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Enrollment Management in Dynamic Times: Strategies from the Pandemic Era to Improve Community College Recruitment, Enrollment, and Retention

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ABSTRACT

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was followed by steep declines in community college enrollment in the United States, requiring institutions to quickly adapt to changing economic conditions and student needs. Through interviews and focus groups with 11 enrollment management leaders from community colleges across the country, this paper explores the strategies that community colleges employed to try to increase enrollment and retention during the first two years of the pandemic. We found that participants instituted a wide variety of targeted recruitment and enrollment tactics, while their institutions also made changes to academic programs and student support services to improve enrollment and retention. These strategies were often dependent on their institution's local context and were in many cases only possible with the support of pandemic relief funding, leaving open questions about the long-term sustainability of pandemic-era enrollment management practices.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to understand what changes community colleges made during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic to try to increase enrollment and improve retention. We use data from twelve interviews and four focus groups with eleven enrollment managers at community colleges across the United States to describe the range of strategies that community colleges put in place. Colleges used technology and community resources for targeted recruitment efforts, made changes to their academic programs to make them more attractive and accessible, and expanded and personalized their student support services. This paper contributes to the literature on lessons learned from the pandemic to support enrollment management development in the community college sector.

Introduction

With relatively low tuition and minimal admission requirements, community colleges have often been thought of as a gateway to higher education (Dowd, 2008), providing students an opportunity to build skills to prepare for the workforce or to earn lower-cost credits before transferring to a four-year institution (Grubbs, 2020). Public two-year institutions also play an important role in providing postsecondary access to underrepresented students of color, first-generation, and low-income students (Ma & Baum, 2015). In Fall 2022, 53% of Native American undergraduates, 39% of Black undergraduates, and 48% of Hispanic undergraduates attended a community college compared to 38% of undergraduates overall (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2024). About a third of community college students are the first in their family to attend college, 13% are single parents, and

23% are students with disabilities (AACC, 2024). Moreover, despite an enrollment decline of 2.5 million students between 2012 and 2022 (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center [NSCRC], 2013, 2023), community colleges continue to serve a large portion of the postsecondary student population, enrolling about 30% of all postsecondary students in the years immediately preceding the pandemic (Juszkiewicz, 2020).

However, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, enrollment at community colleges dropped precipitously. While overall enrollment at public and private four-year colleges was relatively stable in fall 2020, the community college sector experienced a 10% enrollment decline compared to the previous year, fueled in part by large decreases in first-time student enrollment as well as steep declines in popular major fields such as liberal arts (−11.9%) and business (−9.2%; NSCRC, 2020a). These enrollment declines impacted the majority of community colleges, with nine out of ten community college enrollment managers reporting a decline in fall 2020 enrollment and more than 50% reporting a decline of more than 10% (Kelderman, 2020). Community college enrollment declines in fall 2020 were particularly steep among Black (-12.8%) and Native American (-13.1%) undergraduate student populations (NSCRC, 2020b).

While there have been multiple studies that discuss how colleges responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, few focus on recruitment and enrollment practices at community colleges specifically, and those that do typically examine only a single institution or a few institutions within the same state (e.g., Bulman & Fairlie, 2022; D'Amico et al., 2022; Ison et al., 2022). This research contributes to the literature on developing enrollment management practices for a post-COVID era by examining the recruitment, enrollment, and retention strategies implemented during the first two years of the pandemic at a small group of community colleges from 11 states, representing a variety of sizes and geographic locations. Through focus groups and interviews with enrollment managers between spring 2021 and fall 2022, we address the following research question: What strategies did institutional leaders at community colleges use to improve recruitment, enrollment, and retention during the pandemic?

The recruitment and enrollment strategies that community colleges employed during a time of national crisis are applicable beyond the pandemic era as institutions look toward serving a changing population in the future (Bransberger et al., 2020; NSCRC, 2023). With recent data showing that community college enrollment is beginning to recover after the pandemic, we believe that sharing productive strategies across the sector can help institutions to sustain or expand their enrollment goals.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted postsecondary education in the United States in unprecedented ways. During the early months of the pandemic, colleges across sectors had to quickly adapt to government-enforced lockdowns, shifting coursework and student services to virtual environments where possible (Cameron et al., 2021; Felson & Adamczyk, 2021; Nguyen & Rabinowitz, 2023). As campuses began to reopen in some states in the fall of 2020, many colleges had to learn how to safely bring students back to campus while observing heightened health and safety precautions (American Council on Education, 2020). Many community colleges also had to grapple with other challenges during the pandemic, such as responding to racial inequity and widespread social unrest (Wang et al., 2023) as well as struggling with unstable funding sources, all while adapting to meet public health demands (Floyd, 2021).

