

4 Post-Pandemic Challenges Facing Higher Education

Declining enrollments, equity gaps, digital expectations and more: Overcoming the hurdles ahead will require innovation, grit and institutional change.



THE PANDEMIC is the biggest challenge that higher education has faced in decades. But within every challenge lies an opportunity — in this case, to reinvent higher education so that it serves a new generation of students more effectively.

As campus leaders look ahead, they must apply the lessons they've learned over the last 18 months to support the changing needs of students and staff. However, this won't be easy. Nationwide, student enrollment declined

significantly last year, and demographic shifts on the horizon could bring further challenges. Achievement gaps have always existed, but those gaps have only widened since the emergence of COVID-19. The pandemic has also taken a big toll on students' mental health, and students are going to need additional support services when classes resume in the fall.

Here are some of the top challenges and key trends facing higher-education institutions in the coming years.



1 | Enrolling and Retaining Students

The pandemic has had a considerable effect on the number of students enrolling in higher education institutions. Enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities declined by nearly 6 percent from spring 2020 to spring 2021, according to **data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center**. Community colleges, which tend to serve the most vulnerable student populations, suffered the largest hit — with enrollment **falling by 11.3 percent** in that time.

Unfortunately, the long-term outlook isn't much brighter. Nathan Grawe, an economist at **Carleton College** in Minnesota, **has predicted** that the size of the college-going population in the United States will drop by 15 percent between 2025 and 2029 and will continue to fall thereafter as a result of fewer numbers of U.S. births. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) also **forecasted** a reduction in the number of high school graduates in the United States beginning in 2026 and continuing through 2037.

Declining enrollment could put a big strain on higher education budgets. Moody's Investors Service **anticipates** that college and university revenues will decline by as much as 10 percent by the end of 2021 as

campus leaders grapple with the effects of the pandemic. Although colleges have received billions of dollars in pandemic relief aid from the federal government, states have cut spending on higher education at the same time — and **questions remain** about what will happen when the federal money runs out.

To compete for a shrinking pool of students, colleges and universities will have to innovate. For instance, they might have to rethink their enrollment practices by expanding the horizons of their recruiting and using analytics to target prospects more effectively. Developing programs to reach new populations and providing an exceptional student experience will also be critical to attracting and retaining students in an increasingly competitive landscape.

"Traditional institutions have been struggling for a while with enrollment," noted Vincent Martinez, executive government advisor for **Avaya**. "Students are looking for more convenient ways to earn a degree, and large online schools continue to gain market share. As students examine their educational options, non-traditional models that take a different approach will become increasingly important."

2 | Ensuring Student Success and Completion

Making sure that all students who enroll leave college with a degree or certificate was already a significant challenge before COVID-19, but the effects of the pandemic have magnified it.

Prior to the pandemic, fewer than two-thirds (63 percent) of students who began pursuing a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution completed their degree within six years, **according to federal data**. With the challenges to learning that many students have faced during the pandemic, those numbers are likely to drop in the months ahead unless campus leaders can find innovative solutions.

Online learning offers flexibility that can make education more accessible for many students, but it can also introduce key hurdles. As the Brookings Institution **observed**, low-income students are more likely to struggle when learning in an online setting, thus

widening existing achievement gaps. Some obstacles they might face include trying to study in a stressful home environment or a lack of reliable internet access.

These challenges have set back learning for many students over the last 18 months. Overcoming this learning loss and getting students back on track will require creative thinking on the part of campus leaders.

"There's nothing we can't do with technology today," Martinez said. "Take the first-year calculus student who hasn't done well on her first two quizzes. A notification can go out automatically from the learning management system to a guidance counselor, who can match that student with a tutor who fits into her schedule — preventing her from dropping the class before it's too late. Having immediate access to actionable insights can improve the student experience."



3 | Meeting the Evolving Expectations of Students and Staff

The students who enter college from high school this fall were only four years old when the first iPhone came out. They can't remember a world in which touchscreens and mobile apps didn't exist. Having grown up connected to their phones, they expect "any time, anywhere" access to information and services.

The pandemic has accelerated consumer expectations for an all-digital experience. **Sixty-five percent of all customer interactions are now digital**, up from 41 percent prior to the pandemic, and 63 percent of organizations say their customers' expectations have changed as a result of COVID.

Having experienced the ability to learn or work remotely during the pandemic, many students and instructors don't want to return to the old way of doing things. In fact, **a third of campus leaders say** they'll continue to offer both remote and online course options even after normal operations have resumed, and **61 percent of organizations are reimagining work** — up from 29 percent before the pandemic.

To meet the changing expectations of students and employees, leaders will have to pay close attention to what their stakeholders want and design forward-looking programs that anticipate their needs.



Not only are students' needs expanding, forcing campus leaders to ramp up the delivery of essential services, but *how* those services are delivered is also changing.

4 | Expanding (and Reimagining) Student Support Services

Campus health professionals have **identified a growing crisis** among young adults who are struggling with mental health problems related to the pandemic, including suicidal thoughts, anxiety and depression. Connecting students with the mental and emotional assistance they need is one more aspect that higher education leaders will have to address as they look to reinvent student support services for a new era.

Campus leaders have long known that student support services are vital to academic success. The pandemic has intensified the need for services ranging from transportation and food security for students

who commute, to academic advising, career planning, counseling and other supports.

Not only are students' needs expanding, forcing campus leaders to ramp up the delivery of essential services, but *how* those services are delivered is also changing. Increasingly, colleges and universities are providing on-demand access to online services through integrated multi-cloud environments.

"Students are looking for engagement both inside and outside the classroom," said Martinez. "The question facing campus leaders is how to keep students engaged so they can reach their goal."

Begin with End Goals in Mind

Meeting these challenges will require campus leaders to break down siloes, working together across departments to define institutional needs and goals.

"One thing I always did as a CIO was to start with the customer experience that I wanted to achieve, then work backward to determine the technology needed to make that happen," Martinez concluded. "Academic and operational leaders will need to collaborate in order to determine: What is the student and staff experience we want to deliver?" Answering this question is the first step in achieving post-pandemic success.

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