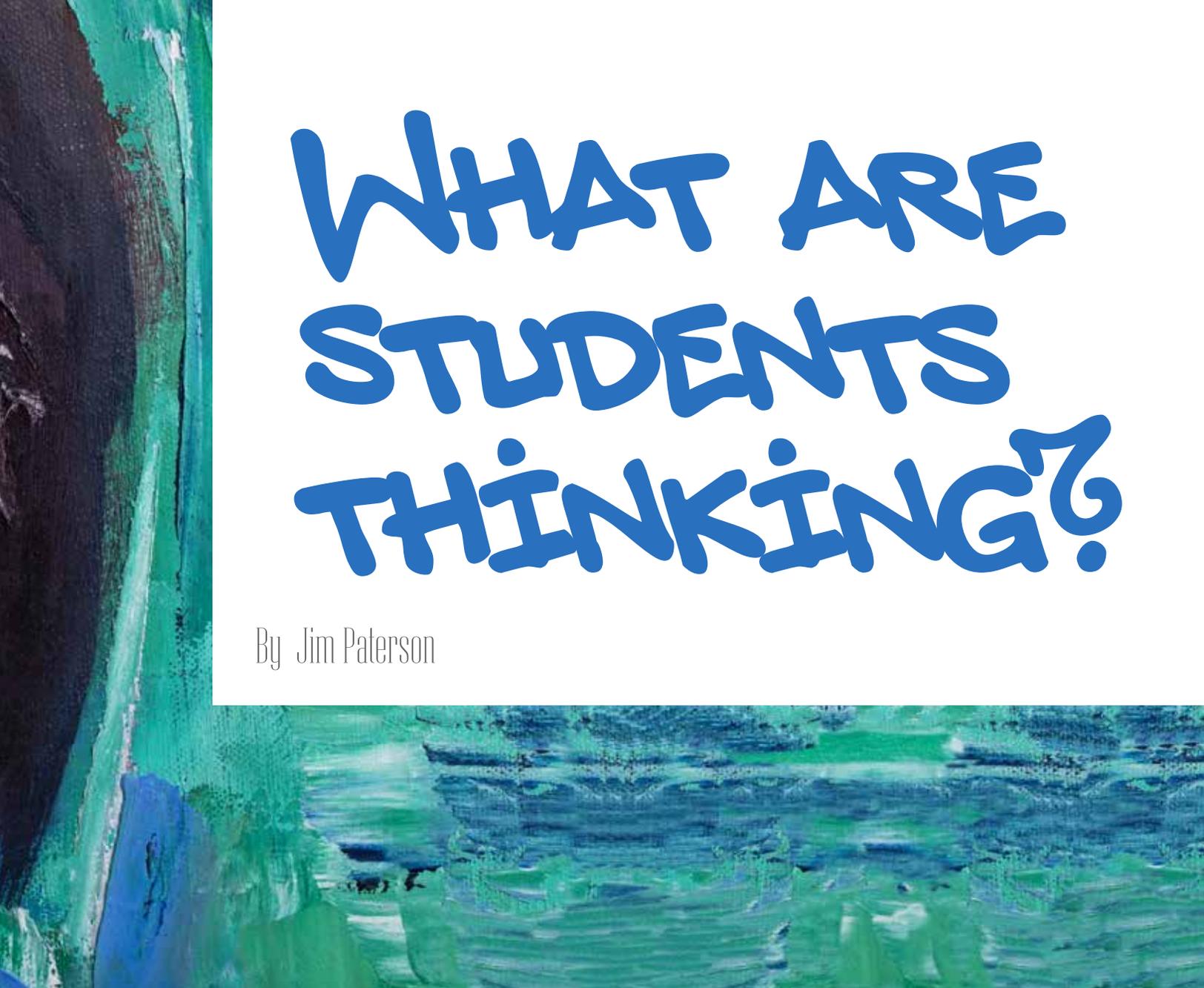


COVID-19 has changed the college search and selection process. Transforming our focus according to student need will continue to be important as we work to support and recruit the next class.