The steep enrollment drops in fall 2020 created further challenges for community colleges, and although decreases were widespread in the sector, the severity of the decline varied significantly by institution. Research from the California Community College System shows that while some colleges reported negligible declines (2% or less), outliers on the extreme end of the spectrum reported losses of up to 43% (Bulman & Fairlie, 2022). Nationally, immediate enrollment among high school graduates fell by 13% in fall 2020 as compared to fall 2019, with particularly pronounced declines among

students graduating from high schools with large proportions of low-income or racially minoritized students (NSCRC, 2021). Enrollment rates at some community colleges were also impacted by the types of courses offered, many of which required in-person, skills-based instruction that was eliminated or significantly constrained during the pandemic by public health protocols (Brock & Diwa, 2021). Declining retention rates over the course of the pandemic also contributed to enrollment loss (Howell et al., 2022), likely due in part to the many financial and personal challenges that students faced as a result of the pandemic (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2021).

Individual community colleges responded to the challenges of the pandemic in a variety of ways, both in terms of providing support to students and adapting recruitment and enrollment practices. With the shift to online instruction, many campuses increased programs to provide students with internet access and technology support in order to complete their academic work or provided additional professional development to faculty to support virtual instruction (D'Amico et al., 2022; McCarthy & Ferreira, 2022; Strayhorn, 2022). Faculty creatively adjusted to shifts in online education, focusing on improving the quality of instruction across modalities, rethinking assessment, and increasing communication with students (Hart et al., 2024). Some colleges shifted student services online and increased their focus on meeting students' basic needs, such as preventing food and housing insecurity (D'Amico et al., 2022; Strayhorn, 2022), while other schools were unable to maintain the same level of student services as prior to the pandemic (Zottarelli et al., 2022). Additionally, while health concerns and the challenges of the virtual environment disrupted some in-person enrollment and recruitment practices, many community colleges were able to pivot to adapt to pandemic conditions (Brock & Diwa, 2021; Ison et al., 2022; Strayhorn, 2022). Some community colleges devised more flexible measures for course placement, given challenges to accessing standardized testing during the initial stage of the pandemic (Brock & Diwa, 2021). Research among a group of historically Black community colleges found that many institutions relaxed enrollment, financial aid, and payment deadlines to better accommodate students (Strayhorn, 2022). Another college leaned into its dual enrollment program to bolster enrollment despite pandemic challenges (Ison et al., 2022).

This research builds on this growing body of literature by sharing the recruitment and enrollment strategies used at a group of community colleges over the course of the first two years of the pandemic, with broad implications the future of enrollment management in the community college sector.

Methods

Our research is a qualitative analysis of data from community college enrollment leaders that was collected as part of a larger study examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on a broad range of postsecondary institutions across the United States (reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards at the University of Southern California and the University of Michigan, approval number HUM00199626). The larger study focused on the perspectives of enrollment management leaders due to their ability to provide a high-level understanding of admissions and enrollment policy in light of broader institutional priorities and pandemic era changes. The original research was conducted by a group of scholars with a variety of expertise in the field of higher education, including the third author. This research is a descriptive secondary analysis of the data collected for the larger project. For our research questions, we chose to focus on the qualitative data from community college enrollment leaders (chief enrollment management officers or equivalent) to develop a deeper understanding of both the strategies directly implemented by enrollment managers as well as some of the larger institutional actions taken to support recruitment, enrollment, and retention efforts.

Participants represented institutions ranging in size from single campus communities of 1,400 students to large, multi-campus colleges enrolling over 50,000 students annually (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). Each community college was located in a different state (11 states total) and our sample represented a range of geographic locations, from large urban areas and midsize suburbs to distant rural communities. Nine of the eleven participating institutions serve a more traditional

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of participant institutions.

Characteristic	Number of Institutions
Geographic location	
Large city	2
Midsize city	4
Small city	1
Suburb	2
Town (distant)	1
Rural	1
FTE annual enrollment	
<2,000	2
2,000–5,000	2
5,001–10,000	4
10,001–15,000	1
15,001–20,000	0
20,000 +	2
Pell Grant recipients	
Average	34%
Range	20–54%

Descriptive statistics are based on IPEDS Data from the 2022–2023 academic year, collected via the IPEDS Data Explorer tool. https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data.

college-age population, with at least 60% of their enrollment composed of students under 25 years of age. Four of the colleges are federally-designated minority-serving institutions. All of the institutions represented by the sample served a significant portion of Pell Grant recipients, ranging from 20% to 54% of enrollment. Thus while our sample size of institutions is relatively small, our participants represented a wide range of institutional settings within the community college sector.

