

The Shifting Demographics of the College Student: What Ohio Regional Campuses can do to Improve Enrollment

Diane Huelskamp
Wright State University, Lake Campus

Joe Cavanaugh
Wright State University, Lake Campus

Education pays. Over one's lifetime, the greater the degree, the greater the earnings. In spite of this, college enrollment in many states is declining. This paper seeks to affirm the benefits of educational attainment and to provide potential suggestions for Ohio Regional Campuses to improve student enrollment, by focusing on the shifts in student demographics.

Ohio Higher Education Enrollment Trends

It is true that education pays. According to Torpey (2018), the greater the degree, the greater the earnings. Educational attainment benefits the student and society at large, including social mobility, better health, more civic engagement and less dependence on social programs (Cui & Robinson, 2022) but can be cost-prohibitive in the short term. College tuition costs have continued to rise over the years, with private, non-profit institutions being the most expensive. From the years 2010 to 2021, private nonprofits increased from an average of \$28,560 to \$32,930 which is an increase of 1.5% and Public four-year institutions increased by 1.3% to an average of \$10,030 (College Board, 2022). Also contributing to the individual's cost is the decrease in per-student funding at the national level. Adjusted for 2019 dollars, funding in 2007-2008 was \$9,000, while in 2019-2020 funding was \$8,640 (College Board, 2022). Even so, educational attainment is worth the investment both for the student and society.

Over the years 2010 to 2020, Ohio's total enrollment in both public and private higher education institutions declined by 30%, with 212,249 fewer college students (Cui & Robinson, 2022; Ohio Department of Higher Education, 2022), which is in comparison to the national trend of a 12% drop in enrollment during the same timeframe. The main reason, beyond COVID, is due to the dwindling number of high school graduates, not because of dropout, but due to declining birthrates, potentially parents

moving out of Ohio, or other factors which impact Ohio's underage demographic. There are simply fewer students to graduate. For universities to maintain or increase their student population, a shift in perspective from the typical demographical image of the college student being 18-24 years old, towards a broader and more diverse viewpoint of our student base must occur.

A similar pattern is present when looking at the percentage of population with a bachelor's degree or higher. Ohio has been below the nation by about 3.5% over the past ten years. Looking specifically at where the Association of University Regional Campuses of Ohio (AURCO) are located, the percentage of the population in these counties with a bachelor's degree or higher is lower than all of Ohio. In AURCO campus counties 21.7% of their population have a Bachelor's Degree or higher compared to 30.6% for all of Ohio (United States Census Bureau, 2022). The fact that Ohio has more students without their Bachelor's Degree compared to the US suggests that there is an opportunity to increase enrollment and this opportunity is even greater for AURCO campuses.

This paper will first define the potential types of college students and the trends within each type. Then it will shift toward the issue of attracting students to Ohio colleges. Increasing enrollment and attainment of a degree for Ohio students suggests a better quality of life for the student and society at large.

Student Demographics

The cost of college tuition in the US have caused students to analyze the cost/benefit of attending college when considering the benefits of job marketability. As Ohio universities strive to attract students, an understanding of who these students are must first be attained.

Traditional College Student

The traditional college student, typically between 18-22 years old, is a declining group of students in college, according to the Higher Learning Commission, and will continue to decline (HLC, 2022). There are many reasons for the decline of the traditional student population attending college. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2022) the percentage of students aged 18-24 who are neither enrolled in school or working increased by three percent since 2019, reaching 16% in 2021. Possible reasons include inability to find work, inability to acquire

educational opportunities, or leaving the workforce/school due to personal, family or financial reasons (NCES 2022).

In the United States there is projected to be a five percent overall increase in high school graduates from 2013-2027 (NCES, 2022). The southern and western regions of the US are increasing, while the northeastern states and midwestern states are each decreasing. These values are also reflected in the shifting demographics of states such as Ohio where the trend is toward an *increasing* retirement-aged demographic, while those 18 years and younger are *decreasing*. It should be noted that the graduation values are whole population numbers, not a percentage of completion versus dropout rates. After around 2025, (WICHE, 2020) there will be fewer students in the US, due to lower birth rates because families had fewer children during the Great Recession, which lasted from December 2007 to June 2009 (Elsby et al, 2010). among other reasons. For Ohio, the projected change in the number of Ohio high school graduates from both public and private schools is expected to decrease by 11% from 2019 to 2037 (WICHE, 2020).

