

What Student Enrollment Decisions Say About Melt, Retention Risk, and the Next Recruiting Cycle

Introduction

This year's undergraduate recruiting cycle is finally coming to a grinding, inexorable, and excruciating end. The whole affair has been a never-ending season of uncertainty for students and institutions alike. Even though students have placed their deposits to signal enrollment decisions, the year and the path ahead are still uncertain as they approach their freshman experiences. It is equally uncertain for institutions as they begin recruiting the class of 2021.

This report takes a look at comparative data from the Eduventures Survey of Admitted Students™ in 2019 and in 2020 in order to examine the real effects of COVID-19 on enrollment patterns. What has really changed in the decision behavior of students in key segments? This understanding, we believe, is important for finalizing the fall 2020 class enrollment, anticipating the student retention issues for this same class, and for considering alterations to recruitment plans for fall 2021.

Methodology

This report draws on 2019 and 2020 data from the annual Eduventures Survey of Admitted Students. Each year this survey assesses college-bound high school students' enrollment decisions. We compared 42,955 responses in 2019 to 49,277 responses in 2020. Typically, as it was in 2019, this online survey is administered in May and June. Due to the impact of COVID-19 on deposit dates, the 2020 survey was administered in June and July 2020 to allow for the delayed decision timeframe.

Table 1 illustrates the demographics of the two samples from year to year. Essentially, the 2019 sample bears a striking similarity with the 2020 sample, showing only very slight increases in first-generation, low income, underrepresented minority, and bottom-half test scorers compared to the 2019 sample.

Table 1. Survey of Admitted Student Demographics 2019 and 2020

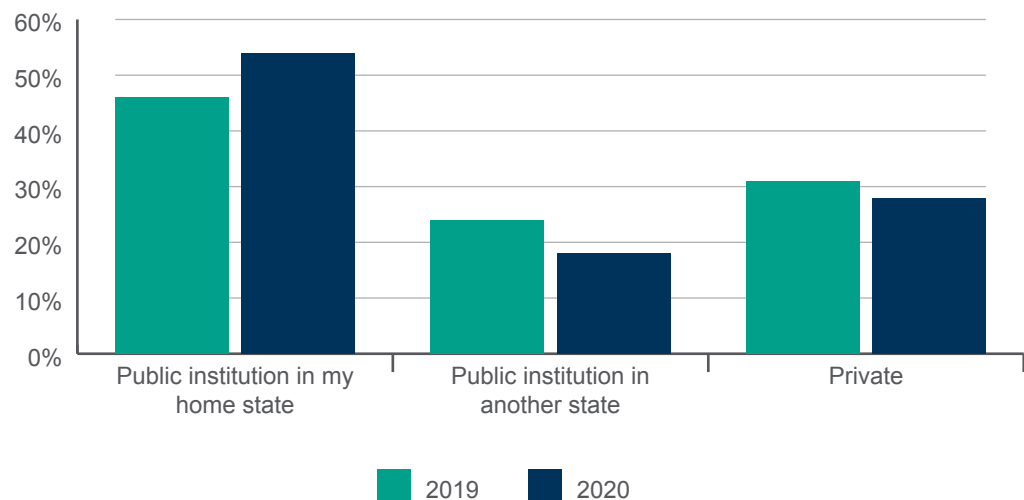
	2019	2020
First Generation	26%	28%
Low Income	24%	26%
Underrepresented Minority	24%	27%
No Access Factors	53%	50%
Three Access Factors	8%	10%
SAT/ACT Concordance- Less than 1200	40%	43%
SAT/ACT Concordance – 1210 or more	60%	57%

Given the close nature of the two samples, we are able to make comparisons on enrollment patterns in general and in key student segments that allow us to draw conclusions about the effect of COVID-19 on enrollment choice.

