COMMENCEMENTS FOLLOW COVID MODELS

Colleges and universities honor their graduates with a unique array of ceremonies in 2021

Wild ride for admissions
Chaotic application cycle, pandemic, led to solutions that may remain for good

Mandatory vaccines?
Some schools are requiring them for students, but be aware of legal pitfalls

UniversityBusiness.com

The art of the possible
How High Point University has thrived during the pandemic, plans to grow
Answers Anytime, Anywhere, on Any Device.

To learn more about Ivy.ai’s solutions for 24/7/365 student support visit www.ivy.ai

facebook /ivychatrobot
linkedin /company/ivy.ai
twitter /ivychatbot
University Information Technology Services (UITS) at Indiana University has a large, award-winning online knowledge base, started in 1988. For years, their self-help search tool has been a well-developed function on IU’s website to provide on-demand IT support. The search tool functions similarly to a google search, where a user enters key search terms to retrieve a ranked list of knowledge base articles.

But, what if that process could be improved? The research team, led by Antino Kim, Agrim Sachdeva, and Alan Dennis, set out to measure student preferences after UITS implemented Ivy.ai to better service its users.

Two of the primary objectives of implementation were to provide better IT self-service support options to IU constituents and enable support staff to spend more time on more complex problems.

Results

For each survey question, the researchers found a statistically significant outcome in favor of the chatbot. Students rated the chatbot with a higher level of overall satisfaction, and said they would be more likely to use a chatbot to answer their questions than a traditional search method. According to the study, it is also substantially less difficult to use a chatbot than it is to use traditional search.

In the main study, the researchers accounted for variables such as gender, familiarity with information technology, and which question participants were instructed to ask. They found that within each group, students still rated the chatbot more favorably than traditional search.

The researchers also discovered an order effect, meaning that students who used the chatbot last yielded a higher average satisfaction rating than students who completed participation with the search tool. They found similar results for likelihood to use and difficulty of use. These order effects likely indicate that the appeal of the chatbot becomes clearer after using the search tool.

In a supplementary study, the researchers wanted to eliminate the order effect and introduce a wider variety of verified questions. 91 students were asked to interact with either the chatbot or the search tool, ask one of 93 available questions, and then provide a rating on a scale between one and seven.

This time, students were only asked to rate their overall satisfaction and perceived difficulty of use. Again, the students rated the chatbot much higher than the search tool in all areas.

"It seems like an efficient way to get my questions answered without spending hours scrolling through IU’s website and randomly guessing what things are," one student said.

"I like that it seems like you are texting someone when you are getting help," said another.

Based on the results, the researchers concluded that the chatbot had a significant positive effect on satisfaction, and that students are more likely to use a chatbot for self-help compared to traditional search methods. Importantly, students reported significantly lower perceived difficulty when using a chatbot to find answers to their questions.

These responses suggest that students appreciated the more conversational nature of a chatbot, while being shorter and more to-the-point. Specifically, traditional search methods require students to review multiple results and select the best answer. Chatbots also have an advantage in that they can interpret meaning from natural language, whereas some search methods may rely on the presence of keywords.
Looking ahead to a return to ‘normal’

Some of the uncertainties of last year have begun to fade. University staff should be mostly vaccinated by autumn. The need to sanitize surfaces is less of a concern, based on revised CDC guidance. And students are now eligible for the COVID vaccine, too.

But some questions remain. Should your institution require those students to be vaccinated? Will that policy lead to lawsuits and more headaches? Will academic professionals feel comfortable being indoors with unvaccinated students? Will it be safe to hold in-person classes again?

And what about SATs and ACTs? After the pandemic is history, will those be back in fashion or are those days over?

In this edition of University Business, we’re tracking these issues and more as we look ahead to the fall and the hopeful return to some sense of normalcy.

After a year of unprecedented challenges, we look forward to covering the things that matter most to you.

As always, if you have feedback or story ideas, drop me a line at eweiss@lrp.com.

—Executive Editor Eric Weiss

More colleges make vaccines mandatory for fall

A growing list of colleges and universities have said students must be vaccinated for the fall, but many more say they’ll wait for guidance.

bit.ly/mandatoryvax

How does your college stack up on Salary Score?

