How to Prepare for Enrollment Decline: 5 Strategies for Higher Ed IT Teams

The history of American higher education has become increasingly inclusive over the past 100 years. Funding from federal and state government agencies have opened the doors of colleges and universities to people of all gender types, abilities, politics, and sensibilities. This inclusiveness has created an educated citizenry which in turn has fostered a vibrant economy and supported innovative progress in the United States.

Higher education has been a critical foundational element of our society, and there has been a presumption that this increasing inclusiveness will continue. But population, economic, and demographic trends tell a different story. In fact, colleges will have to prepare for a significant drop-off in the pool of potential applicants. The resulting impact will create economic and infrastructure changes to how schools operate. The way through this will be with effective use of process-driven technology that will help schools attract students, faculty, and staff, and will be able to be agile and adapt to market trends.

Population and Demographic Trends Impact Higher Ed

Demographic trends paint an interesting view of what the student population will look like as we move further into the 21st Century. The decline in the U.S. fertility rates that started in 2008 has been significant and is starting to have implications for all facets of the American populace. The number of children in elementary schools started dropping in 2014, and the trickle effect of that means that colleges and universities are expected to see major declines in enrollments by the second half of the 2020s. Known as the "enrollment cliff", this decrease in the population of potential college students has major economic repercussions in higher education.

Smaller, regional schools and community colleges will likely feel the effects in a more profound way. Private schools may not be as affected, but with a limited population, the overall numbers simply will not support the trends seen over the past 50 years. Consider that enrollments in American colleges have increased 27% in the past 19 years, but are expected to drop by 15% over the next decade.

A reduction in student enrollments will translate into less income for schools, which will result in leaner budgets. Many colleges will be under pressure to cut liberal arts courses and expand professional programs. As job trends change, schools will be expected to develop curriculums and programs that feed students into vibrant job categories.

The enrollment cliff highlights the need for effective application of technology to manage admissions and enrollment. As Carleton College economist, Nathan Grawe, said, "Students are going to be a hot commodity, a scarce resource." Clearly, this market will become increasingly competitive.

But students are already facing a debt crisis of epic proportions. In the past 30 years, tuition costs have risen 231% (adjusted for inflation), which has resulted in almost 50 million Americans carrying $1.5 trillion in debt — more than credit cards or auto loans.

Young people are also facing a rapidly changing workforce, where higher education may not seem to offer the same road to prosperity that it once did. In increasing numbers, Americans are opting to skip college and enter the workforce in skilled and unskilled jobs, further exacerbating the issues with declining enrollment.

The Hechinger Report calls this, "A crisis that few outside higher education even knows exists," and goes on to explain, ""a dip in the birth rate means there are fewer 18-to-24-year olds leaving high schools, especially in the Midwest and Northeast. This has coincided with an even more precipitous decline in the number for students older than 24, who experts say have been drawn back into the workforce as the economy improves, dragging down enrollment at community colleges and private, for-profit universities that provide mid-career education."

Using automation to address enrollment decline

For all higher education institutions — public and private schools, community college and four-year schools, for research-intensive universities and liberal arts colleges — student-based revenues are the largest single component of their budget. The dance between finding qualified students and supporting the financial necessities of the college means that "revenue" takes on a variety of forms, but mostly come down to tuition and fees, Pell Grants and third-party payer scholarships, federal or state per-capita allocations, room and board payments, parking fees, bookstore and collateral purchases, event attendance and participation fees, and a host of other services account for significant income.

Within the university setting, automation is the foundation for almost everything that students, faculty, and staff will experience in their time at the school. Consider all the aspects of school life that can be improved with effective applications, including things like financials (student financial aid, grant and scholarship management), enrollment (smooth registration and enrollment processes, class assignments), and the university experience (health services, student activities).

Automation has shown to have vastly improved the flow of student data across various university systems and to third-parties like financial institutions and health providers. There are so many stakeholders that contribute to the student experience, and ultimately those who do it best will be more competitive in attracting and enrolling students. For schools facing a drop-off in enrollment, just the benefit of speed allows them to be highly responsive throughout the entire student lifecycle.

Most schools are scrambling to make sense of the future and a host of solutions are being put into practice. Some are looking to make drastic tuition cuts, but an institution can only reduce revenue so much. Others are specializing their focus and offerings, but that could leave them inflexible for when future changes need to be made to meet changing market needs.

Those that are going to find a way through the enrollment crash are those who are willing to be innovative and flexible, and operate with an approach that captures the attention of potential students. The defining factor will be how schools use technology. More importantly will be how they divide their technology applications between in-house needs and in marketing efforts. There are five key ways that innovative schools can be successful:

1. Improve the Student Experience with Technology Innovation

College students are discerning consumers, and among the desired attributes they seek in their schools is savviness with technology. This is among the most important things that schools need to know as they increase efforts to compete for students.

