

 LEADING STRATEGIES

A Faculty Perspective on Enrollment and Retention Success During the Pandemic: A Subsequent Study to the Perspective of Administration

By Jennifer B. Passenti and Luke Schultheis

The pandemic left an indelible mark on higher education. This study is the second of three, focused on how a college navigated enrollment challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The initial study examined the perspectives of college administrators on why the institution did not suffer from enrollment decreases. This follow-up study incorporated the perspectives of faculty and offers viewpoints that differ from the first study. Faculty indicated that their informal and regular interactions with students kept them engaged and enrolled. They also noted that there is a family culture at the institution that transcends the efforts of any individual or initiative. The findings of the two studies have brought to light the need for greater communication amongst the administration, faculty/staff, and students for multiple efforts at retaining students that were underway but seldom shared broadly.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated overall enrollment challenges as students, staff, and faculty were primarily required to study and work remotely. The experiences of such engagement likely led many students to question the value of higher education. There remains a need for additional research on how the pandemic affected student learning and socialization at various levels. There is also a need to better under-

stand what happened to institutions of higher education and how they can better prepare themselves for other significant disruptions in providing traditional campus-based education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), Fall 2020 enrollment dropped about 2.5 percent overall from 2019. It is estimated that approximately 400,000 fewer students attended college in 2020.

The enrollment challenges evident, particularly to public regional and small private institutions, are acute and not expected to improve for quite some time. For years, colleges and universities have invested significant resources on recruiting new students. It is common to see, even today, enrollment leaders posting updates on social media channels indicating they have enrolled record-breaking-sized classes. While that perspective seems to resonate with great success, it does not necessarily indicate much more than an increase in new student enrollment volume. There are other factors that demonstrate an institution is improving its overall enrollment, including student persistence. It is curious that the higher education industry seems relatively unfazed by the fact that there are more than 43 million adults who have completed some college yet have no degree (Cohen, *et al.* 2025, 2). Schools that are able to improve their student retention will likely be able to reduce somewhat the pressures of enrolling an increasingly larger number of new students. There are multiple perspectives on how an institution can improve its enrollment. Leaders of the enrollment division and administrators are one. Faculty also hold a key perspective on institutional recruitment and retention that warrants examination.

One such study has explored how an institution found itself at a juncture of being well-positioned and prepared to enhance student support as it entered the pandemic (Passenti 2023). This study was conducted at a small, private, nonprofit undergraduate institution of higher education located in Northeast Pennsylvania. The institution had seven satellite locations and served 2,000 students, of whom approximately 85 percent were commuters. Throughout the pandemic, the institution was able to maintain its pre-pandemic enrollment, in contrast to the significant decreases seen nationwide.

In order to better understand the reason for this outcome, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eleven participants who were staff members. These individuals included senior leadership, mid-level management, and front-line staff and were selected through purposive sampling.

These individuals were asked two questions about how the institution was able to weather the pandemic. The guiding questions were:

- How is this specific HEI increasing enrollment and retention rates to secure a sustainable future?
- What are the innovative strategies that the HEI is employing to increase enrollment and retention during times of crisis?

Mid-level managers consisted of both academic and non-academic support personnel. They were directors of various departments such as enrollment management, student financial services, registrar, student success, advising, career services, and student wellness. There were also a number of senior leaders and two entry-level staff who were interviewed. While the front-line staff had less than five years of work experience at the institution, all of the other participants had been there longer, with several having been there up to 20 years.

Three key themes emerged from the study: enrollment strategies, retention strategies, and institutional strategies. Table 1 (on page 27) outlines the themes and categories of efforts supporting those themes, as identified by the participants.

The efforts focused on enrollment strategies included collaboration amongst administrative units at the institution and the implementation of technology that supported such collaboration. Work was conducted in advance of the unexpected pandemic to identify various areas of responsibility for the enrollment process. There are many units at an institution that can contribute to the admission of students. Efforts around event design, management, and presence can include offices such as admissions, financial aid, registrar, residence life, student affairs, and others. When these units coordinate with each other, the institution's initial exposure to prospective students can be strong. It also leads to more units accepting responsibility for recruitment.

