

Reshaping Practitioner Higher Education Institutions to Serve Adult Learners: The COVID-19 Pandemic Implications

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Involving over 200 countries, the COVID-19 global pandemic impacts adult learners' retention, increasing the need to reshape practitioner-oriented higher education institutions to better serve students. The purpose of this study was to explore how practitioner higher education institutions adopted innovative approaches and reshaped policies, practices, and perspectives to accommodate changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and successfully maintained or increased enrollment. This article reports the results, which may enhance practitioner higher education programs and enrollment.

INTRODUCTION

The established ecosystem of universities and colleges and students was severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic shook the world to its core, delivering political, social, and economic ramifications that exist today.

Through a political lens, research indicated that political identity was in play at the onset of COVID-19. Political leaders in the Democratic Party favored lockdown measures, mask wearing, and mandated social distancing in public and work settings. On the contrary, political leaders in the Republican Party placed less importance on the virus and more focus on the health of the economy (Collins et al., 2021).

Through a social lens, despite the accessibility of technology, the pandemic forced a culture of social isolation regardless of age. Extroverts need to spend their time around other people to rejuvenate their internal batteries, and in some cases, they are forced to use virtual platforms, such as Zoom and Teams, to quench their social thirst. The best outcome for extroverts was to welcome quality over quantity to make the best of social isolation. Conversely, small crowds or spending time alone created a utopia for introverts as a reprieve from obligatory verbal communication in the workplace and society at large (Liu et al., 2021).

Through an economic lens, the federal government eased the pain of the pandemic with several stimulus bills. The Department of Education, in compliance with President Biden's executive order, suspended student loan payments, stopped collections on defaulted loans, and set a 0% interest rate (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, n.d.). In addition, in March 2020, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act was passed, which allotted \$14 billion to higher education institutions to ensure students could continue their education during the COVID-19 pandemic (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Under these political, social, and economic backdrops of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions worked hard to serve adult learners. Some students had enough money to cover their education but redirected the money to pay bills instead. Other adult learners experienced confusion about whether higher education was a need or a want. As a result, adult learners and higher education institutions faced off during the COVID-19 pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Universities and colleges faced challenges as COVID-19 pandemic radically changed educational practices at every level beginning in early 2020. Many universities and colleges rose to the challenge and adapted policies and practices to the new conditions. The problem is that a general understanding of how policies and practices can support student retention and growing enrollment under COVID-19 conditions is not available. The purpose of this study was to explore how online universities successfully maintained or increased enrollment as they reshaped products, policies, practices, and perspectives to accommodate changes brought about by COVID-19 pandemic. The literature review will survey scholarly sources applicable to reshaping Practitioner Higher Education Institutions that includes adult learners' decision-making system for higher education university selection and enrollment data for both undergraduate and graduate during the pandemic and enrollment data for both undergraduate and graduate students during the pandemic.

Furthermore, Yuen's (2011) four-point model (product, practices, perspectives, and persons) will serve as a framework for content analysis on the seven (7) online universities examined in this study. The study focused on exploring strategies used in the United States by seven practitioner higher educational institutions serving adult online students with steady or increasing enrollments. The intent is to provide a composite understanding of the characteristics that maintain stable retention and increasing enrollment even through the COVID-19 pandemic. Existing literature indicated that online education was effective in ensuring continuity in adult education experience (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Further, online universities or those that adapted quickly to Covid conditions by moving to online platforms were able to maintain or increase university enrollment (Quezada, et al., 2020).

Directed content analysis of public materials was used to analyze products, practices, perspectives and persons maintained or reshaped by online universities that successfully adapted to COVID-19 challenges as evidenced by stable or increased enrollment. The two-step analysis evaluated prominent public data for innovation in form — product, practices, perspectives, and persons (Yuen, 2011) and for content — evidence of concern for university stakeholder well-being. Yuen's (2011) four-point structure was useful for analyzing structural change. Data was gathered from university publications and presentations including home pages, press releases, and selected responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and analyzed for form and positive intent. The proposition explored in this study was whether organizational adaptations to Covid that embedded concern over well-being within the context of educational revised or innovative structures might support or increase university enrollment.

