

# Shifting Demo



Appeared in the March-April 2020 issue of Trusteeship magazine.

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# graphics

BY KAREN DOSS BOWMAN

**The freefall of traditional college-age students is already having an impact on higher education and the competition for students will continue to increase and put pressure on universities to prove their value and retain their financial vitality. Some institutions are already finding ways to adapt with the looming student demographic pressure to position themselves for success.**

**W**HILE NUMEROUS small, private liberal arts colleges in the Northeast have closed in recent years—such as Mount Ida, Newbury, and Wheelock colleges—Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, is thriving. Over the last four years, the college has added 200 students for a total enrollment of 1,750 and is preparing for future growth.

This optimism may be surprising, considering that the New England states are projected to face the nation's sharpest decline in the number of graduates coming out of high school over the next decade. Across the United States, the traditional college-age population is declining. In fact, the majority of students enrolled in colleges and universities are older, nontraditional age. As student demographics continue to change, experts project that the pool of prospective college students will shrink dramatically.

"We're interested in continued growth at Wheaton College, and given [the population forecasts], if an institution is not focused on growth, then they're actually going to end up going backwards," says Wheaton President Dennis Hanno. "[Institutions that don't grow] won't be in a strong position to weather the demographic storm that we know is about to befall higher education."

Hanno believes Wheaton's efforts to provide practical academic programs that incorporate the strengths of a liberal arts approach has appealed to a broader base of prospective students in recent years. New academic majors established in the last five years, such as business and management, neuroscience, and film and new media studies, are now among Wheaton's largest. These programs help students develop the soft skills employers are looking for—critical thinking, written and oral commu-



## TAKEAWAYS

- College enrollment was about 5 percent lower in 2019 than it was at its peak in 2010. It is predicted that the number of college students will fall 15 percent after the year 2025. Also, the average age of college students is changing. People usually think of college students as young adults who just finished high school, but as of 2017, nearly 40 percent of college students are age 25 or older.
- New England states are projected to have the largest decline in the number of graduates coming out of high school in the next decade as more students enrolling start to be older, nontraditional age students. Some institutions, like Wheaton College, are preparing for the declining demographics now by focusing on current growth, such as developing new academic liberal arts majors that prioritize skills that align with employer demands.
- These changing demographics will impact schools in different ways. Selective four-year schools may not see a very strong impact. Other schools will face challenges though. Ways to start facing these challenges include adding graduate and certification programs, expanding online courses, or offering training courses to businesses.
- There are various ways to start heading off these disruptions at institutions. Retention and student success are important ways to keep an institution fiscally healthy. Other methods include improving the success of low-income students and students of color, improving the transition to college for first-year and transfer students, and upgrading the students and academic advising that is offered.

nication, problem solving, and the ability to collaborate in a team setting—through practical experiences that require applying those qualities in a real-world setting.

“Ten years ago, Wheaton’s messages online and [in print] would have centered around [the idea of] this very traditional, liberal arts school,” Hanno says. “But now, our marketing is much more focused on outcomes, which gets back to what the students want out of the college experience. So, this demographic shift really has changed our messaging in a way that links a liberal arts education with providing the kind of outcomes that a student might seek—and that is developing the skill base that employers and graduate schools are looking for.”

### Fewer Births, Greater Diversity

According to *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates*, a study published by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) in 2016, the overall number of high school graduates in the United States will decline during the next decade. Since the economic recession that began in 2008, the total fertility rate in the United States has dropped by nearly 20 percent, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). At the same time, this generation has become more racially and ethnically diverse, particularly in the number of Hispanics and Asian/Pacific Islanders.

The number of high school graduates in each region will vary amid these population shifts. In the South, for example, modest growth in this population is expected for a few years before leveling off around 2025. In contrast, the West, Midwest, and Northeast will all experience a decline in this subgroup. The total number of U.S. high school graduates will hover around 3.4 million through 2023, reaching its highest point at 3.5 million in 2026 before plateauing, according to the WICHE report.

Nathan Grawe, a professor of economics and the Ada M. Harrison Distinguished Teaching Professor of the Social Sciences

at Carleton College, has studied how these demographic shifts may impact higher education. His book, *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education* (published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 2018), introduces the Higher Education Demand Index (HEDI). This tool applies basic demographic variables to data from the 2002 Education Longitudinal Study (ELS) to calculate the probability of high school graduates going to college. It also analyzes existing demand forecasts by institution type—such as four-year institutions, two-year colleges, elite colleges, regional universities, and so on.

Grawe’s work predicts a 15 percent loss in the pool of traditional-age, college-bound students by 2026. The HEDI also suggests that top-ranked, elite schools may be largely unaffected by the changing student demographics. Most others, however, will face challenges, he says.

