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The great realignment and the
impact on the student experience



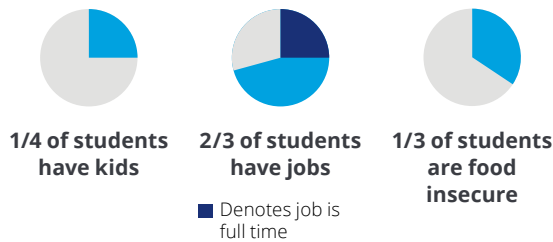
Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated an evolutionary process within the industry that was already in slow but steady motion. Those shifts included an expansion and adoption of hybrid and online classes as well as shared services delivery in administrative functions. Many institutions are still finding the right balance of in-person and remote operations. As this transition unfolds, it is vital to consider how new ways of working affect higher education's primary stakeholder: the students. Perhaps the most essential part of the Great Realignment in higher education is the renewed effort to center on the student; here, we discuss emerging student needs and characteristics that will define higher education going forward and the opportunities colleges and universities have to address related emerging challenges.



Today's students

Demographics



Half of today's students¹ are financially independent, meaning they bear sole responsibility for finding the means to pay for college; more than half live somewhere other than with family or campus housing. A quarter of students have dependents of their own, and almost two-thirds work (40% of working students have full time jobs). Two in five students are 25 or older, and more than one in three do not consistently know where their next meal is coming from.

These realities all intersect with different experiences accessing learning and programming. Students may avail themselves of hybrid learning opportunities but spotty internet, crowded or chaotic living situations, and/or rigid faculty expectations for student engagement and performance can exacerbate the challenges raised by evolving delivery methods paired with emerging student profiles.

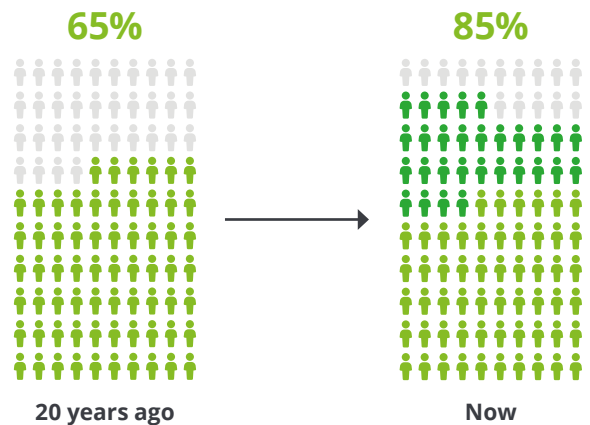
While first-time, full-time residential students directly from high school have historically driven the structure

and delivery of higher education, they are a shrinking demographic. The older, and often more burdened, student described above is becoming the norm, and will drive institutions' efforts to realign in order to support them. Those students are engaging in higher education because they need valuable skills and employable credentials quickly. These changing dynamics have direct implications for academic portfolios and pedagogy, which are ironically the areas in which higher education has perhaps the most difficulty with rapid change.



Academics

20 years ago, 65% of students sought to attend college because it would give them access to better jobs; that number is now 85%.



In an economy searching for qualified talent², students are increasingly looking to higher education for focused upskilling³ that will train them for better jobs and improve their career and life circumstances. Regardless of the age or status of the student, career outcomes are the driving force behind students' engagement with higher education. In fact, more than 80% said getting a job was a key factor in their decision to attend a university⁴. This number has risen recently, up from two thirds twenty years ago⁵; bringing the academic "product" that institutions offer into the front and center for their learners.

Further, given the prior experience a growing number of students bring to the classroom – from other postsecondary education, jobs, military service, and elsewhere – they are looking for institutions that can quantify the value of that experience and apply it toward degree completion. Even better, many students in the midst of their own careers seek new ways of assessing their learning that are more centered on what they can do rather than how well they test.



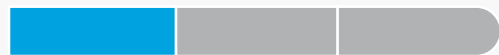
Student life & mental health

Adjusting to a new normal post-COVID has exacerbated a long ongoing student mental health crisis in higher education, with a recent study reporting that the prevalence of depression and anxiety on college campuses rose by 135 and 110 percent, respectively, from 2013 to 2021. 50% of students report a decrease in study hours and an associated decline in their academic performance⁶. It is unsurprising, then, that more than three-quarters of undergraduate students considering dropping out cite emotional stress as the primary driver⁷ in their decision.