Changes in Enrollment Due to COVID-19

The effect of the COVID-19 crisis is most striking when you examine the shift in enrollment choice between 2019 to 2020 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Change in Enrollment Patterns 2019 to 2020



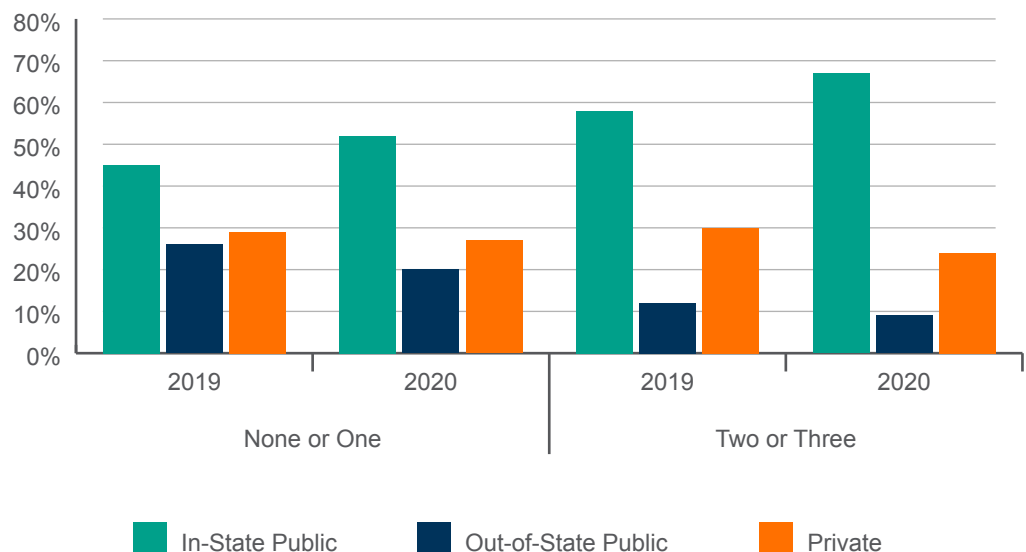
Source: Eduventures 2020 Survey of Admitted Students and Eduventures 2019 Survey of Admitted Students

As we would anticipate in times of economic turmoil, public institutions are seeing a surge of in-state students arriving at their doors. Overall, we see a 6% increase in students choosing to attend an in-state public institution. This movement toward lower-cost education comes at the expense of higher-cost options, especially the out-of-state public choice, which dropped by 5%. The choice to attend a private institution also dropped by 3%.

You might expect the shift to be far more pronounced among access populations (students who are low income, first generation, and/or underserved minorities), but it's almost equally evident for those with few (none or one) access factors as it is for those with many (two or three) access factors (Figure 2 below). Students with multiple access factors generally have a stronger base of interest in in-state education, but in 2020, the drift to in-state education is equally strong for both groups.

This raises the question about the draw to in-state publics. Is it purely economic? Is it about value? Is it about proximity? Safety? Comfort? Figure 2 shows the change in enrollment patterns among access students.

Figure 2. Change in Enrollment Patterns 2019 to 2020 by Access Status



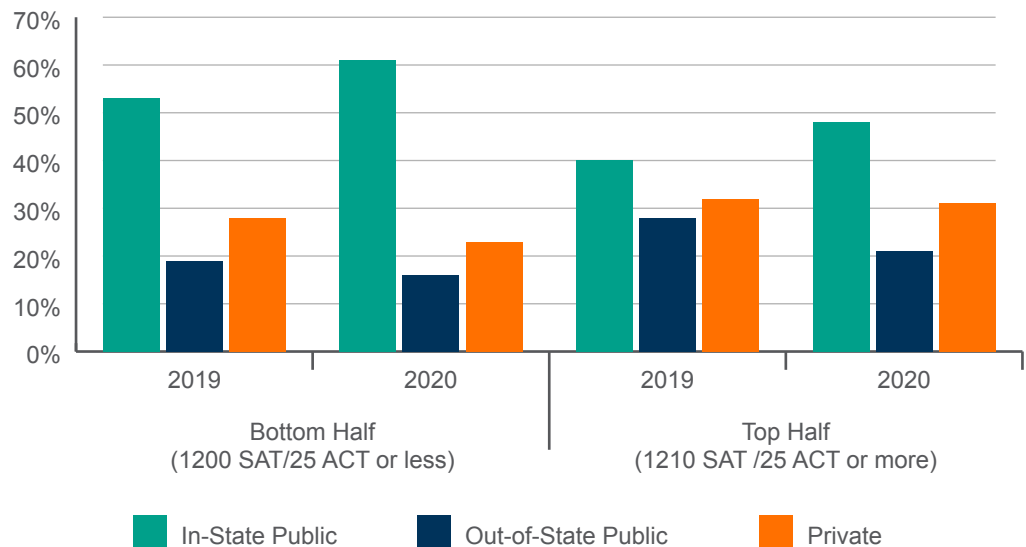
Source: Eduventures 2020 Survey of Admitted Students and Eduventures 2019 Survey of Admitted Students