GradReport’s new metric helps students who are seeking an edge in ROI that compares institutions in several categories.

bit.ly/salaryscore

These 5 universities, colleges push test-optional past 2023

The University of Kentucky is among the latest to extend leeway to future students on the inclusion of standardized test scores during the application process.

bit.ly/skipthetest

College 2030: A conversation on the future of higher ed

The CEO of Barnes and Noble Education discusses the value of colleges and universities forging strategies over the next decade to meet student needs.

bit.ly/college2030

5 ways to help students overcome financial aid barriers

Students who most need financial aid are the least likely to have sufficient support, survey says.

bit.ly/aidbarriers

5 ways to help students overcome financial aid barriers

Students who most need financial aid are the least likely to have sufficient support, survey says.
Summer 2021
Volume 25, Number 2

Publisher
Kenneth Kahn

EDITORIAL
Executive Editor
Eric Weiss
Senior Writer
Matt Zalaznick
Associate Editor
Chris Burt

ART
Production Director
Joe Ciocca
Art Director
Rebecca Eller

ADVERTISING, EVENTS AND CUSTOM MEDIA
Vice President, Event and Media Sales, Education Group
Jim Callan
jcallan@lrp.com  (561) 622-6520 ext. 8696

Sales Manager, East
Robb Holzrichter
rhолzrichter@universitybusiness.com
(818) 630-3737

Sales Manager, West
Fern Sheinman
fsheinman@universitybusiness.com
(858) 877-0739

Content Marketing Editor
Kurt Eisele-Dyrli

CIRCULATION AND OPERATIONS
Director of Audience Development
Dana Kubicko

LRP MEDIA GROUP
President
Kenneth Kahn
Chief Financial Officer
Todd Lutz
Vice President, Marketing and Communications
Missy Ciocca

REPRINTS/PERMISSIONS
For more information, call (561) 622-6520 ext.8456

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Send address changes to:
Dana Kubicko
University Business
dkubicko@lrp.com

HOW TO REACH US
University Business
360 Hiatt Drive
Palm Beach Gardens, FL 33418
Phone: (561) 622-6520
Website: www.universitybusiness.com

FEATURES

5 Commencements follow COVID models
By Chris Burt
Colleges and universities adapt in-person ceremonies in bold, creative ways

8 The Art of the Possible
By Chris Burt
How High Point University thrived during the pandemic, and looks to the future

10 Wild Ride for Admissions
By Chris Burt
Chaotic application cycle, pandemic, led to solutions that may remain for good

COLUMNS

13 Last Word
By Michael Vernick, Brennan Meier, Molly Whitman, Jessica Mannon
Mandating vaccines for students could lead to legal legal pitfalls

BEYOND THE NEWS

4 45 HBCUs have $1.6 billion in debt eliminated; billions for higher ed
DEBT RELIEF

45 HBCUs have $1.6 billion in debt eliminated

The Department of Education said the Capital Financing loan forgiveness will improve outcomes for institutions, students

A group of 45 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) received word from the U.S. Department of Education that they had a total of $1.6 billion in debt discharged.

The 13 public and 32 private institutions that participate in the HBCU Capital Financing Program, which provides financial assistance for infrastructure improvements and construction, received a reprieve through the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA). When the original stimulus plan was introduced last December, that number was estimated to be $1.3 billion.

“Our HBCUs have long been on an uneven playing field, financially, as compared to many other postsecondary institutions,” said Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona. “This relief will further support these mission-critical institutions and help to ensure they have more resources to educate and graduate students during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic.”

The Department also said HBCUs will net an additional $5 billion via the American Rescue Plan and the CARES Act’s Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund.

The combination of assistance will allow HBCUs to not only defray the costs of pandemic-related activities and make necessary repairs but also improve their retention rates and academic outcomes for students.

The institutions receiving aid

The program has helped provide aid to HBCUs since 1992, with 113 lower-cost loans granted to 50 institutions for various infrastructure projects. The Department said 87 of those had been outstanding and ranged from $10 million to just over $150 million.

Some of those included nearly $70 million at Morgan State University to help refinance debt, build a new public safety facility and improve student housing; $100 million for Xavier University of Louisiana to help build new dorms and update its HVAC, plumbing and maintenance in buildings; and $47 million to the University of the Virgin Islands to help construct a research and technology business innovation center and medical simulation center. — Chris Burt

HIGHER ED FUNDING

White House budget blueprint has billions for higher ed

The White House Office of Management and Budget released its preliminary FY 2022 budget request blueprint, including top-line figures for discretionary spending programs, which includes $102.8 billion overall for the Education Department, an increase of $29.8 billion over the FY 2021 enacted budget.

The request includes $1 billion for Department of Justice Violence Against Women Act of 1994 programs, nearly double the 2021 level, including funding for new programs to expand restorative justice efforts, protect transgender survivors, and support women at HBCUs, Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) to enroll, retain, and graduate students.

The request also includes an additional $450 million for tribal communities for climate change mitigation, environmental justice projects, and investment to begin the process of transitioning tribal colleges to renewable energy.

