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CHALLENGES WITH ENROLLMENT INCREASES: LESSONS LEARNED IN THE TRENCHES

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Challenges with Enrollment Increases: Lessons Learned in the Trenches

Synopsis:

This panel discussion addresses how four college-level leaders have managed the demands associated with dramatic increases in enrollment. Providing perspectives from the levels of professor, department chair, program director, associate dean, and dean, the challenges of persistent enrollment increases coupled with irregular infusions of supporting resources are discussed.

Challenges with Enrollment Increases: Lessons Learned in the Trenches

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News and studies on higher education continue to report that universities are facing pressures on enrollment. The reasons for these pressures are varied and complex. It is extremely clear that the 2020/2021 COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting changes to class offerings has had a dramatic impact on universities' revenues. Unfortunately, the outlook is still negative and the impact of the virus is expected to persist throughout 2021 (Wadhwan 2020).

Even before the pandemic, states were expecting educational institutions to increase their own funding sources. States began to consider higher education funding as the source to balance budget shortfalls (The Lincoln Project 2015). By 2015, the budget cuts had been ongoing for more than a decade and accounted for a loss of about 20 percent of research universities' funding (The Lincoln Project 2015). Universities who could not generate sufficient revenue streams were required to scale back their course offerings and decrease the number of both part time and full time faculty; some universities were forced to close (Mitchell, Leachman, and Saenz 2019).

State funding for higher education has historically experienced rapid and steep declines with slow and shallow recovery periods (Laderman 2019). State funding for higher education remains below pre-recession levels (Whitford 2020a). Even when funding has improved, the services, programs, and people have not recovered at the same pace (Mitchell, Leachman, and Saenz 2019). In response, many universities have passed the funding needs on to students with increases in tuition and fees, creating barriers for success and increasing inequities (Mitchell, Leachman, and Saenz 2019).

The pandemic has exacerbated the effect on state funding which is likely to continue and lead to potentially increased cutbacks. States rely heavily on tax revenues to fund higher education (Laderman 2019), and the pandemic has reduced state and local tax income (Sheiner and Campbell 2020). Universities depend on the revenue streams from auxiliary services, such as student housing, meal plans, event hosting, and space rentals, which have declined dramatically during the pandemic (Whitford 2021). Compounding the problems of loss of state funds and loss of auxiliary revenues, when the pandemic struck, universities were required to invest in protective equipment and supporting technology during a quick pivot to off campus learning (Whitford 2021).

Additionally, philanthropic giving to higher education is a source of pressure. Nearly 45 percent of respondent institutions expressed fundraising concerns (Whitford 2020b). They are reporting anticipated declines in the double-digits for fundraising revenue with dire predictions projecting a 30 percent reduction in fundraising for the coming year (Whitford 2020b).

Dramatically changing funding models and the COVID-19 pandemic have increased the burden on recruiting, but these issues are only part of the problem. For nearly 10 years, enrollment in higher education has remained almost flat (Wadhwan 2020). There have been declines in the populations of high school graduates, which is expected to continue. One predication states that university enrollment is expected to decrease by 2.5 to 3 percent (Wadhwan 2020).

All of these concerns drive a strong impetus on individual institutions to increasingly self-fund primarily with revenues from tuition and fees (Whitford 2020a). Some universities address the concerns with tuition increases, but tuition increases alone may not solve the problem. Maintaining historic levels of enrollment, even with tuition increases, may not be enough to offset losses. Increasingly, academic units are feeling the pressure to teach more

students, often without a comparable increase in resources. Universities are having to find ways to at least break even. Ultimately, the problems will be expected to be solved in the trenches.

This panel discussion addresses how four college-level leaders have managed the demands associated with dramatic increases in enrollment. Providing perspectives from the levels of professor, department chair, program director, associate dean, and dean, the challenges of persistent enrollment increases coupled with irregular infusions of supporting resources are discussed. Out of the box thinking examples, including the use of temporary support staff, additional compensation, structured procedures, consistent and stringent application of policies, and maintenance of faculty members' academic freedom, are provided as methods for managing growth and building a unified team.

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