Original Research

Landing the Class: An Analysis of Innovative Enrollment Strategy and Leadership during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The devastation of COVID-19 substantively impacted enrollment opportunities for colleges and universities in the United States. Many higher education institutions responded to the crises by moving students off campus, enacting furloughs, increasing tuition, and appealing to their state and federal legislators for financial resources. At the University of Cincinnati (UC), critical considerations for campus leadership were how to best stabilize enrollment and resources and what needed to take place to ensure that underrepresented students were not lost in the process. Disparities exist in how the pandemic affects people of color and people from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. That, undoubtedly, was true for many of UC's students and their families from historically underserved backgrounds. UC launched a strategic initiative called Landing the Class to address enrollment concerns. The effort, which this article features, discusses how UC used innovative strategy and planning to address its enrollment challenges during the pandemic. Using a variety of institutional and national data, we provide an analysis of the extent to which the Landing the Class initiative was influential in helping the university reach its enrollment goals and implications for higher education leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: strategic enrollment management, urban, higher education, access, affordability, college readiness

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a distressing impact on colleges and universities (Pollikoff et al., 2020). Revenue sources from state and federal governments were either threatened or eliminated. Private giving levels were flat (Stiffman, 2021). Revenue from tuition and fees was in question as many students and their families faced uncertainty regarding college attendance. Urban areas were affected drastically by the pandemic. Many city-dwellers opted to work from home rather than commute to work and engage in the typical attractions that many cities provide (Florida, 2020). State mandates and city ordinances almost certainly contributed to urban ecology. Traditionally, urban universities have had a unique position to engage in partnerships with their cities (Mundt, 1998), and issues impacting the city are inherently a part of the urban university's strategic planning (Smith, 2021).

The University of Cincinnati (UC), which has a mission to be a leading public urban university, was on the verge of having eight years of record-breaking enrollment when the COVID-19 pandemic forced many students to delay their enrollment or drop out because of its economic impact. Various research studies have examined the relationship between college access, race, and socioeconomic status (Baker et al., 2018; Hurtado et al., 1997; Mustaffa & Dawson, 2021; Nelson, 2003). Other studies have considered race and space, including urbanicity, in their research on access and choice (Dache-Gerbino, 2017; Dache-Gerbino, 2018). Studies have also explored location and college choice (Holloman & Nolen, 2008; Miller & Smith, 2017; Perna et al., 2011). Much of the literature on college access and enrollment suggests that students consider several factors specific to them to make their college decision, including family, financial costs, social identity, and location.

In early spring 2020, university leadership noticed that first-year enrollment trends depicted stagnation, presenting concerns in reaching institutional enrollment goals for fall 2020. The combination of these challenges and pre-existing enrollment issues regarding current students contributed to university leadership's decision to develop an innovative approach to combat the collective enrollment trends. As a result, UC launched the Landing the Class (LTC) task force. The purpose of this analysis is to offer an assessment of LTC at both divisional and institutional levels with a specific focus on enrollment.

The University of Cincinnati

The University of Cincinnati is the second-largest public university in Ohio and, in 2020, had a combined enrollment of 46,710 students. UC comprises three campuses, with its Clifton location serving as the main campus, offering a combination of baccalaureate, master, doctoral, and professional programs. The campus is located a little over three miles from downtown Cincinnati and a mile away from the historic Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. UC has two regional campuses located in Blue Ash and Batavia, Ohio, that primarily offer associate degrees. In 2018, UC

introduced Strategic Sizing, an institutional campaign to improve student enrollment size and quality, including an audacious goal of growing the student body from 45,000 students to 60,000 by 2028. Enrollment goals, created in each of the 13 academic colleges in concert with faculty, are a cross-campus effort most recently co-led by Enrollment Management (EM) and each academic college. Given UC's complexity and the purpose of the study, we decided to focus on UC's Clifton campus, its undergraduate and graduate student populations, and the impact LTC had from a strategic enrollment management perspective. At UC, the Division of Enrollment Management is comprised of Undergraduate Admissions; Advising and Academic Resources; College Credit Plus; New Student Orientation; One-Stop Student Services; Registrar Research and Assessment; Student Financial Aid; Graduate Admissions, CPS Strong Initiative; and University Advising Association. The Division of Enrollment Management is headed by the vice provost of enrollment management and four assistant vice provosts. They have shifted from an enrollment service lens to an enrollment management lens partly because of LTC.