The Office for Civil Rights would also see an increase from $131 million in FY 2021 to $144 million in FY 2022 “to advance equity in educational opportunity and delivery at Pre-K through 12 schools and at institutions of higher education.” — UB Staff
A year ago, Rowan University pulled off a stunning feat during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, hosting 13 small in-person commencement ceremonies for graduates in each of its colleges.

So, when officials were kicking around ideas again this year, even with uncertainty still swirling over gatherings, there was only one option – to go live again and make them bigger.

This year, more than 3,300 students and families were scheduled to converge on Rowan’s university green in Glassboro, N.J., this time with 20 separate ceremonies and myriad safety measures in place.

Individual commencements fused with a live virtual celebration, President Ali Houshmand addressing graduates, degrees being conferred and a number of speakers, including 12-time Olympic swimming medalist Dara Torres (4x gold), offering inspiration to send them off to a promising future.

“Our emergency operations team kept challenging us not to think about whether or not something was possible, but rather how,” said Joanne Conner, the President’s Chief of Staff at Rowan. “These are the guidelines that we’ve been given. Nobody is saying you can’t do something. Most colleges were saying we can’t do it, or we can. We were trying to take a different approach by saying, ‘here are the parameters … how can we do this?’”

Rowan is one of many institutions that attempted in-person ceremonies this spring. While some smaller ones planned to host multi-ceremony events on their campuses, others took a more bold approach – holding commencements at large stadiums.

For Conner’s team at Rowan, having that year of experience offered a huge advantage: planning for 20 ceremonies was a challenge, it was not as daunting as the alternative.

Despite the fear of holding gatherings indoors, these colleges and universities are limited capacity and are holding several ceremonies to be able to accommodate guests in larger arenas, either on or off campus (with arena capacity):

**Florida State University:** Donald Tucker Civic Center, Tallahassee, FL (12,100)

**Texas A&M University:** Reed Arena, College Station, TX (12,989)

**University of Florida:** Stephen C. Connell Center, Gainesville, FL (10,133)

**Wichita State University:** Charles Koch Arena, Wichita, KS (10,506)

**St Louis University:** Chaifetz Arena, St. Louis, MO (10,600)

**University of Kentucky:** Rupp Arena, Lexington, KY (23,500)

**University of Wyoming:** Arena-Auditorium, Laramie, WY (15,028)

**University of Dayton:** UD Arena, Dayton, OH (13,409)

**Nevada State University:** Orleans Arena, Las Vegas, NV (9,500)

**University of Hartford:** XL Center, Hartford, CT (16,294)

“Commencement for 20,000 people is a logistical nightmare,” Conner jokes. “So, in comparison, it’s just a different set of logistics really.”

Small ceremonies vs. big
Aside from the virtual celebration, Rowan planned a collection of mini ceremonies to honor students individually.

“We really focused on the most important part: what the family member for each student wants,” Conner says. “What they really wanted was the picture of their loved one walking across the stage.”
Commencements follow COVID models

Rowan alloted four guest tickets per student with chairs spaced out under a tent. Between each ceremony staff had to sanitize them and put down programs.

Prior to the event, Rowan had to remove part of a fence on its baseball field it as a staging area to get students registered.

Speaking of baseball and logistics — the large gathering ‘nightmare’ that Conner referenced — was slated to take place in at least two Major League ballparks — one in the Southeast and one in the Northeast.

Tropicana Field, home of the Tampa Bay Rays, was to hold two commencement ceremonies for the University of South Florida.

Fenway Park, meanwhile, was chosen for four Boston-area colleges and universities — Bentley, Emerson, Northeastern and Suffolk — for several commencement ceremonies with limited guests.

“Fenway Park is one of Boston’s most iconic symbols, and Suffolk is the quintessential downtown Boston university,” said Marisa Kelly, President of Suffolk University. “I can think of no better venue to celebrate our place in the city and our students’ accomplishments in the face of adversity than in this wonderful Boston landmark.”

Suffolk planned two ceremonies — one each for May 22 and 23 for its 2020 and 2021 graduates — while Northeastern, a university with about 30,000 full-time and part-time undergrad and graduate students, was hosting five events early in May at the stadium.

Northeastern students waited months to see whether it would be in person and where it would wind up. David Madigan, provost and senior vice president for student affairs, was happy to share the news with the community: “Our graduate students made their voices heard. Their desire to celebrate commencement together, in person, is abundantly clear.”

**Drive to the finish line**

The mix of ceremonies this year has been unprecedented. Some colleges took the conservative approach and went strictly virtual, some held live ceremonies with no guests, and some like the Boston schools went very big.

The University of Texas at Austin, for example, planned its commencement for 100,000-seat Darrell Royal Stadium (limited capacity) for May 22, while the University of Wisconsin had its set at 80,000-seat Camp Randall Stadium. The University of Memphis and Rhodes College were slated to have theirs at the 61,000-seat Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium.

