



THE UNIVERSITY
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Message from the Publisher

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Social issues have become a key focus in higher education, especially since the global health pandemic, has amplified the gap between the rich and the poor, in society. The latter having very little access to basic social amenities such as food, proper housing, adequate health-care, information and communication technologies among other things. The ability to access these basic human needs have deeply impacted on how citizens access higher education and the length of time they can afford to remain in the education system and complete their education. They also impact learning outcomes and the morale of staff in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) who are tasked with delivery of education, in these institutions.

This issue of Trends in Higher Education explores some of these factors using scientific data to inform the discussion. It also provides evidence of how colleges are coming up with innovative ways to resolve these social issues. The lessons learnt from these examples can become quite useful to policy makers in HEIs, in the Caribbean and globally as they come to terms with rising social issues and trying to keep their students in the classrooms, in a post- pandemic world.

I hope you enjoy reading this volume of Trends in Higher Education.

Trends in Higher Education - Social Issues Affecting Higher Education Institutions

Introduction

This issue of Trends in Higher Education focuses on the social issues impacting Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). As the pandemic wanes, HEIs are concerned about addressing issues such as the relevance of universities, low staff morale and students' success rates, among other things. These topics are explored in this volume using findings from scientific research to provide insights on how colleges are treating with these issues and also, some of the solutions that are offered.

Relevance of college

Although college enrolment was on the decline in the pre-pandemic¹ period, a new study highlights why these trends have been occurring among persons between the ages of 18-30 who graduated from high school and either dropped out of a two- or four-year college or never attended². The study noted that:

- Nearly 40% of respondents stated that the cost of college is keeping them away.
- roughly one in five young adults say higher education isn't worth the money.
- 13% said that they don't plan to go to college.
- 46% indicated they definitely plan on going/returning to college.
- 41% were unsure.

Although a key obstacle to college education was money, respondents indicated that a wide range of support would help them earn or complete a degree (June 2022). See Table 1 and 2.

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Table 1: Key Barriers to College		Table 2: Key Enablers to College	
Reasons	%	Reasons	% (Extremely helpful/helpful)
Too expensive/don't want to take on (more) debt	38%	Having more flexibility in programmes to fit your life	76%
Too stressful	27%	Being able to get more education without additional debt	75%
More important to get a job and make money	26%	Financial-aid adviser who can help with financial aid, scholarships, and questions about managing money	75%
Unsure about major/future career	25%	Job counsellor to help make connections, prepare for interviews, and find jobs	73%
Not worth the money	21%	Having opportunities to get real-world, hands-on experience while in school	72%
Family obligations	19%	Having a free class for all new students on managing personal finances	71%
Did not enjoy going to school	18%	Counsellor to help figure out what to study and what classes to take	71%
Unsure how to pick the right classes	16%	Free laptop and internet access when enrolled	70%
Can get the skills and credentials elsewhere	16%	Assistance with costs of living, such as child care and free transportation	70%
COVID/Didn't want to take virtual classes	14%	Knowing that all your classes will be in person	44%

Source: June, 2022.

Respondents indicated that on-the-job training is the most likely post-high-school opportunity to be seen as an “excellent” value (June 2022) thus, highlighting shifts in the education marketplace.

Staff morale

During the last academic year, the presence of low morale within multiple HEIs (SCUP Spring 2022) and among higher education professionals (McClure 2022) was highlighted. The following themes were highlighted as responsible for low morale: uncompetitive salaries/low compensation, inadequate staff and ballooning workloads, issues of autonomy, (de)valuing of expertise, tensions between various categories of staff, and devaluing of lessons learnt and experiences gained during the pandemic.

Citing the findings from interviews by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* with 60 current and former higher-education professionals, Ellis (2021) concluded that persons wanted a change in the relationship they had with their employers. For some, this included better work-life balance while for others, it meant exploring jobs outside of the academe or leaving the institution and starting their own consulting firms or taking corporate jobs. Moreover, faculty and staff members stated that they no longer trust university leaders to have their best interests at heart. Consequently, higher education employees are assessing how work fits into their lives. This, Ellis (2021) noted as alarming for a profession that “thinks of itself as a calling and has long been seen as a stable employer with solid benefits.”

Several solutions have been proposed to boost morale within the sector. These include but are not limited to:

- (i) making mental health and well-being a strategic time-bound measurable priority.
- (ii) addressing toxic workplace behaviour through an integrated set of practices namely, deliberate workplace inclusion practices, providing effective individual growth, learning, and development programmes.
- (iii) promoting sustainable work practices such as ensuring decent and fair pay, equitable workload distribution.
- (iv) engaging in listening tours, gathering regular employee feedback and acting on it.

Enrolment trends

During the pandemic, enrolment at HEIs fell. According to Fischer (2022) nearly 1.3 million students disappeared from US colleges. Moreover, college attendance among undergraduates fell almost 10% since the emergence of COVID-19. For the Spring 2022, enrolment dropped 4.7% from the year before.