Data were collected through four focus groups held in the spring of 2021 (11 participants total), seven individual interviews conducted in the fall of 2021, and five individual interviews in the spring of 2022. Both focus groups and individual interviews were used to collect data as the focus groups allowed for the generation of data based on the interaction of individuals across institutions, while interviews were used to generate deeper data on individuals' perspectives and experiences within their institutional context (Morgan, 1996). Participants in the focus groups were invited to participate in individual interviews, which provided longitudinal data on participants' pandemic adaptations over time, covering pandemic adaptations over the period of spring 2020 through fall 2022. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour and included two or three participants, while each individual interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. Both focus groups and interviews were conducted via Zoom due to pandemic restrictions and the geographic distribution of research team members. All focus group and individual interviews began with participants providing verbal consent to participate in the research, and all participants were offered a gift card to incentivize participation.

Initial data analysis was conducted by the research team for the larger study, who transcribed and coded all of the qualitative data collectively and iteratively using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006) to develop five, high-level themes regarding institutional enrollment management during the pandemic: recruitment, admission, financial aid, enrollment, and retention. The research team for this project then subcoded the data from community college participants. One member of the team first coded all of the data inductively using descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2009) to develop an initial codebook around four prevailing themes and related subthemes (academic program adaptations, student support strategies, services provided, and other recruitment/enrollment strategies). Two members of the research team then deductively coded all of the data excerpts using this codebook, meeting regularly to discuss the emerging themes and to update the codebook as needed. We then thematically examined the coded data to describe the main enrollment management strategies shared by participants, which led us to the three approaches that we share in the findings.

It is important to note that the authors are higher education researchers with a range of institutional experiences, but that we are neither community college practitioners nor enrollment managers and thus share these themes from an outsider's perspective. Additionally, recruiting community college enrollment leaders to participate in this research was a significant challenge within the larger project, resulting in a small sample size for this research. However, the strategies that community colleges used and the longitudinal data from multiple participants has led to important insights into how community college enrollment leaders adapted to the pandemic and continued to adjust their enrollment strategies over time.

Findings

Our participants shared that their institutions implemented three broad approaches to improving recruitment, enrollment, and retention: (a) making academic programs more attractive or accessible; (b) providing holistic student support; and (c) channeling resources into targeted recruitment/enrollment efforts. Our participants shared that academic and student support changes were part of larger institutional efforts to adapt to students' unique needs during the pandemic, but that these changes were also critical in their efforts to attract and retain students. Moreover, the strategies shared here varied greatly from institution to institution, with participants sharing that the turmoil of the pandemic required them to constantly adapt and try new approaches to keep students enrolled and engaged.

Attractive and accessible programs

The most common approach used by participants to address enrollment challenges was to change the structure, format, content, or accessibility of the academic programs that their institutions offered. These changes were expected to both attract and retain students in general, but also to provide greater access to specific populations, such as working parents, older adult students, or high school students.

Adapting course formats and content

Nearly all of the community college enrollment managers we interviewed shared that their institutions made changes to course formats in response to the pandemic, adjusting to include fully online, hybrid, synchronous, asynchronous, or "HyFlex" approaches. Institutions adapted course formats based on their assessment of student preferences, either formally through analyzing institution-level data and surveys, or anecdotally based on student conversations. Some institutions remained committed to offering both in-person and hybrid formats after finding that students were not progressing as well in online courses. Others aimed to expand online options having witnessed the importance of flexibility for non-traditional students, especially those with jobs or family care responsibilities. To better accommodate students' schedules, multiple colleges began offering HyFlex modalities in which students could decide whether to attend online or in-person for each class. One participant shared that this approach allowed students to "choose depending on how your day goes . . . so you can go in person, you can watch Zoom live, or you can go back to recorded modules." Institutions found this approach to be especially attractive to working adults who had inconsistent time commitments outside of coursework.

Multiple institutions also adjusted their course or semester structures more broadly. One college that actually experienced enrollment increases during the pandemic replaced their 16-week term with two 8-week terms so that students had two opportunities to enroll during the semester. The enrollment leader from this college shared that the shortened format particularly benefited students in developmental education:

> What made a difference for students in traditional [developmental] ed courses were eight week courses, because you weren't stuck for 16 weeks in a developmental math class. You had an opportunity to quickly upskill, or reskill even, in math or reading or writing, and then move on to your college-level course.