Communicating through technological platforms that provide instant messaging capabilities can also create channel-specific groups, allowing efforts around a specific area of responsibility to be targeted more effec-

TABLE 1 ► Themes and Categories

Theme	Category
Enrollment Strategies	► Reason for steady enrollment
	↳ Collaboration
	► Use of technology
Retention Strategies	► Students staying and not transferring
	► Use of technology
	► Technologies
	↳ Learning Management System
	✓ Canvas
	↳ Customer Relationship Management
	✓ (CRM) Spectrum EMP
	✓ Starfish
Institutional Strategies	↳ Laptop loaner programs
	► Scholarships
	► Created new positions
	► Technologies to support
	► Community Partnerships
	↳ Corporate Partnerships/ Donations/ Scholarships
	↳ Tuition Reimbursement

Source: Passenti 2023

tively. This reduces the administrative burden of trying to communicate rapidly through email. The collaboration that was developed lent itself well to working remotely in a team environment, where in-person contact was prohibited. It also benefited the institution, as those relationships had been developed before the pandemic, so collaboration was more natural than forming groups remotely once staff were unable to be on campus.

The second theme, retention strategies, included the purposeful implementation of technological platforms to improve student retention, training on how to manage conversations with students who expressed interest in transferring to another institution, a laptop loaner program, and the disbursement of scholarships to those facing financial challenges.

Not all students who transfer provide advanced indication of their intention. Many do not re-enroll at the institution and then enroll elsewhere. However, some students do share their plans to transfer with ad-

visors and other staff. Rather than coaching the student on what transactions need to be conducted to depart, such as withdrawing, notifying financial aid, and other actions, staff were trained on how to manage conversations with students. While these conversations were not designed to dissuade a student from transferring, they were developed to serve as a means of inquiry into why the students desired to leave. There are many reasons why students choose to transfer, and sometimes it may be due to frustration with something at the institution, confusion, or concerns about their ability to finance their education. Learning from the students why they desired to leave, staff were able to refer some students to support services that enabled them to maintain their enrollment.

Technology that was designed to improve communication with students and to identify factors suggesting a student was likely to attrit was implemented. The first of the technological platforms was the learning management system (LMS)—Canvas. This

system provided a means for students to take classes remotely in a structured manner. Syllabi, assignments, discussion boards, and grades were posted within Canvas. Students and faculty became accustomed to it just before the pandemic. When the school was forced to provide academic instruction remotely, the complete transition to the LMS was not new. While students and faculty were now required to engage in this platform for all courses, it was merely an expansion of how many courses had already been offered. A customer relationship management (CRM) system was also introduced. Spectrum EMP provided a means by which the institution could communicate with students in alignment with various aspects of their standing. The CRM can be programmed to send communications in a calendared manner, alerting students to various important times to take action, such as registering for classes. As students register for classes, they fall off the communication campaign, while those who still need

TABLE 2 ► Theme: Enrollment Strategies

Category	Participant ID	Response
Reason for Steady Enrollment	1	"Record enrollment pre-COVID, and during COVID due to returning students."
	2	"Significant investment in advertising and a shift towards digital advertising that we saw historic growth in inquiries and applications through the two significant years of COVID."
	4	"COVID certainly hurt and helped in a couple of ways. Some students didn't want to go away and stayed home, so we offered affordable service for them while they decided where they wanted to be eventually."
	9	"Because we are local and are community focused, we were able to continue our growth and not just sit still while the world shut down."
Technology	2	"Invested money into our online division, and we've saw significant growth in online."
	10	"We've instituted some different tools to kind of help us track students and help guide them through the enrollment process here at the college, we utilized Spectrum EMP as our CRM, and just recently switched to JRM Salesforce."

Source: Passenti 2023

to register will be sent e-mails with various messages encouraging them to register until they do so. As staff have become more familiar with using the CRM, they have been able to expand and improve the communication campaigns. Similarly, as students have become more accustomed to it, they have begun to rely upon it more regularly.

The second technological platform was designed specifically to improve student retention. Starfish is a tool that enables the staff and faculty to communicate directly with students in an early warning and advising space. It was implemented just before the pandemic. Starfish identified various student data that were determined to predict attrition from the institution. As indicators arose, identifying students who were at risk of departing, staff were provided this information and initiated an intervention. Concurrently, the students were notified through Starfish that they were at potential risk of departure. That could prompt the student to schedule an appointment with an advisor or to pay closer attention to an issue, identifying them as being at risk of departure. This platform reduces the significant administrative burden associated with running reports

and analyzing the data to identify at-risk students. It also acts in real-time, on a daily basis, while it is not efficient to run daily reports, examine the data, and then communicate to the student and other stakeholders. Table 2 outlines some of the technological platforms supportive of enrollment.

The institution developed a laptop loaner program for students who lacked the funds to purchase their own. This initiative was initially designed to support students; however, it proved especially prudent once students were required to study remotely. Although no one could have anticipated the pandemic, having a well-managed laptop loaner program ensured that all students had access to their classes, which were delivered through Canvas.