One difference is that the loss of the out-of-state interest is found, to a greater extent, among students with fewer access factors; few students with multiple access factors ever had interest in this avenue in the first place. Similarly, the loss of interest in private institutions is seen to a greater degree among students with many access factors. Students with few access factors retain their interest in private education. Certainly price is a factor, but students may also

consider the value of these higher-cost options differently. They have an added ability to pay and may have access to the enriched environment of private education because of that ability.

We can look at the same dynamic in relation to whether the student is a top-half or bottom-half standardized test scorer (see Figure 3). Similar patterns emerge. First and foremost, the strong drift to in-state public institutions remains for all students.

Figure 3. Change in Enrollment Patterns 2019 to 2020 by Test Scores



Source: Eduventures 2020 Survey of Admitted Students and Eduventures 2019 Survey of Admitted Students

Top-half test scorers, however, show a strong disinclination to enroll in out-of-state institutions. As a result, public institutions will likely see quality metrics for out-of-state students decline. Top-half test scorers maintain the same appetite for private education as they did in 2019.

Bottom-half test scorers show a moderate disinclination to attend in-state or out-of-state privates in favor of in-state public institutions.

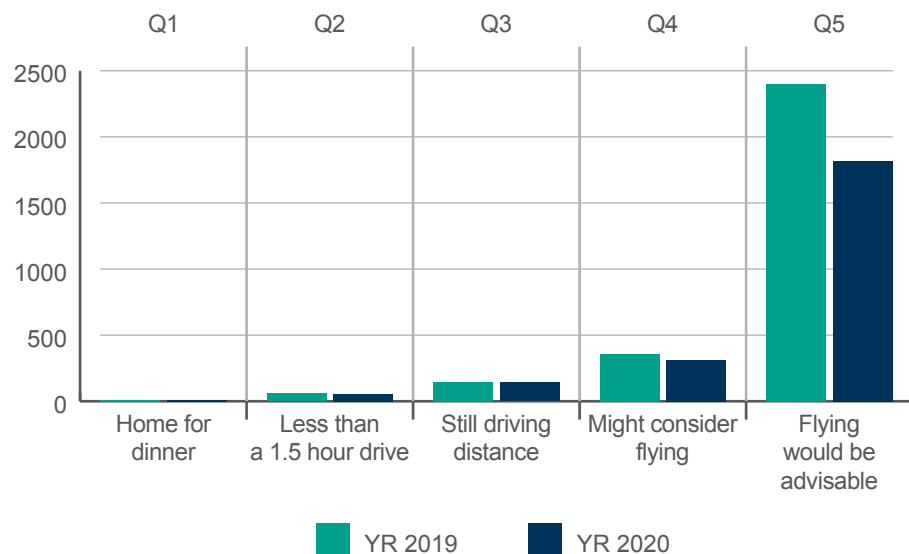
Taken together, this shows that the value proposition of the private institution is holding together for top-half test scorers, but not for bottom-half test scorers. Top-half scorers are most likely considering attending more selective, more elite institutions with stronger brand names and market value. This translates into an ability to hold value under these pandemic circumstances.

Distance from Home

The COVID-19 crisis has had a strong effect on the distance some students are willing to travel for their educations. The sudden angst of shutting down the 2019-2020 academic year is not long forgotten. The travails of students making quick (and expensive) arrangements to return home from campus may have left an indelible mark. We are seeing evidence in the comparative data of a “homing” instinct, or a desire to be closer to home in case anything happens (see Figure 4).