Another enrollment leader described moving toward a competency-based approach, replacing credit hours with competency milestones and providing students with the flexibility to "set their own schedule and go with their own pace." The competency-based approach required institutions to shift to online and asynchronous formats, incorporate prerecorded videos, and engage in large-scale curriculum restructuring. Several participants also shared that their institutions expanded dual enrollment programs for high school students, increasing the size of programs or adding space to early high school sites on campus. Increasing the size of these programs also increased the recruitment pipeline of potential applicants for traditional academic programs, since students could begin to earn their credentials prior to high school graduation.

Fearing a loss of students to job opportunities, several participants also reported that their institutions adjusted their curricula to meet the labor demand of the local economy. The leader at one technical college emphasized the importance of flexibility and willingness to constantly adapt for this approach: "We can pivot. We can go where the industry needs us. We can shift." These institutions aimed to increase enrollment by partnering with local businesses to shape their curriculum around the skills that students would need to be immediately successful in the workforce, incorporating short-term credentials and apprenticeships into academic programs. One institution even offered some skill-based coursework to community members for free, including EMT training and coding. A few colleges described this strategy as an adaptation to what they perceived to be a broader shift in the higher education landscape, with one leader sharing, "we need to look at how we meet the students, and what the demands are today."

Adjusting admissions requirements and expanding financial aid

Strategies for making programs more open and accessible to students largely played out in the realm of admissions and financial aid. Many institutions adopted more flexible course placement procedures or adjusted admissions requirements for some of the more competitive programs. One institution that had previously used a cutoff score on standardized tests for program admission switched to ranking students based on test scores and admitting based on rank to account for the broader trend of declining test scores. Another school reconsidered the academic prerequisites for some of their healthcare programs, with the enrollment leader sharing:

> We stopped doing test scores amongst everything . . . to remove any barrier that we could for students to get into a program. We looked at all our checklist items that students needed to do while coming into a program. We said, "do they need it really to start the program? Or do they need to have it before clinicals?"

Other flexible policies included replacing standardized test scores with other data sources for course placement or extending the validity of test scores and other academic credentials, such as high school transcripts. In making these adjustments, colleges hoped to remove barriers and broaden access while also sustaining competitive academic programs and leveraging their accessibility as a marketing tool.

Since institutions had little control over tuition policies, which are often set by state governments or boards, our participants described ways that they used financial aid resources and other funding to make programs more financially feasible for students. Many institutions channeled COVID relief funds to students, increasing financial aid or setting up low-barrier emergency funds that students could access with little paperwork and few eligibility requirements. As described by one enrollment leader, "they just needed to let us know that they needed it. It could be used for food, housing bills, whatever their needs were." Another leader reported an enrollment boost from setting up a "tuition free" program, in which they bolstered the standard aid already received by students with emergency funds. Although some relief funding was earmarked for specific populations, some institutions were able to leverage public funding or private donations to expand aid to new student populations, such as dual enrollment, DACA, and international students. Multiple colleges also provided student debt relief

and payment extensions for continuing students. Other policies that colleges used to lower student costs included tuition discounts for students who opted into automatic enrollment, no-penalty withdrawals or "first class free" policies, and banded tuition programs that allowed students to take as many courses as they wanted while only paying for a maximum of 12 credit hours. Beyond the provision of additional aid, colleges also hosted financial aid workshops, provided FAFSA assistance (including one-on-one completion appointments), or dropped application and transcript fees.

Holistic student support

Community college enrollment leaders also shared a variety of approaches to providing more holistic student support, including expanding and systematizing student services, providing access to services in multiple modalities, and offering proactive and personalized support. These strategies were intended to improve retention for enrolled students, but also to provide personalized services throughout the application and enrollment process to support students as they transitioned to college.

Expanding and systematizing services

Participants acknowledged that the pandemic increased student support needs and required colleges to expand the services they provided. At many colleges this meant that institutions took on the role of addressing basic needs, such as opening campus food pantries or using state and federal emergency relief funds to make direct grants to students for living expenses (in addition to financial aid). Our participants shared that their institutions had to provide students with significant technology support through laptop loan programs, distributing WiFi hotspots, and providing virtual technology support to ensure that students could access their virtual coursework and campus services. "We worked with different companies . . . so that we could get students laptops and hotspots," shared one enrollment leader. "We have distributions at our parking lots. We now have a discounted laptop program where students can use our financial aid." Several enrollment managers also discussed the need to build a sense of community among students in a virtual environment. One institution implemented a cohort-based advising program to help students connect with one another, while another college began hosting events on Facebook live to gather students and the broader community. The leader from the latter institution described how staff from across their college contributed to these virtual gatherings:

> Every two weeks, we had a new topic. Some of them were about enrollment or financial aid and the traditional admission type things. Others were about community events, current events, the pandemic. We transitioned all of our performing arts programs to be virtual programs.

