

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

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

By Jennifer B. Passenti and Luke D. Schultheis

This study examined students' perspectives on enrollment and retention during the COVID-19 pandemic, building on prior research that examined administrative and faculty perspectives at a small private college. Using a qualitative design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight students who remained enrolled during the pandemic. The study investigated how these students experienced institutional support, faculty engagement, and communication during a period of significant disruption.

Findings revealed that students overwhelmingly attributed their continued enrollment to faculty behaviors, particularly flexibility, attentiveness, and personalized support. In contrast, students reported little awareness of institutional retention strategies, communication campaigns, or senior administrative efforts. This disconnect suggests that while institutional strategies may have been effective, their visibility to students was limited. The results highlight the critical role of faculty-student relationships in sustaining engagement during crises and underscore the importance of aligning institutional communication with student experience.

The demographic enrollment cliff had been discussed in the publication *Knocking at the College Door: Projec-*

tions of High School Graduates, published by Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, for many

years prior to the unanticipated COVID-19 pandemic and continues to highlight the anticipated number of traditional college-bound individuals (Lane, Falkenstern and Bransberger 2024). Despite those initial projections shared years ago, an increasing number of colleges are closing. The number of Title IV institutions decreased from 5,918 in 2022–23 to 5,819 in 2023–24 (IES 2024). The pandemic forced widespread campus closures and required postsecondary institutions to rely upon Zoom and other remote communication platforms to engage students. Researchers are beginning to study the various impacts of this remote engagement on student learning and development. According to The National Student Clearinghouse (2020), college enrollment in Fall 2020 dropped by about 2.5 percent compared to the previous year, meaning roughly 400,000 fewer students attended college.

Many institutions have reflected in the trade media on how the decreases in student enrollment impacted them and what they must do to recover financially. However, not all institutions lost enrollment during the pandemic, and it is important to examine what occurred at these institutions to understand how best to prepare for maintaining enrollment stability in the event of unexpected future situations that could have a negative impact.

The two ways to increase enrollment at a college or university are to enroll more new students and retain more current students. There does not appear to have been a widespread, significant improvement in retaining undergraduate students over the last decade. For the 2013 cohort, the average six-year graduation rate at four-year institutions was 63.4 percent. The average at private, non-profit, four-year institutions was 67.9 percent, and at public, four-year institutions it was 62.4 percent. Five years later, the 2017 cohort performed only nominally better, with an average of 64.5 percent, compared with 68.5 percent at private, non-profit, four-year institutions and 63.4 percent at public, four-year institutions (NCES 2024). Furthermore, the number of adults with some college but no degree, which reflects the increasing number of individuals who did not persist to graduation, was reported by the National Student

Clearinghouse Research Center as 43.1 million at the start of the 2023–24 academic year (Cohen, *et al.* 2025).

Retention rates are important and are incorporated into institutional rankings, such as *U.S. News & World Report*, as well as institutional web search results. Prospective students seeking to enroll in higher education are likely to weigh these metrics as they determine where to attend. This determination is an indicator of marketability and can impact an institution's net tuition revenue, or the contribution to the institution once institutional aid has been applied or discounted against gross tuition.

Retaining students remains a critical exercise for securing some financial stability, especially for tuition-dependent institutions. Maintaining and increasing student retention should positively impact net tuition revenue contributions. It is important for an institution to focus on attracting and maintaining enrollment to generate funds to support operations and advance its goals.

Background and Context

There are many different approaches institutions employ to support student retention. These are often incorporated through student affairs, faculty, and advising, as well as inter-departmental efforts that may utilize vended software platforms.

Some technological platforms are used to analyze student data and indicate which students are considered *at-risk* as defined by the institution. While these vary by institution, they may include grades, repeated courses, credit consumption, and many others. The data-informed indications that a student is at risk may be shared with departments tasked with engaging the student to discuss a plan of success, or, in some instances, technological platforms may communicate directly with students, prescribing a course of action.

