

How New England Colleges and Universities are Preparing for an Enrollment Gap

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While there are many common challenges affecting higher education institutions across the globe, a quick look at recent news articles highlights that U.S. institutions are also contending with regional trends as well.

New England, in particular, faces a declining population of high school graduates, flattening higher education budgets and lower international student enrollments. In this special report, we'll explore how colleges and universities in this region are overcoming these challenges and navigating this changing market.

The Northeast's Challenges: Shifting Populations, Politics and Pricing

Though the U.S. is currently facing some concerning declines related to higher education, that hasn't always been the case. In 1971, 56% of Americans over age 25 had high school diplomas. By 1985, that number had climbed to more than 70%, giving colleges a larger pool of prospective students.⁴ At the same time, many schools began increasing tuition and fees at lower rates annually: approximately 7-8% per year, as opposed to the 12-14% increases common in previous years.⁷ As a result, college enrollment began a period of steady growth, rising 18% between 1985 and 1992, when attendance stabilized for about six years. Another growth spurt occurred between 2005 and 2010 with a 20% increase; but enrollments fell by 5% over the next five years.⁵

Birth rates in the Northeast have since declined, and high school graduation rates in all New England states are expected to drop by 5% or more between 2010 and 2023. According to *U.S. News & World Report*, "those with the largest decreases are concentrated in the Northeast, including Massachusetts (down 6.3%), and Connecticut (down 7.8%)."² And with fewer high school graduates expected, the 2.2% decrease in international undergraduate and 5.5% decrease in international graduate enrollment has many schools worried about filling seats.¹²

Higher education costs have skyrocketed over the last 30 years: average tuition at four-year public schools climbed 213% since 1987 while the average at four-year non-profit private schools grew by 163%.¹¹ Rates for public schools in New England have grown faster than those in many other regions.¹

High costs of living may also pose a barrier for students from outside the area. State funding for higher education in the New England states has slowed — funding in Connecticut shrunk, Maine's budget remained flat and other states saw smaller budget increases than in recent years.¹³ In Vermont and New Hampshire, where in-state tuition is the highest in the country, state and local funding is less than half the national average.¹⁰

The political environment has had an impact on enrollments as well — since President Trump took office as U. S. president, travel bans, budget cuts and policy changes have posed challenges for higher education.

Partnering as a Way Forward

Since 2016, three Massachusetts schools have closed (Mount Ida College, Atlantic Union College and New England Institute of Art). Vermont's Burlington College and Mount Washington College in New Hampshire (formerly Hesser College) took a similar route.⁹ Others have merged or developed partnerships to weather the storm: Wheelock College and Boston University merged in 2018. The *Boston Globe* reported, "Under the merger, BU's School of Education will join with Wheelock's School of Education, Child Life and Family Studies. The school will be renamed as Boston University's Wheelock College of Education & Human Development, with Wheelock's current president, David Chard, serving as the interim dean of the program for at least two years after the merger."⁶ As a small school with declining enrollments and increasing expenses, Wheelock recognized the

merger as its best option to continue the school's mission.

Partnerships that offer clear value for students can provide stability for organizations as well. For example, catering to transfer students — especially those from community colleges — can offer a steady pipeline for specific programs. With more than 1/3 of college students transferring at least once within six years, colleges that create streamlined transfer processes will have an advantage.¹⁴

"A well-thought-out merger process can help presidents, boards, faculty members, students and staff members understand where a college stands and where it must go in order to preserve its mission and values into the future. Such a process can be successful even if it does not result in a consummated merger. It can help leaders choose from a range of actions: perhaps a strategic partnership with another college that doesn't quite amount to a full merger, or maybe a specific plan for trimming expenses and refocusing student recruitment."⁸

Consider the partnership between Western New England University (WNEU) and Greenfield College, which serves both students and the participating schools. Western New England University's pharmacy program allows academically qualified students to transfer from Greenfield College after two years and earn a \$15,000 scholarship for their first two years at WNEU. These students will also be guaranteed a spot in the university's two-year Doctor of Pharmacy program as long as they maintain academic eligibility.¹⁶ The program represents a very intentional effort with a clear pathway for students to move through the requirements for a specific career.