It's clear that schools that deploy technology to students will have a major advantage over those that don't. A survey by teaching platform company Top Hat found that 75% of college students feel that digital devices help them comprehend classroom information better, and that 94% of students want to use mobile apps to stay more connected to school services and activities. Student relationship management vendor, Ellucian, discovered that 87% of college students made a school's technology prowess and innovation a major determining factor in deciding which college to attend.

This technology, however, doesn't exist in a vacuum. Schools need processes and applications that provide student services that are delivered fast, efficiently, and through digital form factors like Web browsers, smart phones, tablets, and Internet of Things (IoT) devices.

Consider some of the daily aspects of student life that are conducted through school services and require processes for scheduling and organization. Just a small sample includes:

- Housing
- Food services
- Class registration
- Financial aid and scholarships
- On-campus transportation
- Student safety
- Student recreation
- Healthcare

In most schools, each of these services is built around a physical location, traditional business hours, forms, and multiple touchpoints. But young people are accustomed to doing almost everything through their phones; operating with too many steps can be confusing to those who are accustomed to ordering a pizza, paying the water bill, and checking today's news headlines, all on their phones. Their version of life is seamless, integrated, and highly connected; outside of that type of experience, students might struggle. Beyond just the day-today aspects of managing their lives, students who are accustomed to a digital activity may quickly become alienated in an environment that takes them too far outside their comfort zone.

2. Automate Recruiting and Admissions to Increase Engagement

A 2017 study of higher education admissions directors reported that 66% of colleges and universities fell short of their enrollment goals, which the report attributed to poor awareness of individual schools, and a lack of focused recruiting efforts. While the report shows an indication of what's to come, it also demonstrates that there is much that can be done to rectify this issue.

Today's colleges and universities have to act like marketers and need to think in terms of things like lead-generation and its necessary components, like effective response, follow-up, and conversion optimization. Most schools have a compelling message and brand that can create enthusiasm and awareness for potential students. The key is to put together the right stack of tools and strategies to move those prospects from interested parties to members of the student body.

The vast majority of schools rely mostly on social media and websites to convey curated images of their schools, and to communicate calendar-driven milestones like admissions deadlines. What's missing is a targeted approach that helps schools not only identify solid candidates, but nurtures them through the path from early engagement, through an educational process, to ultimately applying for admissions.

To optimize the process, schools can rely on Process Director's case management capabilities and the ability to build and deploy applications through low code development. This makes it easy to build and deploy sophisticated digital applications that emphasize a human-directed work style. A case management approach enables each student's file to be moved through the processes and milestones required by admissions departments. Process Director applies automation to improve how and where applications are routed, and individual admissions team members are equipped with the tools necessary to collaborate, advocate, and discuss students and the factors being weight to determine acceptance. In the higher education applicant process, this includes: 1) screening, sorting, and scoring; 2) individual analysis; 3) committee collaboration; and 4) decision.

Among the key features that support the admissions process is document workflow management. Students often need to submit multiple documents, including transcripts, recommendation letters, and other documents that speak to their fitness as a potential student. Process Director offers a document workflow management system that empowers team members to rapidly create filtered searches and tabular reports with a few keystrokes. Reviewing task lists, browsing document folders, or searching for a specific asset about a particular student, Process Director Knowledge Views are easy to configure and even easier to use.

3. Reduce the Complexity of Financial Aid Management

Colleges and universities must operate fairly complex financial aid systems in order to attract and retain students. As the enrollment cliff approaches, schools will need to demonstrate breadth of financial aid offerings, and efficiency in delivering it.

Unfortunately, however, most of the processes and workflows that support grants and scholarships exist in a combination of paper-based formats and disparate digital repositories, which can make it difficult to identify and utilize the necessary data. Without a system for moving this data from intake to funding, colleges could lose opportunities to demonstrate a student-first approach. Fortunately, BPM and workflow enable higher education institutions to facilitate the requests of students to help them fund their education.

Automation is the foundation of simplifying grant and scholarship management, and it leads to faster funding and better communication. Just as workflow has enabled student registration, it is also being used by colleges and universities to facilitate the flow of that data of students, financial institutions, and universities so it can be evaluated and and disbursed to meet needs based on individual cases. Access to this data is only one aspect of the process. Utilizing it and processing it with the right permissions and with speed give all parties the best shot at ensuring grants and scholarships are awarded most effectively.