Background on the Landing the Class Task Force

LTC is a university strategic initiative that called on cross-campus leadership to engage in collaborative enrollment planning to address enrollment challenges. Due to the complexity and decentralized organizational model of UC, this initiative needed to rise to the most senior level of the university instead of being managed by individual units and colleges. The president of UC and the vice provost for enrollment management co-chaired a working group comprised of campus stakeholders, including senior university leaders, staff, and faculty. Many of these individuals were selected based on their institutional knowledge and responsibilities. The task force was designed to have decision-makers and innovative thinkers in the same space to consider the various risks associated with the pandemic to collectively and deliberately decide on the appropriate responses to COVID-19. The president gave the charge to highlight the importance of this committee and its responsibility to help stabilize enrollment and resources. LTC attempted to stabilize enrollment and identify growth strategies by focusing on returning, admitted transfer students, and new student populations. Each week, LTC focused on a targeted population and identified approaches that could aid in achieving enrollment goals.

UC Enrollment Challenges and Strategies

In fall 2019, UC announced its seventh year of record-breaking enrollment with more than 46,000 students. With the celebration of yet again record-breaking enrollment, UC ended 2019 with an increase in first-year undergraduate applications for fall 2020. Spring is when prospective students begin to confirm their intent to enroll at a college or university in the admissions cycle. The university released a record-breaking number of admission decisions in response to its increase in submitted applications. Early in this cycle, UC was positioned to break the record for the number of incoming first-year students. Predictive modeling suggested that the

university would have an enrollment growth of 5% to 7% among incoming first-year undergraduates over the previous year.

In March 2020, a couple of weeks after the university decided to close in response to the rise in COVID-19 cases, the confirmation and registration rates for incoming first-year students began to slow. At that time, student enrollment confirmations declined 7% compared to the same time in the previous year. Registration rates for orientation and housing lagged by 10% to 15% compared to this same time the year before. Also, the Division of Enrollment Management lacked clarity on how to best describe the upcoming academic year to students and their families. There were several questions from future and current students that initially remained unanswered. Even more concerning, for the first time in seven years, UC was on the verge of not meeting its enrollment goal, which was antithetical to the purpose of strategic sizing. The pandemic challenged how the office of admissions was accustomed to operating. The division adjusted to these challenges by converting traditional campus recruiting events to a virtual platform, counseling students and families experiencing financial hardship related to the pandemic, and addressing the abundant competition between other colleges and universities.

Four prevailing challenges that would disrupt enrollment goals remained in front of campus leadership. The first was to identify realistic and achievable enrollment goals given current circumstances. This challenged university leaders to examine current enrollment goals outlined in strategic sizing plans and adjust as needed. According to goals outlined in strategic sizing, UC projected an overall increase of close to 1,000 students representing all student degree types. Faculty and academic colleges had to identify how to stabilize enrollment growth to remain the same as in 2019 before the pandemic, 46,388 students across all three campuses.
This required highly sought majors that had limited growth because of resources, thinking creatively about accommodating more students and course offerings, and recognizing that some majors will experience a decrease in enrollment. The second required university leaders to acknowledge uncertainty and coordinate communications while building trust with campus stakeholders and the public. UC needed to communicate that it was adequately prepared to manage the pandemic crises by addressing issues and remaining proactive. The institution also presented an overarching communication that, as a leading urban university, it would continue to offer world-class, quality education, including online. UC has provided online education for more than a decade, and its commitment to providing delivery options to students is directly tied to the university's strategic direction. The third challenge was stabilizing the university's financial position, which involved reviewing multiple financial models to minimize monetary loss and impact. As a result, the university decided that it needed to land the class with an overall enrollment of 46,388 (39,200 Uptown) students. The last obstacle was meeting institutional enrollment goals by retaining current students and growing new student enrollment while prioritizing equity and diversity. The following sections of the study discuss the university's strategy and approach for accomplishing its goals.

Enrollment Challenges and those Affected

According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected college-going populations, and colleges experienced losses in enrollment. All racial and ethnic groups experienced enrollment declines at the undergraduate level and impacted students of color and international students particularly hard (NSCRC, 2021). Compared to the previous academic year, international students, Native American, and Black students experienced the most substantial drops (NSCRC, 2021). As such, UC's LTC initiative focused on these vulnerable populations. During this time, prospective international students, while interested in enrolling at UC, could not enter the United States due to the travel restrictions. This setback would ultimately impact the number of international students enrolling at UC for fall 2020. For UC, 6.4 % (3,015) of its students identify as international students, and 17% (8,039) of its students are from underrepresented student populations (UC Facts, 2020). This year, nearly one in four first-year students are underrepresented, making up about 23% of the overall student population (UC Facts, 2020). Similar to the data presented by the National Student Clearinghouse, UC's student populations showed earlier signs of enrollment challenges. International and underrepresented student populations make up almost 30% of UC's enrollment portfolio across undergraduate and graduate programs, which would not allow UC to fulfill its enrollment goal.