The College and University Journal article discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic might change higher education learning in the future. The article discussed how COVID-19 increased accessibility to more students, including both domestic and international students (Dennis, 2021). The article suggested that the pandemic will, or already has, shifted the way colleges and universities will recruit students, change enrollment from semester based to admissions all year long, and offer cost-effective tuition in the post-pandemic world (Dennis, 2021).

Research conducted by the Center for Education Consumer Insights depicted over one-third of US adults either changed or canceled their education because of COVID-19 (Hanson, 2021). This statistical data is directly correlated to a recent study that presented a decision-making system for higher education university selection by assessing priorities, both pre- and post- COVID-19 through the lens of current higher education students. Using a creative approach, education data from LinkedIn Insights was examined using a multicriteria decision-making (MCDM) model that employed eight common factors of the university selection process. The pre-Covid results from the study depicted that the top two priorities were student life and skills. The post-COVID-19 results from the study depicted that the top two priorities were E-learning and cost (Nanath, Sajjad & Kaitheri, 2021). While the study did not address prospective students, there is enough empirical data to categorize prospective students with current students.

A study on student support and COVID-19 strengthened gaps between face-to-face students and online students concluding that online student support improved both groups' feeling of being supported (Bouchey, Gratz & Kurland, 2021). Another study discussed increasing housing and food insecurity, financial hardships, lack of social connectedness and sense of belonging, uncertainty about the future, and access issues of traditional students transitioning to online distance learning during COVID-19. The study concluded that higher education institutions need to use data-driven decision making, deliver clear and informative messaging to students, prioritize, and expand student support services, and use an equity framework to guide all processes to improve the online environment and support their students (Lederer et al., 2021).

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2021) report discussed undergraduate and graduate enrollment since the beginning of the pandemic. The report showed a 5.9% decrease in enrollment in undergraduate students and a 4.4% increase in graduate student enrollment from 2020 to March 2021. The report broke down undergraduate enrollment by public four-year universities which showed a decrease of 2.9%; private non-profit four-year universities 3% decrease; private for-profit four-year universities 0.1%; and public two-year universities 11.3% decrease. Graduate schools were broken down into public four-year universities which showed an increase of 6%; private non-profit four-year universities increased 2.5%; and private for-profit four-year universities increased by 3.8%.

A research study on COVID-19 and higher education discussed how COVID-19 affected learning, teaching, and assessment in the new online environment (Kahn, 2021). The study concluded that disruptions in teaching were evident especially noted in transition from face-to-face to online environments. Several ways to improve the online classroom such as flipped classrooms, training in digital literacy, peer-to-peer learning, and community collaboration were discussed and recommended. Also, concern for education staff's mental health and ways to improve this were discussed (Kahn, 2021).

This article will inspire the readers by sharing how the U.S.A. practitioner higher education institutions adopted innovative approaches to reshape their policies, practices, and perspectives to accommodate changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and maintained student enrollment. To fulfill the purpose of the study the following question was developed.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What products, practices, perspectives, and persons related to stakeholder wellbeing were maintained or reshaped by online universities and colleges that successfully adapted to COVID-19 challenges as evidenced by increased or stable enrollment in the era of COVID-19?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Content

A content analysis design was employed for this study. The qualitative content analysis tracked the frequency of words, or concepts within text (Nagai, 2015) with the goal of identifying themes to answer the research question. The analysis was based on text published by the universities and colleges stakeholders such as faculty, students, or other informed sources that is descriptive of products, practice, policy, and other indicators of the student experience at that university or college.

