Beyond the Term:

How to Adapt and Respond to New Expectations for Postsecondary Education

Re-Evaluating Enrollment Strategies

It's no secret that enrollment in colleges and universities declined markedly during the COVID-19 pandemic. These losses are now putting intense competitive pressure on higher education institutions to recoup their student populations for fiscal viability.

Total undergraduate and graduate enrollment had declined by 7.4%, or nearly 1.3 million students, by the spring of 2022, two years into the pandemic.[1] While both undergraduate and graduate enrollment continued to shrink in the fall of 2022, the decline did begin to slow to nearly pre-pandemic rates.[2]

> " In the aftermath of the pandemic, colleges and universities are pressed to re-evaluate their long- and short-term strategies, particularly as they relate to enrollment management and student support services. "
>
> — National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, October 2022

But pre-pandemic enrollment rates were already worrisome—the public health emergency just exacerbated a longer-term downward trend. Between 2009 and 2020, total undergraduate enrollment decreased by 9 percent, from 17.5 million to 15.9 million students.[3] Enrollment in graduate programs outpaced undergraduate enrollment over the same timeframe, but high costs, inflation, and a hot job market may challenge graduate programs to meet their enrollment goals in the future.[4]

Moreover, the value of a college degree may be eroding. "The tight labor market is prompting more employers to eliminate one of the biggest requirements for many higher-paying jobs: the need for a college degree."[5]

Factors Impacting Enrollment

Without a better strategy for meeting the moment and managing enrollment, larger forces will continue to challenge colleges and universities in their quest for students:

- **Changing student demographics.** "Traditional" 18- to 24-year-old college students typically attend in-person, full-time programs with little interruption. But traditional students are now in the minority in higher education. In fact, 85% of students are considered "post-traditional" and are a diverse group of adult learners, full-time employees, low-income students, students who commute to school, and working parents. In general, post-traditional students have one or more of the following characteristics: they delay enrollment in college after high school, they attend part-time for at least part of an academic year, they work full-time while also enrolled in school, they are financially independent, or they have dependents (spouse and/or children).[6] "Today's college students are parents, caregivers, full-time employees, and retirees."[7]

Student populations are more diverse racially and ethnically as well, with enrollment declining among white students and rising among Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Pacific Islanders.[8] Historically underserved populations face unique challenges in their journeys through postsecondary education, which many institutions struggle to address.

- **Changing student preferences.** Having endured pandemic shifts to remote and hybrid learning in high school, prospective college students "continue to expect digital course offerings and flexible scheduling" and "varied course formats, schedules, credit loads, and degree types," according to a survey of high school sophomores and juniors.[9]

  Flexible program options are equally important for attracting nontraditional students, who are "often balancing more responsibilities than traditional college-age students, and therefore ... seek education options that fit with their life and work schedules."[10] Financial barriers are a top challenge for enrolling and continuing in postsecondary education for nontraditional students.

  Both traditional and nontraditional students are interested in breaking free from rigid academic calendars. They might want or need to take breaks, take advantage of shorter-term learning opportunities, or earn credentials along with a diploma. They might want to curate and stack shorter credentials into a full degree.

  The pandemic also exposed a "crying need" and student expectations for more effective mental health and well-being support. Stress is the most-cited reason when students consider "stopping out" of college.[11] Traditionally unrepresented student populations, who are at greater risk of mental health conditions, may need more flexibility to persist in college and earn their degrees.

- **Increased competition.** Higher education institutions no longer have a lock on the market for students. Many alternatives offer shorter routes to credentials, career pathways, and jobs. Some colleges and universities are embracing these alternatives. For example:

  ° **Competency-based education** (CBE) offers flexibility for students to progress as they demonstrate mastery of content regardless of time, place, or pace of learning.[12]

Fast Facts

In a 2020 study, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) found that 128 unique postsecondary institutions reported offering at least one CBE program — and 64% of them planned to increase the number of CBE programs at their institution. In addition, 82% of institutions surveyed expected the number of CBE programs to increase over the next five years. "CBE could help institutions respond to future disruptions or uncertainties."[13]

  ° **Workforce development programs** train people for specific jobs, including those that pay a living wage in high-demand industries without a college degree.