UC performed a series of budget projections using national enrollment trends. Each assessment concluded that UC needed to employ innovative and strategic enrollment strategies to stabilize and grow enrollment during the global pandemic and a period when high school graduation rates are negatively impacting college attendance among traditional college-age students. Multiple research and population data reports indicate enrollment declines over approximately the next ten years. Underrepresented and international students are vulnerable populations, and they are also demonstrating the most growth in population size for colleges and universities (Grawe, 2018). Successful recruitment cycles are critical for the financial stability of colleges, especially so during a pandemic (Kafka, 2021). For UC, the pandemic increased students' access in multiple ways that run contrary to typical recruitment cycles. Some of these examples included flexibility in determining completed applications, extending deadlines, waiving test requirements, forgoing application and confirmation fees, increasing student support throughout the admission cycle, tuition discounting, and increasing access to financial aid.

Analysis and Findings

We examined several descriptive data to better understand the institution's approach to holistically addressing the pandemic's impact on enrollment. We referred to data available through UC's Office of Institutional Research and national data on enrollment from SimpsonScarborough and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. At a broader, institutional level, UC put into place several strategies that relied on frequently updated data to guide decisions for enrollment. For example, survey results released by SimpsonScarborough (2020) revealed that 40% of incoming first-year students who once aspired to attend a four-year institution were now likely or highly unlikely not to attend. Informed by these data, UC identified first-year applicants as a probable source for enrollment decline. Initial data collected in summer 2020 provided insight that for UC specifically, applications for first-time undergraduates were up from 2019 with a positive difference of 351, while new transfer student applications were down 169. Unfortunately, data also showed that while applications for first-time undergraduates had increased, the number of confirmed enrollments decreased compared to 2019. From the initial findings, an early emphasis was placed on identifying populations of focus and developing innovative approaches for retaining and recruiting these populations to meet enrollment goals.

Populations of Focus

In tandem with enrollment management, the LTC initiative focused on four populations: returning students, admitted students, transfer students, and new populations of students. A data-driven approach for each population was taken using innovative ideas tailored to each group to overcome probable enrollment decline. These approaches included specific marketing campaigns targeting subgroups of the four populations.

Returning Students

Retaining returning students was a concern, and emphasis was placed on the subpopulation of continuing international students, both graduate, and undergraduate. These students were at a heightened risk for summer enrollment melt because many returned to their home country at the beginning of COVID and could not return to the United States by the fall semester. Summer enrollment melt is a period when students reconsider whether or not to attend college, and in many cases, decide not to attend (Rall, 2016). This decision is prevalent among historically underrepresented students and can extend to international students. UC International, the office that supports the university's global education efforts, and Enrollment Management worked together to survey all international students to identify how many would be impacted and the actual population for outreach. The goal was to provide these students with an online schedule, wherever possible, to allow for their continued enrollment.

The survey response rate, 26%, was an initial concern. However, the data provided the shocking revelation that while only 9% of continuing UC graduate students returned home, 40% of undergraduate students did the same. Increasing flexibility for online scheduling helped reach the initiative's retention goal of most international students. However, much of its success was attributed to the development of the Bearcats Everywhere Scholarship. The scholarship provided and continues to provide international students, as of summer 2021, with a one-time tuition award for each semester applied. This funding matched what students would have paid for their non-resident surcharge, a discount for undergraduates totaling $7,667 for the uptown campus. International graduate students were also eligible, with the discounts varying based on the program and other stipends already provided. We found that throughout two semesters, scholarships paired with flexible online scheduling options resulted in the enrollment of 3,579 international students compared to the 2,952 enrolled for fall 2020.

Admitted Students

The LTC task force developed a few different approaches to help address admitted first-year student concerns. Each has specific metrics to meet the same enrollment goals set before the pandemic. The first approach allowed fall 2020 admitted students to begin classes in summer 2020. Traditionally, students admitted in the fall are not permitted to start early at UC. However, task force discussions helped identify that early student enrollment would create an opportunity to give students a head-start in their program and ensure their enrollment in the fall. This initiative was initially developed with the expectation that they would become more likely to remain enrolled by building relationships with incoming first-year students earlier. This was evident with the enrollment goal of an additional 75 fall 2021 admits being met after they could schedule summer classes.