In Figure 4, we broke students into five equally-sized “willingness to travel” groups and then examined the average number of miles to their enrolling institutions. While all students are less willing to travel, COVID-19 has especially clipped the wings of the students who typically fly to reach their campuses of choice.

Figure 4. Miles to Enrolling Institution by Travel Quintiles



Source: Eduventures 2020 Survey of Admitted Students and Eduventures 2019 Survey of Admitted Students

The implication this has for recruiting is that students are of a more regional mindset; the five- or six-hour flight is daunting. A short-hop flight is better. Driving distance is especially comforting in a pandemic. Institutions that rely on significant national out-of-state recruiting might have to revise their plans to reflect this regional mood.

Of course, some students are willing to take on more travel risk to attend the colleges of their dreams. Figure 5 shows the relationship between standardized test scores, access status, and willingness to travel for fall of 2020.

Figure 5. Distance to Enrolling Institution by Access Status and Test Score Quartile 2020



Source: Eduventures 2020 Survey of Admitted Students and Eduventures 2019 Survey of Admitted Students

“Willingness to travel” is a complex phenomenon even in the best of times. Interestingly, students with multiple access factors and top-half test scores are the ones who say they will travel the most in 2020. At the opposite end of the spectrum, students who have all three access factors and bottom-half test scores are most likely to stay close to home. Likewise, those with no access factors and top test scores are less amenable to travel compared to access students with top test scores.

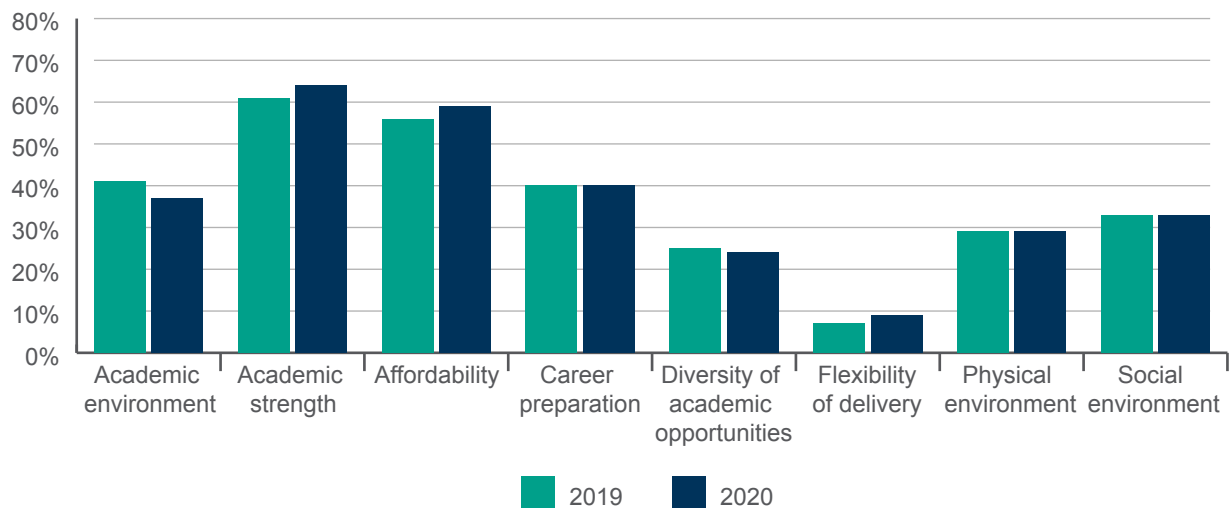
Thus, willingness to travel is not a simple demographic phenomenon. Ultimately, the dynamic between these factors is complicated. It is a myth that your class cannot be diverse or high quality in the light of COVID-19. Student desire is there, but it may be a bit harder to fulfill this desire due to economic circumstances.

A Change in Value Proposition?

Getting students to make the decision to choose your institution means making a sharply convincing argument about the value of your education in a time of heightened concern about price and safety. The comparative data indicates a shift in the focus on value (see Figure 6). This year, students placed more importance on two key components of the college decision: academic strength and affordability. We also saw a slight uptick in importance of flexibility of delivery and a slight reduction in the importance of the academic environment. This is likely

due to the timing of this study; students were responding to this survey in June just as many institutions were still deciding what their (initial) fall plans might be. Figure 6 shows the change in importance of eight enrollment drivers between 2019 and 2020.