At the other end of the spectrum are several Ivy League schools, including Cornell and Harvard. Columbia is going virtual for ceremonies at all of its schools.

There are those like Rowan that gave students multiple options. Widener University in Pennsylvania scheduled four straight days of live commencements and a drive-thru ceremony for students and families that want to remain safe.

“In order to meet the individual needs of graduates and their guests, we are excited to offer two commencement options for the first time in university history,” says Katie Herschede, Vice President for Strategic Initiatives and Chief of Staff. “Our commencement options reflect what students asked for, while fully respecting the significance and severity of the pandemic.”

Three other institutions (the University of Hawaii-Hilo, Sonoma State University and Utah Valley University) planned drive-thrus as well — some where students remain buckled into their seats, and others where cars stop and students get out and walk across a stage. Others featured tailgating for families in parking lots with big screens.

No matter how the academic year ends, presidents lauded those who helped them get to the finish line — students who remained patient, persistent and most of all safe.

“In large part, an in-person commencement is possible because of you — your efforts to keep yourselves, your friends and your community safe and healthy,” University of Kentucky president Eli Capilouto told students, who will be honored in several in-person ceremonies. “Thank you for all you have done to make this important moment possible.”

Chris Burt is associate editor of UB.
Commencements follow COVID models

Some of this year’s most notable commencement speakers:

- **Assumption University**: George Will, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist
- Emory, Vanderbilt, the University of North Carolina and Yale School of Medicine: Dr. Anthony Fauci, director, U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
- **Florida A&M**: Lloyd Austin III, U.S. Secretary of Defense
- **Harvard T.C. Chan School of Public Health**: Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general, World Health Organization
- **High Point University**: Dr. Mae Jemison, NASA astronaut
- **Hillsdale College**: Tim Allen, actor and comedian
- **MIT, University of Michigan, Tufts and UC Berkeley School of Law**: Bryan Stevenson, civil rights lawyer
- **Ohio State University**: Jamie Dimon, Chairman and CEO, JP Morgan Chase
- **Regent University**: Mike Pompeo, former Secretary of State
- **University of Mississippi**: Jonathan Reckford, CEO, Habitat for Humanity International
- **University of Pennsylvania**: Laurene Powell Jobs, founder and president, Emerson Collective, widow of Steve Jobs
- **University of Texas at Austin**: Robert Iger, executive chairman and former CEO of The Walt Disney Company
- **Virginia Tech**: Francis Collins, Director of National Institutes of Health
- **Washington University of St. Louis**: Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, basketball Hall of Famer and social justice advocate
- **Youngstown State**: Kristin Fox, assistant school principal who had all four limbs amputated after flu complications

**All-Star speaker lineup**

**University of Pennsylvania**: Laurene Powell Jobs, founder and president, Emerson Collective, widow of Steve Jobs

**University of Texas at Austin**: Robert Iger, executive chairman and former CEO of The Walt Disney Company

**Virginia Tech**: Francis Collins, Director of National Institutes of Health

**Washington University of St. Louis**: Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, basketball Hall of Famer and social justice advocate

**Youngstown State**: Kristin Fox, assistant school principal who had all four limbs amputated after flu complications

**Innovation is not only about creation, it’s also about redefining where you want to go.**

Integrated Payment Solutions
Campus ID Solutions
Campus Commerce Solutions

Let’s begin

TRANSACT

TransactCampus.com
Every day for an hour, High Point University President Dr. Nido Qubein walks his university’s campus with the vice president of facilities to spot items that need improving or “ideas that need to be created.” For most who take a scroll across the pristine grounds, they’d be hard-pressed to find fault in anything the university has built under his watch over the past 15 years.

High Point, in fact, has spent about $500 million of a $1 billion, 10-year plan on various projects – a STEM corridor for its Schools of Pharmacy, Health Sciences and Undergraduate Studies, a botanical conservatory, a state-of-the-art planetarium and a jaw-dropping $170 million arena and conference center plus Kahn Hotel, replete with twin curved staircases in its lobby. Red brick buildings with Greek-inspired columns, manicured lawns and paver walkways fuse to form an awe-inspiring architectural masterpiece. Surely, nothing could be missing, right?

The school’s president says one older building has given him pause for a while. “We have been saying for a number of years that we needed a state-of-the-art library,” Qubein said. “We’re not looking at a library that is strictly for housing a bunch of books. We’re looking at a library that would be all-encompassing for learning... And it’s a place where you have to allow students to have environments for study.”

So, Qubein and his team have set out to create an extraordinary one at High Point that will be the centerpiece of campus – a four-story, $80 million stately structure that blends traditional and modern-day offerings, along with an Admissions Center.