The team searched subject university and college websites with a strategy of using one or two clicks from the home page to search for language related to the university's portrayal of products, practices, perspectives, and persons who represented the university's brand, mission and vision. The language was then analyzed using a text analysis technology, term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF), to create simple word clouds (MonkeyLearn, 2021). The technique of TF-IDF is a statistical measure that evaluates how relevant a word is to a document in a collection of documents. This is done by multiplying two metrics: how many times a word appears in a document, and the inverse document frequency of the word across a set of documents. In this case, how many times a word appeared in the first few pages of a university's website or in pages devoted to COVID-19 response.

Data Analysis

The data focused on universities with extensive experience in adult focused, online learning. There were two primary sets of data, collected from publicly available sources:

- 1) Information about the products, practices, perspectives, and persons that universities promoted through their public websites, and
- 2) Data about enrollment, student demographics and tuition comparing 2019 to 2020 (pre-pandemic and mid-pandemic).

Additional data was taken from reports and articles that analyzed student enrollment in Spring of 2021.

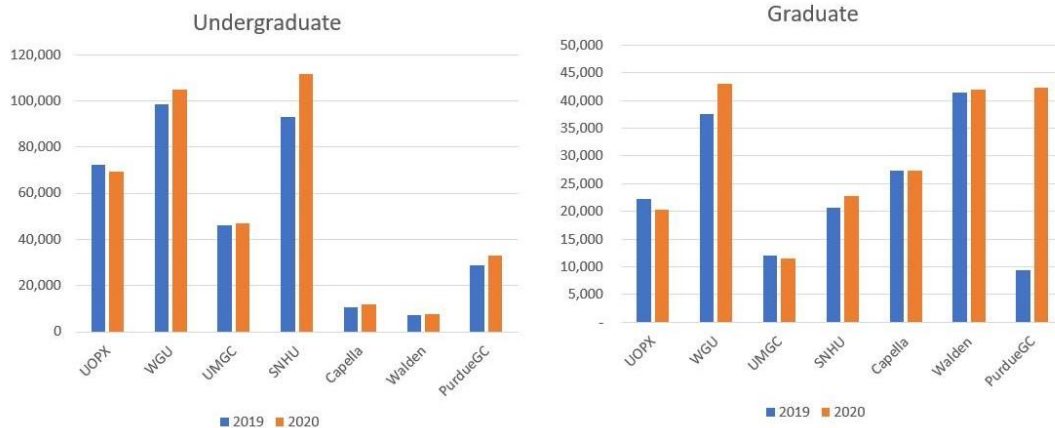
Universities included in our study included:

- 1) University of Phoenix (UOPX)
- 2) Western Governors University (WGU)
- 3) Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU)
- 4) University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC)
- 5) Walden University (Walden)
- 6) Capella University (Capella)
- 7) Purdue University Global (Purdue GC)

The data regarding enrollment, student demographics and tuition did not demonstrate tremendous differences between 2019 and 2020. The source for the 2019 and 2020 data were the IPEDS reports, a division of the National Center for Education Statistics (2021).

As shown in Figure 1,

**FIGURE 1
UNIVERSITY ENROLLMENT**

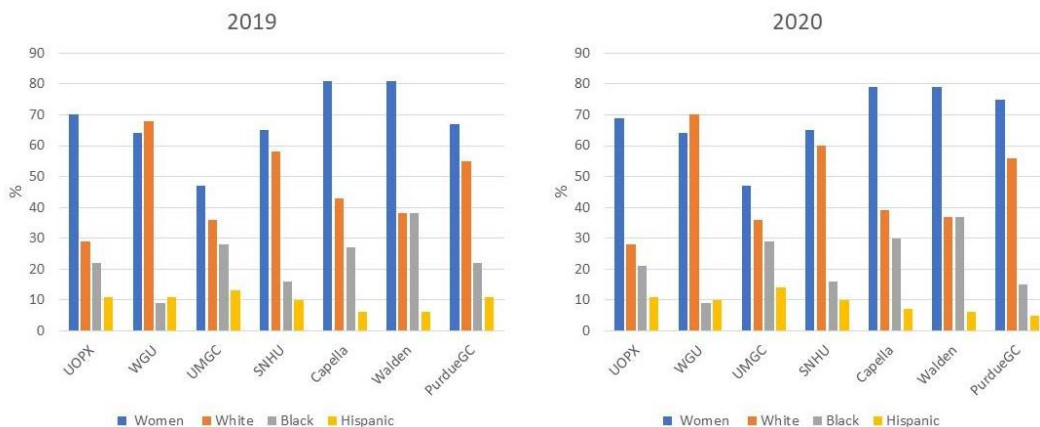


Most of the study universities saw a slight increase in undergraduate enrollment from 2019 to 2020. Graduate enrollment went up or stayed the same for all of the schools.