“The market might be a little bit stronger for more selective forms of higher education due to the rising share of parents who have college degrees themselves and are more likely to send their kids to four-year schools—specifically selective four-year schools,” Grawe says. “But when we look at the bulk of higher education, which are the institutions that are ranked outside those top 100 schools, that’s where we will see more pressure.”

Most institutions already are seeing changes in the demographics of their stu-



dent bodies. Not only is there greater demand for higher education among students of color, but also students from low-income backgrounds, those from rural communities, older adults, U.S. military veterans, and adults with full-time jobs. Additionally, most jobs of the future require an education beyond high school, and studies continue to show overwhelmingly that college graduates earn more than their peers who do not have a degree.

In addition to overhauling recruitment strategies for prospective high school students, institutions can increase enrollment by taking steps such as adding graduate and certification programs, expanding online course offerings, or offering credentialing and training programs to businesses. But as colleges and universities prepare for the demographic freefall predicted to come in the mid-2020s, Grawe cautions against viewing these challenges merely through a “demographic lens.” A complex mix of cultural and economic factors may impact institutional sustainability, including affordability and student debt, retention and student success, and student support services.

“Disruptive change can provide both challenges and opportunities for improvement. In the next decade, higher education can expect a healthy dose of both,” Grawe wrote in “How Demographic



Members of an Infosys Business Analysis for Digital Transformation Program cohort take part in a training session in Trinity’s Raether Library and Information Technology Center.

Change Is Transforming the Higher Ed Landscape,” a February 2019 blog for *HigherEdJobs*. “What might it look like if higher education were to grow and develop in the face of demographic change such that in 2035 we might say that we did not merely weather a storm but instead stepped more completely into our institutional and societal missions? What if we took actions that not only headed off financial and other disruption but also prepared us for another generation of serving our communities?”

### Retention and Student Success

While increasing enrollment certainly can drive an institution’s financial strength, keeping those students who already have matriculated is vital to sustaining fiscal viability. Retention is a critical area of concern for most schools. Grawe cites data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center estimating that just 62 percent of the students who started college in 2017 returned to the same institution the next fall.

Wheaton College has implemented several initiatives to promote retention and student success. For example, a cross-campus workgroup, “Student Success and Enrollment Management,” meets regularly to evaluate the different stages of the Wheaton College experience, starting from the time a student commits to coming to Wheaton right up until graduation. This structure brings together faculty and staff from a wide range of backgrounds to develop integrated approaches to promote student success.

The college also received a \$1-million grant from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) to launch the Wheaton Inclusive STEM Excellence (WISE) initiative. This program creates access and support for traditionally underserved populations in the sciences, with an emphasis on women, underrepresented populations, and first-generation students.

“[These initiatives] are directly connected with our focus on growth,” Hanno says. “And our [focus on] growth is driven by our desire to provide a buffer against the current and impending demographic shifts.”



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The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, comprising 14 universities, has significant efforts underway to improve the success of low-income students and students of color, says Chancellor Dan Greenstein. A commitment to increasing financial aid and affordability, for example, offers possible options such as expanding institutional aid, providing emergency assistance and boosting financial aid literacy. Other plans include major investments in equity and inclusion programs; better support systems for low-income students and students of color; helping students acclimate to college through new approaches to developmental math; improvements in the first-year experience and support for community college transfer students; and upgrades to student academic and career advising.

“To hold ourselves accountable for progress in these areas, universities are establishing multiyear goals using a measurement framework that tracks student access, affordability, progression, and postgraduation outcomes, among other things,” Greenstein says. “[The assessment] disaggregates data by student group, such as by income, race, and ethnicity, so that we are able deliberately to target and track progress elimination of attainment gaps. We want to ensure that our students have the highest possible opportunity to retain and succeed in whatever degree they’re seeking.”

In a move to better student success and a completion rates, Youngstown State University has revamped student support services, starting with the recruitment of a vice president of institutional effectiveness and a chief student success officer to establish stronger safety nets for at-risk students, restructure academic advising, enhance the first-year experience, and more.

“Getting students in the door is one thing; keeping them is another,” says Molly Seals, a trustee and alumna of the university. “We redesigned our whole student support system to create a more staying environment, and this is particularly critical for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and first-generation students. So, we are creating a holistic and relational approach to student support, and we believe that will pay off.”

### Helping Students Adjust

From the moment they arrive on campus, students have academic, social, and emotional needs. Having the appropriate support services in place can make a difference in their adjustment to college and achieving academic success.

“The students who are landing at our doorsteps in higher education are fundamentally shifting as far as the needs that they have,” says Angel Perez, vice president for enrollment and student success at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. “The schools that are going to thrive in the next decade are the ones that are serving students well, providing a phenomenal customer service experience, but also meeting the needs our students have today.”