Scholarship distribution was the final initiative in the retention strategy's theme. It is generally not financially feasible to make large-scale awards to an entire population of students, hoping that it will assist them with their financial needs. It is more beneficial to the student and the institution when specific students can be identified through self-identification or analyzing data, which indicates a student is struggling to pay

TABLE 3 ► Theme: Institutional Strategies

Category	Participant ID	Response
Creation of New Positions/ Center/Programing	5	"During COVID we had no idea what enrollment was going to look like. And so, we add additional bodies to our enrollment team, to try to increase our outreach. So, during COVID, the response was not what we thought it would be, we fared better than most of a lot of other institutions in terms of our enrollment. During COVID, staffing was increased, staffing has been part of the initiative to keep our enrollment up."
	2	"Significant growth and you can probably also say it was historic growth for and that was due to a variety of reasons. It wasn't just changing our Admissions team or at the Center we launched for the first time in the college's history, awarding bachelor level degrees. We opened new satellite centers, we relocated satellite centers and invested more money into the launch of our online division and we've seen significant growth in online. We've added additional specialty programs."
	9	"There is one partnership in the area that has, definitely helped us at our location. It's the McDonald's partnership. It's a scholarship through the Mueller Family Foundation. It provides 100% tuition assistance for students who work at least 16 hours a week, maintain a 2.5 GPA, and are enrolled in at least two classes."
	10	"We've developed some scholarship opportunities for students working at certain organizations. Where you know they are offering some scholarship money, we match that money."

Source: Passenti 2023

for their cost of attendance. It is also good practice to determine what amount of a micro-grant needs to be awarded to students on an individual basis in order for them to maintain their matriculation.

The third theme that emerged was institutional strategies. These were conscientious decisions on the part of the institution, which were implemented specifically to improve enrollment. These included new positions, technological support, and community partnerships that included employment relations, financial contributions, and tuition reimbursement. The institution implemented an eLearning/online division that was charged specifically with developing curricula that would support students who desired a blend of online and on-campus courses, as well as exclusively online instruction. It was also charged with leading the implementation of Canvas, the learning management system. These efforts were especially helpful because if they had not been implemented before the pandemic, it is unlikely a successful launch could have occurred when operations were completely remote.

The final theme was that community partnerships had been developed around supporting students, such as providing internships and employment, as well as scholarship contributions. Relationships were also developed in which businesses provided some amount of financial assistance through tuition reimbursement. This proved to be a good benefit for employees as well as a means to make studying more affordable. These partnerships also led to the creation of new academic programs that prepared students for in-demand employment. (Passenti 2023)

Table 3 outlines the themes and categories of the institutional strategies.

Enrollment Management

Enrollment management is recognized as a collaborative process that incorporates mission and institutional goals (Hossler and Bontrager 2015). Enrollment management will evolve as various situations shift at the institution. Recruitment and retention efforts get modified to best suit the present and impending situation. As

Dolence (1990) stated, “A successful enrollment management program fundamentally changes the way institutions perceive their clientele, confront challenges, exploit opportunities, and manage their resources” (p. 1). The themes that emerged from the study acknowledged that enrollment efforts were the result of collaboration among departments, leadership engagement, and alignment with the institution’s strategic goals. While the participants did not specifically refer to the term enrollment management, it is clear that through their collaboration with a focus on enrollment, it was indeed enrollment management. Although the literature describes enrollment management in some cases as not requiring reporting to one specific area, Bontrager (2004) establishes that, “where formal lines do not exist, strong communication links must be established” (15). The interviews provided specific reflections on each of these initiatives, and participants credited these concerted efforts, launched pre-pandemic, with maintaining enrollment. They did not mention efforts provided by the faculty as having an impact. Upon reflection on these results, the researchers were compelled to examine the views of the faculty, as they had not participated in the original study (Passenti 2023).

This Study

Faculty at most institutions are often considered the glue that keeps the students engaged and more often a large part of retention efforts. In the previous research, the intention was to study the administration’s point of view on the impacts of COVID-19 on enrollment and retention. Utilizing Kotter’s (1996) Change Management Theory, to highlight the eight steps to leading change in organizations: (a) establishing a sense of urgency; (b) forming a powerful guiding coalition; (c) creating a vision; (d) communicating the vision; (e) empowering others to act on the vision; (f) planning for and creating short-term wins; (g) consolidating improvements and producing still more change; and (h) institutionalizing new approaches.