The National Education Clearinghouse Research Center published data in May of 2021 for Spring 2021 enrollment estimates by institution sector. These data showed only slight negative change from enrollment in Spring of 2020 for public, private nonprofit, and private for-profit four-year institutions. The only sector with continued negative enrollment trends was the two-year community college.

As shown in Figure 2,

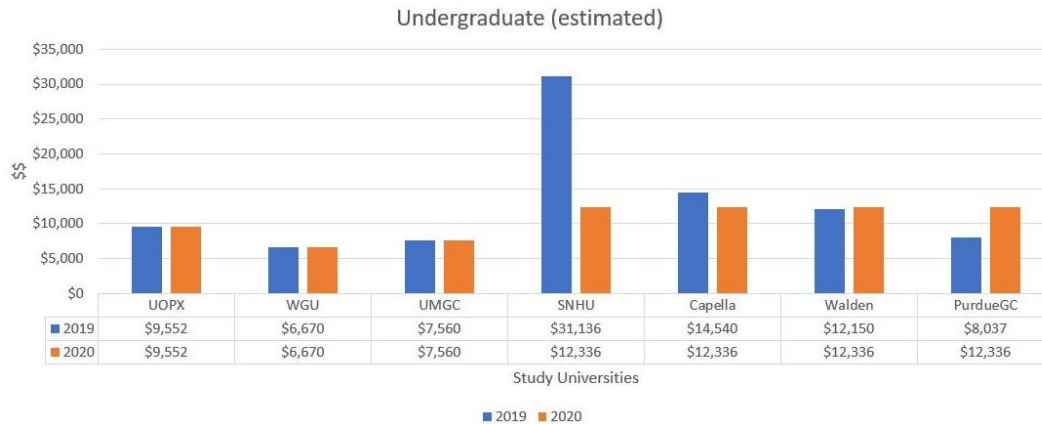
**FIGURE 2
STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS (AS % OF TOTAL)**



The student demographics in these slides represents undergraduate students. However, comparing data from 2019 to 2020 revealed almost no differences in demographics for each university comparing 2019 to 2020.

As shown in Figure 3,

**FIGURE 3
TUITION PER ACADEMIC YEAR**



Most of the universities kept tuition rates the same from 2019 to 2020, or even lowered them. Southern New Hampshire University made a dramatic reduction in tuition from 2019 to 2020. Walden and Purdue University Global both raised tuition just slightly in 2020.

University Website Text Regarding Student Support

This section compares the word cloud results for all of the study universities. Since the Universities websites are the major interface platforms with students, it is worth analyzing if the text used on the websites was significantly different for the study universities. Figures 4-8 contain the text analysis results for each individual university.

**FIGURE 4
PRODUCTS**



Table 1 illustrates some of the terms used in study university websites that have the highest relevance to the category of “products for student support”. This is based on text from all the study universities. The higher relevance terms could demonstrate why these universities were more successful in maintaining or increasing enrollment during the pandemic, but that correlation cannot be verified statistically.

**TABLE 2
PERSPECTIVES**

Website Text	Relevance
Cost of attendance	0.989
Professional skills	0.659
Special conditions appeal	0.659
Community Leader	0.44
Attendance appeal	0.44
Action plan	0.44
Career goal	0.44
Students' success	0.44

Again, the focus on attributes and features that make online programs affordable, skill-based, and flexible are what students are drawn to. The cost of attendance is the highest relevant term in this category. Cost has been shown to be of high importance to students consider online education.

