

 LEADING STRATEGIES

The Relationship Between One-Stop Support and New Student Enrollment

By Lisa Perry

The COVID-19 pandemic created lingering challenges related to enrollment and made transparent the need for institutions to examine processes and remove enrollment barriers. Higher education may be perfectly poised to implement deep and lasting change that could result in increased access and improved retention. As student populations become increasingly diverse, there is a responsibility to examine institutional practices to increase enrollment and retention. Through a quantitative study, the one-stop service model was evaluated as a possible practice for reducing melt. Findings from this study suggest the one-stop model at UC Merced is making a positive impact on new student enrollment for historically marginalized populations.

For quite some time now, strategic enrollment management experts have argued the need for a transformation in higher education, a deep and lasting change that will address the college attainment gap and systemic enrollment barriers facing marginalized populations (Bejarano and Valverde 2012; Black 2002; Jenkins 2011; McNair, *et al.* 2016; Miller 2006; Walters 2003). While higher education administrators may have read, discussed, and possibly agreed with these arguments, many institutional practices remain unchanged (Bejarano and Valverde 2012; Davidson 2019; McNair, *et al.* 2016; O'Shea 2016; Perry 2022). Having just weathered the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, higher education institutional leaders may be perfectly poised to launch a trans-

formative approach to how they support students. The COVID-19 pandemic affected all aspects of life, including shifting almost all higher education to a temporary remote experience; two years later, American colleges and universities are experiencing a concerning and consistent nationwide decline in enrollment, especially for marginalized student populations (Hoover 2020; June 2022; Moody 2022).

The recent pivots to remote and back to in-person (or hybrid) instruction have created an environment in which both staff and systems are primed to adopt a nimbler approach to operations. Many enrollment management professionals agree that institutions tend to rely on a traditional structure, one that has not changed for

many years (Schaaf n.d.); these structures are falling short of meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student population (Bejarano and Valverde 2012; Black 2002; Jenkins 2011; McNair, *et al.* 2016; Walters 2003). Universities are reliant on tuition and fees as a revenue source for operating budgets (Jordan 2019; Kalsbeek 2006, 3–10; Levin and Kater 2012; Pellicciotti, Agosto-Severa, Bishel, and McGuinness 2002, 57–70; Perry 2022); given the reliance on student enrollment, an investment in understanding student needs and correspondingly evolving matriculation practices is much needed.

Problem

By 2023, students of color will make up nearly half of K–12 enrollment (Boeckenstein 2022; Welton and Martinez 2013). Traditional enrollment practices may not meet the needs of this up-and-coming diverse student body, and it is important for administrators to remember that this diversity requires a different set of skills and abilities. Higher education can no longer use systems that were designed to reflect the white, middle-class experience. Today's higher education enrollment experience must value the individual skills and knowledge of every student. Instead of focusing on administrative needs, institutions need to put the student at the forefront of their decision-making and develop matriculation practices that embrace all new students.

For enrollment management professionals who work directly with students, the challenges new students face when attempting to complete the matriculation process are too familiar; higher education's use of multiple siloed steps and unfamiliar jargon is confusing (Arnold, *et al.* 2015; Perry 2022; Riggs 2015). The complex college matriculation process presents barriers for many students, especially low-income or first-generation students; these barriers contribute to melt (a term referring to when a student accepts an admissions offer but does not complete the matriculation process), or loss of new student enrollment (Castleman and Page 2014a). The months leading up to college enrollment are critical; during this time, students make complex decisions about finances, enrollment, and living arrangements; students who are not connected to support services may succumb to melt.

To foster enrollment and combat melt, this article proposes a student-ready enrollment management service model that guides all students through the matriculation process. According to McNair, *et al.* (2016), “[a] student-ready college is one that strategically and holistically advances student success and works tirelessly to educate *all* students for civic and economic participation in a global, interconnected society” (5). To become a student-ready university, institutions must be committed to student development as well as improving the student experience. (McNair, *et al.* 2016; Perry 2022; Riggs 2015). One way higher education can become student ready is to adopt a centralized service model for enrollment management operations in which processes are equitable, and the unique experiences and knowledge of every student are embraced (Benjarano and Valverde 2012; Perry 2022).