For this study, six faculty members were purposefully chosen to participate. Invitations were extended to more than 100 faculty members, and of those who

TABLE 4 ► Core Insights and Key Findings

Theme	Category
Strong Relationship	Reason for steady enrollment
Family	Students staying and not transferring
Enrollment	Classroom were filled with students

responded that they would like to participate, an effort was made to ensure representation among those of differing levels of responsibility at the institution, so that they were not all leaders or only taught classes. Some of the faculty held leadership positions and potentially would have been more aware of the initiatives noted by the staff in the first study. They also represented a variety of different academic departments. The participants were asked the same questions as the administrators were in the prior study.

- How is this specific HEI increasing enrollment and retention rates to secure a sustainable future?
- What are the innovative strategies that the HEI is employing to increase enrollment and retention during times of crisis?

In recruiting faculty to participate, they were informed of the prior study and that the participants consisted exclusively of administrative staff. It was shared that this subsequent study was being conducted to learn the faculty’s perspectives regarding student enrollment during the pandemic. The participants were not aware of the findings of the prior study.

The six faculty participants were divided into two groups to meet with the two researchers. These unstructured interviews lasted approximately an hour, with the researchers following the strands of thought from the participants. The findings were quite different from those in the first study.

The researchers did not share their findings with each other until the interviews were completed. Several themes emerged as the reasons why enrollment was strong in the faculty’s perspectives. The first theme was that the faculty had developed strong relationships with

the students. The second theme was that the students and faculty were *family*, and the final theme was that the faculty believed enrollment was *good* based on the number of students enrolled in their class.

The faculty expressed that they had developed strong relationships with the students. They did not suggest that they counseled students to remain enrolled, but instead were good “pedagogues” whom the students enjoyed learning from and knew the students. In each interview, the participants indicated that it was due to their close relationships with the students that they remained enrolled at the institution, despite engaging in class sessions via Zoom. The faculty provided examples of their personal engagement with the students, which included general familiarity with their lives and an understanding of the students’ career trajectories and academic interests. When asked to explain the relationships, one participant noted, “We know them. We know them better than anyone else, and they know us.”

The second theme was that the culture of the institution is one of *family*. This theme may have overlapped with the first in that the close relationships of a family may have led to a better understanding of students as individuals. An example of this was a statement that “we are like family...it’s always been like that, I don’t know, it just is like that.... It didn’t start with anyone, the president isn’t the leader of it...no one promotes it, we’re just family...” None noted a specific time when this culture developed, but rather that it was one that seems to have always existed. None indicated that there was a spokesperson or leader of this culture, and they noted that it transcended different presidents. This family culture was one that presented a sense of responsibility and support to each other. It also represented a bond that would be difficult to break; thus, withdrawing from the institution would sever that bond. It is noteworthy that the institution’s six-year graduation rate is significantly below the average for similar institutions. This may suggest that the faculty are unaware of the high rate of student attrition at the institution, and that the institution began offering bachelor’s degrees in 2017, which raises questions about the high attrition rate.

A third theme emerged: enrollment success based on the number of students who were enrolled in their specific courses. Although, this may show that the faculty are quite popular, this does not represent a valid identifier of enrollment success during a pandemic. One faculty member, when asked about enrollment, said, “I know we are doing well with enrollment when my classes are full.” Moreover, enrollment can represent a number of definitions. Based on this research, the faculty defines enrollment based on students who make up their class roster rather than the total student body needed to fulfill budgetary requirements. Based on faculty responses, student engagement is an area to explore further.

Several definitions and conceptualizations of student engagement exist in the literature. Below are definitions of student engagement crafted by higher education scholars.

- Kuh (2009) defines student engagement as the “time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (683).
- Axelson and Flick (2010) define engagement as “how involved or interested students appear to be in their learning and how connected they are to their classes, their institutions, and each other” (38).
- Fletcher (2015) provides a definition that outlines engagement as “any sustained connection a learner has towards any aspect of learning, schools, or education” (para. 3)
- McCormick, *et al.*, (2013) clarify that “student engagement refers to college students’ exposure to and participation in a constellation of effective educational practices at colleges and universities” (47) These scholars define engagement as connection between students, faculty, and institution, this is one way in which retention can be used to drive the data.