An enrollment leader at one institution described attempting to keep student affinity groups running throughout the pandemic so that students could continue to provide mutual support. Several participants discussed boosting career services during the pandemic through implementing career assessments or targeted career counseling services, such as connecting early college high school students with professionals in their career field to provide ongoing mentoring and support.

Many participants referenced the need to collect more data on students' experiences during the pandemic to provide more effective services. Two participants also described ways that their institutions had begun systematizing their approaches to data collection or student services to provide more targeted student support. One enrollment leader discussed how their institution began to collect better data on student outcomes to understand where students needed more support in the college to career pipeline. This participant described broadening the scope of their institutional metrics for student success:

> A lot of our goals are around enrollment, our retention, and graduation rate, but how we're measuring that is how many people we're touching . . . but are they getting employed in their field? Are they transferring? We're starting to look at those types of things and the highest credential, and then how soon are we getting them through? From the time they start, how long? We want to reduce that.

By collecting more in-depth, systematic information on student progress and outcomes, this enrollment leader felt that their institution would be able to better identify potential obstacles to student persistence and completion, and could also then provide more targeted services to help students obtain a credential and transition quickly to the workforce. At another community college, institutional leaders created a systematic approach to connecting students with appropriate services by centralizing all of their student support in a student success center. Students could reach out to the success center for a variety of needs and a generalist would then connect the student with the appropriate personnel if they could not fulfill the student's request directly. This one-stop-shop approach made it easier to connect students with services, rather than relying on students to seek out multiple services at different offices across campus.

Maximizing access through virtual and in-person modalities

Many colleges took the same approach to student services as they did to coursework, offering support in both virtual and in-person formats. Participants shared that during initial phases of the pandemic lockdown, colleges recognized the importance of pivoting to offer critical services in virtual formats so that students could access them off-campus, such as telehealth counseling services and virtual tutoring and advising. At the same time, several participants discussed ways that their institutions maintained in-person access to some services throughout the pandemic to meet the needs of their student population. For example, one enrollment leader shared that maintaining a campus presence for financial services was critical for keeping students enrolled, sharing "our population isn't the most tech-savvy population, and they are under-banked and unbanked for the most part. The ability to come in person to make cash or check transactions was essential for them to continue their education." Another enrollment manager described the importance of setting up socially-distanced computer labs on campus so that students without appropriate technology or internet access could continue to participate in virtual learning.

Additionally, the majority of our participants described ways that they continued to offer dual modalities for accessing services beyond the first year of the pandemic, including virtual advising centers, virtual admissions programs, and virtual access to financial aid services. A participant described this approach as a way to "meet [students] where they were, as opposed to making them come meet us where we were." However, several leaders noted that while continuing virtual services expanded access, it also created new time demands for staff, which could be challenging for teams that were already operating at maximum capacity. One leader described how offering virtual advising improved access for students who could not travel to campus during the day, but that it also led to expectations that advisors would be available after traditional business hours, which was not something that staff members could always accommodate.

Personalized and proactive support

Perhaps most importantly, participants described adapting their overall approach to student support to become more proactive and student-centered, focusing on relationship building, open communication, and trying to proactively identify and address student challenges. Intentionally cultivating supportive relationships between students and faculty or staff was one such strategy that colleges employed. One institution created training programs for faculty members to encourage high-touch practices within and outside of the classroom, such as learning all students' names within the first week of class and meeting with each student individually at least once a semester. Another institution invested in more intensive support for some of their professional programs, pairing adult education support staff with academic content faculty to provide one-on-one remediation to students who needed it. "We had a model where the faculty taught, and then the student attended another hour to get that adult basic education support while they're in the other class," the enrollment leader from this institution described, "giving them that support versus having a complete remedial [course] and then starting with their coursework." The same school also assigned faculty as academic advisors to students within each program so that students had access to personalized, consistent academic support

for the duration of their coursework. Another college employed a dedicated student success team to work with faculty to flag students that were falling behind to increase individualized support. "We're noticing that maybe they're not showing up for class by getting a heads up from faculty members, that type of thing," this enrollment leader shared. "It's almost just getting them before they leave."

