Boosting Enrollment: Obstacles and Strategies

- **Persistent — and growing — challenges**

- **Using data to provide focus**

- **Engineering an enrollment turnaround**

- **Capitalizing on career-placement success**

The enrollment news of recent years has been discouraging, and economic strains and political tensions complicate the outlook further. How might colleges nonetheless discover and avail themselves of opportunities?

College leaders, experts say, should examine and forthrightly address what students and their families seek and what they fear, gear academic programs and recruitment toward clear and demonstrable value, increase flexible schedules and online-learning options, reimagine who a college's potential students are, and, by focusing on students' step-by-step success through graduation, improve institutional reputation.

Enrolling and retaining more male students would be transformative, as would re-enrolling the millions of adult students who haven't completed their degrees. However, both involve

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problems that run broad and deep, from early-childhood educational and psychological circumstances to child care, transportation, and scheduling complexities. While colleges aim to help resolve those stubborn problems, they can try other strategies to accomplish shorter-term gains.

Achieving enrollment goals requires focused, multiyear strategic thinking. Enrollment drives cannot be left solely to admissions offices — that guarantees only ever-faster burnout of enrollment managers. Successful strategies require data-driven, energetic, cooperative efforts by a college's entire leadership team.

Let's look at some enrollment challenges, what research reveals, and then at how a couple of institutions are growing despite obstacles.

Persistent — and growing — challenges

The long-looming "enrollment cliff" originally projected for 2025, with an anticipated 15-percent decrease in potential college students in the Midwest and Northeast, has been preceded by a sharp drop from the pandemic. Enrollment declined 4.2 percent between 2020 and 2022. Both undergraduate and total enrollment decreased by more than a million students. Looking further ahead, demographers project a Covid-triggered demographic dip around 2037.

Americans are in a pessimistic mood and skeptical about the value of a college degree. Respondents to a March 2023 poll by *The Wall Street Journal* and the nonpartisan research organization NORC at the University of Chicago were worried about their finances, especially inflation, and about their children's future.

Seventy-eight percent of Americans don't feel confident that life for their children's generation will be better than it has been for their own, which is "the highest share since the survey began," the *Journal* reported. Fifty-six percent of respondents felt that a four-year college degree is "not worth the cost because people often graduate without specific job skills and with a large amount of debt to pay off."

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Colleges also face rising competition not only from robust hiring for service and construction jobs but also from industry-run work-force-development programs, white- and blue-collar apprenticeships among them. "Today, colleges and universities enroll about 15 million undergraduate students, while companies employ about 800,000 apprentices," *The Wall Street Journal* reports. "In the past decade, college enrollment has declined by about 15 percent, while the number of apprentices has increased by more than 50 percent." As the job market for college graduates cools, prospective students might cast an even warier eye on the professional value of a bachelor's degree.

To benefit society and to help ensure their own futures, colleges increasingly are reaching out to potential students from low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented-minority backgrounds. However, a November 2022 survey by the ECMC Group, a nonprofit student-success organization, found that fewer than half of such students, 45 percent, believe post-high-school education is necessary. That's not because those students aren't thinking about their futures. Eight in 10 think it's important to have a career plan by the time they graduate and six in 10 already have a career path in mind. Many of them, however, do not see clear connections between postsecondary education and future professional and personal success.

From that, one might conclude that while colleges think of these students as enrollment prospects, they need to persuade more of the students themselves that college is a necessary and affordable step to the future.

It's not just money that's getting in the way. Mental-health challenges are affecting an unprecedented percentage of college students, but they are also keeping many potential students from enrolling. Almost two-thirds of people who don't enroll in higher education say emotional stress is a key reason, according to the Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education 2022 study. Mental health ranks as the fourth-most-cited reason after college cost (81 percent), inflation (77 percent), and work conflicts (69 percent).

Add to those enrollment complexities a polarized political environment. A March 2023 study by Art & Science Group, an educational-strategy consulting company, found that "one in four college-bound students are eliminating schools they'd been considering exclusively because of their perceptions of the political climate in the schools' states." Those survey results were tallied "before legislative moves in Florida, Texas, Ohio, and other states prompted some of the most notable headlines." Students identifying as conservatives were as likely as those identifying as liberals to reject colleges on political grounds.

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Of the quarter of respondents who ruled out a state because of politics, about a third did so for their own state, the Art & Science study found. A March 2023 poll by Intelligent.com, an education ranking and information site, found that one in eight graduating high-school seniors in Florida won't attend a public college there because of Gov. Ron DeSantis's conservative education policies.