When asked if any administrative efforts contributed to student retention during the pandemic, none of the

candidates believed that they did. It was also particularly telling that none of the participants had any knowledge of enrollment goals, plans, or recruitment and retention efforts at the institution. None of the participants mentioned any of the themes or categories in the prior study. They did not discuss any collaboration with the administration or other faculty members. It seemed as if each of the participants focused on their own engagement with their students. Two in leadership positions did not discuss any department or faculty-wide efforts to collaboratively retain students. One out of the six participants discussed the use of Starfish and Canvas to engage students and maintain connectivity throughout the COVID-19 closure of in-person classes. However, there was no mention of concerns about students transferring to other institutions, nor the need to intervene. One may assume that many students probably would not entertain transferring as all schools were operating remotely; thus why move to another institution that is essentially doing the same thing? Further discussion highlighted that one faculty member was highly familiar with Canvas, while the other five faculty did not discuss their experiences within Canvas or any challenges or successes of teaching through the LMS. The Starfish platform was not mentioned by all participants, although it remained in use throughout the pandemic. The laptop loaner program did not rise to the point of discussion, nor did the partnerships with businesses, the tuition reimbursement, or additional grant funding for students.

As the researchers discussed their findings, it became evident that the administration and faculty clearly did not agree on what constituted support for students. It also became apparent that there was a significant lack of communication from the administration to the faculty. The efforts identified by the administration, to a large effect, were costly in both funds and effort to implement; however, they seemed to be unknown to the faculty. One would tend to believe that either the faculty is unengaged with the administrative supports and developments, or that the administration is failing in its commitment to communicate these supports.

Application for Practitioners

The initial study provided insights into how a university administration implemented several strategies before the pandemic that served them well during the period of remote instruction and service. In the second study, the faculty engaged the students in a manner that they believed kept them retained at the institution due to close relationships and interactions. They also credited the institution with having developed a longstanding culture that fosters a welcoming, family-like environment. Both perspectives may be salient; however, there remains room for improvement for the practitioner. There are a number of ways that the administration and faculty can better support each other and, subsequently, the students.

Committees or work groups that are focused upon initiatives the administration launched, which include faculty representation, can provide additional insights from the faculty as well as a channel of communication back to the faculty. Some of those initiatives may have been further refined had faculty been engaged. Enrollment-related data should be shared with faculty. It is beneficial to know how many students are enrolling and how many are leaving the institution prior to completing their degree. That would lead to joint efforts to improve retention if there was a problem. Finally, communication needs to be more robust. Oftentimes it is simply helpful to keep everyone informed. All employees are spokespersons for the institution, and it is important that all parties are informed about major initiatives.

Based on this research finding, it would be beneficial to expand this research to explore the student experience at other institutions with similar success, where there is an agreement that retention has improved. This study will focus on students who were enrolled before, during, and after the pandemic to gain insight into the institution's perspective. Key questions would be why you stayed, and how the remote learning environment impacted your engagement.

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Jennifer Passenti, Ed.D., is the Senior Center Director for the Northern-Tier, and she oversees the operation at the Lake Region, Towanda, and Tunkhannock Centers of Lackawanna College. Her home base is out of the Lake Region Center of Lackawanna College, located in Hawley, Pennsylvania. Lackawanna College has eight locations across Northeast and Southern Pennsylvania, with the main campus located in Scranton. Passenti has worked at Lackawanna College for the past fifteen years, first serving as an Adjunct Professor, followed by Enrollment Specialist, then as the Director of the Lake Region Center, and now as the Senior Center Director for the Northern-Tier.

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Passenti is a community advocate and serves on 20-plus boards, committees, and advisory councils, including serving as the President of the Pike County Chamber of Commerce. She has been published, serves as a public speaker and presenter focusing on enrollment, retention, higher education, community

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Prior to coming to Lackawanna College, Passenti worked for the New York City Board of Education where she taught in the Bronx for many years. She earned her master's degree in elementary education at Mercy College, and a bachelor's degree in speech communications and public relations from Kutztown University. Passenti also holds professional certifications in both Six Sigma Green Belt and Lean Six Sigma through Villanova University and completed her doctorate in higher education at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

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Dr. Schultheis has extensive experience bringing his business acumen to higher education with a keen focus on identifying metrics aligned with strategic plan goals and assessing the ability of the institution to meet those goals. He has participated in the development and implementation of campus-wide

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He has served as the inaugural vice president for enrollment, strategic planning and effectiveness at Fairleigh Dickinson University, after leading the Neighborhoods and retention work at Michigan State University—the national model for combined living-learning—and as liaison to the University Innovation Alliance. Previous work experience included overseeing 22 units as the inaugural vice provost of strategic enrollment management at Virginia Commonwealth University and leading the enrollment management and student services portfolio at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Additional leadership roles included serving as the founding dean of the

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He has authored book chapters and journal articles on higher education and has made more than 80 presentations at national conferences and served on several prominent journal editorial review boards.

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