While some tools are available to assist in identifying at-risk students and prescribed outreach efforts are in place to engage them, it is generally acknowledged that retention is *everybody's responsibility*. This acknowledgment or approach lends itself to collecting and assessing data that indicates how *everybody* is impacting retention. There are student satisfaction surveys, such

as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Student Experience in the Research University Survey (SERU), that are widely used; however, their scope of discovery is limited and will not provide evidence of outcomes in retention efforts.

Literature Review

Retention During the Pandemic

Several studies have examined student retention during the pandemic. The article “Centering the Marginalized: The Impact of the Pandemic on Online Student Retention” (Brown, Kush, and Volk 2022) examined how COVID-19 affected college student retention, focusing on fully-online learners from marginalized backgrounds. Using data from a single university, the authors compared pre-pandemic and pandemic cohorts and found that overall retention declined during the pandemic for both online and on-campus students. Online students—and particularly Black and Hispanic students—had lower retention rates than their peers. The study concluded that the pandemic worsened existing inequities and called for institutions to better support online and marginalized students in retention strategies (Brown, Kush, and Volk 2022).

Data-Driven and Institutional Approaches

The article “Understanding the Prediction of Student Retention Behavior during COVID-19 Using Effective Data Mining Techniques” (Parvez, Tarantino, and Meerza 2023) investigated how educational institutions can use data mining to predict and improve student retention during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors analyzed various student-related data, including academic performance, engagement, and demographics, to identify patterns that signal potential risk of dropout. By applying machine learning models, they found that certain factors, including online participation and socio-economic background, were strong indicators of retention. The study concluded that data-driven approaches can help institutions proactively support at-risk students, especially during times of crisis like the pandemic (Parvez, Tarantino, and Meerza 2023).

Institutional and Faculty Perspectives

Passenti (2023) examined retention at a small, private, nonprofit college in Northeast Pennsylvania that experienced positive student enrollment patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the global crisis disrupted traditional recruitment pipelines, campus operations, and student persistence, the institution faced intensified financial and operational pressures. Using a change management framework, Passenti highlighted how strategic leadership, collaboration, and innovation enabled the college to adapt and maintain stability during one of the most turbulent periods in higher education. The study identified how the pandemic acted as both a disruptor and a catalyst for transformation, accelerating the adoption of new technologies, reshaping support systems, and inspiring creative partnerships that strengthened student engagement and institutional resilience. The findings offered practical insights for small colleges seeking sustainable strategies to manage enrollment volatility and student retention in a rapidly changing educational landscape.

Five major themes emerged from the analysis. First, collaboration across departments was essential to developing coordinated responses and aligning institutional goals. Second, the college invested in technological advancements, including digital platforms for recruitment, communication, and student tracking, to support both remote operations and hybrid learning models. Third, the institution leveraged external financial support, such as scholarships and partnerships, to reduce economic barriers and enhance access for students affected by the pandemic. Fourth, deliberate investments in retention and support systems, including advising, early-alert tools, and proactive outreach, helped sustain student persistence and engagement. Finally, the college pursued program innovation and community partnerships, introducing new academic offerings and roles that responded to shifting market needs while strengthening ties with local organizations. Collectively, these strategies fostered institutional adaptability, improved student outcomes, and demonstrated that comprehensive, collaborative approaches are critical for small colleges confronting enrollment and retention crises.

A subsequent study at the same institution was conducted to elicit faculty observations (Passenti and Schultheis 2025). This study was the second phase in a research series on the COVID-19 pandemic. While the first study captured the senior administrative perspective, the second study explored faculty viewpoints to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how one college navigated student engagement and success amid disruption. Faculty insights revealed the practical realities of implementing institutional strategies during an unprecedented shift to remote and hybrid learning. By aligning administrative strategies with faculty experiences, the study underscored the importance of integrating frontline teaching perspectives into future institutional planning and crisis-response frameworks. The focus on a single institution provided depth of understanding within a specific context, though the findings may not be widely generalized.