Maintaining ongoing channels of communication and proactive student outreach were also key to keeping students connected and providing personalized support, especially when operating in a largely virtual environment. "We're finding that a lot of students that just stay online need a lot more contacts, more touchpoints to keep them going to the point of graduation," one enrollment leader shared. Strategies for creating these touchpoints included utilizing two-way texting applications for responding to student requests for support, creating automatic notifications for students throughout the application process, and conducting individual outreach to improve retention. For example, an enrollment leader at a mid-sized suburban college shared that staff members from across campus were trained to conduct individualized phone calls to support re-enrollment efforts:

> Basically, "Hi, my name is [name]. I'm calling from [college name]. I see that you're a current student, but haven't yet had the opportunity to enroll for the next semester or register for the next semester. I was just calling to see, is there something I can do to help?" Then basically hearing the student. Do I need to plug them in somewhere? Have they forgot their password, and I need to connect them with an IT Help Desk? Are they struggling with the mechanics, if you will, of online registration? Well, then I'm going to connect them with the Registrar's Office. They would like to come back but don't know what course they should be taking? Well, then connect them with advisors . . . They didn't know we had a payment plan? Connect them with a bursar's office. These were the initial camp [of support staff] calling to help. "This is the deal. What can I do?"

This enrollment leader shared that while this strategy was time-intensive, approaching students proactively paid off. "It had a dramatic impact. It really did – just more aggressive effort on retention than [there] had been in the past."

Several participants also described proactive support strategies to prepare students for the transition to college – some of which began before students even enrolled. One college instituted a pre-enrollment survey during the pandemic to ask applicants to identify potential barriers to their success, which staff members then used to connect students to services when they enrolled. Other colleges used summer bridge programs for students who had not met academic benchmarks or created self-paced tutorials to help students learn to navigate college processes. At one institution, students were proactively connected with a career counselor to help them map out their pathway through college before they began their coursework. "A counselor meets them before they even register for the first set of classes," this enrollment leader shared. "Before they even start school, we can get a plan in place for them to be successful."

Targeted recruitment efforts

Finally, our participants also shared many targeted recruitment and enrollment strategies that their admissions and financial aid teams implemented during the pandemic to mitigate enrollment challenges, such as employing high-touch, personalized recruitment outreach, providing enrollment incentives, and capitalizing on community connections and high school programs. While these strategies offered some level of success to institutions, not every strategy was successful across the board. For example, participants reported different levels of return on investment from sending out promotional materials or holding virtual recruitment events. Therefore, the context of each institution and the target population for particular recruitment efforts proved to be important as enrollment management leaders experimented with new approaches.

High-touch strategies and incentives

As part of outreach and enrollment efforts, multiple participants emphasized the importance of individualized, personal connections with students. Similar to the academic and student service adaptations that institutions made, participants shared that they also utilized both virtual and in-

person avenues for student recruitment, allowing for different forms of connection depending on students' preferences. The consensus among participants was that dual modalities of recruitment would outlast the pandemic, with one enrollment manager summarizing the importance of remaining flexible:

> I think [prospective students] will inform how they want to connect with us, because I still think there's a population who really want to see you, talk to you in person, and to make that connection ... We'll offer both and see how folks respond, and then we will just have to adjust as needed based on what their needs are. I think 50/50 may be the way we're thinking.

In the virtual environment, institutions leveraged technology and digital communication tools by using text and digital marketing, social media, geofencing, and data analytics to attain higher response rates from students. One college reported that they hired a dedicated social media coordinator, while others began experimenting with new online platforms for recruitment, such as TikTok or Instagram. AI texting platforms, text notifications, and live chats were also useful throughout the admissions and enrollment process, providing students with live updates on their application status, deadline reminders, and opportunities for immediate connection 24 hours a day. One enrollment leader shared that it was necessary to use multiple technology services to maximize connection:

> We had to get creative, ramped up things like TikTok and other things that we knew high school students were using. The most significant thing that we did with regards to purchasing was a text platform that has some artificial intelligence linked to it. You could actually ask students questions, and they could respond, and it appeared like you were speaking with a college professional. It also gave them direct access to services or action items that we needed them to do.

For some enrollment managers, these platforms were a "game changer" in the recruitment and enrollment process.

In addition to offering multiple avenues of connection, participants shared that their institutions and financial aid teams tried to make their communication more accessible and personalized. One participant described the need to "come off as being a bit more real," attuning the language in recruitment and enrollment materials to be more casual and direct:

> We're going through our enrollment checklist for new students, returning students, and let's cut the very professional language. Let's talk to students like real talk, what do they need to do? Let's get to the bottom line. I think for us, we've really edited ourselves.

