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There are no shortcuts to increasing enrollments

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Regional

There are no shortcuts to increasing enrollment

Colleges and universities are more and more reliant on the number of students that they can enroll. Private ones, even the ones with large endowments, are heavily dependent on tuition money to survive.

Despite the fact that many of them, as is the case of small liberal arts colleges, are intended to have fewer than 2,000 students, they know they need a minimum number of full-paying students just to keep their finances afloat.

Because of their endowments these private institutions can afford some generous scholarships, which result in many students paying far less than the actual cost of the education they receive.

This is called “the discount rate.” Still their tuition is much higher than public institutions. They justify the difference by saying that they can provide a better education because the student-faculty ratio is low (usually around 11-12 students per instructor), leading to a more personalized education.

When it comes to public institutions the need for more students is also increasing, but for different reasons. The steep decrease in public funding has made public colleges and universities more and more dependent upon tuition money to survive.

We are now hearing about the “privatization of public institutions” as a result of that trend. At the end of the day, students in public institutions end up paying more without necessarily seeing a higher quality of education.

While many public institutions are increasing their

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

numbers of students, others are going in the opposite direction and shrinking enrollments.

When one looks at the recent data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (part of the U.S. Department of Education), one sees a complicated higher education landscape.

On the one hand some institutions have increased their enrollment by basically increasing their acceptance rate. In other words, by lowering their standards. They accept more applicants whether they are likely to succeed in college or not.

This ends up in lower quality students overall, which damages the entire educational experience. Faculty morale suffers when they have to spend more time and effort acting as remedial teachers for unprepared students.

Many schools have opted for keeping low tuition and fees even if that means that the discount rates they offer grow larger.

On paper that makes them more attractive to students, but at the end of the day the quality of the education they offer is also lower because they hire more and more temporary faculty who earn lower salaries than tenure-track ones.

These part-time instructors usually do not conduct

research, and their teaching reflects that lack of scholarly engagement.

Another factor affecting enrollment in institutions of higher education relates to demographics. For example, those schools (generally public ones) that depend almost exclusively on students from the state in which they are located are experiencing a large decrease in the number of high school graduates.

Their response? Offer in-state tuition to students from other states. But this is just a temporary and unsustainable solution. They are making the citizens of their state subsidize with their tax money students from other states.

At the end of the day they are covering expenses for hundreds if not thousands of students. This situation is not economically sustainable. They may say that their headcount is up, but their financial statements soon show how much they are affected in a negative way.

So, how to solve these problems? One way is to take advantage of the yearly increase in students coming to this country from abroad. International students tend to pay full tuition.

However, to attract and retain those students you need to have an infrastructure in place to manage many of the complex problems that they encounter.

That means that there is a need for vision and courage to invest in such programs, something that usually escapes the minds of administrators who, when confronted with budget issues, see the only solution as making budget cuts rather than investing in ini-

tiatives that will generate income and actually grow their programs.

The other alternative is to make their institutions more attractive in terms of the originality and quality of the programs they offer.

Students, particularly good ones, will go to colleges and universities that offer opportunities that others do not. And I am not talking about fancy athletic facilities or fitness centers with climbing walls and juice bars. What I am talking about are programs in areas such as cybersecurity, big data management, 3D applications, biotechnology, digital humanities, and convergent media, just as examples.

Yes, we need to keep teaching the standard curriculum but to stick only with that is a recipe for failure.

Again, the problem lies with the lack of vision and courage from many executives in academia whose only response to budget cuts is more budget cuts.

There is a difference between administrators and leaders. Many do not realize that you have to spend money to make money, that you need to fundraise for programs from donors whose enthusiasm and imagination can be captured by exciting ideas.

No wonder the current challenges affecting higher education are testing the quality of its leadership.

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