The concept of fusing together those elements is part of a plan to maintain its rock-solid enrollment – which grew 5.4% last fall during the pandemic – and showcase its commitment to academic success. It is slated to be finished in 2024, which will be High Point’s 100th anniversary.

“It will be modern, architecturally elegant,” Qubein says. “It’ll be a pretty sophisticated building.”

The new library will be markedly different than the current one promising to build on High Point’s quest to arm “students with the skills that allow them to succeed in a globally competitive marketplace,” according to Qubein.

At High Point, staying competitive, committed and innovative are key drivers of success.

**IDYLIC ENVIRONMENT**—High Point University in North Carolina has created a campus with red brick buildings, manicured lawns and upscale amenities that attract students and fueled the school’s dramatic growth.

**ART OF THE POSSIBLE**

How High Point University’s transformative approach – both in its vision and its capital improvements – have been inspirational in a difficult year for higher education.
“Yesterday was a wonderful place to visit and today is a great day to celebrate, but we have to be focused on the future,” Qubein says.

What’s there now
It would be difficult to replicate what High Point has done in the past decade under Qubein.

Since his arrival in North Carolina, High Point has given $55 million a year in scholarships and is continuing to grow those for underserved and first-generation students. The revenue budget has expanded from $28 million to $340 million. Its assets have grown from $56 million to today’s $1.1 billion.

It has also been a trailblazer during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the majority of institutions shut down last year, High Point got to work. It built a medical clinic, rented eight hotels, put in an ice skating rink and held events each afternoon with food trucks and music.

“We did not take the [remote] approach. We stayed open all the time,” Quibein said. “People loved the fact that we were courageous. We took all the precautions. We did many things to ensure that we could keep our students safe.”

For Qubein, that kind of bold leadership and calculated risk-taking has been a driver of success. So, too, have his words – eloquent, visionary and yes, brash at times.

“Remember the Recession?” Qubein says, referring to 2008. “People were scared to death. Everybody was bemoaning things. We have a mindset that says, we can grow, we can do wonderful things, we have a duty and responsibility to our students and their families and employees. Somehow, the formula works.”

That formula has led to large donations and the funding of $2 billion in campus property and projects. It also has included a heavy emphasis on academics – the university, has increased its faculty from 108 to 330, launched six additional academic schools and has that library in the works.

All of it, he says, is done with purpose.

“There is a conscious focus on ensuring that every student at High Point University receives an extraordinary education in an inspiring environment with caring people,” Qubein says.

“There can’t be a chasm between the worst of what we do, and the best of what we do. It cannot be separated by more than a centimeter. Otherwise, you’re not providing for students the holistic education that we work so hard to achieve.”

The 6 secrets to High Point’s success
U.S. News and World Report perennially lists High Point as a top choice for innovation among Regional Colleges in the South. Its remarkable turnaround from near the bottom of that list has been orchestrated by Qubein, a former business leader who had just $50 when he came to the U.S. as a Middle Eastern immigrant.

He offered some words of wisdom on what has led to his university’s rise:

Leaning on faculty: “Our faculty have a growth mindset. They’re not quick to say, no. They are mentors, not lecturers, and the focus here is not on teaching, but on learning.”

Making students think: “We’ve invested very appropriately in expanding academic programs, attracting stellar faculty and building an ecosystem that encourages each student to learn academically and to have life skills. But to be sure, they are armed with the skills that allow them to succeed in a globally competitive marketplace.”

Business acumen: “We insist that upon graduation from college, you should have some knowledge of communication, some knowledge of business and some knowledge of leadership. If you don’t have that, you really haven’t been fully educated; you’ve merely been trained in a discipline.”

Walking the talk: “Parents don’t want to pay large fees to send their child to school, whereupon graduation they can’t find a job. 97% of our students will find a job or go to graduate school. Our graduate students are 100% employed within six months upon graduation. We guarantee every student an internship. We guarantee that you’re going to graduate in four years. We’re not trying to win any awards. We’re simply trying to prepare our students for the world as it is going to be.”

Smart spending: “We have faithful courage. So, faith alone is not enough, and courage alone is not enough. But if you put the two together and have faithful courage, you can move mountains and you can take risks. Life is not about risk avoidance. Life is about risk management. So, if a risk can lead us to a better place, and if we prepare properly for what might happen, then, we go for it. That commands faithful courage. It commands agility.”

Dreaming big: “We believe in the art of the possible. There is no such thing as unrealistic dreams but only unrealistic timelines. While that may not be literal, it is certainly aspirational.”

Chris Burt is associate editor of UB.
Wild Ride for Admissions

By Chris Burt

What occurred during this year’s admissions cycle was almost impossible to predict. Pandemic fallout, steep declines in first-year student enrollment and a lack of face-to-face time with prospective students led to unprecedented uncertainty that had higher education leaders nail biting from October through April. Some still are.