Enrollment teams worked to make the language in acceptance letters and financial aid notifications more accessible as well, with several institutions turning to the use of physical mail as a way to offer personalization. One institution returned to mailing financial aid letters, which they believed would be a "nice touch for parents." Another institution sent out postcards, magnets, and letters to graduating high school seniors inviting them to apply. An enrollment manager at an institution with a high applicant-to-enrollee conversion rate emphasized the importance of creating intentional and engaging acceptance letters. This participant's institution made letters colorful, provided detailed information about the student's academic program, and assigned students to a success coach so that "they could immediately call someone the second [the acceptance letter] came in the mail." Some participants also emphasized the importance of timing and persistence in their outreach, with one institution maintaining scheduled contact for two years with students who had not yet completed a credential but had failed to reenroll.

Additionally, several institutions found strategies to leverage new or existing funding sources for student enrollment incentives. To re-attract students who dropped courses during the transition to online learning in the spring of 2020, one college offered students the opportunity to reenroll in those courses for free in the fall semester, marketing it as a one-time only offer to quickly reengage students in their programs. A few institutions provided cash incentives of up to $1,000 to students as enrollment or completion bonuses. One institution even set up a rewards system that awarded

students points for activities such as opting into auto-enrollment or completing the FAFSA, which students could use to win sponsor-funded prizes.

Community and high school connections

As part of their proactive outreach, institutions drew heavily on their communities, recruiting through local businesses, high schools, and community events. A participant described this approach as a need "to reach deeper and wider into the community," sharing that their college had begun partnering with community organizations to "do more of a grassroots recruitment effort." Another enrollment leader shared that their recruitment team went into communities to meet prospective students wherever they could, whether it was shop floors, high school events, or coffee shops. Multiple colleges described taking a proactive approach to attending community events to build brand recognition, with one participant sharing that they had even created an excavation simulator to take to events to attract members of the community to their technical programs. These approaches collectively illustrated the goal of meeting students "where they are, versus having them always come to site."

Many participants also reported that their institutions expanded their recruitment for pre-college students in particular, a population that grew for some institutions during the pandemic. These institutions believed that their dual enrollment and early college high school programs were critical to maintaining a strong enrollment pipeline, especially if the local economy was weak with little need for skills-based credentialing. Enrollment leaders shared a number of strategies for targeting this population, including dedicated staffing for dual enrollment recruitment and strategically marketing either degree or transfer pathways. One college found strong engagement with their digital marketing campaign that promoted the opportunity to earn an associate's degree before high school graduation, while another institution reaped more benefits from their marketing around credit transferability and partnerships with nearby four-year institutions. An enrollment manager from another institution shared that they benefited from increasing their advertising in a school district where the district partially paid dual enrollment tuition, leveraging public funding to attract students to these programs.

Discussion and implications

Facing the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, our participants and their institutions strategically adapted to meet the evolving needs of prospective and current students. In adapting academic programs, student services, and recruitment and enrollment tactics, community college leaders demonstrated flexibility, creativity, and a willingness to experiment with new strategies and tools. Adjusting the structure of academic programs and removing restrictive admissions requirements provided students with more opportunities to enroll and greater flexibility in pursuing a credential. Balancing in-person and virtual formats made academic programs and student services more accessible in virtual environments, while also maintaining critical access to physical campus resources for students who needed them. Expanding and personalizing support services provided students with the tools to succeed and fostered a greater sense of connection to institutions and campus communities. Enrollment leaders also recognized the need for more student-centered approaches to recruitment and enrollment, employing high-touch and individualized strategies to support students throughout the enrollment pipeline and beyond.

The challenges caused by the pandemic incited experimentation and innovation among community college enrollment leaders. Although participants and their institutions continued to employ and refine some of their traditional enrollment and recruitment practices during and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the strategies discussed by our participants were previously untested at their institutions. Several of our participants shared that their institutions had considered some of these changes prior to the pandemic, such as experimenting with new technology platforms or course modalities, but that the pandemic had drastically accelerated the move toward new enrollment management approaches. Across the board, participants agreed that the pandemic required them to be more flexible and to think in new ways about how to best

serve students. One enrollment leader captured the general sentiment of our participants overall, explaining, "I thought I used to know how students wanted our services delivered, I thought I knew where the problems were . . . and then what COVID has taught me is that it's a whole new ball game now." The majority of participants felt that their enrollment management practices were forever changed by the pandemic, and that many of the adaptations initiated during the pandemic were now a permanent part of their ongoing recruitment and enrollment strategies. Institutions will need to continue to collect data on the implementation and outcomes of these new practices, and future research should explore how these strategies can continue to be iterated to maximize their effectiveness beyond the pandemic.