Using data to provide focus

The pandemic, the volatile economy, a mental-health crisis, political friction — all of those are aggravating enrollment woes and colleges have little or no power to change any of them. Colleges do, however, have the power to change themselves and to warmly and confidently convey their priorities — like affordability, inclusiveness, and attentive academic and emotional support.

Data indicate what high-school students and their families want and what they are anxious about. More than two-thirds of respondents in the March 2023 "College Hopes and Worries Survey" from *The Princeton Review* cited debt or cost as their biggest concern, and four out of five cited financial aid as "extremely" or "very" necessary to attaining their college degree. While they value exposure to new ideas (31 percent) and education for its own sake (23 percent), they value a degree's job and career benefits more (46 percent).

Rob Franek, editor in chief of *The Princeton Review*, says those and other results from the survey carry some clear messages for colleges. They should address students' financial concerns straightforwardly and explain that, because of aid, students "should never cross an expensive school off their list for consideration." Colleges should also make sure that aid and other aspects of applying "are a knowable and navigable process."

In addition, colleges should heed students' career priorities, Franek says.

The professional benefits of a solid liberal-arts education should be trumpeted, not whispered, and experiential learning and career centers expanded and showcased.

While Americans overall are skeptical about higher education, high-school seniors and their parents are not, the survey shows. They worry about affordability, but they believe in college's value. "Asked quite simply if they believe college will be 'worth it,'" *The Princeton Review* writes in a summary of the results, "99 percent of respondents (parents and students alike) checked the 'Yes' box."

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Higher education as a whole sometimes forgets the potential impact of its largest recruiting team: current students. Madeline Kerner is co-founder and chief executive officer of Matriculate, a nonprofit that partners trained undergraduate advisers with high-achieving, low-income high-school students to help place those students in colleges where they will thrive. Since its founding in 2014, Matriculate has trained more than 3,000 undergraduate advising fellows at 18 partner colleges and universities. Those fellows have helped more than 14,000 high-school students navigate college choices and applications. "It's in these authentic relationships," says Kerner, "that social capital can transfer."

Liz Gross, CEO of Campus Sonar, a higher-education strategy consulting company, says that often students and graduates have a bigger impact on a college's reputation than does a corporate-crafted college-orchestrated institutional brand. "Earned conversation" is how Gross describes the combined impact of word of mouth and social media on colleges' reputations.

Earning that conversation isn't easy, but even these days it's possible. And while research can help focus on the best recruiting strategies, sometimes a bit of trial and error is necessary, too.

Engineering an enrollment turnaround

When Andrew T. Hsu began his term as president of the College of Charleston in May 2019, enrollment had been gradually but steadily declining for a decade, he says. That was unsustainable, "so I made it my first task to turn the enrollment around."

His leadership team threw everything they could think of at the problem. The college joined the Common App, streamlined application requirements, increased merit- and need-based scholarships, and started purchasing names of high-performing high-school students in not just senior but sophomore and junior years to get on their radar earlier. It upped its marketing budget while often waiving application fees. Its strong NCAA basketball showings have helped too, Hsu says.

The result? Since Hsu took office, applications have grown from about 12,000 to 26,000, and fall enrollment grew from 9,967 in 2021 to 10,885 in 2022 with record first-year classes in those years. While some strategies worked better than others, the overall push has significantly improved the college's reputation, he says.

Before entering academe, Hsu worked as a staff scientist and aeronautical engineer for NASA and Rolls-Royce's aircraft division. He is proud that 40 percent of the college's engineering students are women

— that's more than twice the national average. On the flip side, he worries about men underperforming academically. About a third of the college's students are men. He sees its strong engineering program as a potential magnet for more male students. So too is the college's "Call Me MISTER" program, which draws minority men to study education and go into teaching.

From a racial-equity standpoint, the College of Charleston has what Hsu calls "a difficult past." The South Carolina college became private in 1949 to avoid integration and didn't integrate until 1967, before going public again in 1970. There's no painting over that racist history. The college is treating its past candidly and working hard to make up for it, Hsu says. There is ongoing work across campus to tell, through signage and other means, a fuller story of the college's past, and some 15 programs are geared toward furthering the success of minority students. In one of those retention strategies, some students who are in danger of dropping out and have a grade-point average from 1.8 to 2.2, for instance, are offered special scholarships under the condition that they participate in intensified mentoring and advising.

Hsu says that while you can't change the past, you can overcome it and look to the future. Coming from some presidents, that might sound like hollow rhetoric, but Hsu learned it firsthand, growing up in China during the Cultural Revolution, teaching himself English as a teenager from a calculus book and a Chinese-English dictionary when he wasn't picking cotton and harvesting wheat with a sickle. "Education was my way out and to a better life," Hsu says.