This perfect storm pushed colleges and universities to seek out new solutions, to surge into virtual spaces, to lessen the importance of standardized test scores and to offer loads of incentives to pique student interest.

For top tier and big brand public institutions, the results were quite positive. Applications rolled in. Harvard University received more than 57,000 and had to push back its deadline. MIT saw a 66% year-over-year jump in those who applied. New York University reported topping 100,000.

And yet, many smaller institutions were forced to wait anxiously. Scores of hopeful students with impeccable resumes were denied or put on waitlists. At Harvard, Columbia and Princeton, the impacts were severe. Less than 4% of students were sent acceptance letters.

It all added up to one long, strange trip that is still ebbing and flowing heading into 2021-22.

“What occurred during this year’s admissions cycle was almost impossible to predict. Pandemic fallout, steep declines in first-year student enrollment and a lack of face-to-face time with prospective students led to unprecedented uncertainty that had higher education leaders nail biting from October through April. Some still are.

This perfect storm pushed colleges and universities to seek out new solutions, to surge into virtual spaces, to lessen the importance of standardized test scores and to offer loads of incentives to pique student interest.

For top tier and big brand public institutions, the results were quite positive. Applications rolled in. Harvard University received more than 57,000 and had to push back its deadline. MIT saw a 66% year-over-year jump in those who applied. New York University reported topping 100,000.

And yet, many smaller institutions were forced to wait anxiously. Scores of hopeful students with impeccable resumes were denied or put on waitlists. At Harvard, Columbia and Princeton, the impacts were severe. Less than 4% of students were sent acceptance letters.

It all added up to one long, strange trip that is still ebbing and flowing heading into 2021-22.

“Many institutions are making announcements about fall being ‘back to normal’, but there remain a lot of unanswered questions,” says Jonathan Wehner, Vice President and Dean of Admissions at Cleveland State University. “I’m concerned about our ability to meet student expectations. I’ve seen research that suggests that what students have missed may have less to do with the modality of course delivery than with social interactions. Are colleges/universities going to be able to deliver the ‘student life’ experience students want so desperately?”

What the fall looks like will be anyone’s guess. When it comes to enrollment, it is likely that the elites will continue to thrive, while those in the tiers below will continue to experience challenges. The questions are many. Will the mass rejections change how future students apply to schools? Will admissions strategies employed this year be utilized again? Will outreach be different as institutions begin to open up?

“The questions for our next recruitment cycle will be: How much will be in person? How much will be virtual? Will it all be hybrid?” said Drew Carter, Associate Director of Admissions at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass. “At this point, nobody really knows. Will we be able to have events on campus with crowds? Will we be able to travel? Will high schools let you in to talk to the kids? … There’s a challenge there too because every admissions office has created this incredible amount of virtual programming. Most of that is probably not going to go away.”

Changing the script

The lessons that Holy Cross and others learned over the past year likely will shape at least part of their admissions strategies for 2021-22. For Carter and his team, that may mean another dose of conducting interviews with students in their homes and offering tips to demystify the application process.

Though it will be a bonus to get prospective students back on campus for tours and meetings, Carter says the new way of connecting with them might be
here to stay. For one, it gives Holy Cross a better window into students responding more naturally in their own environments. It also offers a way to reach the unreachable and is far less costly.

“No college isn’t going to be thinking about budget next year,” he says. “It is going to be under close inspection as we walk that balance between virtual and in person recruitment efforts. Is it worth it to spend the money to go to that state across the country to visit some high schools when there’s a virtual replacement?”

The hybrid model seems likely for another reason. Take any small to mid-size school, especially private nonprofits that only have had a regional reach in the past. Virtual recruiting has opened huge potential to increase pipelines to those in far-away states and rural locales.

The numbers bear that out. Even MIT, which annually receives a robust number of applications, garnered more than 33,000 for the Class of 2025, which it credits in part to being able to extend its reach through online channels.

**More targeted outreach approaches**

If the elites and big-brand publics are employing virtual strategies, how can the others remain competitive? Incentives and savvy marketing offer some hope.

Colleges found success in 2020-21 by pitching flexible academic offerings, enhanced career pathways, leans to research and technology, and sustainability on campus. Most were quick to note their stances on topics that resonate with students, such as diversity, equity and inclusion and social justice.

“We have been intentional about sharing the rich tradition and legacy of Spelman, while also highlighting our ability to produce the next generation of leaders in a tech-forward society,” said Chelsea Holley, interim director of admissions at Spelman College, which broke a record for applications with more than 11,000.

