TIAA Institute

Trends and Issues
June 2022

The pandemic and access-oriented private nonprofit colleges

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As the pandemic emerged in early 2020, educators and policymakers grew increasingly concerned about its potential impacts on equity.[1] How would underrepresented populations fare in the context of radically changed educational operations? At the time, most attention focused on K-12 education and large public postsecondary institutions, including community colleges and state universities. Overlooked in much of the discussion were the nation's access-oriented private nonprofit colleges (APCs), a set of institutions educating large numbers of students from minoritized and lower-income backgrounds.[2] APCs are not the "elite" ivied schools popularized in the press, and instead are what some observers have termed "the invisible colleges."[3] In recent years, critics have accused those institutions of retaining outdated curricula, providing poor returns on investment, and losing revenues at unsustainable rates.[4] Press outlets, ranging from *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* to *Inside Higher Ed*, have regularly published dire predictions for the colleges' futures. Typical of the genre was a 2019 *Forbes* article titled "Dawn of the Dead: For Hundreds of the Nation's Private Colleges, It's Merge or Perish."[5]

1 Maloney, E.J. & Kim, J. (2020b). The challenge of equity in higher education under COVID-19. *Inside Higher Education*, May 21. Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/learning-innovation/challenge-equity-higher-education-under-covid-19.

2 Crisp, G., Horn, C.L., Kuczynski, M., Zhou, Q., & Cook, E. (2019). Describing and differentiating four-year broad access institutions: An empirical typology. *Review of Higher Education*, 42 (4), 1373-1400.

3 Tarant, M., Bray, N., & Katsinas, S. (2017). The invisible colleges revisited. *Journal of Higher Education*, 89 (3), 341-367.

4 E.g., see Vedder, R., 2004, *Going Broke by Degree: Why College Costs Too Much*. Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute.

5 Schifrin, M. & Coudriet, C. (2019). Dawn of the dead: For hundreds of the nation's private colleges, it's merge or perish. Forbes, November 27. Retrieved at https://www.forbes.com/sites/schifrin/2019/11/27/dawn-of-the-dead-for-hundreds-of-the-nations-private-colleges-its-merge-or-perish/#c6482bd770d7.

The arrival of the pandemic only increased the pessimism. In spring 2020, the title of a *Chronicle of Higher Education* essay asked "Will the Coronavirus Close Your College for Good?"[6] and a subsequent *Forbes* article was titled "Why the Coronavirus Will Kill 500–1000 Colleges."[7] Perhaps as a consequence, these colleges have often been overlooked in considerations of how best to reduce inequalities and inequities in postsecondary access and student success.

Decades of studies of college impacts have regularly found that smaller, more immersive colleges can contribute powerfully to students' intellectual and social development, and may be especially beneficial to traditionally underrepresented students.[8] With high levels of classroom engagement, faculty/student interaction and extracurricular activities, supported by residential living/learning environments, such colleges can provide academically and interpersonally intensive contexts for personal growth and academic achievement.[9]

The arrival of the pandemic posed threats to these intensity-related features. Instituting social distancing, shifting to online instructional approaches, reducing residence hall capacity, cancelling intercollegiate athletic seasons–each of those potential actions by college leaders struck at the "high-intensity" heart of the enterprise.[10] With finances and market appeal already being questioned by many, [11] the pandemic's emergence could pose an existential threat to the institutions and a major barrier for the minoritized and lower-income students they serve. College leaders were forced to make difficult choices about which actions to pursue and which to avoid. Some aggressively adopted an array of ameliorative actions, including not only moving to online instruction but also freezing or reducing tuition and imposing vaccine mandates. Other leaders resisted such moves, perhaps concerned about overreacting and reducing their colleges' appeal to students and their families.

With valuable support from the TIAA Institute, our research team examined the responses of access-oriented private colleges to the pandemic and those choices' implications for student success among underrepresented minoritized (URM) students. First, using several nationally available datasets, we identified 152 institutions meeting our criteria of being access oriented (i.e., less selective admissions rates, wide ranging test scores among enrolled students). We analyzed data on those colleges' pandemic actions and on subsequent enrollments and outcomes of URM students and others.

To supplement the findings of these quantitative analyses and go deeper into what the numeric data were telling us, we interviewed five leaders of private colleges differing in size, selectivity, diversity, and resources. Each of the leaders was at the presidential or vice presidential level.

Several findings from the quantitative analyses merit highlighting:

- As in most other institutional sectors, first-year full-time undergraduate enrollments declined on average in access-oriented colleges in the 2020-21 academic year. The declines were less steep among URM students, however. That is, the institutions' average proportions of URM students in their student bodies actually grew, although the numbers of such students declined.
- First-to-second-year retention rates rose among all students in 2020-21, relative to 2019-20. Unfortunately, data limitations precluded examining retention rates among URM students.
- A minority of the APC institutions we examined adopted fully or primarily online instruction in 2020-21: 22% did so in the fall of 2020, and that number had risen to 35% by the spring of 2021. The institutions choosing these approaches tended to be those with larger numbers of Black and Hispanic students, higher spending levels, and more favorable enrollment trends over recent years. Institutions resisting moving to online instruction were especially

6 Zemsky, R. (2020). Will the Coronovirus close your college for good? *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 25, 2020. Retrieved at https://www.chronicle.com/article/will-coronavirus-close-your-college-for-good.