The second approach to enroll admitted first-year students included leveraging additional financial aid dollars in place of both state and federal funding sources. Based on SimpsonScarborough (2020) data, 24% of study participants who were high school seniors believed that they might change their minds about attending college because of COVID-19. These findings suggested that UC could engage its urban core and enroll students locally who were still undecided. Also, more expansively, this initiative specifically targeted students in Ohio who were admitted to UC but had not yet confirmed enrollment. This push for enrollment helped UC compete for students who planned to attend an Ohio public university, staying home, or staying close to home. The objective was to increase awards for 800 students and yield 200 students as a part of UC's traditional enrollment goal. Ultimately, 100 new student yields were met through the facilitation of this initiative.

The Division of Enrollment Management also developed an institutional grant to address the disparities related to race, socioeconomic status, and financial aid. Scholars have suggested that

institutions should reexamine their roles in supporting students the summer that they matriculate to college (Tichavakunda & Galan, 2020). Insufficient financial resources, for example, are an obstacle to access for many college students (Perna, 2006; Perna et al., 2011). Also, studies have shown that financial aid like small grants contributes positively to student success outcomes (Denning et al., 2019; Hurwitz, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2019). The office supported incoming underrepresented and first-generation students by incentivizing them to complete their enrollment steps to mitigate the possibility of summer melt. Students had the opportunity to earn up to $1,500 depending on their enrollment status. This investment was novel because EM usually has minimal scholarship awards besides merit, which has historically led to financial burdens for students of color and first-generation student populations. Evidence exists that financial aid directly affects student outcomes such as access (Denning, 2019; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2012). For example, complications in the financial aid process contribute to students not receiving the entire amount of eligible aid and possibly influence their enrollment decisions (Page & Clayton, 2016). While not an exclusive outcome, UC had its most diverse class, with nearly one in four first-year students from historically marginalized populations or a low socioeconomic background this year. The total number of these students rose to just over 23%.

The last approach was a campaign developed with university housing called Start Where You Are. This initiative was implemented to support first-year students taking all their courses online. The initiative's primary purpose was to allow students to begin their first year from home or choose not to live on campus or in university housing for the fall semester, including waiving the mandatory on-campus living requirement. The initiative was designed to be program-specific and required active involvement from the Office of New Student Orientation for first-year students and major adaptations to their advising process. While metrics for this initiative were not as easy to set, we identified that the goal was met to maintain enrollment for incoming first-year students who may have been in jeopardy of not attending in the fall. This outcome was realized through the analysis of the overall enrollment of UC first-year students.

Transfer Students

Students' enrollment decisions were clearly in flux during the pandemic. Instead of waiting for conditions to evolve, LTC developed three targeted marketing campaign initiatives: Stay in Cincinnati, Change the World, and Ready for Next. The first campaign, Stay in Cincinnati, was used to engage incoming transfer students not currently in the applicant pool, including students from the Cincinnati and metropolitan area who attended other universities. The campaign was specifically aligned with the university's desire to lead as an urban public university. In addition, the campaign was also able to target individuals who were not currently in the workforce and wanted to return to school for up-skilling and additional credentials. The content of the messages focused on being a resource for transfer students regarding financial aid and transfer credit decisions.

The Change the World and Ready for Next marketing campaigns were crafted for the local Cincinnati market and developed to increase confirmations among first-year students changing institutional commitments and increase applications for incoming transfer students. These campaign efforts increased transfer applicants by 200 for fall 2021 and yielded 75 to 100 additional transfer students. We found it challenging to narrow down exactly which efforts produced the outcome of meeting fall enrollment goals or even if a mix of the three was the answer. Overall, the result was positive regardless of specificity.

New Student Population

The fourth student population LTC considered was new student populations. UC waived test requirements and application fees associated with enrollment, such as confirmations, housing, and orientation for incoming first-year and transfer students to the uptown campus. When considering the class of spring 2020 baccalaureate graduates, many of those who had planned to enter the workforce were changing plans due to the pandemic's contribution to a dearth of job opportunities and limited travel options and instead considering entering a UC graduate program. The university created a new opportunity for an unrealized student population to enroll in the Stay a Bearcat initiative. The initiative helped meet enrollment goals by engaging an entirely new group that might not have considered graduate education at UC before the pandemic. Stay a Bearcat was a robust effort with many moving parts (see Table 1) that ensured that students who did not plan to continue their educational pursuits could make an easy, stress-free decision on whether to attend graduate school. Finally, the metrics set for Stay a Bearcat, like the other initiatives, included an application goal and a yield. The fall 2021 graduate student enrollment goals were met, including increasing graduate applicants and yielding 176 more new graduate students than in fall 2020.