Figure 6. Importance of Enrollment Drivers in Decision to Attend Choice

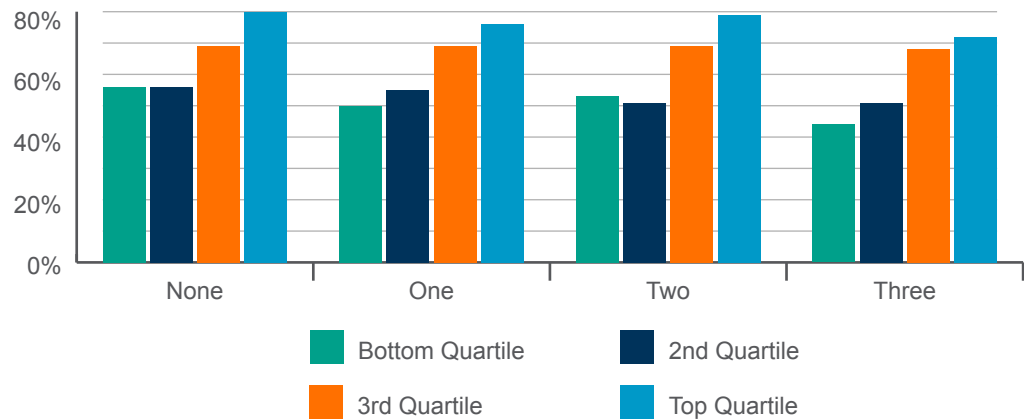


Source: Eduventures 2020 Survey of Admitted Students and Eduventures 2019 Survey of Admitted Students

The data shows a sharpening of the value proposition related to the essence of what students want most: academic strength at a good price. Many of the nice-to-haves may be falling lower down on the list. This is the time to focus on essentialism in recruiting.

Academic strength is the province of top test-scorers, regardless of access status (see Figure 7). This decision driver is the dominant driver of enrollment choice for top-half test scorers and is little influenced by a student's access status.

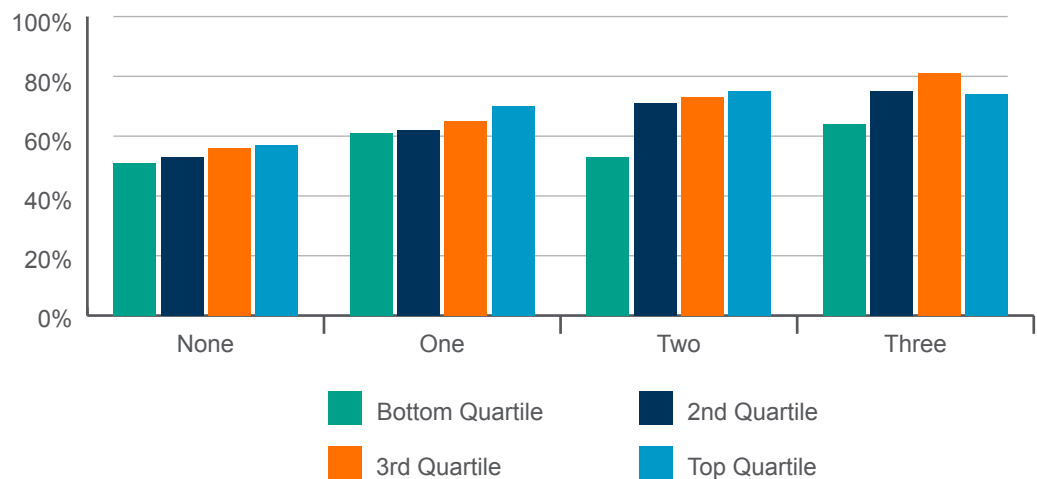
Figure 7. Importance of Academic Strength by Access Status and Test Score Quartile 2020



Source: Eduventures 2020 Survey of Admitted Students

Affordability, however, is an enrollment driver that becomes more important for students who have higher numbers of access factors as well as a higher degree of skill on standardized test scores (see Figure 8). The more your students fall into these categories, the more your focus should be on this half of the value equation.