Ella Fountain and Dakota Brown have a lot in common, but their last few years have spun out in quite different ways.

They both grew up in small cities along the western border of rural Idaho—Fountain in Moscow and Brown in Lewistown, about a half hour to the south. They both are excellent students with an interest in English, writing, and perhaps teaching. And they are nearly the same age.

But for Brown, who had settled into her freshman year at the University of Idaho when COVID-19 swept through the nation and then spiked in Idaho, the pandemic brought with it a tiresome stretch of days in front of the computer taking classes when her campus closed. This year, although she has options for face-to-face instruction, she primarily chose to take online classes to avoid getting the virus.



WHAT ARE STUDENTS THINKING?

By Jim Paterson

“I really dislike studying virtually and meeting over Zoom. I feel like it shortens my attention span and lowers my motivation to learn,” Brown said. “I’m still doing well, but I feel drained a lot working behind a computer all day.”

For Fountain, a senior at Moscow High School, the last year instead has been packed with uncertainty. Simply taking standardized tests was impossible when she and her family got the virus and needed to quarantine. Tests were repeatedly canceled or postponed. She couldn’t visit her dream schools, California’s Claremont Colleges, and began looking at state schools nearby. The entire process of exploration and application was frantic at times and consuming, but like so many exciting and highly anticipated high school senior traditions and routines, it seemed empty and unsettling too.

“I was always planning to go to college and looking forward to the whole process, but so much has been up in the air in so many ways,” she said. “It’s been very frustrating.”

While Brown and Fountain experienced the pandemic in different ways, both experiences are familiar to professionals working with students headed to postsecondary education. There is some mix of a dreary dullness to the studies and social life for those attending college, and confusion and frustration for high schoolers.

Some experts say the pandemic will forever change higher education and young people’s attitudes about it, but others believe the crisis has shown most colleges can adapt and thrive, as long as they are aware of the various student mindsets.

“They are just worn out by it all,” said Cheri Barad, an educational consultant in Overland Park, Kansas, and board member of the Higher Education Consultants Association. “There has been a lot of disappointment and serious issues with testing and

college visits—and even being able to meet with their high school counselors or teachers who are valuable resources. We all have a lot of work to do.”

“My general impression is that there is a lot of unstated, perhaps unformed, dread out there,” said



and maintain their interest in higher education,” he said.

Other professionals agree that students have developed ways to move ahead, but researchers have seen potential shifts in attitudes about higher

education’s value, frustration with the exploration and application process, and concern about college costs.

A spring [survey](#) of nearly 81,000 high school and college students conducted by Niche, a college search platform that does research on higher education, shows that 57 percent of seniors were reconsidering schools on their list, around 40 percent planned to choose a college closer to home, and 9 percent who had been planning to attend were instead taking time off. Nearly 90 percent of seniors reported being more concerned about paying for college.

In another [survey](#) in October, Niche found that 92 percent of students were fearful or anxious about college attendance. The most frequently cited fear? Not being able to afford the college they hoped to attend.

Niche also found that 70 percent of current college students reported that how their school handled the pandemic would determine if they returned next year, and 20 percent said they might take time off or transfer. Meanwhile, 93 percent of respondents were concerned about how to pay for their education.

But despite their experiences navigating one of the most unsettling and challenging years ever for higher education, Fountain, Brown, and scores of other students have been resourceful and persistent—and generally still have a good feeling about higher education.

“I WAS MOST SURPRISED BY THEIR LEVEL OF RESILIENCY. THEY HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO FINISH OUT A PIVOTAL YEAR IN THE WAY THEY WOULD LIKE, WHICH IS VERY TOUGH. BUT THEY SEEMED TO REMAIN OPTIMISTIC AND THEY MAINTAIN THEIR INTEREST IN HIGHER EDUCATION.”