An article in *The Wall Street Journal* (Korn 2022) cited cost as a possible barrier to enrollment while applauding three University of California campuses (UC Berkely, UC Merced, and UC Riverside) who were able to increase their number of Pell Grant recipients (an indication of low-income). It is interesting to note that these three institutions are also the only three in the University of California system who offer a centralized enrollment service model, better known as a one stop. While cost to attend higher education is an issue, declining enrollment may be attributed to a deeper problem directly connected to the complex enrollment process. An indicator of this is evident in one student's interpretation of higher education organizations: “universities, to him, were like government offices: uncaring bureaucracies” (McMurtrie 2022, 55). A pressing question is how do institutions become student ready and improve the enrollment outcomes for this new generation of students?

Study

UC Merced is the youngest campus in the University of California system, and this unique role gave their campus the opportunity to be innovative; founding staff were committed to creating a student-centered public research university where administrative needs would not create barriers (Merritt and Lawrence 2007). One

of the ways UC Merced embodied this philosophy was by adopting a one-stop service model for enrollment management; the one stop was appropriately named the Students First Center (SFC), because at UC Merced, *Students Come First*.

The University of California, Merced opened in fall 2005, making it the first American public four-year research institution to open in the 21st century. UC Merced was placed in the heart of California to increase higher education access; UC Merced “leads the UC system in the percentage of students from underrepresented ethnic groups, low-income families and families whose parents did not attend college” (University of California, Merced 2022b). The findings from this study may shed some light on what UC Merced is doing differently that fosters enrollment for these populations. One unique fact that stands out is being able to open UC Merced with a one stop in place; UC Merced is the only higher education institution to have this experience (Perry 2022).

The author studied the effectiveness of the SFC and utilized dissertation research to explore the possible impact of the SFC on fostering new student enrollment and retention. The research findings suggested the one-stop model at UC Merced positively impacts new student enrollment for historically marginalized populations. The study identified equitable melt rates for all student populations who interact with the UC Merced one-stop model. Results provided evidence of an environment in which historically marginalized populations melt at a lower or equal rate than other students.

This research focused on the matriculation experience of students who identify as Black, Latinx, low income, and first generation. These populations were

selected based on institutional priorities and the historical commitment of the University of California system to provide a distinguished higher education experience to students regardless of socioeconomic status (The University of California 2018). The study focused on the new student enrollment experience in the fall terms of 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019. UC Merced’s SFC first leveraged Salesforce in 2016 to track student case activity, making it the first year of useable data. Data from 2020 was excluded because of the global pandemic that began in 2020; 2020 is a unique enrollment experience and should be evaluated separately. The study combined data from UC Merced’s student information system and their customer relationship management (CRM) tool; leveraging both sets of data created a distinctive dataset that clearly identified new students who interacted with the SFC and who remained enrolled at fall census. Then, a quantitative analysis was applied to evaluate the relationship between the variables: new students who interacted with the SFC and new students who were enrolled at fall census for the term of their admissions. During the analysis process, the author reviewed UC Merced Enrollment Management Annual Reports, from 2016–2019, to interpret the findings.

Results

The potential for melt is decreased if a student interacts with UC Merced’s one stop (Perry 2022). Table 1 provides overall new student enrollment data by term; the average four-year melt rate for the selected time was 24 percent. The Statement of Intent to Register (SIR) is the number of students who accepted their admissions offer. Enrolled count is the number of students who submitted their SIR and remained enrolled at fall census. Total

TABLE 1 ► University of California Merced Fall SIR and Enrolled Count 2016–2019

	Fall 2016	Fall 2017	Fall 2018	Fall 2019
SIR Count	2,977	3,132	3,132	3,034
Enrolled Count	2,222	2,453	2,405	2,279
Total Melt Rate (%)	25	22	23	25