Capitalizing on career-placement success

Trine University has two campuses in Indiana, education centers in Detroit and Phoenix with a third soon to open in Virginia, plus intensive hybrid and online graduate programs. Trine has leaned into career preparedness and touts its 99.5-percent rate of desired career placement — either in jobs or graduate programs — within six months of graduation. Its programs in physical therapy, education, and engineering management are particularly strong, says Kim Bennett, vice president for enrollment management, and its biomedical and information-technology programs are positioned to grow quickly.

Trine works closely with regional business and industry partners, says Bennett, and has souped up its career services, with specialists in health sciences and business linking students to interested potential employers.

Bennett herself attends high schools' college fairs, and prospective students, she says, "are not just a name or a number. You get to know people." Faculty members and coaches meet in person, one on one, with interested potential applicants, and dual-enrollment and transfer students receive immediate consideration, she says — as in same day.

That focused attention is paying off. Including popular graduate programs in business, engineering management, and information science, Trine's spring 2023 enrollment is 9,520 — a nearly 70-percent increase from the year before.

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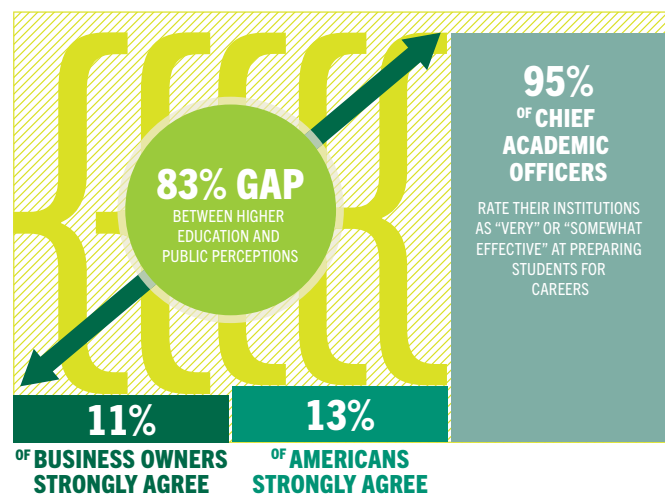
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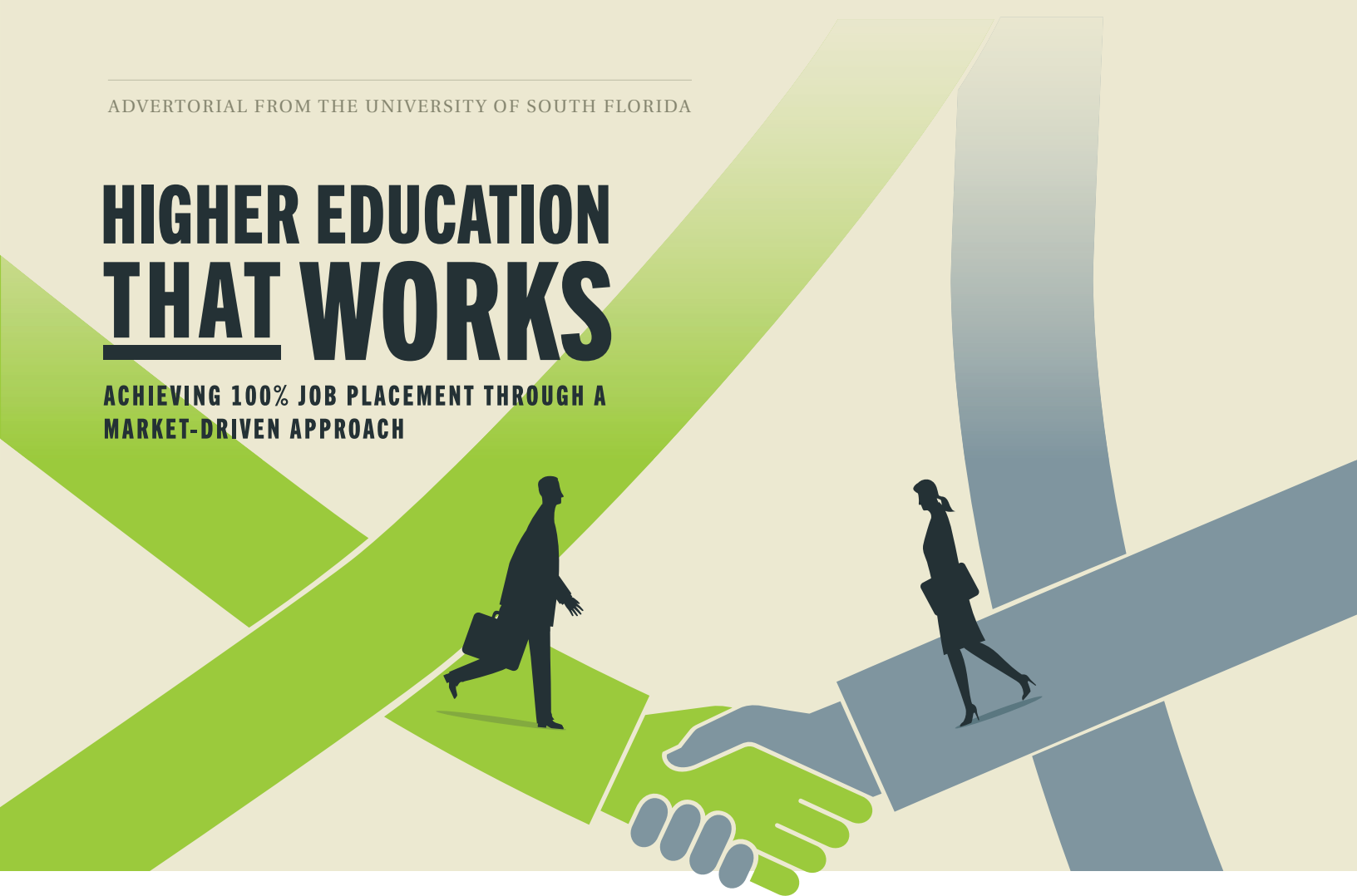
A recent Gallup/Lumina poll suggests that 95 percent of chief academic officers rate their institutions as very or somewhat effective at preparing students for careers. Yet just 13 percent of Americans believe college graduates are well-prepared for success in the workplace, and only 11 percent of business leaders strongly agree that graduating students possess the skills and competencies their companies need.