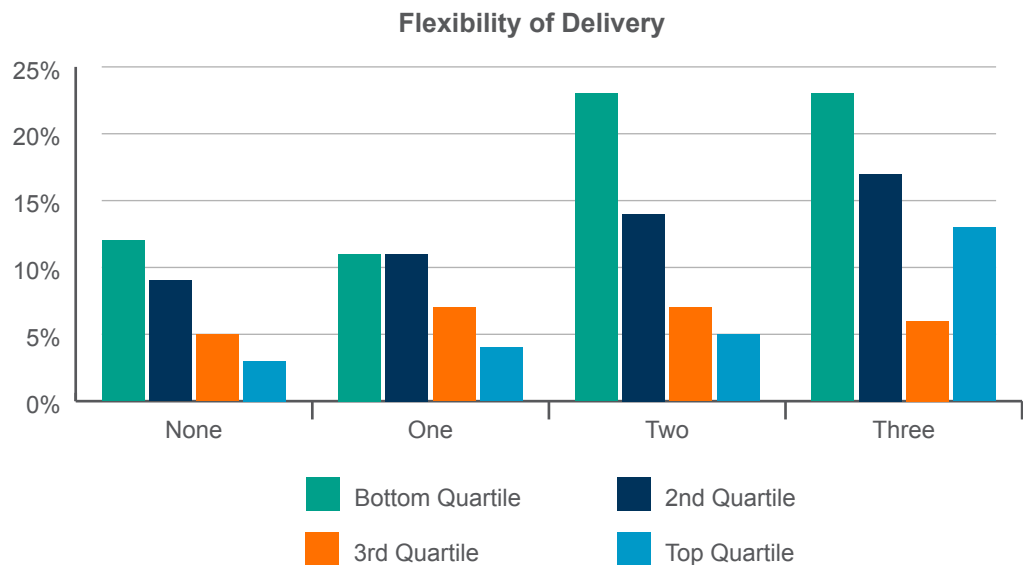
Figure 8. Importance of Affordability by Access Status and Test Score Quartile 2020



Source: Eduventures 2020 Survey of Admitted Students

Flexibility of delivery also took center stage in 2020 (Figure 9 below). How much should you foreground flexibility of delivery in your discussions with students this recruiting season? Bottom-half test scorers who have more access factors are far more concerned with flexibility than their peers. Think about when and how to introduce the nature of your remote and hybrid options that your university is developing for students. Quality first, format second. How will the fundamental quality translate to the format if necessary?

Figure 9. Importance of Flexibility by Access Status and Test Score Quartile 2020



Source: Eduventures 2020 Survey of Admitted Students

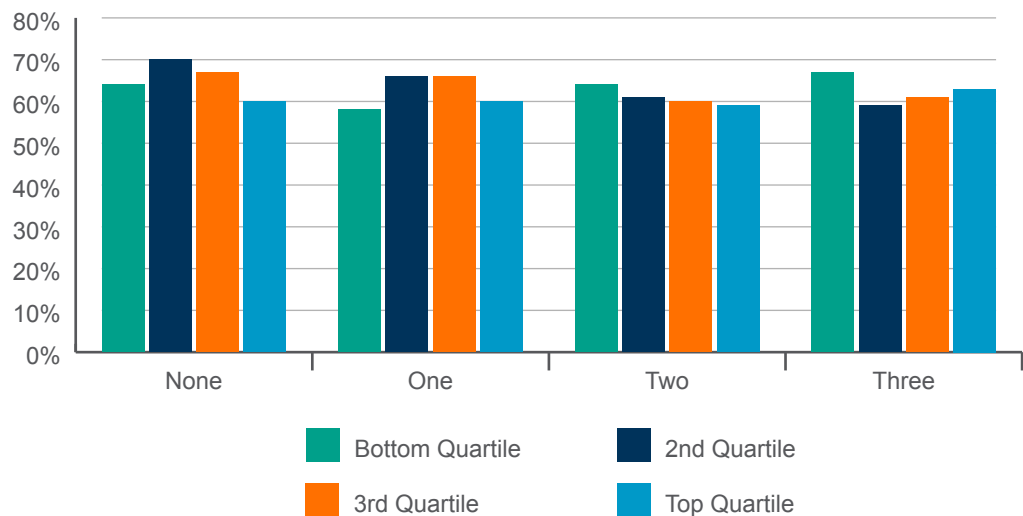
These findings indicate that when it comes to the value proposition, this is a time for directness. Eduventures Student Mindset™ research reminds us that students see different pathways to the eventual outcomes of their college educations. For all Student Mindsets, however, academic strength and affordability become paramount in the decision-making process. COVID-19 recruiting demands that the path to these two pillars of the decision be more transparent and upfront.