From the faculty perspective, several key themes emerged. Faculty emphasized the institution's agility and flexibility in transitioning to online and hybrid learning, noting both successes and strains in adapting to rapid change. Communication and student engagement surfaced as critical factors influencing retention, particularly when classes moved online. Many instructors highlighted the essential role of institutional support, such as access to technology, advising, and tutoring, in promoting student success and expressed concern that deficiencies in these areas hindered outcomes. The pandemic also expanded faculty roles beyond instruction, requiring increased mentoring and outreach to sustain student connection. Some faculty identified a mismatch between administrative expectations and classroom realities, suggesting gaps in planning and communication. Overall, the study illustrated that effective retention strategies must be informed by both administrative vision and faculty experience, emphasizing collaboration, communication, and resource alignment to support student success in times of disruption.

Student Experience Studies

A study by Orton, *et al.* (2022) examined how engineering students at a Midwest university were affected when

their in-person classes suddenly switched to online learning during the COVID-19 shutdown. Researchers wanted to understand the biggest challenges students faced and what worried them the most about learning engineering online.

They surveyed students midway through the semester, asking open-ended questions and using a simple rating scale to measure their confidence in learning and teaching. The results showed that students were more worried about their own ability to learn (48 percent) than their instructors' ability to teach (36 percent). The biggest struggles included difficulty staying focused, low motivation, time-management issues, and difficulty absorbing material. Many students also struggled with technology issues, while a small number had no concerns.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted engineering education worldwide, forcing instructors to quickly move their courses online, even if they had no prior training in online teaching. This was especially challenging for project-based and design-focused engineering courses, where little guidance existed on how to support students in a remote setting.

On a scale of one to ten, students rated their confidence in learning engineering online at about six out of ten and their confidence in their instructors' ability to teach online at around seven out of ten. The study's findings can help universities improve online engineering courses and provide better support for students.

Another study (Johnston, A., K. Douglas, J. Martin, and T. Short 2021) surveyed 235 undergraduate engineering students at a large research university to understand their experiences with social support during this transition. Researchers analyzed student feedback and interactions to suggest ways instructors can better support students in online project-based courses. Key recommendations included:

- Encouraging informal conversations between students and instructors
- Grouping students in the same time zones for teamwork
- Hosting virtual co-working sessions
- Establishing a clear weekly structure

- Incorporating live (synchronous) elements, such as virtual office hours

These strategies aimed to improve student engagement and make remote learning more supportive and interactive.

Enrollment Management

Enrollment management may not be a concept with which students are familiar in its formal sense. Although students are the recipients of coordinated services across the institution, they see them as institutional supports rather than efforts coordinated by a division. As students experience the outcomes of these efforts—through recruitment practices, retention initiatives, and the overall supportive environment—it becomes evident that these strategies are grounded in the institution’s broader mission and goals (Hossler and Bontrager 2015). The dynamic nature of these processes reflects how institutions adapt to changing internal and external circumstances.

Dolence (1990) described effective enrollment management as transformative, shifting how institutions view and serve their students. In Dolence’s study, participants demonstrated that mindset. While the 22 participating institutions did not explicitly use the term “enrollment management,” their coordinated efforts to support enrollment clearly embodied its foundational principles. Students, whether or not they are aware of the terminology, are affected by these strategic decisions—particularly when such efforts are marked by interdepartmental collaboration, active leadership, and alignment with institutional objectives.

The research complements Bontrager’s (2004) assertion that communication is essential where centralized systems are lacking. From a student’s viewpoint, these communication efforts may be reflected in consistent institutional messaging from faculty and staff, coordinated support services, and a sense of stability during periods of change. Participants credited intentional strategies implemented prior to the COVID-19 pandemic with helping to sustain enrollment, which students likely experienced through continued access to resources and a maintained sense of institutional continuity.

Interestingly, in Passenti’s (2023) research, senior leadership was not consistently identified as a driving force in day-to-day enrollment efforts, suggesting that their involvement may be more strategic than visible. This observation raises questions about how students perceive the presence and impact of institutional leadership in shaping their educational experience. Given the significant role leadership plays in aligning enrollment goals with institutional priorities, Passenti (2023) was compelled to explore this area further to better understand how leadership engagement is communicated and experienced from the student perspective.