Although public confidence in college is declining, Fischer (2022) noted that nearly seven in ten high-school graduates immediately go on to pursue, although not necessarily complete, some sort of post-secondary education. Noting that remaining subset is likely to be difficult to recruit and that the US is dealing with the effects of a demographic cliff³, Fischer (2022) projected that over the next decade that

the “pool of applicants for two-year and regional four-year institutions could contract by 10 percent.”

This has left HEIs to consider who they should enrol. Among the non-traditional students they are targeting are adults particularly those who attended college but did not complete their degree. This group numbers some 39 million Americans (or 1 in 5 persons over age 18) in 2020, up nearly 9% in two years (Mangan 2022). While some former students may be interested in returning to college, there are challenges such as work, family obligations, and cost of education.

A 2021 Gallup and Lumina survey examined perspectives of the current, previous, and never enrolled persons and found that:

- demand for higher education is high among those who have never enrolled before and those who have stopped out of their coursework.
- 44% of those who have never enrolled in higher education training or a formal programme toward a degree report they have considered enrolment in the past two years.
- 85% of those who stopped out recently report they have considered re-enrolling in courses, and 56% of those who stopped out before the pandemic report they have also considered re-enrolment in the past two years.
- 20% of respondents said they are unenrolled because they do not see value in additional training/education and 18% said that a degree does not align with their beliefs or values.

Promoting student success

As students returned to campus in Fall 2021, McMurtrie (2022) noted that many struggled to integrate into campus life following a period of isolation and online learning, a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. That led administrators and faculty to take a deeper look at the connections among mental health, feelings of

belonging, and the ability to learn. Consequently, HEIs are placing more emphasis on teaching them a blend of social and academic skills; embedding peer mentoring and tutoring into undergraduate life; emphasising belonging and engagement in course design; focusing on wellness across campus; and reaching out to students as soon as they show signs of academic struggle. Several HEIs have designed and implemented programmes to support students such as the summer bridge programmes that combine general-education coursework with coaching, tutoring, and discussion of college-success strategies and an expanded orientation programme. Additionally, HEIs have built wraparound supports such as tutoring and peer mentoring, into the classroom to support student success, including supplemental instruction.

In addition, students are reporting high levels of anxiety. Gallup and the Lumina Foundation (2022) stated that the majority (71%) of bachelor and associate degree students said emotional stress was among the most important reasons they have considered withdrawing in the past six months. This has led some campuses to foster wellbeing as campus-wide theme or hire more health-care workers, ramp-up advertising of wellness programmes, and focus on preventative care. There is a proposal to allow students to choose a “designated advocate” who would be notified by their college if they are facing “challenging circumstances,” including physical injuries, mental-health problems, disciplinary issues (Myskow 2022).⁴

Another option is the model of the personal tutor present at UK universities. Allsion, Bassnett and Yale (2022) noted that the personal tutor is “someone with whom a student can chat over coffee or something stronger, about issues that are sometimes only vaguely formulated” and then more specialised advice or help can be pinpointed. The authors drew reference to Newcastle University that states on its website that students will be allocated a personal tutor,

who “will support you throughout your time with us.”

Conclusion

Some of the social issues, which affect higher education speaks to the lingering impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sector. As debate on the relevance of higher education continues, HEIs have the opportunity to identify a new subset of the population to recruit. In addition, the impact of demographic shifts will affect the traditional base forcing HEIs to identify a new set of cohorts. Concern with staff morale and student success are not necessarily new areas for the sector but may require more targeted supportive services and interventions to ensure the well-being of these groups. Campuses can also use this opportunity to foster an additional sense of social engagement and sense of belonging for students and staff. Overall, the issues and concerns raised within this Bulletin will require HEIs to pay closer attention to their stakeholders, operations and services.

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¹ Data from the “Report on the Condition of Education 2022,” produced by the National Center for Education Statistics, show that the decline in undergraduate enrolment began in 2011. By the fall of 2019 (pre-pandemic) the number of undergraduates had shrunk by more than 1.5 million students. Data from the fall of 2020 show a 7-percent drop in male undergraduates from the year before. See Audrey Williams June. “[Higher Ed’s Enrollment Crash Has Been Underway for Years](#).” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 15, 2022.

² The study — a partnership between Edge Research, HCM Strategists, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation — reflects the responses of 1,675 people in seven states (California, Florida, New York, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington) who were surveyed in the spring of 2022.

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UWI “Triple A” Strategic Plan:

Did you know the theme for the UWI “Triple A” Strategic Plan Phase II is **Revenue Revolution**?

To learn more about the Plan, click on the following link <http://www.uwi.edu/uop/strategic-plan-about-plan>

³ Demographic cliff for higher education refers to the dramatic drop in the traditional, college-aged population beginning around 2025. It results from a decline in birth rates that began with the financial crisis and recession of 2008.

⁴ Following the death of Katie Meyer, a student and soccer goalie at Stanford University, her parents are proposing a new university policy they believe could have helped their daughter when she was in crisis. See Katie’s Save - <https://www.katiessave.org/>. The issue of college female athletes and mental health was reported on by Nell Gluckman. “[It’s Definitely a Crisis: Why Women in College Sports Are Struggling With Mental Health](#).” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 6, 2022.