Table 1. Strategic Elements of Stay a Bearcat Initiative

1. Standardized test score waivers for prospective students
2. Referral process for students to a different program rather than being denied
3. Submission deadline extensions for programs
4. Increased contact with prospective students
5. Extension of confirmation deadlines for admitted students
6. Revamp of holistic admissions processes to attract a more diverse group of students
7. Movement of program start dates to allow for the most convenient start date

Measurement of Impact

We identified that a vital part of weekly LTC task force meetings included gauging impact and progress through analysis of three established data groups automatically generated and sent weekly to the group before meetings. The task force evaluated pre-COVID data that reflected retention of the fall 2018 cohort to fall 2019 and compared it to current real-time retention numbers using the fall 2019 cohort's retention to fall 2020 (see Figure 1). The data collection included students retained versus those not retained for each college and the overall university retention total. Utilizing these typical year data as a means of comparison versus the retention conditions under the stressors of the pandemic allowed the group to actively monitor weekly progress and adjust their plan accordingly.

*Figure 1.* Fall 2018 Cohort Retention to Fall 2019
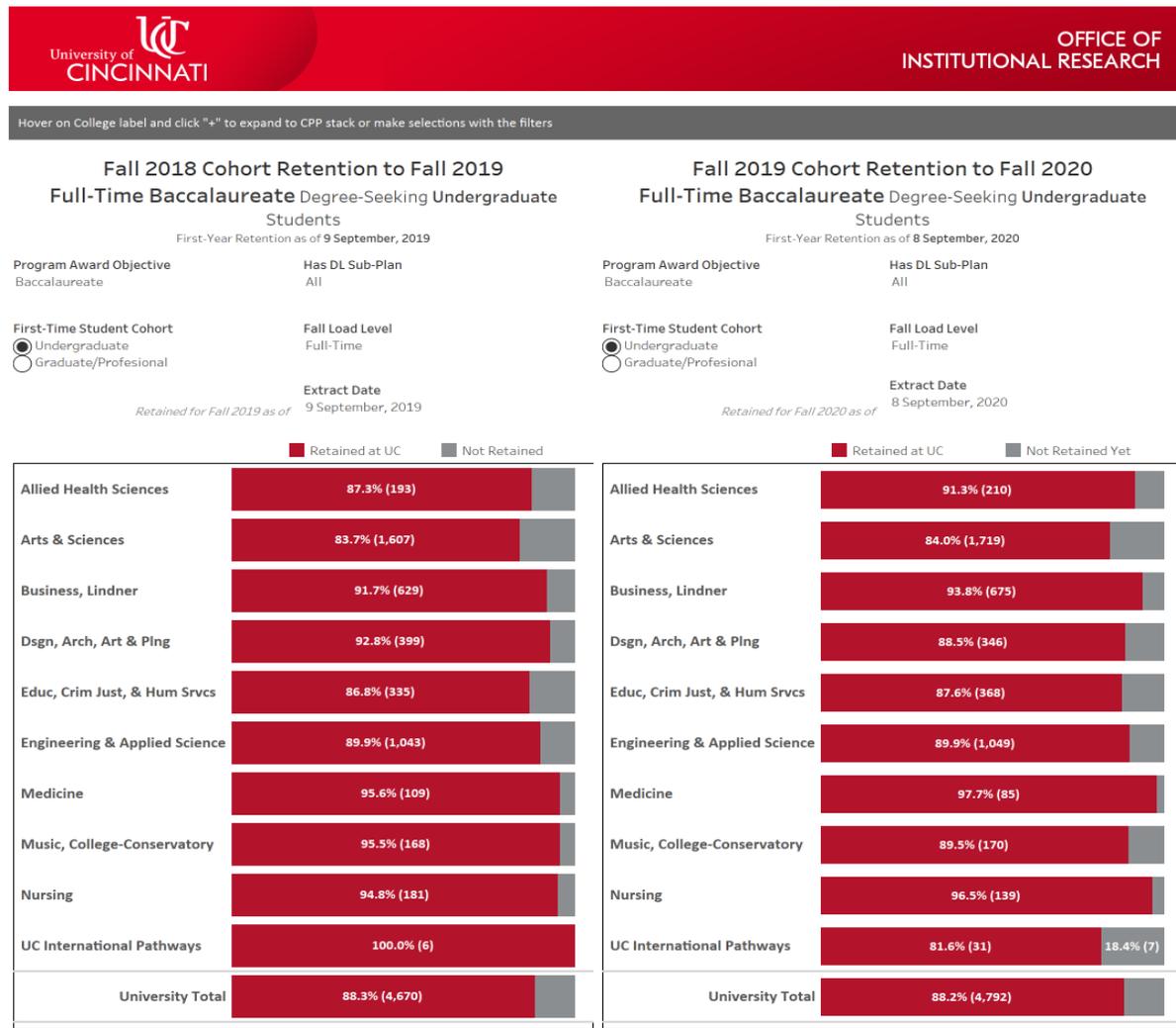
The second data extraction was an overarching enrollment headcount separated by colleges showing fall 2019 versus fall 2020 and a graphed depiction of change (see Figure 2). The data set provided the LTC task force with a broader depiction of the current state of enrollment. These data also indicated which specific colleges required extended efforts compared to others. These same data were also used to successfully monitor progress post-pandemic for landing the class from fall 2020 compared to fall 2021 (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. Headcount Enrollment, Fall 2019 to Fall 2020
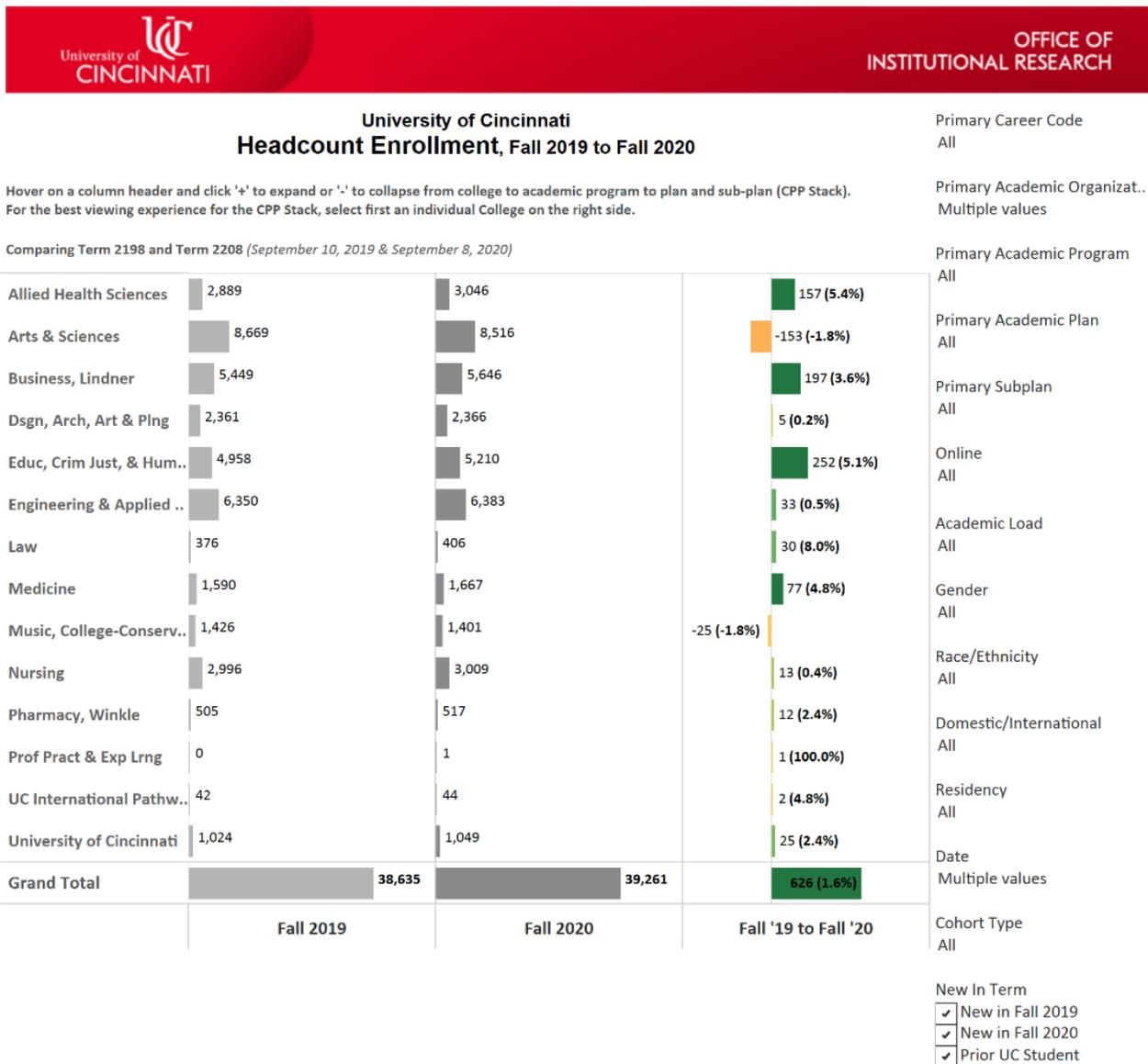
The third data set the LTC task force utilized was the overview of university-wide enrollment goals set by the task force. This data set provided the group with a descriptive analysis of each of the focused populations discussed earlier with an additional layer of specificity of the student's degree type, including undergraduate, graduate, or transient students. The data considered enrollment, confirmations, and goals for fall 2019 and fall 2020, respectively. The data also considers fall 2021 goals and the metrics necessary to meet those goals.