A survey (Means and Neisler 2021) of 1,008 college students found that when their in-person classes suddenly switched to online learning in spring 2020, their satisfaction with their courses dropped. Many students faced obstacles, such as bad internet connections and technology issues, which made it hard to keep up with their studies. Students struggled with motivation and missed receiving quick feedback from their professors and working with classmates. Students from lower-income backgrounds and Students of Color had an even tougher time compared to white and higher-income students. Despite these difficulties, most students were at least somewhat satisfied with their online learning, especially in courses that followed best practices for online teaching.

Gap in the Literature

In the two studies by Passenti (2023) and Passenti and Schultheis (2025), noted above, the senior administration and faculty held differing views on why student retention was strong. An additional study was warranted to elicit students’ views.

Methodology

Theoretical Framework

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, a series of interview questions were developed to understand how the increase in retention manifested.

Participants and Sampling

To gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind this outcome, qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with eight students selected from the same institution in which the previous studies (Passenti 2023; Passenti and Schultheis 2025) were conducted. The participants, chosen through purposive sampling, included graduates, juniors, and senior students. Some of these students began their educational career with the institution, while others transferred from neighboring institutions. They also represent a variety of different majors.

In recruiting students to participate, they were informed of prior studies and that the participants consisted exclusively of administrative staff and faculty holding leadership positions. It was shared that this subsequent study was being conducted to learn about the students' perspectives regarding their enrollment during the pandemic. The participants did not see the

findings of the prior studies. For the purposes of this research, senior administration refers to members of the President's Cabinet.

The participants were divided in half to meet with the two researchers. The interviews lasted approximately an hour, with the researchers following the participants' lines of thought. The individuals were asked the same questions about how the institution weathered the pandemic. The guiding questions are below.

During the pandemic, the institution experienced stronger enrollment trends than most schools. Please explain your observations and decisions to remain enrolled during that time. The more detail you can provide, the better it will enable the researchers to understand.

- * *How much of a role did the faculty play in your continued attendance?*
- * *Did any staff or faculty interact with you outside of class instruction?*
- * *Were you aware of any institution-wide efforts to maintain enrollment?*
- * *How did you stay "connected" to the institution outside of classes?*

Findings

The findings were markedly different from those of the first two studies. The researchers did not share their findings with each other until the interviews were completed. Three key themes emerged from the students' perspectives as reasons they stayed enrolled. The first theme was that the faculty were attentive, flexible, and caring during the crisis. Their continuous communication with the students on both academic and personal matters positively impacted retention. The second theme was that students did not remember retention campaigns or the software tools used to identify at-risk students and alert students and support staff to the need for attention. The final theme was that the students did not recall any communication campaigns aimed at improving student retention.

Table 2 (on page 23) presents the themes and corresponding categories of effort identified by the participants.

TABLE 1 ► Participants Demographics:
Gender, Graduation Year/Alumni

Identification Number	Gender	Grad Year
1	Female	2023
2	Female	2024
3	Male	2024
4	Male	2024
5	Female	2022
6	Male	2022
7	Male	2024
8	Female	2025

Table 3 provides an example of the participants' understanding of enrollment.

Limitations

There were limitations to this study that prevented a more comprehensive analysis. Participants had progressed several semesters beyond their enrollment during COVID-19. They may not have clearly remembered all of their experiences and decision-making that led to continuing their studies. Interviewing a larger number of students would have provided additional viewpoints or reinforced those provided by the participants. Future research opportunities would exist immediately following a crisis that removes students from on-campus learning. Additionally, segmenting students by term of entry may shed light on how newer students develop perspectives compared with those of students who have been enrolled for longer periods.