Margaret Jenkins, founder and director of Palouse Pathways, a community-based organization helping students from Idaho’s rural areas and small towns with college access. “There is a lot of lost momentum and lack of engagement.”

Experts say students have been frustrated by those problems and a variety of others—even just the safety of being on campus or the stability of the college they’ve chosen and the availability of financial aid.

DATA ON ATTITUDES

Warren Quirett, associate director of college counseling at Episcopal High School in Alexandria, Virginia, said his students have struggled and considered gap years or attendance at a closer or cheaper college. But he believes they have remained positive.

“I was most surprised by their level of resiliency. They haven’t been able to finish out a pivotal year in the way they would like, which is very tough. But they seemed to remain optimistic

WHAT YOU CAN DO

To help students facing college exploration or a return to college during the pandemic, recognize that each situation is different and understand their very unique concerns—reinforcing with them that things will at some point return to normal.

“Counselors will need to work with students to understand their timeframe and how they can help them feel prepared to make decisions because they may just be paralyzed with anxiety right now and need small steps that they can accomplish,” said Will Patch, an enrollment marketing specialist at the education research firm NICHE, which conducted a wide-ranging study of student attitudes amid the pandemic.

Patch said there are several considerations for professionals working with high school students and those enrolled in college, and they often revolve around empathy and attention to the specific individual needs of a student.

Bill Hancock, senior associate dean of college counseling at the Cranbrook Schools in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, agrees, noting that each student’s concerns and needs are very different.

“Context is so important. I’m working

A separate [survey](#) of seniors and college students for New America and Third Way, two think tanks that study education, showed that about a third of high school students were less likely to attend college because of the pandemic and nearly 70 percent said they did not feel college was worth the cost. Among those not planning to enroll, 40 percent of respondents said their decision was related to the pandemic.

New America also reported that enrollment would decline, but probably not as significantly as institutions believed at the beginning of summer, at least for currently enrolled students.

Its report also showed that 41 percent of the students were applying to schools closer to home due to the pandemic, while over one-fifth were prioritizing applications to schools offering online classes or lower tuition rates.

Will Patch, an enrollment marketing specialist at NICHE and the author of the survey report on student attitudes, said there are a number of ways that the pandemic is not only affecting current and prospective college students, but will continue to affect young people for some time to come.

“Lower retention and more transfer activity are coming,” Patch said, noting that there are also “more students reporting they plan to take loans while feeling less confident that they can afford the college they enrolled at.”

Rachel Fishman, deputy director for higher education research at New America and one of the authors of its report, notes that the data from any particular time may be skewed because the environment changed quickly. For instance, high school students who were surveyed last spring and over the summer were in the middle of

a particularly disappointing and confusing period.

“The shift to online education was much more dramatic for high school students, and it probably soured them somewhat on higher education, especially if it’s online. They have (a) certain vision of what college is and what they want it to be...When they can’t have that dorm and college green experience they may ask ‘do I want to sign up for that?’” said Fishman.

A STUMBLING START

Those who work with high school students say they were initially frustrated by the process of investigating their college options, a problem likely to continue this year.

The Niche research showed that about 70 percent relied entirely on search sites to investigate colleges and a similar number used virtual tours without much firsthand experience on campuses. Use of college rankings also increased.

Bill Hancock, senior associate dean of college counseling at the Cranbrook Schools in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, said his students utilized online resources reluctantly at times, but effectively.

“It would be nice if they could have a more firsthand experience, but I think the kids understand we are in an unprecedented time right now. They know this is not normal and they are going to take advantage of whatever is available,” he said. “They have visited schools virtually, met coaches and professors on Zoom, and made other connections online. Colleges have done a great job of providing them with those experiences, and I think that colleges may continue to make use of these approaches.”

Barad, however, believes that students are dramatically affected by the inability to visit a campus,



with kids who may be very different than those at other schools, yet each family has their own needs and other personal circumstances in the midst of this pandemic. These matter; they have an impact.”

