One COVID-19 residual: Reimagined applicants, students, and graduates

By Marguerite J. Dennis

If there is any leader who thinks we are going back to where we were a year ago, they are kidding themselves.

According to a Pearson Global Learning Survey conducted in 2020 of 7000 people, aged 16–70, three out of every four survey participants believe that COVID-19 has fundamentally changed higher education as we know it, and there will never be a return to the pre-pandemic higher education experience.

On March 18, 2021, TeachOnline.ca published an article titled “Ten Emerging Developments Are Shaping a Different Future for Colleges and Universities.” The 10 trends listed are:

1. Modules and stackable credentials.
2. 365 admissions.
3. Access to technology.
4. Learner mobility.
5. Mode choice.
6. Assessment on demand.
7. Competency-based learning for skills.
8. Collaborative programming.
9. Enabling a green transition.
10. Strong focus on indigenous education and learning.

Higher education has changed since the pandemic, and so has the college and university student. The higher education student-consumer has emerged. Students know they can integrate online and in-person classroom instruction. They know that alternative educational providers can offer short courses, boot camps, and certificate programs at a fraction of the cost of a single college course. Students know they no longer want to graduate from college with unmanageable debt and an uncertain future. Students have options.

The following are some of the characteristics of a reimagined applicant, a reimagined enrolled student, and a reimagined graduate.

Reimagined applicants

Before applying to any college or university, the reimagined applicant will know:

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- The availability of credit-bearing gap year projects.
- Health procedures in place in the event of another natural disaster.
- The protocols in place for students experiencing mental health or emotional issues.
- The courses necessary to graduate in two, three, or four years and the sequencing of the courses.
- The availability of hybrid learning.
- Differential costs for in-person teaching and online instruction and the availability of scholarships and financial aid.
- Progression of first-year students to the second year and the retention and graduation statistics for all students.
- The name and contact information for an academic, financial aid, and career counseling advisor.
- The availability of internships.
- The four-year calendar of semester starts and stops.
- A list of and contact information for all clubs and organizations.
- Profile of graduates, including employability at the time of graduation and graduate and professional school placement.
- A list of area alumni.

Reimagined enrolled students

After matriculation, enrolled students will be given:

- A list of names and contact information of all relevant college and university personnel.
- A schedule of meetings with an academic advisor.
- A schedule of meetings with a financial aid advisor.

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be careful not to create a program that makes decisions on the basis of race.

Race-conscious decision-making is often conflated with voluntary affirmative action programs, which provide a legal method for developing and retaining a diverse applicant pool. But, if an institution is a federal contractor, it is already required to recruit and advance qualified minorities, women, persons with disabilities, and covered veterans, pursuant to the Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act of 1974, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and Executive Order 11246. Also, states may have their own affirmative action programs for state government contractors.

If the institution is not a federal contractor, then it may be scrutinized for creating and implementing a voluntary affirmative action program, which is only legally permissible in a limited number of circumstances. The U.S. Supreme Court found that the consideration of a protected category, such as race or sex, may be permissible only when an employer can establish a historical imbalance or disparity in the workforce.

Further, a plan or initiative should be temporary in nature, with short-term goals adjusted regularly. Plans must never include quotas or a specific threshold for hiring nor unnecessarily interfere with the interest of nonminority employees, such as by terminating those employees to replace them with diverse employees.

Similarly, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's

guidance on voluntary affirmative action plans notes that employers may use affirmative action practices only if (1) used to remedy prior hiring practices; for example, on analysis it is clear such hiring practices effectively had a disparate impact and restricted minorities from applying or being selected for positions; (2) used to correct the effects of discriminatory

practices; or (3) due to historic restrictions, there are circumstances where the available opportunities to the particular underrepresented group were limited.

Thus, when assessing or creating a plan for increasing diversity while remaining compliant with the law, consider these key factors:

Bias can cause institutions to make non-diverse hiring choices based on unconscious assumptions about candidates, which can lead to inadvertent discrimination and even potential liability for the institution.

1 Consistency. Ensure that standards and methods for hiring evaluations are consistent across the board. These should be clear, neutral, and nonbiased standards.

2 Consideration. A protected trait should never be the basis for a hiring decision, but diversity can be a goal of the hiring process.

3 Communication. Monitor the communications made throughout the employment decision process.

Higher education administrators should always be cautious when implementing new techniques or procedures and consult legal counsel if they intend to create or implement a DEI plan or initiative to ensure they fully understand any legal risks and implications. ■

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➤ Contact information for staff in the student health and counseling office.

➤ A schedule of meetings with a career and lifelong learning counselor.

➤ The availability of personal financial management courses and seminars.

➤ A schedule of meetings with a graduation counselor (registrar).

➤ A transcript listing not only courses completed but the competencies learned in each course.

➤ A list of study-abroad opportunities.

Reimagined graduates

In a reimagined university, graduates will have a lifetime engagement with their college or university. That engagement will include the following:

➤ One free course awarded to each graduate at the time of graduation.

➤ A list of online courses, short-term courses, and certificate programs offered to graduates at a reduced or no cost.

➤ A list of graduates in their home state or country.

➤ A list of upcoming alumni events.

➤ The future of reimagined universities rests with the vision of the chief academic and administrative officers. But reimagined students will also help shape how schools will meet their expectations.

➤ Students will help create vision statements. They will determine, in part, what their schools will "look like" after some sort of normalcy returns to higher education. They will decide when they want to begin their academic program and how much they are willing to pay for it. They will help design new learning and living spaces on campus. They will demand a commitment from their college or university for lifelong learning.

Perhaps one of the most significant residuals of the pandemic will be the reimagining of the relationship between college, university, applicant, student, and graduate. ■