Post Traditional Student

While many use the term “non-traditional,” many prefer the word “post-traditional” indicating those students beyond 25 years old who have broader life experiences to bring to their colleges. Both words can be used interchangeably. According to NCES (2022), in Fall 2019, comparing full-time undergraduate students, at four-year institutions, 85% were under age 25, while the 25- to 34-year-old comprised 10%, with 5% of the student population over 35. For part-time students enrolled, 58% were under 25, 23% were 25- to 34-years old, and 18% were over 35. It is interesting to note that most 25- to 34-year-olds attend more private-for-profit schools (38%) while traditional students attend them at 34%. The post-traditional student often has financial obligations which have them attending school on a part-time basis. The allure for the for-profit schools includes scheduling flexibility and online course options. These can be quite attractive to working adults (the post-traditional student) seeking a degree while continuing to work full time.

The International Student

In the United States, “the pandemic, visa restrictions, rising tuition and a perception of poor safety” has decreased the international student

population down by 72% in 2020 (Fischer & Aslanian, 2021). In the 1980's universities often sponsored international students, however this has shifted in the 21st century toward foreign student's providing the tuition that help fund American universities (Fischer & Aslanian, 2021).

Enrollments began to climb in 2006, reached their peak in 2018 with almost 1.1 million students, then drastically declined with COVID-19 (Fischer & Aslanian, 2021). A large percentage (nearly one-third) of International students were from China. During COVID, with a perception from some that the initial outbreak came from China, many Asian students felt unsafe (Fischer & Aslanian, 2021). The applicants from China has declined by 18% in the Spring of 2021 (Fischer & Aslanian, 2021).

Diversity in Students

The student population is shifting in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. Minority groups are continuing to increase, while non-minority students are decreasing. Comparing 2000 to 2016, the white student population shifted down from 70% to 56%, while most all minority groups (Black, Hispanic, Other) increased from 29% to 43%. One group did not see a shift, and stayed at 1%: Native American/Alaskan Native (NCES 2017). This trend of increasing minorities in college is expected to continue following the US population demographics (NCES 2022).

What Regional Campuses Can Do

Although one cannot go back in time and change the birth rates in Ohio, there are opportunities for attracting student populations into Ohio colleges. The following identifies potential areas which may be beneficial to maintaining or increasing student enrollment.

Attract Post-traditional Students

This population of 25- to 34-year-olds is often juggling the care of dependents, working full or part-time, and some may also be in the military. As stated prior, this group needs the flexibility to attend classes at convenient times, even asynchronous. Online learning is an ideal learning venue for this group, along with weekend or evening courses. For-profit colleges have attracted the highest percentage of this cohort; unfortunately many of them are predatory, giving degrees that are not recognized or accredited (The Best Schools, 2022). College students need to realize the value of accreditation. Many students are unaware of accreditation and it is

up to accredited universities to ensure students know this distinction. Many for-profit colleges have earned a negative reputation for providing low-quality education with a high quantity of debt (The Best Schools, 2022). Accredited colleges need to fill this gap, replacing predatory colleges with degrees which are recognized. In the long run, it pays to have a degree from a recognized and accredited university for the student; students need to be informed of this.

Attract International Students

The United States is seen as a destination of choice for its higher education, but the decline in international students is due to fear of discrimination and safety (Pew Research Center, 2021). Still, having international students benefit the United States. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, colleges play a “dominant role” in the development of entrepreneurs. Colleges also funnel these graduates into postdoctoral appointments. Eight out of ten international PhD students the STEM fields stay in the United States (Fischer & Aslanian, 2021). Although many regional campuses may not be in the center of urban life with its cultural diversity and tourism which many international students may want to experience while here in the US, focusing on what makes the Ohio college unique in what it offers may attract International students. Safely assurance is another issue that may need to be addressed by Ohio colleges, affirming *all* students are welcome.