7 Vedder, R. (2020). Why the coronavirus will kill 500–1000 colleges. *Forbes*, April 7, 2020. Retrieved at https://www.forbes.com/sites/richardvedder/2020/04/07/500-1000-colleges-to-disappear-survival-of-the-fittest/?sh=710cb5b111a1.

8 Mayhew, M.J., Rockenbach, A.N., Bowman, N.A., Seifert, T.A.D., & Wolniak, G.C. (2016). *How college affects students: 21st century evidence that higher education works*, 1st Edition. San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons.

9 Pascarella, E.T., Wolniak, G.C., Cruce, T.M., Seifert, T.A., & Blaich, C.F. (2005). Liberal arts colleges and liberal arts education: New evidence of impacts. *ASHE Higher Education Report, 31*(3). Also see Warshaw, J.B., & Ciarimboli, E.B. (2020). Structural or cultural pathways to innovative change?: Faculty and shared governance in the liberal arts college. *Teachers College Record*, 122(8), 1-46.

10 See Maloney, E.J. & Kim, J. (2020a). The low-density university. *Inside Higher Education*, April 15. Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/blogs/learning-innovation/low-density-university. Also see Maloney, E.J. & Kim, J. (2020b). The challenge of equity in higher education under COVID-19. *Inside Higher Education*, May 21. Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/learning-innovation/challenge-equity-higher-education-under-covid-19.

11 Taylor, B.J., & Cantwell, B. (2019). Unequal higher education: *Wealth, status, and student opportunity.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

likely to have higher commitments to residential living on campus and higher student participation rates in intercollegiate athletics.

- About one-sixth of the institutions (16%) chose to reduce or freeze their tuition charges in 2020-21. Those colleges were disproportionately institutions with large numbers of minoritized students and students with measurable financial need.
- Nearly half (45%) of the studied institutions adopted some form of a vaccine mandate for students for the fall of 2021. Colleges resisting this choice were those with high levels of athletic participation, low numbers of minoritized students, and affiliation with non-Catholic Christian churches. In addition, colleges located in states with Republican control of governorships and legislatures were especially unlikely to adopt vaccine mandates.
- When the data on colleges' actions and equity-related outcomes were considered jointly in regression modeling, the patterns noted above were generally confirmed. The only action appearing to have had a noteworthy impact on equity-related outcomes was adopting fully or primarily online instruction in the same fall as the students were entering (fall of 2020): doing so played a role in limiting the number of entering URM students, but did not affect the proportion of URM students or the first-to-second-year retention of students overall.
- Institutions' levels of student body diversity and intensity (full-time enrollments, high athletics participation, commitment to residential living on campus) may have interacted to affect colleges' actions–most notably, high-intensity/high-diversity colleges were especially likely to adopt vaccine mandates.

Taken together, it is easy to take some solace from the quantitative findings of the project. *As of 2021, the pandemic did not seem to have disproportionately harmed the outcomes of racially minoritized students in access-oriented nonprofit private colleges.* That said, national access and retention rates remain lower among URM students than among other students, and the fact that the data examined here were aggregated at the institutional level no doubt hides troubling stories of individual URM students' academic progress. Further, data for the project were limited and short term. It will be important to study whether the access and persistence patterns found here endure.

Continuing to listen to the voices of college leaders will also be important. Those we interviewed provided insights invaluably adding to our understanding. The interviews were not representative of our full sample, but do provide perspectives enhancing the depth of our quantitative work.

Several leaders emphasized the importance of learning from other institutions during the pandemic. As one vice president put it to us,

> *We weren't the first school in [our home state] to come out and say that we're going to complete the spring semester remotely. We weren't the one to come out and say we're not going to have an in-person graduation. We kind of let some of the behemoths in higher education set the tone so that when the [college] family heard what we were doing, they realized that we weren't flying solo.*

Interestingly, we found leaders commenting on how institutions used to competing with each other turned to collaborating in the face of the crisis. One vice president noted that, *"[S]tarting early in fall 2020, we were meeting at least monthly [with] one or two persons from [three nearby private institutions] to learn from each other."*

Another significant theme emphasized by virtually all our respondents was remaining true to their institutions' historical roots and mission. A vice president and dean of students said,

> *[Students here] didn't sign up for online education. They are paying for a private, residential living experience. They're paying for the opportunity to come and participate in their sport or marching band. As we've discussed before, [our college] is very much a participatory institution, and that's what people were coming to do. So we knew in the spring that we were going to have to return to in-person instruction and open residence halls and to navigate through the pandemic in the fall.*

Intersecting with these commitments were financial concerns. One executive told us,

> *The [college's] experience is about being here on campus, about being in the environment, about being with people, about all the additional resources, all the additional opportunities that students have. We couldn't in good conscience ask students to pay for [this] university and only get a quarter of the experience. And honestly, we couldn't afford for them to only pay for a quarter of the experience. [As a] tuition-dependent institution,*

we've got bills to pay. Right? And so those two things…made the decision clear. It was just a matter of how. And so that was the path forward.