The stressors of this mental health crisis are not evenly distributed. Students of color⁸ and first-generation college students⁹ have borne the brunt of the pandemic's toll, being more likely to have experienced financial hardship, food and housing insecurity, and less likely to live in safe, stable environments in which to pursue their studies.



90% of counseling centers have seen increasing demand for their services



33% of students are seeking counseling, double what it was ten years ago



75% of institution presidents list student mental health as a top concern

This mental health crisis has driven greater demand across higher education institutions for mental health and counseling services. A 2020 survey¹⁰ of college counseling center directors found that more than 90% of their centers experienced higher demand than the previous year, with one third of students seeking counseling¹¹, a number that has doubled over the last ten years. University presidents have taken note: an April 2021 survey found 73% of university presidents¹² ranked student mental health as their most pressing issue.

Adapting to changing student needs requires changing institutional operations to support their needs. Deloitte has identified the following three related opportunities to do so.



Opportunities to better serve students

Meet students where they are

As the profiles and characteristics of students accessing higher education diversify, higher education leadership should consider positioning their institutions to meet those students where they are. It is well-established that cultural competency is critical to good educational practice. Educators with a basic understanding of how students' identities shape their journeys, and the curiosity and vulnerability to navigate new questions and conversations with a sense of empathy, can be transformative agents¹³ for students who may otherwise feel insecure in postsecondary environments.

Though Student Affairs professionals have acknowledged¹⁴ for years that they have a responsibility to extend support to students in all learning situations, those practices have yet to be widely adopted¹⁵. Models of student supports designed around the concept of the "traditional" residential student matriculating right from high school have constrained development of mechanisms to support emerging student populations. Institutions who wish to effectively serve these populations will need to thoughtfully structure and source talent in student support roles. Prioritizing wrap-around and holistic supports while helping students navigate challenging circumstances both within their academic and non-academic lives is imperative to student success. Cultivating peer and cohort connections, maintaining social programming, and adding touchpoints with students who are on-campus residents help to cultivate a sense of belonging for students.



Continue prioritizing student mental health

To address this mental health crisis, higher education institutions can expand access to mental health services for faculty, staff, and students by hiring more mental health professionals and/or leveraging third party services. Adoption of tele-health technology and more flexible models of care has been effective and lowered barriers to receiving care. This model has also demonstrated efficacy in adolescents and could potentially enable shared mental health services between partnered or same-system institutions.

Universities may also need to explore non-traditional methods to support the mental health of their student and staff populations. For example, the African-American Knowledge Optimized for Mindfully-Healthy Adolescents (AAKOMA¹⁶) Project and Steve Fund¹⁷ have established evidence-based group psychotherapy

targeted at students of color towards addressing population-specific mental health challenges. Higher education institutions could translate these and similar programs into their own mental health offerings and hire staff capable of leading them.



Match Academic Offerings and Practice to Student Needs

In adapting to this “next normal,” higher education cannot adjust its administrative operations alone. They should reshape their academic portfolios to meet the needs of both students and the workforce; this means valuing and awarding credit for prior learning, integrating experiential learning, delivering a wide variety of course content remotely and asynchronously, and making curricula flexible enough to onboard students with prior skills and develop those skills into a new level of marketability.

To anticipate and meet this growing demand for upskilling/reskilling opportunities, faculty should prepare to reconfigure coursework to align more closely with workforce needs and embed credentials with inherent workforce value into degree pathways. These refined curricula should then provide meaningful progress towards a degree over time.

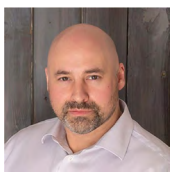
Types of academic credentials aside, centers for teaching and learning have continued to support faculty teaching in new online or hybrid modalities throughout the pandemic. While most institutions of higher education have some online offerings, the quality and pedagogy of those offerings vary widely between institutions as faculty struggle with online approaches that are just repackaged versions of in-person learning. Considerable support and professional development for faculty will be critical as institutions look to refine these practices; otherwise, they may risk losing swaths of students due to outmoded technology and teaching practices.



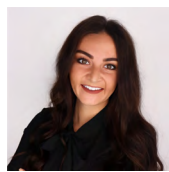
Closing

As higher education emerges from the tumultuous pandemic-dominated period of transition to the next normal, it is vital that the programmatic, curricular, pedagogical, and support structures that emerge be centered on the student experience. Higher education can expect that a nimbler and more responsive operating model will be essential for adjusting to the emerging environment. In this iterative process of changing and adapting to the times, it is vital that universities stay focused on the stakeholders at the heart of their mission: the students who inform the work of a university and define its future.

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