While enrollment leaders demonstrated ingenuity in their experimentation with new practices, they also shared concerns that many of their pandemic era adaptations would be unsustainable long term due to a lack of stable funding. Federal and state emergency funding during the pandemic provided institutions with the means to purchase new technologies, provide enrollment incentives, invest in multiple modality learning, and increase student support services. These investments allowed institutions to become more student-centered and consumer-friendly, but the majority of enrollment leaders were uncertain that their institutions could maintain these programs and services once the additional pandemic funding was exhausted. A few enrollment leaders shared that they had begun to seek sources of external funding from local businesses and community partners to fund scholarships and services, but these financial sources were also not guaranteed to continue past the pandemic. Staff limitations were also a concern, with many departments operating at maximum capacity or repurposing staff members to take on additional enrollment and student support work. These challenges illustrated the larger tension that participants felt between providing a high level of personalized student support while also maintaining financial stability. State and district-specific policies around tuition and funding also played an important role in the financial accessibility of community colleges. Moving forward, state policy makers and institutional leaders alike will have to make difficult decisions about how to best continue to serve their community college student populations, especially in terms of which pandemic innovations to continue financing.

Additionally, the local and community context of each institution proved to be one of the most influential factors in determining which enrollment and recruitment strategies were most successful during the pandemic. Enrollment managers and their institutions took approaches that both catered to and capitalized on local economic needs and the prevailing demographic of prospective students. In communities with a strong local business presence, colleges leaned into their ability to provide important workforce skills and forged new partnerships with local businesses to offer onsite training or to raise additional funds for student aid. These partnerships were crucial to recruitment success during the early stages of the pandemic, as colleges in locations with abundant workforce opportunities also found themselves competing for students against a strong market for high-paying, low-skill jobs. At colleges in locations with less industry, participants felt that partnering with local high schools and community organizations for student recruitment was more successful. The strategy of targeting students who are still in high school for dual enrollment and early college high school programs might prove to be increasingly beneficial to community colleges in the future, given continued projections that the number of high school graduates will begin to decline in the next decade (Bransberger et al., 2020).

Finally, our participants rarely mentioned concerns about how academic changes instituted during the pandemic might impact the quality of education provided to students. Only one enrollment leader noted that students' preferences for online coursework might be in conflict with their academic success, as their institution had found that students had lower levels of achievement in online coursework as compared to in-person courses. As institutions continue to collect and analyze student data from the pandemic era, it will be important to examine whether students are as successful in multi-modality and virtual formats as they are in more traditional classroom settings. Institutions will also need to consider what types of resources and training faculty need in order to provide high-quality instruction in a multi-modality, "HyFlex" classroom environment. It is possible that without the

financial resources to support training in this type of instruction, the quality of education provided will suffer. Additionally, few participants discussed an emphasis on promoting transfer pathways to four-year institutions for students. Rather, the majority of new strategies employed by institutions focused on workforce preparation, micro-credentialing, and meeting the demands of the local economy. This trend among participating institutions illustrates a larger tension in the community college sector between a focus on credentialing to promote economic outcomes and the socio-democratic goal of promoting access to higher education and the opportunity for social mobility (Duncheon & Hornbeck, 2023; Gonzales & Ayers, 2018; Grubbs, 2020). It remains to be seen whether this shift in focus during the pandemic will translate to fewer transfer options in the future, and whether the prioritization of workforce preparation will come at the expense of offering students low-cost credit options toward pursuing a four-year degree.

Conclusion

Community colleges are a critical part of the education ecosystem in the United States, providing access to student groups who might not otherwise pursue higher education. When faced with the unique challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollment leaders at community colleges demonstrated creativity and resourcefulness in their efforts to improve recruitment, enrollment, and retention practices to continue providing postsecondary opportunities to their communities. Despite this ingenuity and willingness to adapt, questions remain about how community college leaders will be able to maintain new programs and services when pandemic relief funding runs out. More research is needed to understand the long-term efficacy and financial sustainability of pandemic-era enrollment management practices. Additionally, as the student population in the United States continues to evolve over time, institutions from other sectors in the field of higher education may be able to learn from and adapt some of the strategies that community college enrollment leaders shared to improve college access more broadly.

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Disclosure statement

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