■ SIR = Statement of Intent to Register
Source: Perry 2022

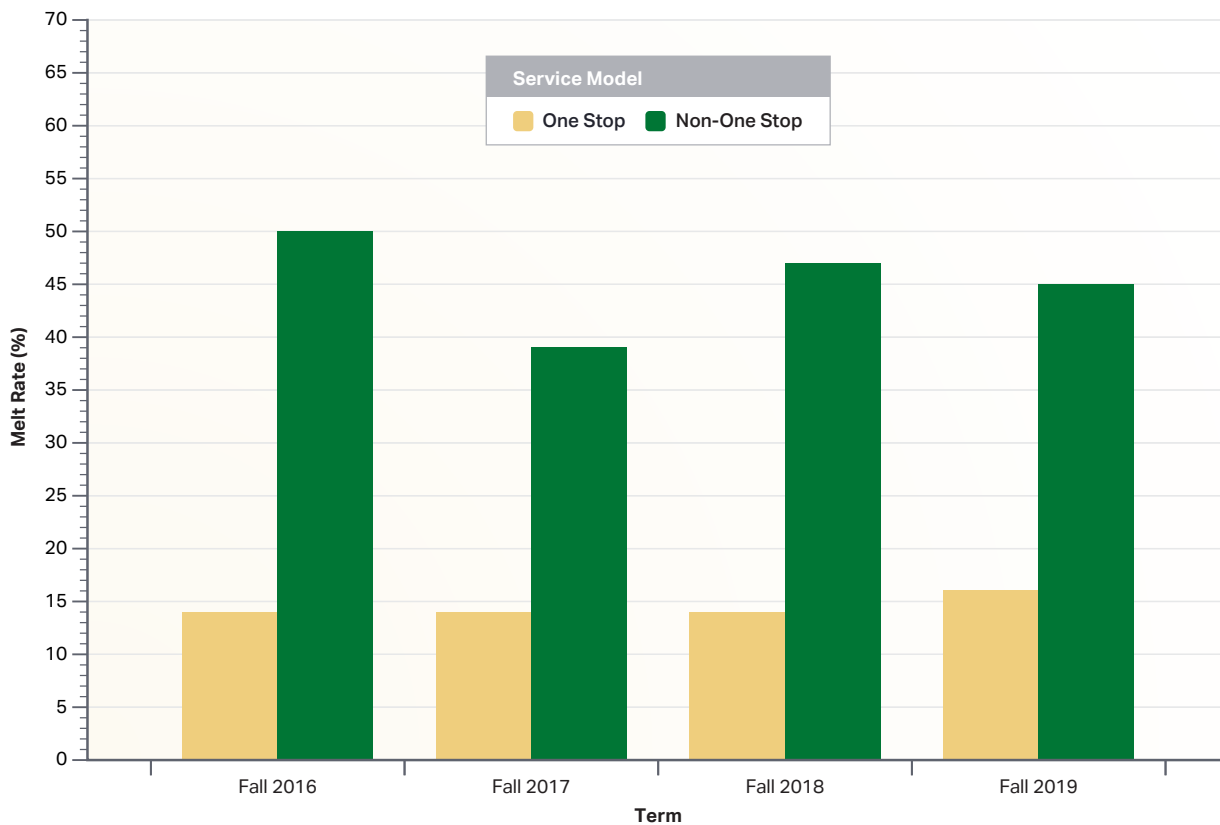


FIGURE 1 ➤ University of California Merced Fall Melt Rate and One Stop Interaction 2016–2019

Source: Perry 2022

melt rate is the percentage of students who submitted their SIR but did not remain enrolled at fall census (in other words, they melted away). The study was designed to learn more about the role of UC Merced's one stop and whether interacting with the SFC is related to higher new student enrollment rates. To answer this question, the study evaluated new student enrollment and melt rates based on one-stop interaction.

Figure 1 provides melt rate data for students based on one-stop interaction; in all terms, students who interacted with the one stop melted at a lower rate than students who did not interact with the SFC (Perry 2022).

The overall melt rate for students who interacted with the SFC suggested that a centralized enrollment management service model positively impacts new student enrollment. It is even more interesting to note the melt rates for marginalized student populations who

interacted with the SFC (see Figure 2). According to melt research, marginalized student populations are more impacted by melt; many scholars agree melt rates for marginalized student populations can be as high as 40 percent (Castleman and Page 2014a; Castleman, *et al.* 2013; Rall 2016; Stringer 2006) while other socioeconomic groups' melt rate typically falls in the 10–18 percent range (Castleman and Page 2014a; Castleman, *et al.* 2013). This study indicated an environment in which marginalized student populations who interact with UC Merced's one-stop melt at the same or lower rate than their non-marginalized counterparts. For example, data in this study indicated white students had an overall melt rate of 23 percent; non-low-income students had a melt rate of 22 percent; non-first-generation students had a melt rate of 32 percent; and the selected marginalized student populations who interacted with the

