



12 Higher Ed Trends to Watch In 2021



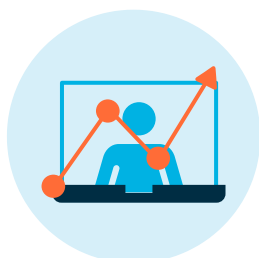
The seeds of every trend are sowed in the years prior. We dug deep to identify the 12 we'll be watching in 2021





Trend 1. The need for student crisis support continues to escalate

After nine months of pandemic-created isolation, anxiety, health worries and financial instability, mental health challenges among college students have gone from bad to worse. An [InsideTrack analysis](#) of year-over-year numbers shows that the need for student crisis support is greater than ever. In a [survey from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) on mental health during the pandemic, 25.5 percent of respondents aged 18 to 24 reported that they had seriously considered suicide. Roughly one-quarter of this same group said they had increased their substance usage to cope with the pandemic. And three-quarters reported facing at least one adverse mental health symptom. Food and housing insecurity, unemployment and underemployment, being fearful of getting sick (or making a loved one sick), and other stressors have come together to create a perfect storm of mental health overload. With fewer resources and greater needs, institutions need to develop creative ways to prioritize mental health.





Both by choice and out of necessity, the number of students taking most (or all) of their [classes online skyrocketed during the pandemic](#). As students become more accustomed to this modality — and seek ways to reduce their college costs — watch for online learning to take a larger piece of the higher ed pie, even once COVID-19 is under control. Yet issues remain — particularly in the area of equity, where online learning can magnify achievement gaps between student groups. Some students, for example, may be juggling academic, work, and family responsibilities — making it difficult to follow traditional class schedules. Low-income students may be sharing a single computer in households where paying for broadband bills and finding space for quiet study may not be possible. And students in rural areas are less likely to have reliable internet service at home. With COVID-19 shutting down the places they once relied on for free wifi, these students have no way to connect to online courses or services.



Trend 3. Financial flux: Budgeting into the great unknown

When COVID-19 closed down much of the economy in spring 2020, states quickly found themselves in precarious and uncharted financial predicaments. And when legislatures needed to slash budgets, higher education was often on the chopping block. This rapid and unexpected decrease in state funding has sent the operations at many schools into a tailspin, forcing them to make cuts or look for other revenue sources. As a result, institutions of all types began feeling the pinch. Cut programs or proceed as usual? Layoff faculty and staff or hang on and hope for the best? What about contracts with outside vendors who run everything from dining halls to dorms? Add to that the unexpected expense of going online — providing laptops and hotspots for students who need them, adding or expanding IT services and software, and maintaining campuses while





Trend 4. Adult learners question the value of a college degree

During times of economic downturn, workers with a college degree typically fare better than their degree-less counterparts. Yet during the economic recession caused by COVID-19, even the traditional wisdom behind the importance of a college degree was turned on its head. According to a [2020 Strada Education Network survey](#) of more than 25,000 responses, only 17 percent of adult learners believe additional education will be worth the cost, compared to 37 percent in 2019. In the same survey, just 24 percent believed additional education will make them an attractive job candidate to potential employers and help get them a good job, down from 56 percent the year before. Since the pandemic began, adult learners are opting for quicker, less expensive nondegree credentials (39 percent) and skills training (24 percent) over the traditional bachelor's degree (11 percent).



Trend 5. Student loan forgiveness is at a crossroads





trillion, making it the second highest consumer debt category, behind only home mortgages — and higher than credit card debt and auto loans. During the 2020 election season, there was a lot of talk about student loan forgiveness. The [NY Times](#) reports that president-elect Biden has endorsed canceling \$10,000 in federal student debt per borrower through legislation, while some congressional Democrats are pressing him to cancel \$50,000 per student using expedient executive action. [Research from the Roosevelt Institute](#) shows that the greatest marginal gains come from canceling the smallest debts. Wiping out \$20,000, for example, would end student debt for half of all households with loans. Not surprisingly, there is resistance from some quarters on student loan relief, citing the budget hit and the fact that millions have paid off their loans. But when, as Mr. Biden says, student debt holders are “having to make choices between paying their student loan and paying the rent,” something has to give.



Trend 6. Community colleges take a hard pandemic hit

The drop in enrollment caused by the pandemic has been unlike anything previously seen. In preliminary results from the [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's December report](#), changes in high school graduates' enrollment at four-year public schools is declining the least, at a rate of 13.8 percent — roughly 10 percent worse than pre-pandemic rates. Community colleges, on the other hand, which typically see enrollment increase when the job market is poor, have seen enrollments plummet 30.3 percent — a shockingly high decline. At the start of the pandemic, experts expected community colleges to get a bigger-than-usual enrollment boost, as students transferred out of four-year programs to save money and stay close to home. But that didn't happen. Reasons for this include the fact that community college students are the most likely to



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something to monitor throughout the year.