Figure 3. Headcount Enrollment, Fall 2020 to Fall 2021
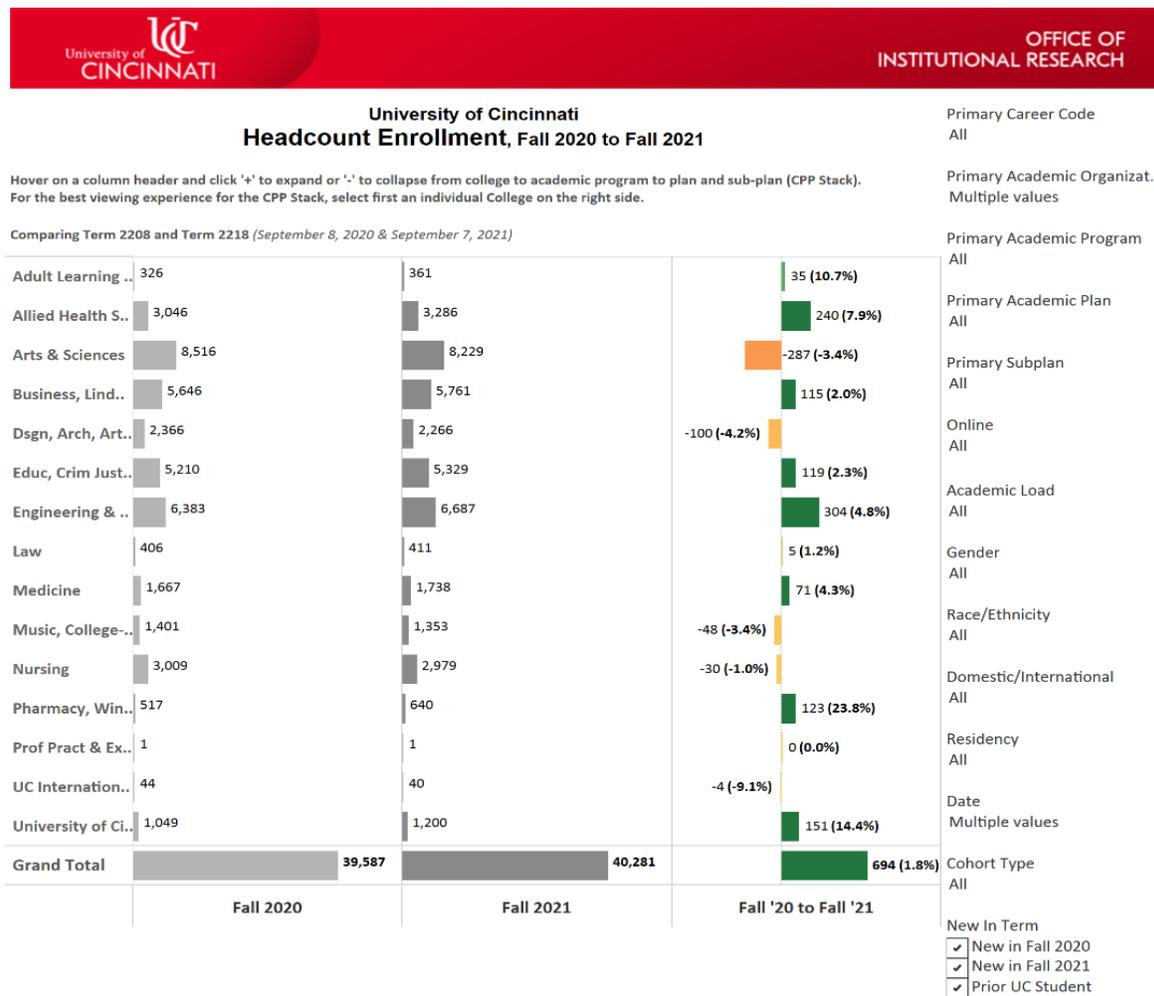
Implications for Practice and Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed university leaders, including senior admissions and enrollment management officers, to think and operate differently than they traditionally have and offered valuable lessons and headway into cultivating a campus culture of strategic enrollment management. Sustainable practices, including a greater focus on strategic sizing and long-term planning, created opportunities for tactical conversations to figure out how the institution can increase financial assistance for Pell-eligible students who want to enroll at UC but cannot afford the costs. Multiple subpopulations of students share this situation, including first-generation, rural students, and more. Despite wanting to grow, the university has seen a decline in the percent of Pell-eligible students over the years. The pandemic presented a clear opportunity to yield and retain these students more competitively. Furthermore, LTC has allowed UC to be competitive in its yield efforts without creating new programs.

