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STUDENTS

A Population in Flux Forces Colleges to Adapt

By Eric Hoover and Beckie Supiano DECEMBER 06, 2016 PREMIUM

California U. of Pennsylvania

New projections of high-school graduates foresee a period of continued stagnation that threatens enrollments. In Pennsylvania, many colleges — including California U. of Pennsylvania, which draws primarily from five local counties with shrinking populations — are trying an array of strategies in response to those changes.

The projections loom like storm clouds, worrying college officials throughout the state. Over the next 15 years, the number of high-school graduates in Pennsylvania is expected to fall steadily to 132,000, down from 150,000 in 2009-10. With fewer prospects to go around, the already-fierce competition for students will surely intensify. Those numbers come from the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, known as Wiche. On Tuesday, the group released new projections of high-school graduates in all 50 states through 2031-32. After years of increases in the overall number of graduates, the commission's report says, "the U.S. is headed into a period of stagnation," in which colleges can no longer rely on growth.

The national figures mask significant regional variations. Wiche projects further growth in the South and West, and a continuing drop in the Midwest and Northeast. Meanwhile, the nation's high-school graduates will become more diverse than ever before. The number of white graduates is expected to decrease sharply while the number of Hispanic graduates grows substantially.

As robust as Wiche's widely anticipated reports are, state-level statistics only begin to convey the complexity of population shifts. "A statewide number doesn't really tell the story," says Peter H. Garland, executive vice chancellor of Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education. Indeed, the story of demographic change varies from county to county, ZIP code to ZIP code.

In Pennsylvania — where two major cities bookend a heavily rural expanse — there isn't one plot line, but many. "The eastern third of the state is in better shape than the rest," Mr. Garland says. Generally, the diverse population in and around Philadelphia is growing, and the predominantly white areas to the west are seeing declines. From 2013 to 2023, for instance, the number of high-school graduates in Chester County, just outside Philadelphia, is projected to grow by 19 percent, according to data from the university system. During the same period, Clarion County, in the western half of the state, can expect a 23-percent decline.

Although geography shapes a college's fortunes, many other factors matter, too. An institution's mission, market position, and financial resources all affect its ability to adapt to demographic trends. In Pennsylvania, the high price tag of the state's colleges complicates the task, says Joni E. Finney, a professor of practice at the University of Pennsylvania, who directs the university's Institute for Research on Higher Education. The state ranked 49th in a college-affordability index released with a study co-written by

Ms. Finney. Moreover, paying for college is a particular challenge for the pockets of students — Hispanics and adults — whose numbers are growing.

Throughout the Keystone State, where dramatic population changes are well under way, campus leaders are embracing an array of strategies to shore up enrollment. As the needs of their communities evolve, two-year colleges are stepping up outreach to underserved populations and revamping course offerings for working adults short on time and money. And as the supply of high-school graduates in many areas drops, four-year colleges are recruiting farther afield and tapping other markets — transfer students, adult learners, and online programs.

Caveats apply. "The success of doing all that varies, campus by campus," Mr. Garland says. Any new market a college enters is likely to be just as competitive as the old one. And in an era of demographic change, survival isn't just a matter of filling classrooms and beds. A population in flux requires college officials to think harder about campus culture — and how to help an increasingly diverse cohort of students succeed.

Demographics and 'Destiny'

Susquehanna University is located in central Pennsylvania, once home to a thriving coal industry. Traditionally, the small liberal-arts college attracted most of its students from working-class towns within a 100-mile radius. "Faculty members love those hard-working rural kids who've always come here," says Madeleine E. Rhyneer, vice president for enrollment and marketing. "They also understand there are fewer and fewer of them."

Like many private colleges, Susquehanna must cast a wider net for applicants, though its net reaches only so far. "We didn't just wake up one day and go 'Florida!' That's not going to work for us," Ms. Rhyneer says. Instead, the university has doubled down on recruiting in nearby states, especially New Jersey, which exports a high percentage of its high-school graduates. The university purchased more names of prospective students and personalized its communication with families. The goal: Enrolling more suburban/urban students with educated parents earning between $75,000 and $150,000 a year.

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Recruitment's just one piece of a broader strategy, though. Susquehanna is considering new academic programs, such as data analytics, that would prepare students for jobs in growing fields. Meanwhile, the university has played up career preparation in marketing materials. "People are still willing to pay for a liberal-arts education," Ms. Rhyneer says, "but fewer of them believe in knowledge for its own sake."

Last fall brought good news. After several years of enrollment shortfalls, the university brought in a record 668 first-year students — a 16-percent increase over the previous year — and met its revenue goal. This fall, the university welcomed 645 new students, along with increases in transfers and retention.

Small private colleges aren't the only ones adapting. Pennsylvania's universities are retooling, too. After Slippery Rock University hired a new president and provost, in 2012, the two officials led a "deep dive" into planning for the state's changing population. The goal? "Not letting demographics be our destiny," says Amanda Yale, associate provost for enrollment management.

