

4-Year College Students: Changing Demographics

In recent years, the demographics of 4-year college students have shown a significant shift. As society evolves and new opportunities arise, students are making different choices when it comes to pursuing higher education. In this blog, we will explore some key attributes of the changing demographics, considering how this **changes the approach to student recruitment** and retention.

Students with Children

Traditionally, the image of a college student has been that of a young individual straight out of high school, free from any familial responsibilities. However, this perception is no longer accurate. Increasingly, we are seeing a rise in the number of students who have children while pursuing their education.

According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, more than one in five college students (or 22%) are now balancing the responsibilities of parenthood along with their academic pursuits. This rise in the number of students with children can be attributed to changing societal norms, access to support systems, and advancements in childcare services on college campuses. It is important for colleges and universities to recognize and accommodate the needs of these students by providing resources, such as childcare facilities and flexible class schedules, to ensure their success.



Consider that 22% of your own student body may need to hear messaging about flexible schedules, accommodations for parents, and how many other students have similar circumstances. **Study your own student body** to fully understand how to speak to the kinds of students you are attracting.

4-Year College Students: Changing Demographics (CONT'D)



Many Choosing to Delay College

Another significant shift in the demographics of 4-year college students is the increasing percentage of students choosing to delay their college education. In the past, it was common for students to enroll in college immediately after completing high school. However, this trend has witnessed a decline as more individuals opt for gap years or take time off before pursuing higher education.

From fall 2019 (the last semester pre-pandemic) to 2021, undergraduate enrollment has fallen 6.6%, and community college enrollment down 13%. Enrollments were already on the decline, trending down since 2012, but the pandemic “turbocharged” this, according to NPR. Moreover, Black freshmen enrollment has seen a decline of 6.5%, according to the BestColleges Data Center.

Some students want to explore other options, such as traveling, volunteering, or gaining work experience, before committing to a college education. Others may need time to determine their career goals or improve their financial situations. Whatever the reasons may be, the choice to delay college is becoming more prevalent, and colleges and universities should consider adapting their admissions processes and support services to accommodate these students.

This decline in student enrollments immediately after high school means that the audiences colleges are recruiting will increase, and the manner the university’s value proposition is stated should be considered. An 18 year old may feel that campus lifestyle is among the most important attributes. A 22 year old may prefer that other students share their same life circumstances, and that the institution will feel like a community. These are very **different messages, and should be presented differently**, based on the targeted audience.

4-Year College Students: Changing Demographics (CONT'D)

Many Choosing to Delay College

In addition to students with children and those delaying college, another notable trend among 4-year college students is the increasing percentage of individuals opting for 2-year degree or certificate programs instead of pursuing a traditional bachelor's degree. Students are recognizing the value of acquiring specific skills and certifications in a shorter period, which can translate into immediate employment opportunities or a stepping-stone towards future educational endeavors.

This shift can be attributed to the rising cost of tuition, the demand for specialized skills in the job market, and the flexibility offered by 2-year programs. Students may find that a 2-year degree or certificate program aligns better with their career aspirations or personal circumstances, allowing them to enter the workforce more quickly or apply their skills to entrepreneurial endeavors. As such, colleges and universities should acknowledge these changing preferences and offer a diverse range of educational pathways to cater to the needs of these students.



If your university is making the case for a 4 year degree, spend the time to hone the manner by which your entire university describes this. Public perception of a 4-year degree is changing, beginning with the students seeking it. Clear, concise description of the value, a support path to achieve it, and a **student-first mentality** articulated to those considering your school will be critical to recruitment success.

The demographics of 4-year college students are continuously evolving. As seen through the increasing percentage of students with children, those choosing to delay college, and those opting for 2-year degree or certificate programs instead of pursuing a traditional bachelor's degree, it is clear that students today have diverse needs and aspirations when it comes to higher education. Colleges and universities must stay responsive to these changing demographics by offering support services, flexible options, and alternative pathways that cater to the unique circumstances and goals of each student. By doing so, they can ensure that higher education remains accessible and relevant for all.



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