Moreover, LTC assisted in developing a culture that is interested in solving enrollment issues, less about crisis and more about strategic enrollment management. Another sustainable practice includes tactical meetings with university leadership versus the previous reporting on enrollment management processes, timing, and whom UC served. Lastly, in concert with a consultant, a cross-campus committee highlighted multiple friction areas regarding undergraduate student experiences that needed improvement to help reduce the melt of incoming students and retain current student enrollment.

The LTC task force developed several innovative approaches to meet enrollment metrics in response to what could have been a detrimental year for the institution. When the pandemic began, and institutions were sending students, faculty, and staff home before the end of the spring 2020 semester, UC rapidly prepared for the unknown. Their early preparation and emphasis on enrollment contributed to the university's efforts to retain students from the onset of the pandemic resulting in the most extensive summer enrollment in its 200-year history. The total headcount increased 1.5% over the previous year as of the first day of fall 2020 classes, and 783 more full-time equivalent (FTE) students were enrolled, an increase of 9.7% over the previous year. Also, gross tuition for the summer, including the removal of non-resident fees, experienced a slight increase. LTC recognized these successes but did not assume they would continue to span through the fall semester. While simultaneously considering summer enrollment, retention, and recruitment, the task force was able to help the institution start the fall 2020 semester as one of two public Ohio institutions with increased enrollment.

The findings in our analysis suggest that the UC's mission and approach to enrollment management are tied to its urban identity. The documents and artifacts that we examined for the study support this conclusion. Urban universities have unique opportunities to engage their surrounding communities during the most pressing of times. The pandemic illuminated UC's

efforts in addressing access and affordability, especially for students from the city and who now called Cincinnati home. The urban mission that guides the institution and its leadership was elevated because of the crisis. How UC managed through this once-in-a-century challenge was arguably rooted partly in its desire and strategy to engage the city of Cincinnati.

Our analysis suggests that UC was one of the fortunate universities to sustain itself during the pandemic. Takeaways from the study include the notion that LTC efforts brought enrollment management to an institutional forefront in a way that had not been previously established. Historically, enrollment management had not been involved in the planning at the college level. LTC cultivated a culture of collaboration between colleges and the office of admissions in the enrollment management process. Also, the pandemic propelled the opportunity for the university to redefine relationships with enrollment management and admissions and other institutional operations such as marketing and communications to centralize its collective admission efforts in a more efficient way.

College access is a priority that urban universities should keep in front of them by actively engaging their communities. Institutions should look for opportunities to invite constituents to have substantive conversations about promoting higher education to youth in their city and investing in partnerships with school districts within the metropolitan area. A sincere commitment to college access, specifically for citizens in the metropolitan area, demonstrates a commitment from the urban university to improve educational outcomes for their city and creates a more straightforward pathway toward postsecondary education for many.

Today, the division of enrollment management works more closely with college leaders in their planning efforts to ensure that they are establishing enrollment practices that are informed from Landing the Class committal and retention strategies. These recruitment experiences have informed how enrollment management will approach recruiting students in the future.

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