Cleveland State, seeking to boost enrollment numbers by 4,500 by 2025, launched a new initiative that will consolidate some colleges, increase research and bring more students on campus. It also put out a unique incentives for new students: a 2-for-1 tuition deal (essentially one free semester after

---

**By the numbers**

49,555: Applications received by Duke University, nearly 10,000 more than for 2020-21.

39,342: First-year applications received at Syracuse University, a new record and a 24% increase over the previous year.

10,000: Early-decision applications to Harvard University. Less than 8% were accepted.

6,892: Acceptances (13%) at Emory University from a pool of more than 33,000 applications.

8,370: Additional applications received this year by Northwestern University for the Class of 2025 over Class of 2024 numbers. More than 47,600 first-year students applied overall.

51%: Percentage increase in applications received this year by Columbia University.

47%: Students who applied test-optional at the University of Rochester from early numbers. It was 17% during the previous cycle.

41%: Increase in applications to U.S. institutions from students in Brazil, according to Common App. Pakistan was next at +37%. China dropped 18%.

18.1%: Early-decision acceptance rate at Vanderbilt University.

---

**Going low**

Inundated with applications (because of a combination of factors including prestige, the ease of Common App and test-optional initiatives put in place by institutions), top colleges and universities have had the luxury of turning away even the best students. Here are some astonishingly low acceptance rates for 2021-22:

- **Harvard** 3.43%
- **Columbia** 3.6%
- **Princeton** 3.98%
- **MIT** 4%
- **Yale** 4.62%
- **Penn** 5.68
- **Vanderbilt** 6.7%
- **Northwestern** 6.8%
- **Swarthmore** 7%
- **Colby College** 8%
achievement in the first).

“As COVID was starting to hit, we heard students were going to defer,” Wehner said. “We said, what can we do to try to incentivize these students to get to started? We’ve heard of some financial aid incentives, but we haven’t heard of anyone doing it quite the way that we’re doing it – tying it to that success in a student’s first semester.”

Reaching students where they are – in digital spaces – has become a popular and smart strategy.

“When COVID hit, it threw a five-year accelerant on virtual platforms and virtual connections,” says Casey Welch, co-founder and COO of Tallo, a LinkedIn-style platform for students that showcases their work and helps them network with colleges. “Virtual recruiting is a must have for colleges to continue to get the numbers and type of talent they want. There are so many universities that aren’t Florida State or Miami. It puts them on more of a level playing field. [Recruiters] have to make sure it is a fundamental part of the strategy going forward.”

The true tests for recruiting

Another increasingly popular strategy – test-optional score inclusion – took off after the pandemic hit. More than 1,600 colleges and universities now have obliged, some permanently, some temporarily.

“Rochester was test optional before it was cool, but others who only adapted because of the pandemic will continue more flexible policies,” said Robert Alexander, Dean of Admissions, Financial Aid, and Enrollment Management at the University of Rochester. “I hope that change re-norms what was an overreliance on a single marker for college readiness.”

Alexander and his team made it clear to applicants (and his staff) to not focus on one variable during the application process. Understanding the difficulties of the pandemic, Rochester and other institutions have found success by taking a more receptive approach with students and families.

“We are very concerned about some of the students with the least resources and the least access to higher ed to begin with, now exacerbated by reduced guidance counseling and increased family responsibilities – whether that’s caring for younger siblings while parents are doing essential work, or students who themselves are working,” Alexander says. “Our message to students is, tell us those stories and what you’re learning from that because that could be a much more powerful lesson than anything that we could get looking at your standardized test scores.”

— Robert Alexander, University of Rochester

“I think there’s more nuance to the conversation than standardized testing is bad,” Wehner says. “Even accounting for the ways in which standardized testing can be and is problematic, sometimes it served a purpose. At CSU, standardized testing played an important role in freshmen placement. I want to make sure that we get students into appropriate math and English courses. With only about half of our applicants submitting test scores, we’ve lost what was an imperfect but important tool in placement.”

And with more students applying to top-tier schools, some smaller institutions saw far fewer applications early on.

“Medium selectivity or non-selectives are worried about that piece of the puzzle,” Melissa Meyer, Director of Integrated Marketing for Intersect at Hobson’s, told University Business in late February. “When we look at it holistically, it’s going to be more important than ever that institutions double down in yield as much as they can to make sure that they come out on top on the back end. When they look at yield, it’s going to be important that they emphasize cost, location and majors in those communications. When they look at majors, they should focus on what their differentiators are. The top three things that students are searching for are cost, location and majors.”

Location might be the one variable that will adjust slightly as colleges and universities begin to reopen. Another might be how admissions teams set their strategies for the next cycle that might look different from 2020-21.