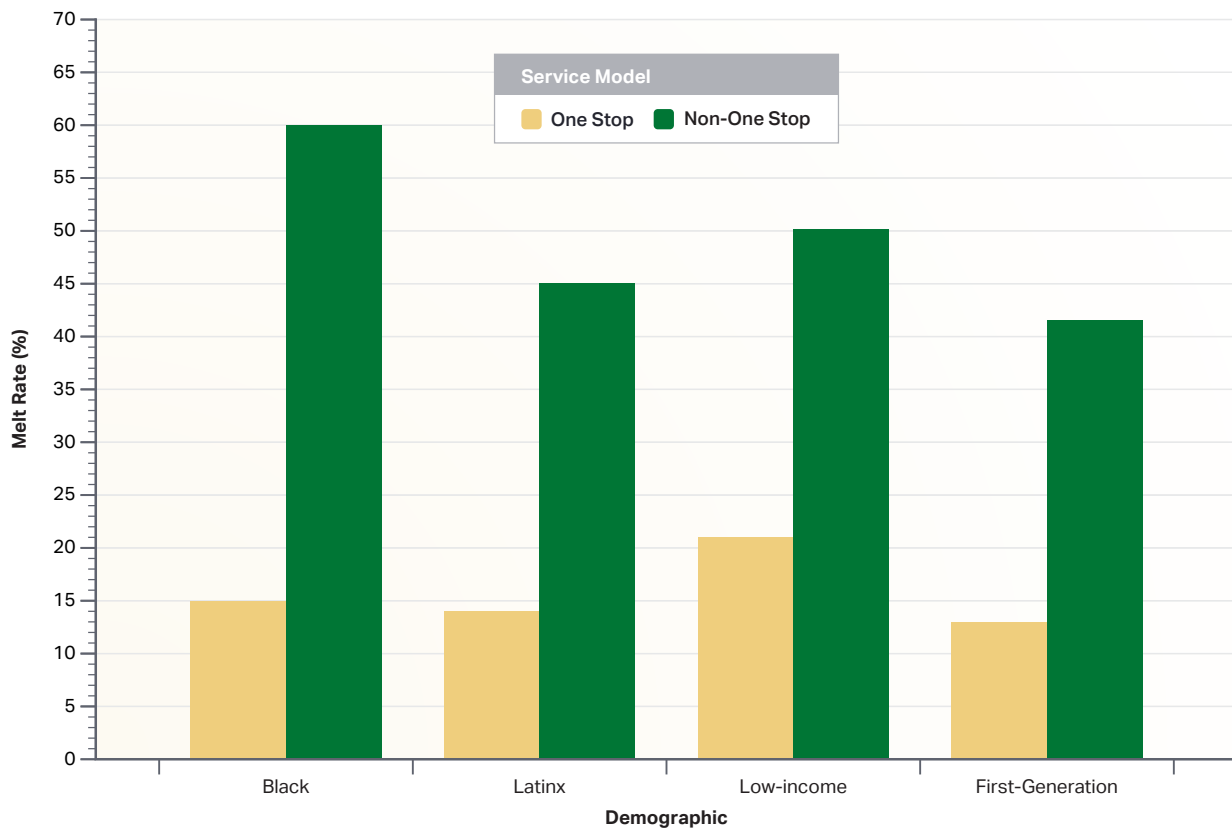


FIGURE 2 ➤ University of California Merced Fall Melt Rate and One Stop Interaction, by Subpopulation 2016–2019

Source: Perry 2022

one stop had a melt rate ranging from 13–21 percent. Figure 2 (on page 63) provides a visual overview of the differences in melt for the selected marginalized populations based on one-stop interaction.

In addition to the quantitative analysis, this study leveraged Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model as a lens for interpreting the quantitative results and the SFC's role in supporting new student enrollment; the Enrollment Management Annual Reports were the source for contextual information and evidence of intentional acts that fostered CCW. While these acts cannot be directly linked to melt rates, discussion of findings through the lens of the Enrollment Management Annual Reports can help inform future enrollment management strategies (Perry 2022).

CCW is an asset-based approach to understanding the forms of capital that historically marginalized pop-

ulations may embrace. Yosso's (2005) model discusses six types of capital: linguistic, familial, navigational, resistant, aspirational, and social. This study focused on familial, linguistic, and navigational. Familial capital refers to the values and cultural knowledge fostered among family members; it reinforces a commitment to the family's happiness, which can impact a student's educational decisions (Mobley and Brawner 2019, 353–369; O'Shea 2016, 59–78; Yosso 2005). Navigational capital describes a student's ability to maneuver within complex institutions that were designed to support the dominant class, and which may not embrace the experiences of historically marginalized students (Mobley and Brawner 2019; Yosso 2005). Higher education is a complex structure. Universities are large bureaucracies that sometimes do not make sense even to those within them; unfortunately, siloed structures seem to be less