“Just coping with the stress of the times is the main issue right now,” said Jennifer Reeves-Eisbach, a school counselor at Roosevelt High School in Portland, Oregon, a school with a majority of students from minority families and a large number of students who hope to continue their education but are stressed financially.

Here are some other suggestions for working with young people bound for college.

Cooperate. “Students need all the support and counseling they can get now,” Patch said, recommending that college counselors support high school staffs and that counselors at different schools support each other. Connect students with people in academic departments or other services on campus and follow up to be sure that they made the connection. Students will appreciate it if their path is made easier by adults working together for them—and they need it now.

Do virtual carefully. Students may be suffering from online overload so make sure you direct

meet with college representatives face-to-face, use resources at their school, or get other supports at their high schools.

“Also, when people ask me about how to just get a student interested in college, I tell them to take them there. Just the excitement of being on a campus does it. But that is gone—at least for now,” she said, noting that she even knows high school freshmen who are already thinking about how the pandemic might affect the process for them.

Joan Koven, an independent educational consultant in Havertown, Pennsylvania, said students are missing that “time in the car” on the way to a college visit and other opportunities for excited discussions about selecting a college.

“You spend a year and a half getting off the runway and looking for the way that you can spend what you’re told will be the best four years of your life, and then the pandemic hits,” Koven said. “So, I think students struggled. They wanted to be cautious but move ahead. There was a lot of conflict. It became a matter of calculated risk rather than an exciting process.”

Some professionals believe students will continue to take such risks, but Hancock said students will be more deliberative about their choices. “I have noticed that kids are being more thoughtful in balancing their lists. Yes, they are going aggressively for dream schools, but when I suggest that they have a safer school or one nearby on their list, they quickly

“THE TRADITIONAL STUDENT WANTS THAT TRADITIONAL EXPERIENCE, BUT OTHERS MAY ALSO BE SEEKING HELP WITH FINANCIAL AID, ADVISING, OR MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT THAT MAY BE HARDER TO ACQUIRE.”

“It’s just not the same, although colleges have done a very good job of getting resources on their site. The students and parents want to get on campus and walk around and get a sense of whether they fit in,” she said.

Koven also said students are concerned about how colleges are handling student safety, noting that Colgate University (NY) got additional attention because of thorough safety measures.

OTHER PATTERNS

For the students who navigated the search process last year and enrolled, things suddenly changed.

agree—or they have already done it,” he said.

Jennifer Reeves-Eisbach, a counselor at Roosevelt High School in Portland, Oregon, believes that students are being practical about their education now, and also believes they are more often considering safer options.

“My seniors are mostly concerned with trying to make it through online learning right now,” she said. “In relation to their college choices, I have seen many of them looking at staying closer to home and applying to state colleges and local community colleges.”



Hancock noted that parents are also driving changes because they “want to be able to reach their kid. Some of the colleges closed down last spring with just one- or two-days’ notice and the students had to be out of the dorms for the rest of the year. Being closer makes an emergency evacuation like that easier to pull off.”

Fishman noted that research hasn’t shown a dramatic increase in students choosing alternatives. Community college enrollment, for instance, actually is down about 11 percent, she said.

“Enrollment patterns do not appear to have shifted dramatically at this point,” she writes in the report. “But there are signs that college students are questioning the value of a degree....”

She believes that while students generally are considering the importance of academics, current dissatisfaction is driven by their

feeling that they aren’t experiencing college fully, and they don’t have other support services available.

“The traditional student wants that traditional experience, but others may also be seeking help with financial aid, advising, or mental health support that may be harder to acquire,” Fishman said.

According to Patch, students also are “more focused on institutional safety and response now, and that will be the case going forward as well.” They want to know how an institution handles the student safety amid a pandemic, as well as its future plans under such circumstances.

TESTING AND MONEY

Two familiar topics in the college search process have new significance: testing and college costs.

Professionals and students have reported that one of the biggest

problems students last year dealt with was testing. Both Fountain and Brown faced canceled or postponed test dates several times, and Hancock said that was common with his students.