  ° **Boot camps and massive open online courses** (MOOCs) through services like Coursera and General Assembly offer crash courses and professional certificates.

This leaves colleges and universities in a predicament. Today's students are increasingly interested in faster, skill-oriented courses they can take on their own time. Many colleges and universities offer alternative learning opportunities — but fitting them into a traditional term model is challenging. How can institutions offer a mix of models that meet all students' needs?

Key Takeaways

Colleges and universities face enrollment pressures from every direction. Enrolling students increasingly depends on an institution's ability to meet students where they are by offering flexible programs. Institutions that have a strategy to address today's market dynamics have an opportunity to turn a competitive disadvantage into an advantage by responding more effectively to the challenges, needs, and preferences of traditional and nontraditional students.

Limitations of a Term-Based Approach

Understanding the enrollment pressures on colleges and universities hinges on two primary challenges for U.S. colleges and universities: the enrollment calendar and financial aid.

The **enrollment calendar** determines when and how colleges and universities can assign students to courses. The traditional calendar is term-based, typically using a semester, trimester, or quarter schedule. Terms have concrete lengths, starting and concluding at the same time every year. Courses are structured to meet credit-hour requirements within the confines of term durations. The typical course has 45 to 48 contact hours, resulting in three credit hours for students upon successful completion.

Financial aid is intrinsically connected to the enrollment calendar. Higher education is expensive; costs are typically untenable for students without financial aid. Any institution that cannot meet federal financial aid requirements is certain to see massive enrollment losses.

For students to secure financial aid, institutions must report regularly on student progress to the U.S. Department of Education. Traditional term-based enrollment calendars keep all students' progress in lockstep, making reporting relatively easy. Most colleges and universities still operate on some form of term model to simplify scheduling, reporting, financial aid, and other academic administrative processes.

The Challenges of Shifting from Rigid to Flexible Enrollment Models

Some colleges and universities recognize the need for more flexible enrollment models to compete for students and provide structures that help them succeed. Some already offer revenue-generating CBE, workforce development programs, boot camps, or MOOCs that may not lead to traditional academic credits. Instead, they may reward competencies or successful completion with badges, certificates, or other credentials.

But nontraditional calendars create challenges with credit-bearing courses. How can institutions fulfill reporting requirements and ensure that students receive financial aid in time for their next session if all students are completing credit hours at different times?

At a Glance: The Conundrum of Enrollment Models

Standard Term Enrollment Calendar

	Fall	Spring
Sessions	A • 16 weeks	B • 16 weeks

Non-Term Enrollment Calendars
(Sessions Overlap with Standard Term Calendar)

Sessions	C • 11 weeks	D • 11 weeks	E • 11 weeks

Sessions	F • 8 weeks	G • 8 weeks	H • 8 weeks	I • 8 weeks

Adapted from **National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators**, 2005

Traditional term enrollment calendars are organized as standardized semesters, trimesters, or quarters that do not overlap.

Non-term enrollment calendars with overlapping sessions, or multiple calendars at the same institution, break that mold. But without robust administrative systems, they can create reporting challenges for institutions and disrupt financial aid for students.

Traditional and nontraditional calendars do not live alongside one another harmoniously. Attempting to combine different calendars causes reporting challenges on student status and progress to the U.S. Department of Education, which has strict and elaborate regulations for students to remain eligible for financial aid.

For instance, in the example above, Session D overlaps with Sessions A and B. Students in Session D would have to wait until Session B reporting to receive credits for completing the course. But what if those credits were needed to demonstrate the ongoing pursuit of a program approved for financial aid or to meet prerequisites for Session E? What happens to students whose financial aid is delayed? Institutions lose timely revenues, and students could drop out.