Trend 7. Using coaching to help students connect – on-ground and online

Regardless of whether students are on campus, online or going the hybrid route, attending college under the specter of coronavirus means a loss of the traditional school community. Traditional campus activities like intramural sports, dorm events and even grabbing pizza with friends are gone or greatly curtailed. And building a support network of fellow students, professors and staff members is a challenge at best. As a result, students are feeling isolated, often unsure of where to go for even the most basic help. Colleges and universities are turning to coaching as a way to motivate students and connect them with the resources they need to succeed. Skilled coaches can help [students with belonging](#), growth through struggles and challenges, developing strengths, and normalizing tough situations. This, in turn, helps the institution with increased retention and deeper insights into their student population – insights that can be used to remedy roadblocks or respond to new challenges. It's an additional tool in the student success toolbox – one that's more important than ever.





For several years, there has been talk about adding a three-year college degree to the mix at four-year institutions. The main benefit is lower overall cost, with reduced loan amounts to match. It also gets the student into the workforce or on to grad school more quickly. Cons include students having less freedom to explore different career paths and “find themselves,” as well as having less time to work and earn money, and less downtime to enjoy the full college experience. Roughly 30 colleges and universities currently offer students a three-year pathway to graduation — including University of San Francisco, University of Iowa, Kent State and New York University. And the majority of these programs have been created in the past 10 years. With the talk about finding ways to mitigate skyrocketing tuition and crushing student loan debt growing louder — especially in light of the economic issues caused by the pandemic — is it time to rethink the generations-old four-year bachelor’s degree?



Trend 9. “The college experience” takes a hit — will tuition costs follow?

When the pandemic hit, institutions nationwide closed their campuses and sent their students home to finish the term online. That greatly changed the college experience — no dorms or dining halls, no intramurals or athletics, no in-person interactions with faculty and staff, and so on. Yet the price tag didn’t change. Students have started hundreds of Change.org petitions, citing “an inferior learning experience” and the inability to access campus services. They’ve also taken their schools to court, challenging them to demonstrate the value behind the price tag. Institutions argue that by offering remote instruction so students can continue their studies, schools are upholding their part



and insurance



learning. Combine that with less state funding (for state schools), fewer alumni donations, and a drop in revenue from housing and dining plans and you get a Catch-22 that's leaving institutions with no room to move.



Trend 10. Lowering – yes *lowering* – tuition

2020 saw record unemployment numbers as states went on lockdown to slow the spread of COVID. Meanwhile, student enrollment for the fall 2020 term at campuses of all types plummeted. With less available income and fewer students willing to enroll for pandemic-forced online learning, something had to give. That something, it turns out, was the rising cost of tuition. Dozens of private colleges and universities have announced tuition resets, freezes or expanded scholarship programs for 2021. According to the [College Board](#), for the 2020/2021 academic year, average tuition and fees increased by just 1.1 percent for in-state students at four-year public colleges and 2.1 percent for students at four-year private institutions – the lowest increases in 30 years. Experts see this as the beginning of lowering costs, not the end. Another bigger hurdle to overcome: the system of tuition pricing that makes comparison shopping nearly impossible. By reducing tuition and fees – or by showing a more realistic cost upfront – schools are hoping to reverse declining enrollments.





Trend 11: The high cost of foreign students staying away

According to the [Open Doors Report On International Education](#), the United States is the top global destination for foreign students studying abroad, topping one million for five straight years. So when overall enrollment in the 2019-2020 academic year dropped 1.8 percent — the first decrease in nearly 15 years — it was a red flag. Educational leaders point to the social and political climate as a key reason for this — with more restrictive visa policies and an unwelcoming stance on immigration. Then came the pandemic, with travel from many countries limited or banned altogether. Data from the [Institute of International Education](#) shows that at the start of the 2020-2021 academic year last fall, the number of international students studying in the U.S. fell 16 percent, largely due to a 43 percent decrease in new enrollments. Is the pandemic causing a short-term enrollment drop or is something deeper at play? Time — as well as vaccines, immigration policies and other factors — will tell.



Trend 12: Faculty and staff are feeling the burn(out)

Without question, 2020 has been rough on college students. But it's been equally challenging for faculty and staff. Converting to online delivery modes literally overnight. University-wide budget





weekends – for months on end. Individually, these stressors can fray mental health. Put them all together and it’s the perfect recipe for burnout – which is exactly what’s happening to support staff and faculty as the uncertainty from coronavirus continues into the new year. In a late 2020 [study from Course Hero](#), three out of four faculty reported significant stress related to switching to online teaching. Two-thirds said meeting students’ emotional and mental health needs caused significant stress. And since March, their stress level has only increased as the pandemic drags on. Acknowledging and addressing the mental load being placed on staff and faculty is crucial for helping support them – before burnout leads to resigning.