He also believes the move by many schools to become test-optional didn’t help because students were suspicious about whether their chances would be diminished if they didn’t present test scores—even though in some cases it simply was impossible to take admission exams.

(In his most recent research for Niche, Patch reported as of mid-October, 42 percent of high school students had not taken a standardized test and 36 percent of those who did say they won’t submit a score. He did not yet have comparable data from other years.)

Hancock thinks reliance on testing will change going forward, and other experts suggest that

professionals in the field should be prepared for that shift and for changing student attitudes—and suspicions—about testing and the reliability of school policies.

Quirett agrees and looks for more fairness in the process that will perhaps provide opportunities for students who may have previously been hindered by testing.

When it comes to finances, student concerns range from the stability of certain institutions and the availability of financial aid to worries about their own family finances because of the pandemic. Some also are essential workers or have had to work longer hours or hours that conflict with their education.

“Cost has always been a big deciding factor, even before the pandemic, so now it’s really prominent in the minds of my students,” said Reeves-Eisbach. “It is not unusual for my seniors to work 20-40 hours a week while going to school in a normal year and this has increased with the loss of jobs in their families.”

The Niche survey found that 89 percent of seniors and 87 percent of juniors are more concerned about being able to pay for their education and the New America/Third Way report indicated that those concerns were, predictably, higher for caregivers and minority and low-income students.

“People are more suspicious of the price of college,” Fishman said. “It is hard to justify spending \$60,000 when you are going to be online. I understand that colleges need to survive, but it is a hard pill to swallow.” □

.....
Jim Paterson is a former counselor living in Lewes, Delaware.

them to the best online resources and give them plenty of guidance about how to use them. Only use online contact when it is necessary and don’t load them down with messages. Virtual events should be less than 45 minutes and fun and engaging. (Patch has several [recommendations](#) about virtual events from an October survey of 31,000 students, including insights about what events they want to hear about.)

Be strategic. Hancock said some students are complaining about too much contact from colleges—and even suggesting it turns them off and makes the schools look desperate. Nearly 50 percent of students surveyed by Patch said all the communications from colleges “look and sound the same.” He suggests quick informative notes with headlines, such as “Wonder what’s up?” followed by details students care about. Make communications more personal, Patch recommends.

Understand emotions. It might seem like an easy transition to online classes or working at home for a period, but research is showing that students generally don’t like working excessively online and distinctly miss the college experience and atmosphere—and their social lives. Consider some may have significant emotional fragility, and counselors can let them know it’s common and normal.

Touch up tours. Make virtual tours useful and engaging—“instead of showing off your buildings,” Patch said. Feature videos, student voices, and offer a sense about what the campus is about.

Be flexible. “While hundreds of schools already have pushed back their decision deadlines, and hundreds more were already rolling admission, this is not the time to stand by your historic reply date,” Patch said. He said schools also should adjust their application review, perhaps for the next several years. “Transcripts are going to look a little funny for a while,” he notes. “Students are not focused 100 percent on their education right now and that will certainly affect GPAs. Staff should be empathetic...”

Help with testing. The process will likely get better, but many students have complained about it. Help students find reliable testing dates and sites and help them get good information about how campuses are treating test-optional plans.

Be open to all options. Rachel Fishman, a researcher with New America on higher education issues, notes that the number of students transferring, deciding late, and being undecided will increase, along with the number choosing to postpone college. Those helping these students should accept these paths.

Understand safety concerns. No matter how good you may feel about the safety of a campus or the status of the pandemic, understand that students and their families all have had different experiences and have different attitudes about this event. If you want to attract students, keep things safe and make students feel comfortable no matter what level of concern they have.

Prepare for new attitudes. There has been a bump up in the number of students questioning the value of college, so those working with prospective students shouldn’t assume they appreciate the value of higher ed the way those in the past have. You may have to take a step back to remind them in various ways. □