The Promise of Non-Term Enrollment Calendars

To gain a competitive advantage, postsecondary institutions can expand or adapt their enrollment calendars. By doing so, they can attract the growing pool of nontraditional students and better respond to the needs and preferences of traditional and nontraditional students.

"Shorter academic terms, typically eight weeks, present a promising opportunity to meet the needs of today's learners better than traditional 16-week semesters … Shorter terms often require learners to take fewer classes at once to be considered full-time students, which can help them balance work, family, and education. And if learners still need to pause their education or don't succeed on a course, they can jump back in or catch up more quickly the next term."[14]

Flexible scheduling can mitigate the stress and anxiety that many traditional and nontraditional students experience routinely.

Adjusting the Enrollment Calendar to Meet Student Needs

To ease life barriers that disrupted student momentum and to reduce the enrollment-to-degree duration, Odessa College in Texas switched its enrollment calendar from a 16-week semester to two eight-week terms in 2014. Two years later, the college reported a 13% increase in enrollment, and five years later, enrollment had increased by 25%.[15]

Key Takeaway

Non-term and nonstandard enrollment calendars can be a win–win for students *and* postsecondary institutions.

Adapting to Changing Market Dynamics

The future of enrollment models is being created inside and outside of higher education.

To address market shifts, some colleges and universities are offering programming in many different formats. These are the most prominent adaptations to the term enrollment calendar:

- **Standard term with modules.** Some institutions are working around standard seasonal semesters, trimesters, or quarters by breaking up terms into modules. Modules do not have to adhere to standard lengths or content. If the modules in a term meet credit-hour or CBE requirements, they can be reported as traditional terms.

- **Nonstandard terms.** Coursework is still offered within the confines of terms, but these terms do not adhere to traditional semesters, trimesters, or quarters. Like standard terms, however, they are scheduled at set periods on the calendar, and they do not overlap.

  ° **Equal nonstandard terms** are of the same duration, such as a calendar filled with six-week courses.

  ° **Unequal nonstandard terms** are of different durations, such as a summer with three six-week terms and a full-term fall semester.

- **Nonterm programs** enroll students who identify a class or course of study, pay for it, and attend. Nonterm programs come in three primary varieties:

  ° **Clock-hour nonterms.** Programs measure progress in clock hours rather than credit hours. English as a Second Language programs are a prime example.

  ° **Flexible nonterms.** Programs measured in credit hours that do not begin and end within a standard term, such as self-paced courses and programs that overlap multiple terms, can be considered nonterm. Sequential courses that are not confined to a term also can be considered nonterm.

  ° **Subscription.** Students pay a set fee on a regular basis to gain access to a library of classes. This model is highly popular outside of education, with Coursera, Udemy, and edX, for example. Some universities are seeking ways to provide a similar experience.

New models and variations of these models continue to emerge across higher education. But they present a two-fold challenge for institutions that encompasses enrollment, scheduling, reporting, and financial aid.

- How do you customize legacy, term-based student information systems (SIS) to accommodate nontraditional enrollment calendars?

- How do you manage a mix of standard and nonstandard enrollment calendars, some with adaptations?

There are perceived barriers to adopting one alternative program that is gaining traction in higher education and fits well with flexible enrollment models: competency-based education. The 2020 AIR survey found that 52% of institutions with existing CBE programs, or those in the process of implementing programs, cited "business systems and processes" as barriers.

Barriers to Flexible Enrollment Models

Business systems and processes
52% of institutions
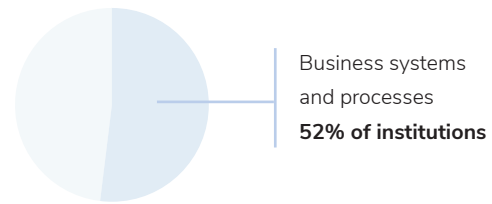
Anthology Breaks Down Enrollment Barriers

Anthology offers the one SIS that can help institutions overcome the key barriers to flexible enrollment models — business systems and processes — and provide a competitive advantage in a challenging market.