But the process-driven coordination of financing, collection, and student lifecycle management demands an effective workflow framework that incorporates activity among government bodies, non-profits (who are often the benefactors who distribute scholarship money), students, parents/guardians, and financial aid departments within the schools The output of this effort is when funds are supplied through grants or scholarships. But, to ensure that schools are making the ideal moves to finance students, they need a solution to navigate this intricate web of decision-makers and groups in an organized fashion.

Managing workflows for grant and scholarship awards with a platform like Process Director helps present a clear picture to scholarship and grant administrators of all aspects of the financial aid process. Accuracy, accountability, approvals, and create efficient processes, and Process Director's clean, user-friendly interface encourages adoption and usage.

Financial aid processes typically require the input of multiple sources, and not all of them exist within the same organization. Process Director can apply a case management approach which is optimized to coordinate the activity of all involved in the process. This includes university departments like the Office of Financial Aid, Admissions, Registration and Academic Records. External groups include banks and other funding sources, government agencies who disburse grant money, and private institutions and individuals who fund private scholarships.

With crucial enrollment numbers at stake, it is essential that schools demonstrate efficacy at delivering financial aid services in a fast, reliable way. Procedure Director generates arrangement among, and between, process phases and different information sources. The result is a system that's inclusive of participants, allowing efficiency, compliance, and consistency.

4. Apply Low-Code Development and a Predictive Approach

With a simple user interface, Process Timeline provides non-developers with a way to compose, manage, and modify business processes. Data and analysis related to processes, such as duration and usage, are delivered in a continuous fashion as processes are running. The benefit to organizations is more involvement by business users who are most informed about effective ways to address business problems. Organizations recognize significant advantages through features such as:

Simplify Process Automation

Time is essential for schools to maintain the normal cadence of the academic calendar. With the help of a tool like Process Timeline, processes can operate simultaneously and in parallel with other applications and processes to deliver the concept of time-awareness to processes and workflows. This predictive analysis with case management provides a unique way to identify patterns in data, and apply that to school-related processes. Late actions, or actions that Process Timeline predicts will be late—are highlighted and identified.

Maintain Process Consistency

Process Timeline delivers notifications to users as soon as there is an indication that some future task is predicted to be late. Users can also apply automated directions through Process Timeline which will escalate or re-route activities to account for the predicted delay. Processes are continuously evaluated and compared against past experience and current status to make accurate predictions.

Low-code Application Development

With Process Timeline, individuals and teams can build and deploy efficient, robust workflows and business processes for all departments within a school, all without requiring specialized programming skills.

5. Deliver Unique Mobile Experience

Today's students have grown up with a device in their hands, and they feel more attached to organizations that support mobile engagement. Sixty-eight percent of today's college students believe they will improve understanding and retention of knowledge if they can use mobile devices for tests. A McGraw-Hill study discovered that 4 out of 5 college students felt that school-sponsored mobile tools helped them save time, boosted their grades, and provided them with a more complete education.

For students in today's colleges and universities, mobile app usage is not just a luxury, but a critical part of managing their lives. The time, financial, social, and even educational aspects of their lives are mobile extensions of the many processes they are involved in every day. And increasingly, those different processes converge in a way that is critical to determining their success as college students.

Mobile technology, therefore, plays a significant role in how students feel about the schools they consider, and this is a critical factor when facing the enrollment cliff. For one thing, as schools can demonstrate a willingness to use mobile as an interface for engagement. It gives students the ability to take care of the school-related administrative aspects of their lives, and also have a portal to become connected through the extracurricular fabric of the school.

The mobile experience will be apparent to students as soon as they start searching for schools. They will see that forms and processes for things like financial aid, accessibility, registration, and the myriad of other processes in their lives, are easily available through their smartphones and other devices. This engenders a sense that the school is more tightly connected to the things that students are trying to achieve by being part of the campus environment

Just putting information in a mobile app, however, won't be enough. IT departments at universities have to find ways to capture the information, processes, forms, and other data that are critical to student success, and present it in a seamless, effective way.

A mobile app, developed for student purposes, brings together the processes and data from various applications and delivers it in an accessible way that provides students with more control and connectedness. Packaging these processes together through workflow provides a completely new element to the student experience. It empowers students with the ability to manage the timelines and requirements demanded of them so they can take advantage of school-related opportunities, meet important deadlines, and become active in campus life.

There will be a lot of coordinated processes and efforts required by colleges and universities if they want to avoid major enrollment changes as the higher education enrollment cliff gets closer. But with the right type of foundational technology that enables digital transformation, schools can stand apart from their competitors by delivering a comprehensive, efficient, and engaging student experience.

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