Implications for Practice

The initial study (Passenti 2023) provided insights into how a university's senior administration implemented several strategies prior to the pandemic that served them well during the period of remote instruction and service. The senior administration expressed belief that their retention campaigns, supported by technological platforms and institution-wide communication, were the primary reason students remained enrolled despite

TABLE 2 ► Themes and Categories

Theme	Evidence
Faculty Engagement	► Reason students stayed enrolled ► Flexibility in assignment deadlines ► Attentive to student concerns
Retention Campaigns	► No recollection of the following Technologies ► Learning Management System ► Canvas ► Customer Relationship Management: ► Starfish ► Laptop loaner programs ► No recollection of Scholarships
Senior Administration	► No recollection of receiving any correspondence from the Senior Administration about maintaining enrollment

TABLE 3 ► Participants Understanding Enrollment

Category	Participant Identification Number	Response
Faculty Support	2	"Checking in to make sure I was ok and understood the assignments, felt supported by my teachers."
	3	"We were all in this together."
	4	"Felt like they really cared about my success."
Retention Campaign	7	"I don't know what Starfish is.... I've never heard of it, I think."
	8	"Returning bachelors scholarship will help students stay enrolled and provide the much-needed financial help."
Senior Administration	6	"No sure, I really have not heard much for them, my advisor and faculty provided me with the most information."
	1	"They sent out general stuff, about we're going remote, but nothing specific about us."

needing to study off-campus. In the second study (Passenti 2023; Schultheis 2025), the faculty expressed that the institution's character as a "family" led to genuine, caring engagement with students that helped maintain enrollment. They did not feel the senior administration's efforts were a contributory factor in maintaining enrollment. In this final study, students attributed their

continued enrollment to flexible assignment deadlines and faculty engaging them regularly.

Although previous studies highlighted the role of strategic planning and a strong institutional culture, these elements were not clearly recognized by students. This divergence suggests that, while efforts may have been effective, they were not experienced by students as coordinated or explicitly aligned, including within the framework of Kotter's change management theory.

These findings have important implications for how institutions design, communicate, and implement enrollment and retention strategies. There are several ways that the senior administration and faculty can better support each other and students when they proactively design interventions and communications. First, institutions should establish cross-functional committees or work groups that include faculty representation in the development and implementation of retention initiatives. These structures can strengthen alignment between senior administration and faculty while also creating clear channels for communication and feedback.

Second, the senior administration should actively involve faculty in shaping retention strategies, as faculty perspectives may lead to more effective, student-centered approaches.

Third, institutions should regularly share enrollment and retention data with faculty. Providing visibility into student trends can encourage shared responsibility and promote collaborative efforts to improve persistence. It is beneficial to know how many students are enrolling and how many are leaving the institution before completing their degrees. That would lead to joint efforts to improve retention if there was a problem.

Fourth, institutions should strengthen communication strategies to ensure that retention initiatives are clearly communicated across all levels of the institution. Consistent and transparent messaging can help faculty and staff reinforce institutional efforts in their interactions with students.

Additionally, institutions should recognize that all employees serve as representatives of the institution

and should ensure they are well-informed about major initiatives so they can effectively support and communicate with students. If an institution is making a significant effort to impact change, such as a retention initiative, this should be broadly shared. Finally, institutions should implement ongoing assessment practices to evaluate the effectiveness of retention strategies. This includes collecting and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data to ensure that institutional efforts align with student experiences. Aligning institutional strategy with student experience is essential to ensuring that retention efforts are not only implemented effectively, but also recognized and experienced by the students they are intended to support.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on enrollment and retention during the COVID-19 pandemic by centering the student perspective. While prior research at this institution highlighted the role of senior administration and faculty in supporting student persistence, the findings of this study revealed that students primarily attributed their continued enrollment to faculty support rather than to formal institutional strategies.

This divergence underscores the importance of understanding how institutional efforts are experienced by students. Although senior administrative initiatives and retention campaigns may have been effective, their limited visibility suggests a gap between institutional intent and student perception. Bridging this gap is critical to ensuring that retention strategies are not only implemented effectively but also recognized and valued by students.

It would be beneficial to expand this research to explore the student experience at other institutions with similar success. Such a study would focus on students who were enrolled before, during, and after the pandemic to gain their perspectives on the institution and how it supported retention. Key questions would seek to ascertain why students remained enrolled and how the remote learning environment affected their engagement.

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Prior to coming to Lackawanna College, Passenti worked for the New York City Board of Education, where she

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