Students from Other States

In spite of Ohio’s demographics, interestingly, Ohio University in Athens had a spike in enrollment in Fall 2022 (Forster, 2022). Although reasons are still being examined, Ohio University does recruit outside of the state of Ohio (Forster, 2022). Ohio University is processing the data from surveying every student who was admitted to determine what factors drive student selection of colleges (Forster, 2022). Ohio University does have recruitment officials in other states and countries, and has shown an overall increase in out-of-state and international students (Forster, 2022).

Ohio also has a Higher Education Reciprocity agreement with its neighboring states, allowing Ohio residents to attend out-of-state institutions at in-state rates and vice-versa. This is reviewed every two years to ensure parity and fairness in the exchange. Ohio’s challenge is to be

attractive to out-of-state students to attend college in Ohio (Ohio Higher Ed 2022).

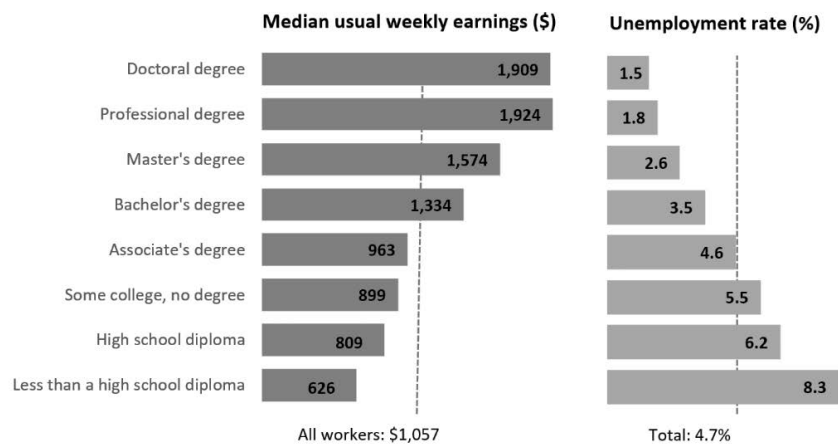
Diversity Equity and Inclusion

Continuing diversity is happening in our educational systems; institutions of higher education must help to support their success and completion rates through college (HLC 2022). Universities may benefit by offering support services and activities/organizations for students to join. Research suggests that students who feel welcome, supported and are part of the university show greater retention rates which is critical to students’ success (HLC 2022).

Higher Educational Attainment is Important

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), Education attainment does pay, as the following bar graph shows:

Earnings and unemployment rates by educational attainment, 2021



Note: Data are for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

The weekly earnings of those with a bachelor’s degree and higher have incomes above the median, while those with lesser degrees fall below the median. The unemployment rates of those with higher education degrees is also below the median unemployment rate as well. The potential benefit of attaining a higher degree for a student would be a greater probability of employment and higher wages. The potential benefit to

society at large would be not only a more educated populace but also lower unemployment rates as well. Both the student and society benefit from higher educational attainment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, and in spite of decreasing traditional student enrollment, education still pays both the individual and society at large. Universities must continue to find ways to attract students and increase student enrollment. One possibility is to focus on post-traditional students whether through continuing education or flexibility in delivery modes, accommodating their needs to be able to balance and meet their responsibilities in life. Post-traditional students also need to be informed of what it means to go to an accredited university. International student needs can also be met by assuring their safety and addressing their fear of discrimination. Colleges must be mindful of maintaining a culture that accepts diversity within its campus. No longer are student populations primarily white or male dominated. Inclusion of all types of learners ensures attracting students from a diversity of backgrounds. If colleges can adapt to these demographic changes, accommodating the shift in student populations, higher educational attainment will continue benefit both the student and society.

Future Research

This paper focuses specifically on student demographics and ways to attract students into college according to the shifting demographics of the American college student. Factors which will also impact student enrollment are degrees offered, housing, extracurricular activities, scholarships and other features which certainly can impact a student's choice of college, but are beyond the scope of this paper.

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