**Preparing for the demographic storm is not just about attracting and retaining a broader base of students. It’s also about “creating an infrastructure of systems and actions that will allow us to be a more versatile and flexible organization that can react and adapt nimbly to such a rapid decline in the population of high school graduates.”**

Mental health services are a critical need on campuses across the country. An increasing number of college students are dealing with a spectrum of mental health concerns, including anxiety and stress, inattention and difficulty concentrating, and feeling overwhelmed. Perez says that parents of prospective students often want to know what resources are available to help their children cope with the pressures they face. Trinity has partnered with nearby Hartford Hospital to provide mental health services for students to fill the gaps that may not be covered by staff on campus. The school also developed awareness campaigns about these services, targeting faculty and staff to enable them to direct students to the “ecosystem of mental health supports” available when necessary.

“We’re trying to attack those issues front and center when students come on campus,” Perez says. “We are trying to transform ourselves as an institution to be proactive instead of reactive around these concerns. These services used to be on the sidelines, but now they must be front and central to the work of the institution.”

### Strength in Numbers

Forming strategic partnerships with businesses, nonprofits, or other educational institutions can reduce costs and help institutions survive. At the same time, these connections can enhance the academic experience for students by offering the opportunity for hands-on experiences in real-world situations.

The Trinity-Infosys Applied Learning Initiative, for example, brings together the benefits of a liberal arts approach and workforce training in technology and innovation. Trinity students and employees of global tech giant Infosys will come together for unique learning opportunities that enhance problem-solving skills and promote creative thinking.

Trinity also participates in the Hartford Consortium for Higher Education, which brings together 10 institutions that collaborate

and share resources to list the region's economic, cultural, and social prosperity.

"The future of higher education is going to have to include many more partnerships, as opposed to this old mentality where we all go at everything alone," Perez says. "It's important for us to look at strategic ways to partner with the corporate sector, the technology sector, and other areas to help fulfill workforce needs and provide a high-quality experience for our students. Partnerships should be mission focused, but at the same time, they can produce revenue to sustain your financial model."

### Engaging Trustees

When it comes to developing strategies for growth and improvement, higher education leaders should tap into the expertise and commitment of their governing boards. The Youngstown State University Board of Trustees have discussed research from sources such as the Education Advisory Board and the university's Office of Institutional Research and Analytics to develop an understanding of changing student demographics and how they will impact the university, Seals says. The board's meetings in recent years have included sessions led by higher education thought leaders who offer insights that can guide discussions about the university's role within the broader community.

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At Youngstown State, that effort has included close evaluation of current and potential academic programs, with possible changes to general education requirements that would give students more opportunities to become immersed in their academic major courses and research programs. The board also is working closely

with faculty to develop ideas for increasing student and faculty involvement with the university-affiliated Youngstown business incubator, an internationally recognized program. Other areas in which the trustees have been involved include addressing the universities shortage of on-campus housing with the addition of four student apartment buildings, the redesign of scholarships and financial aid to increase opportunities for upper class students, and the creation of a partnership with a local health care organization to improve medical and mental health care services.

"It's important for the university to maintain enrollment in a way that will support economic growth on a local, regional, and national level," Seals says.

With a demographic storm expected in the next five years, it's not too soon for institutions and their governing boards to begin making plans for survival. Seals encourages trustees and campus leaders to work together to understand the unique needs of their students. By asking questions and listening to ideas and concerns, she says, trustees can find out what students value about their campus experience and what changes they would like to see.

"We learned from on-campus research the importance of relationships and building student support," Seals says. "There is no silver bullet solution. You have to look at your institution and your institution's behaviors, assumptions, culture, and programs. All of that had to change so that we could adopt an institutional mind-set to support the whole student and to build the programs that will give students the skills they will need in the future."

Greenstein emphasizes the importance of educating trustees about how the university operates and providing opportunities for them to interact with faculty and staff.

"When we do board meetings, we have breakout sessions where board members get to roll up their sleeves and engage with faculty and with staff [to better understand] real issues within higher education," Greenstein says. "That ensures that when they come to a decision point about a budget approval or any other issue, they will understand the range of issues so that, they can play their fiduciary role. So, I think engaging the board in the work of the university is super important."

Hanno adds: "Allow trustees to carve out a role for themselves to help stimulate innovation on the campus. And that means connecting them with leadership and with the faculty and staff so that everybody knows that the focus on innovation and program development is starting at the very highest level with trustee ownership. At the end of the day, it comes down to colleges and universities providing high-quality student experiences and providing opportunities that attract even more students to come to your institution." ■



Trinity College President Joanne Berger-Sweeney pictured with Hartford HealthCare President & CEO Jeffrey Flaks during a press conference announcing its partnership.

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