Along similar lines, a vice president for strategy said,

The committee's top priority was to figure out how to continue with [the college's] top priority: in-person education. This priority set [the college's] course of action for the rest of the time. After spring 2020's online experience, students and parents said they didn't like the online experience and were not ready to pay the same price for online education. So soon the monetary issue became an important concern for the college.

Leaders emphasized that finances were connected to extracurricular life as well as academic approaches. A president told us,

Athletes tend to come back…and we know that they create a vibrancy on campus that contributes to the retention of current students that aren't even into athletics.

Another leader, describing the importance of student clubs, intramural sports, intercollegiate athletics, and other nonacademic programming at his college, put the marketplace dependence of his college on extracurricular activities bluntly:

The number of students that are willing to [enroll at the college] and not participate in a signature program is dwindling. That was the case prior to the pandemic. And I think the pandemic has really exposed that. It's a lot of money to come here when you can go to a community college or a [nearby regional public institution] if you're just going to show up and go to class. There's a cheaper option, and I think the pandemic has exposed that.

Leaders also stressed the importance of community spirit in getting through the worst of the crisis. One complimented the students at his institution:

We could not have achieved what we have achieved without our student body collectively buying in pretty early on. That while the 18–22-year-old demographic is not at risk for serious illness or death because of COVID, there is enough love for the little old lady who works in the dining hall and the 70-year-old adored English faculty member that we had to do some things around here to take care of them. And for the most part, our students have really bought into that.

Another vice president told us his choice to emphasize his college's mission as a motivating force:

At one point, I asked the faculty to reflect on… the [college's] Ideal that kind of serves as a guiding light for us. I picked about a half dozen or so faculty to share briefly…what the…Ideal meant to them. I think that was inspiring to the faculty we had.

Overall, the project's findings portray colleges' varied approaches to adaptating to the health crisis. Despite the dire earlier warnings and forebodings, the great majority of small private colleges have thus far persisted. Only one of the colleges in our initially identified pool of access-oriented institutions significantly changed over the period of the study, and rather than closing, it simply moved entirely to graduate-level programming.

In fact, it is hard not to be rather heartened by what has taken place among the access-oriented colleges to date. One provost we interviewed put it nicely:

I think [one] of those characteristics [of colleges] we used to talk about [was that] higher education is fairly resistant to change. We found out in a horrific way, but we found out through a pandemic that we can change on the dime…we can turn the aircraft carrier around very quickly.

Of course, it is still early times, and the effects of the pandemic along with pre-existing financial challenges may be accumulating as we speak, eroding the viability of the access-oriented colleges more slowly than initially expected, but eroding it nonetheless. Searing racial/ethnic and socioeconomic gaps in postsecondary access and success remain, and it is imperative that those gaps be monitored and addressed. The findings here provide some small comfort for now, but research and attention to the core issues should continue.

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Professor Hearn holds a Ph.D. in the sociology of education and an M.A. in sociology from Stanford University. He also holds an M.B.A. in finance from the University of Pennsylvania (Wharton) and an A.B. from Duke University. Prior to initiating his academic career, he worked as a financial analyst at a bank, as an administrator at a small private college, as a program research director at the American College Testing program, and as a policy analyst and project director at a Washington, D.C.-area consulting firm. In his subsequent academic career, he served as a faculty member at the University of Minnesota and Vanderbilt University in addition to the University of Georgia.

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This paper reports on research funded by a TIAA Institute research grant to the first author titled "Impacts of the Pandemic on Access-Oriented Private Colleges." That support is gratefully acknowledged. The interpretations and conclusions reported here are those of the authors alone and may not reflect those of the TIAA Institute. The authors wish to express their gratitude to Dr. Chris Marsicano and his staff at Davidson College's College Crisis Initiative for providing data on colleges' responses to the pandemic. The authors also gratefully acknowledge the research assistance of Jennifer May Trifiletti, Alex Monday, and Ijaz Ahmad, and the helpful comments and suggestions of Erin Ciarimboli, Noble Jones, and participants in the McBee Institute Zoomtable on "Strategic Change in Private Colleges" on April 30, 2021. Please address correspondence to James C. Hearn, McBee Institute of Higher Education, Meigs Hall, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602-6772. Email: jhearn@uga.edu.

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(06/22)