As shown in figure 6,

**FIGURE 6
PRACTICES**



Table 3 illustrates some of the terms used in study university websites that have the highest relevance to the category of “practices for student support”. This is based on text from all the study universities.

**TABLE 3
PRACTICES**

Website Text	Relevance
Covid 19 dashboard	0.396
Support services	0.396
Security operations team	0.297
Virtual commencement ceremony	0.297
Based academic program	0.297

The terms here are less relevant to the idea of practices, but the top two terms “COVID-19 dashboard” and “Support services” fit for obvious reasons. Virtual commencement is a convenience during the pandemic. The fit for the other two terms is less clear.

As shown in figure 7,

**FIGURE 7
PERSONS**



Table 4 illustrates some of the terms used in study university websites that have the highest relevance to the category of “persons representing the university brand”. There is actually quite a long list that these examples were chosen from. Many are simply associated with the university’s name.

**TABLE 4
PERSONS**

Website Text	Relevant
Distance learning association	0.968
Higher education accreditation	0.968
Positive social change	0.968
International quality group	0.968
Diverse students’ population	0.968
Named best value	0.968
Best value school	0.968

Some themes do emerge in these examples, accreditation, diversity, value. These suggest that attempts to create community and connection by universities can have a positive impact on student perceptions of support.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide adult online learning institutions with information needed to more effectively identify organizational characteristics and system relationship development to attract a larger number of students, including people from an underrepresented population for stable retention. The goal of increasing enrollment and economic stability benefits both learners and institutions. Providing a framework for comparative analysis of practitioner-oriented adult online higher educational institutions

after COVID-19 with stable retention and increasing enrollments could allow further analysis of organizational and cultural attributes that support student and organizational growth.

Online universities that provided flexible programs and support for students increased enrollment post pandemic in some areas. Cultural indicators of care for the well-being of all stakeholders were aligned with successful adaptation to rapidly changing conditions. In some instances, evidence of care for non-traditional students seeking personal advancement through education was prominent. Adaptations to university forms included enhanced existing products such as expanded career placement services, flexible learning, scholarships, tuition plans, practices such as technology supported meetings for large and small groups, perspectives such as creating new learning opportunities and cultural heroes such as persons who mastered the changing conditions. The combined effect of the adapted forms and demonstrated concern for stakeholder well-being both now and in future community work roles could be considered transformative.

The text used in categories of products, practices and perspectives seem to be consistent across the study group universities. However, in the category of persons, the UOPX focused on types of potential student or existing students, whereas other universities focused on real or actual persons through profiles and stories. This may be an important distinction for future consideration.

Table 5 illustrates the top scoring text from all study university websites. How this text correlates to support student enrollment has yet to be determined.

TABLE 5
SUMMARY OF HIGHEST TEXT ANALYSIS RESULTS

Website Text	Relevance
Career Services	0.976
Cost of Attendance	0.989
Distance Learning Association	0.968
Higher Education Accreditation	0.968
Positive Social Change	0.968
COVID-19 Dashboard	0.396

Applying findings from this study may support organizational ethics in treating adult online learners worldwide to create and increase students' organizational citizenship within practitioner-oriented higher ed institutions. Society further benefits from alumni of the institution serving in communities.

The goal of the study was to identify effective strategies to reshape the U.S.A. practitioner higher education institutions to accommodate changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and serve students. In some instances, evidence of care for non-traditional students seeking personal advancement through education was prominent and may have contributed to the increased enrollment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There is no question that the COVID-19 pandemic has forever altered online education for all age groups, but especially for adult learners. They are more aware than ever that online education can support them in their pursuit of career advancement. Universities that can effectively communicate their value to these potential students will succeed in maintaining target levels of enrollment. Surveying current and future students about their interests, priorities, and decision-making process when choosing an online university will further refine the strategy for successful marketing and recruitment for all universities seeking to serve the online adult learner.

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