The need has never been greater for higher education practitioners to guide students into academic programs leading to well-paying, sustainable career paths. Rapid changes in technology and opportunities created by the global economy demand that institutions respond to emerging jobs and skill sets that in many cases didn't exist a few decades ago.

DOES HIGHER EDUCATION PREPARE GRADUATES FOR THE WORKFORCE?[1]

83% GAP
BETWEEN HIGHER EDUCATION AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

95%
OF **CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICERS**
RATE THEIR INSTITUTIONS AS "VERY" OR "SOMEWHAT EFFECTIVE" AT PREPARING STUDENTS FOR CAREERS

11%
OF **BUSINESS OWNERS STRONGLY AGREE**

13%
OF **AMERICANS STRONGLY AGREE**

[1] Gallup/Lumina poll, UCLA Cooperative Institutional Research Program, Gallup/Inisde Higher Ed poll

These realities are evident amid a growing perception gap around the value of a college education. At the University of South Florida, this has led to the development of forward-thinking curricula that include industry partnerships, along with certification and training opportunities that prepare graduates to enter talent pipelines equipped with the skills necessary to thrive from day one.

Starting roughly a decade ago, when supply chain management programs were virtually nonexistent in higher education, USF, in conjunction with key industry partners, began laying the groundwork for what would become a leading-edge approach to curriculum building. Now, the sector has grown in size and scope to match the dramatic increase in the flow of goods, services and finances brought on by a 40-fold increase in global exports over the past century.

Students in the supply chain management program average two to three job offers before graduation and accept starting salaries up to $90,000.

"Supply chain is all about relationships," said Rob Hooker, associate professor and director of student success. "From the very beginning, the relationships that the university had with industry partners were a driving force behind the way we designed and built the programs and the success we've experienced so far."
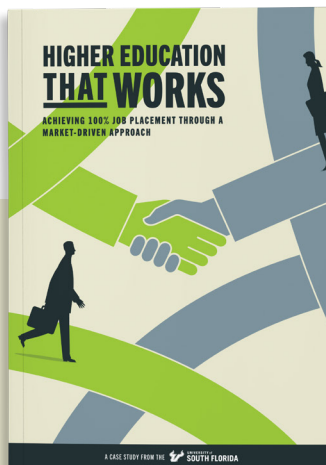
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Download the case study to learn how the university:
- analyzed the job market, economic environment and geographic considerations to identify the right new program,
- elevated the role of the local business community,
- used data to make an informed and compelling case for the new program,
- took continual steps to "future-proof" the curriculum.

UNIVERSITY of SOUTH FLORIDA