“All of us are anxiously awaiting reconnecting with other human beings in person,” Alexander says. “While we’re eager to interact with prospective and current students in person, I hope that we will create a ‘new normal’ – not revert back to our old ways but intentionally determine how virtual engagement tools can improve access for students we wouldn’t usually see in person, and enhance opportunities for faculty, staff, current and prospective students to connect with one another no matter where we are located.”

Chris Burt is associate editor of UB.
Mandatory COVID vaccines for students: Legal pain point or panacea?

Some states are considering bans that would prohibit universities from requiring COVID-19 vaccines

By Michael Vernick, Brennan Meier, Molly Whitman and Jessica Mannon

A fter universities responded to the spread of COVID-19 by transitioning to online learning in spring 2020, they soon faced a barrage of lawsuits seeking refunds of tuition and fees.

Now, as vaccines can help facilitate a return to campus, some institutions, such as Rutgers University, Brown University, and the University of Notre Dame, have already announced that students must be vaccinated before the fall 2021 semester begins.

As other institutions of higher education consider whether to require students to be vaccinated before returning to campus, they will have to balance whether doing so will create a new wave of litigation.

California sued over flu vaccines

Thus, the decision to mandate certain vaccines in order for students to enroll in higher education classes rests with university leadership and is not without potentially significant legal risk.

For instance, the University of California was sued after it mandated the flu vaccine for the 2020-2021 flu season in the Kiel v. UC case. While UC won the case, universities should note a key distinction: historically, only vaccines with full FDA approval have been mandated.

There is little precedent indicating whether mandatory COVID-19 vaccines will receive the same treatment in court, as the available vaccines currently have only FDA emergency use authorization.

In addition, at least a dozen states are considering, or have enacted, legislation providing universities with limited legal immunity for claims related to COVID-19, and some legislation includes protection related to claims for tuition and fees.

Thus, plaintiffs’ lawyers currently engaged in such suits may shift their focus to suits challenging university vaccine mandates.

Vaccines’ role in reopening

Several benefits appeal to universities weighing whether to mandate COVID-19 vaccines. Foremost is increased campus safety for students, faculty, and staff.

Second, and relatedly, with a fully vaccinated student body schools would perhaps be able to reopen on-campus activities more fully with less reliance on testing or tracing.

Third, for those schools already embroiled in litigation following the temporary transition to online learning, a vaccine mandate could be another way to cut off the accrual of potential damages.

On the other hand, universities must be mindful of the varying access to vaccines across the country, and whether such a mandate might disproportionately impact students from varying locations or socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, vaccine mandates will need to include certain exemptions for medical or religious reasons.

Further, because there is no settled law on whether a school can require a vaccine that has received only emergency FDA approval, that in and of itself may generate legal risk.

As two universities in Texas and Florida recently discovered, a decision to mandate COVID-19 vaccines may be blocked or limited by executive or legislative action. St. Edwards University in Texas and Nova Southeastern University in Florida first announced a mandatory vaccine policy before being forced to back-peddle when their respective governors issued executive orders banning so-called “COVID-19 Vaccine Passports.”

The Texas ban applies specifically to state agencies and organizations that receive public funds “through any means,” which means it will likely apply to all public and some private universities. Florida went one step further to prohibit any business from requiring a “COVID-19 Vaccine Passport.”

To accommodate the Texas governor’s April 5, 2021 order, St. Edwards announced that its qualifying vaccine exemptions would include a student “declining to provide the university an individual’s COVID-19 vaccination status.”

Treading carefully

While COVID-19 vaccines appear to be a crucial step to returning to in-person university life, universities are going to have to weigh whether imposing a mandate (and the associated legal risk) outweighs strongly encouraging vaccination, perhaps in combination with enhanced testing and tracing.

Over time, as COVID-19 vaccines become more widely available, higher education administrations will likely gain further insight into whether they can and should require students to be vaccinated before returning to campus.

In the meantime, universities should tread carefully and consult legal counsel to understand the federal, state, and local laws at issue before making this critical policy decision.

Mike Vernick leads Akin Gump’s government contracts group and maintains a practice focused on higher education and other sectors. Brennan Meier and Molly Whitman are counsel, and Jessica Mannon an associate, in Akin Gump’s litigation practice.
SLX-D Digital Wireless continues the legacy of exceptional wireless technology from Shure. Flawless 24-bit digital audio for your presenters and performers. Rock solid RF that’s easy to set up for your staff. A complete selection of system configurations and microphone options. Docking rechargeability options that provide to-the-minute details.

Easy to scale for small assemblies all the way to prominent live events, SLX-D Digital Wireless is the state of the art, high-value choice that simply makes sense. Learn more at Shure.com/SLX-D

WIRELESS EXCELLENCE, WHEREVER REQUIRED.