Anthology® Student is unique in the market and built from the ground up to support flexible enrollment models. Anthology Student is a dynamic, cloud-based SIS designed to promote student success and deliver a personalized student experience, from acceptance to graduation. Anthology Student supports these institutional goals and more:

- **Flexible academic programs.** Anthology Student is the *only* SIS on the market that offers a single, centralized solution for standard, nonstandard, and nonterm academic programs. Anthology Student doesn't organize students by what term they are in, but by what educational goal they are trying to achieve. Any courses, modules, badges, or other experiences they pursue on their journey toward a credential can be tracked, regardless of an institution's type of enrollment calendar (or calendars). This extends beyond a single campus as well. Anthology Student can unify reporting and processes for multi-campus institutions, even if individual campuses have their own unique programs or business processes.

- **Increased student success.** Anthology Student intelligently leverages data to promote student success. Our SIS offers early, data-driven alerts to identify and help at-risk students. Intuitive student progress reports trigger intervention strategies and resources and personalized support plans and academic services based on student needs. It also enables institutions to manage internships and externships within careers services to strategically match students to employment opportunities.

- **Improved operational efficiency.** Anthology Student frees faculty, staff, and administrators from manual processes. This means they can spend their time doing what they do best: supporting students with personalized interactions and critical data to increase engagement, persistence, and completion.

Anthology partners with institutions to design a comprehensive strategy to align an institution's technology and tools with their enrollment calendar(s) and develop policies, processes, and practices that support the institution and its students.

Footnotes

[1] National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (May 26, 2020.) **Current Term Enrollment Estimates: Spring 2022**.

[2] National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (Oct. 20, 2022.) *Stay Informed.*

[3] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (PEDS), Spring 2010 through Spring 2021, Fall Enrollment component. Enrollment in Degree-Granting Institutions Projection Model, through 2030. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table **303.70**.

[4] Sterba, S. (Jan. 31, 2023.) "**Reflecting on the State of Graduate Enrollment**." NAGAP, The Association for Graduate Enrollment Management.

[5] Hufford, A. (Nov. 26, 2022.) "**Employers Rethink Need for College Degrees in Tight Labor Market**." *The Wall Street Journal.*

[6] Postsecondary National Policy Institute. (Sept. 26, 2021.) **Factsheet: Post-Traditional Students in Higher Education**.

[7] Hittepole, C. (n.d.) *Nontraditional Students: Supporting Changing Student Populations*. NASPA.

[8] National Center for Education Statistics. (2022.) Postbaccalaureate Enrollment. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

[9] Hanover Research. (2022.) *2022 National Prospective Student Survey.*

[10] Hanover Research. (January 2018.) *Strategies for Attracting and Supporting Nontraditional Students.*

[11] Gallup & Lumina Foundation. (2022.) *The State of Higher Education 2022 Report.*

[12] Blackboard. (2015.) Competency-Based Education (CBE). *Higher Education's Answer to the Call for Change.*

[13] Mason, J., Parsons, K., & Cap, Q. N. (2020.) *State of the Field: Findings From the 2020 National Survey of Postsecondary Competency-Based Education*. American Institutes for Research.

[14] Stout, K. A., & Shaver, T. (Oct. 1, 2021.) "**Obliterating the Academic Calendar Is the Easy Part**." Times Higher Education.

[15] Achieving the Dream. (July 6, 2021.) "Shorter Terms at Odessa College: 'An Overnight Success Several Years in the Making.'"

About Anthology

Anthology offers the largest EdTech ecosystem on a global scale, supporting over 150 million users in 80 countries. The company's mission is to provide dynamic, data-informed experiences to the global education community so that learners and educators can achieve their goals.

Through Anthology Intelligent Experiences™ and over 60 SaaS products and services, Anthology advances learning in partnership with education, business and government institutions. Tapping into this unmatched portfolio of solutions, only Anthology can leverage data from across the EdTech ecosystem to create Intelligent Experiences that lead to better outcomes.

Learn more about our mission at **www.anthology.com.**