Leaders at Slippery Rock, in a rural area about 50 miles north of Pittsburgh, saw that the number of prospective students nearby was dwindling. They also considered that the campus was best known for educating teachers, demand for which had dropped off. It was time, they soon decided, to diversify the university's academic offerings.

Slippery Rock introduced accelerated programs combining undergraduate and graduate study in those "STEM + H" (science, technology, engineering and mathematics, plus health) fields for which a thorough analysis found market demand. The new offerings include a physician-assistant program, which has driven growth in related undergraduate majors, such as biology, public health, and exercise science, officials say. The new additions have also appealed to transfer students from local community colleges.

Despite its location, the university has been able to grow. Slippery Rock's enrollment is up about 3 percent — in combined undergraduate and graduate students — over last year. "To be up anything in western Pennsylvania" Ms. Yale says, "you don't see that." And what is more, enrollment is up at least slightly in all of the major categories, she says. "The president calls this the trifecta," she says, "graduates, undergraduates, and transfers being up."

California University of Pennsylvania, in the southwestern part of the state, hasn't been as fortunate. The campus, which draws primarily from five local counties with shrinking populations, has seen its overall enrollment drop for several years in a row. California had 5,522 total undergraduates in its fall census, down from 5,786 the year before.

Tracey Sheetz, the dean of undergraduate admissions, was hired this summer to help turn things around. She hopes to broaden the university's reach by focusing on areas surrounding other state universities, where "Cal U" might already have name recognition among teenagers seeking "that going-away experience." The university has also created merit scholarships to attract more high-performing students.

Traditional students aren't the only focus. California is also continuing to promote a program called "Finish Line," which supports those who have earned college credits but never graduated. That's a market worth trying to break into: There are more than a million Pennsylvania residents with some college but no degree.

'Inviting, Welcoming, and Safe'

John J. Sygielski thinks of himself as an ambassador. Since becoming president of Harrisburg Area Community College five years ago, he has visited local trailer parks and black churches. He has attended Latino festivals and county fairs. And he has introduced himself to recent immigrants trickling into the area from Russia and Tibet.

As Harrisburg's enrollment has dropped steadily over the past several years, the college has stepped up its outreach. "We're focusing on communities that, historically, we have not put a lot of energy into," Mr. Sygielski says. At each stop, he talks up the college's English-language courses and certificate programs. He explains opportunities in fields such as information-technology, health care, and welding.

The first in his family to attend college, Mr. Sygielski knows that people from underserved communities often struggle to see themselves on a college campus. So he tries to convey a broader message about the institution, where nearly a third of students are nonwhite. "I want them to know we're inviting, welcoming, and safe," he says. "There's often a self-esteem issue. People will say, 'I wasn't smart in high school, aren't I going to feel intimidated?'"

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Harrisburg has bolstered programming and support for underrepresented students on its five campuses. A few months ago, Mr. Sygielski hired a chief inclusion and diversity officer, with whom he has sought candid feedback from students and staff. "We're

asking them, What's working? How can we be a more inclusive community? What do we need to do?"

As students change, colleges must adapt accordingly. Even if that means altering how — and when — courses are delivered, says Jerome S. Parker: "We have to accommodate them, or else we'll lose them."

Mr. Parker is president of Delaware County Community College, which has seen a significant uptick in part-time enrollment over the past few years. The institution, in the eastern part of the state, has long served lower-income adults working one or more jobs.

"Now we're just seeing more of them," Mr. Parker says. "They're rationing their time and money, wanting to take just six credits at a time."

So Delaware has revamped its academic calendar to offer students greater flexibility — while keeping them on track. "We've become a year-round college, with full-time faculty in the summer," Mr. Parker says. "That's been an enormous change."

The institution is also working harder to land students who enroll straight out of high school, who make up about a fifth of its enrollment. Recently, Delaware has expanded its dual-enrollment programs and assigned two recruiters to work regularly with counselors at local high schools.

Mr. Parker hopes those strategies will help Delaware maintain its enrollment of younger students in an increasingly tough market. "We've got four-year schools coming in and being aggressive," he says. "There's a very intense competition."

Amid such competition, it's easy to fixate on near-term goals, the annual wins and losses that define success or failure enrollment. What keeps Robert Springall up at night, though, is a long-term question: As the nation becomes more diverse, will college campuses look like more like rest of the country — or less?

Mr. Springall is dean of admissions at Bucknell University, in central Pennsylvania. In recent years, incoming classes have become more diverse. Last fall, a record-high 23 percent of freshmen were minorities, and just under 10 percent were first-generation students. These days, he says, there are more conversations — sometimes uncomfortable ones — about race, privilege, and economic disparity on campus. He takes that as a sign of progress, the inevitable result of bringing together students from different backgrounds.

Still, Mr. Springall wants the campus to better reflect the nation's changing demographics. "We've got to make progress every single year in becoming a more diverse institution, a more welcoming institution, a more inclusive institution," he says.

"If we lose that momentum, next year's class will be fine, the class two years from now will be fine. But what will the class of 2035 look like?"

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