In building partnerships and collaborations, look for opportunities to build on your particular strengths.

Engaging New Audiences to Address Pipeline Concerns

Another way for schools to remain competitive is to engage with new audiences. Exploring new tools and communication channels can be a crucial element in attracting the right students. Roughly 77% of Americans own smartphones — and rates are even higher among younger adults, with 92% of 18-29 year-olds reporting they have one.¹⁵ Yet not all institutions consider that smartphones may be a prospect's primary means of accessing the internet when developing admissions materials. Mobile-friendly websites and ads make a difference.

Text messaging can also be an effective means of communicating with prospective students — Harvard Graduate School of Education found that the best way to actually reach low-income students was through text messages customized by name and intended college.³

Participating in a Centralized Application Service (CAS™) can also attract applications from a larger pool of prospective students. By presenting each school's academic programs as part of a larger marketplace, a CAS makes it easy for students to research and apply to the programs that align with their interests and values. Most participants report increased applicant diversity and geographic reach when they adopt a CAS.

Attending virtual fairs and developing relationships with professional organizations targeting specific groups can pay off as well. Brett DiMarzo, director of graduate admissions at Simmons College School of Nursing and Health Sciences, said when he was at Suffolk University the school held a virtual admissions fair specifically targeting veterans. "That allowed us to supplement from a regional perspective," DiMarzo said.

A Case Study: Simmons College School of Nursing and Health Sciences



Located in Boston's Fenway area, Simmons College faces intense competition from many nearby neighbors. With just over 6,000 students, Simmons lacks some of the resources of other larger and better-known Boston-based institutions.

Brett DiMarzo, director of graduate admissions at Simmons College School of Nursing and Health Sciences, recently shared some of the strategies he and his team have found effective when recruiting students. "As a smaller institution, there are many areas where we can't compete with larger schools," DiMarzo said. "We highlight our services then deliver great service throughout the admissions process."

To attract applicants from beyond the regional pool, DiMarzo said he and his team focus on professional conferences and newsletters targeting people in specific career paths, such as nurses or nutritionists. "Simmons has nutrition programs — when we launched our online programs, we went to the Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo. It was a large investment but gave us great exposure to people in the profession. It wound up being a good tool for us," said DiMarzo.

Developing partnerships has also been critical in driving enrollment. "We've been looking at organizations we can partner with as a school, then asking what they need in their employees and how we can streamline admissions for them," DiMarzo explained. For example, an organization called Wellness Workdays offers a distance internship program. Simmons partnered with them to allow interns to enroll in the master's in nutrition and health promotion program while completing their internships.

DiMarzo said that participating in a CAS and working with professional associations has streamlined the admissions process. "It makes it easier for students to do what they were already doing," he said. A revamped website, updated communications plan and more mobile-friendly approach drawing on the power of Liaison's Enrollment Marketing Platform (EMP™) also improved engagement. "You want to make the process easy, informative and welcoming — not just for recent undergrads, but for nontraditional students and career changers as well," DiMarzo said.

Connecting with New Audiences Through Trusted Partners

In many cases, institutions already have access to an admissions solution that could help them attract more qualified applicants and streamline application review, allowing admissions teams to focus on ensuring accepted students enroll. Many professional associations offer a CAS, which presents all programs in a discipline in a single marketplace. Applicants can easily identify programs that align with their preferences — even those at schools they may not have known about previously. Best of all, participating in a CAS costs nothing for member schools. Liaison, in collaboration with organizations such as the American Dental Education Association (ADEA), the American Society for Engineering Education (ASEE) and the American Psychological Association (APA), offers these communities as a way for your program to access a larger, more diverse pool of students.

[Visit liaisonedu.com](http://liaisonedu.com) to learn how a CAS can help you maintain a healthy enrollment.

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