Confidence

Overall, nearly two-thirds (65% of all students in our sample say they are very confident about their enrolling school choices, but that leaves the door open for the remaining third to have concerns. These concerns could be about cost, safety, fit, distance, the remote or hybrid instruction on offer, etc. Whatever the case, institutions will face an array of new challenges

when it comes to retaining traditional undergraduates. This data can highlight which students are most or least confident in their school choices (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Very Confident about Choice by Access Status and Test Score Quartile 2020



Source: Eduventures 2020 Survey of Admitted Students

Once again, the patterns are complex. Generally speaking, students with no access factors are more confident, unless they are top quartile test scorers, in which case, their confidence plummets. Perhaps for these students, their dreams of attending an institution with a rich set of campus experiences is deeply imperiled.

When it comes to students with multiple access factors, the lowest quartile test scorers are the most confident. They are more likely going to public institutions close to home, with fewer tough decisions to make and smaller tuition bills to pay. The access students with higher scores are probably going farther afield, taking on loans, making bigger bets on their educations. With richer experiences at stake, they appear less confident about these bigger risks.

In any case, with 30% to 40% of students indicating some uncertainty about their enrollment choices, many institutions have a mammoth wave of continuing melt and retention risk on their hands. The job of the enrollment team in bringing in the class of 2020 this year will be more extensive and collaborative than ever.

The Bottom Line

The comparisons between Eduventures 2019 and 2020 Surveys of Admitted Students show that the enrollment landscape changed due to COVID-19 and is still changing. Every year, one recruiting cycle overlaps with the completion of the prior year's work. In 2020, this will be truer than ever. Work to keep the class of 2020 engaged and enrolled must continue while new work to enroll the class of 2021 moves into full swing. So what guidance does the data give us as institutions push forward on these two challenging work streams?

The Line between Melt and Retention Will Blur

As of the publication of this report, every institution is still working away at melt and waiting to see which students will make it to enrollment whether on campus, hybrid, or remote. Even if students make it to the first day of class, however, the environment is sufficiently uncertain, and students will continue to melt away after enrollment. Traditionally, if this were after the census date, we would call this "attrition" and name it a retention problem. Instead, it is useful to think of this as an extension of the continuous relationship you are building with a student in your melt strategies. This means that the collaborative work that enrollment offices have with academic and student affairs to make transitions as seamless as possible could matter a lot this year. Additionally, the reasons that students will melt away (or are not retained) will likely be broader and affect many more students than in prior years.

Your Competitive Set Will Change

Institutions will now be in competition with a greater number of public and regional institutions—institutions they would not normally consider to be competitive. Thus, when recruiting and positioning your programs for students, you must revisit where your programs fit within this expanded set of competitors.

You Should Recruit More Regionally, With Some Exceptions

The COVID-19 crisis has clipped the wings of travelers. Students who were inclined to make a cross country flight to a new part of the world for their educations just are not as willing to do so. When making and adjusting your recruiting plans, take this into consideration. You're likely to see continued depression in numbers of students from long distance markets—unless they are top-quartile access students who might be receiving the support to make the choice.

Sharpen Your Value Proposition by Focusing on the Essentials

Students still want to see their pathways at your university, but in the end, they will focus on the two most important things about a college education: academic strength and affordability. COVID-19 crystallized the focus on these two enrollment drivers. When you communicate with students virtually this fall and winter, be direct. Show them their pathways; also show them that all roads lead to an affordable high-quality education.



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