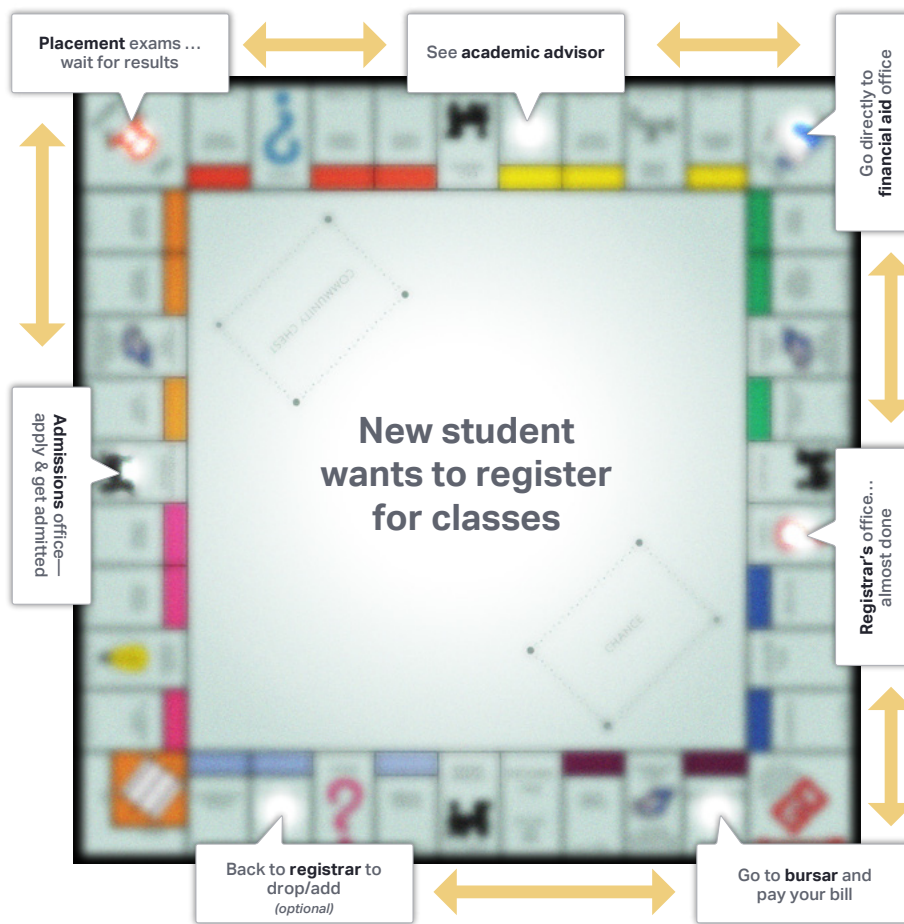


FIGURE 1 ► Monopoly Analogy for the Student Enrollment Experience

Source: Nealon 2007

and less translatable to anyone outside the higher education organization. One way to describe the complex matriculation process is by using an image from NA-CUBO where Nealon (2007) builds upon the game of Monopoly to articulate the student experience.

Linguistic capital is an expression of the various communication methods students can leverage (California State University, Chico n.d.; Yosso 2005). Designing practices that embrace the individual linguistic capital of each student is an asset-based approach to service that fosters student's identity and creates a sense of belonging. In this study, linguistic, navigational, and familial capital provided a lens for explaining the SFC's role in promoting an equitable matriculation experience.

Using Nealon's image as a representation of the complex matriculation process, the selected three forms of capital are additional intricacies that, if intentionally taken into consideration, could simplify the student's ability to "pass go." By leveraging linguistic, familial, and navigational capital in each phase of the monopoly board, the two directional arrows (what we call the Bobcat Shuffle) might become a seamless forward moving experience. For example, imagine your institution has challenges with students understanding their financial obligations. Next, imagine a pop-out bubble between the registrar's office and going to the bursar, this bubble might say "attend next steps guidance session, bring your family." Using linguistic, navigational, and familial

capital as a lens for designing this step, the matriculation experience works toward providing an asset-based approach to service; instead of working to reform the student, the institution is examining their own practices and modifying the system toward being student ready.

In every year, intentional acts toward supporting navigational, linguistic, and familial capital were evident; the student-ready mindset permeates thinking and processes within enrollment management at UC Merced. Most importantly, the Students First Center service model is an important step toward fostering navigational capital; regardless of a student's college knowledge the SFC provides a seamless student support experience for everyone. Linguistic capital was supported in various ways; examples include multi-lingual staff and publications in languages other than English. Annual reports also documented multiple practices that supported familial capital; most of these practices were related to deliberate efforts inviting families to be a part of the matriculation process and related conversations. The documented evidence, in the Enrollment Management Annual Reports, of multiple intentional acts that fostered these three forms of capital, reinforces the spirit of UC Merced's founding staff; founding staff at UC Merced were committed to designing a student-centered university (Merritt and Lawrence 2007).

The intentional organization structure and staff training program at UC Merced's one stop is a strengths-based approach to student service. The SFC training program fosters quality holistic service; the quality standards for UC Merced's enrollment management team teach staff that they "have a responsibility to create an environment where a diverse community feels comfortable to ask questions, team members listen to understand, and we communicate with respect and honesty valuing each person's cultural and identity differences" (University of California, Merced 2022a). For too many years, institutions have designed processes to meet administrative needs. Findings from this research support the contention that putting the student first and designing practices that embrace all students is a more effective approach than assuming that students who missed a step in an overly complex matriculation

process are at fault. The one-stop study at UC Merced is one step toward better understanding the matriculation needs of students entering higher education, particularly those from marginalized student populations.

Implications

Given the continued decline in enrollment, some experts argue the pandemic is not the only contextual factor impacting a person's choice to enroll in higher education; inflation and the overall cost to attend college may also be at play. A college degree is a product that students pay for, and institutions that are attuned to this concept and more aware of the customer service experience of their clientele will face fewer challenges recruiting and retaining students. For example, this study revealed that during the selected timeframe, Latinx and Black students were the largest percentage of students who interacted with the SFC. These findings could be an indication that the matriculation experience does not embrace the Latinx and Black student's cultural capital thus resulting in a higher need for quality holistic customer service. To better support these populations, UC Merced needs to consider how they might connect students to the SFC earlier in the admissions cycle. By connecting them to the one-stop service model in a pro-active approach, UC Merced may be able to increase their admissions yield and ultimately enrollment for these populations.

As college enrollment trends begin to shift post-quarantine, new trends and new needs may emerge. First-generation college students are a market that may need additional guidance and new forms of support. While institutions start to consider what a "new normal" could be, institutions have a fresh opportunity to evaluate the matriculation experience. The results from this study demonstrate a significant relationship between first-generation new student enrollment and interaction with the SFC. These results align with other research that identifies the university matriculation process as a contributor to melt (Arnold, *et al.* 2015; Castleman and Page 2014a 2014b, 144–160). The Enrollment Management Annual Reports revealed several ways the UC Merced one-stop service model is

fostering a more equitable experience for the first-generation population. Although these practices cannot be directly linked to first-generation new student enrollment, they do demonstrate a student-ready mindset.

Summary and Recommendations

While the one-stop service model may not address all enrollment barriers, findings from this study demonstrate the impact non-traditional operations can have on marginalized new student enrollment. If new students are melting, institutions must consider if melt is truly students not being engaged or if it is a symptom of a systemic failure to be student ready. The matriculation process should embrace new students' skills by building upon their current knowledge and fostering their move from the P-12 microsystem to higher education.

The transition experience matters to students; it can facilitate a sense of belonging or it can alienate a student, creating a loss of enrollment for the campus; more importantly it could disconnect the student from college all together (Arnold, *et al.* 2015; Bentrin and Henning 2022; Castelman, *et al.* 2013; Castleman and

Page 2014a 2014b). From the disruption created by the COVID-19 global pandemic emerges an opportunity to innovate and re-think the overall student experience and operations. Enrollment management professionals have an opportunity to engage in a "great pause" (Denial, Sorensen-Unruh, and Lehfeltdt 2022) to consider the evolution and ultimately how higher education will meet the needs of today's (and tomorrow's) student. If higher education does not become more flexible and learn alongside students, institutions may continue to face enrollment challenges. This is a time of evolution; it is time to focus on what works now and what could work in the future and let go of what has been done in the past.

Improving matriculation practices is only one piece of the puzzle. An organizational culture that fosters the student-ready mindset is critically important. Gaining staff buy-in and developing a team who deliver service with care is an essential element in creating a positive student experience. Further research and sharing of effective models for fostering a community of care through conferences and publications is warranted.

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