



REPORT

WHEN THE CRISIS IS OVER

Becoming Student-Ready in
Post-Pandemic Higher Education

Student-Ready
STRATEGIES



A CALL TO ACTION

In recent weeks, as COVID-19 has spread across the globe, people have found themselves divided into two very distinct groups: “essential workers” and everyone else. As a member of this latter group, I’ve often felt helpless, even useless. I’m not trained to care for the sick, develop a vaccine or manufacture ventilators for the ill. I can’t coordinate with state and national public health officials on a response. I’m not closing campuses to protect students or converting courses to distance learning. With the deepest admiration for these individuals who are taking brave action and making difficult decisions right now, I realize that I am the definition of a “non-essential worker.”

Yet, I remain steadfastly committed to the path I have pursued, fighting for equity and student success. Our day-to-day work of helping colleges be student-ready will not heal the sick today; however, it will play an essential role in helping an ailing economy recover and counteracting the racial and societal inequities this pandemic has further aggravated.

It is our organizational philosophy that the first step to becoming a student-ready organization is to authentically center our work around the voices and experiences of students. We developed this report to draw focus around three distinct student groups that will be affected by this global crisis, each with very different challenges that will require different interventions:

Rising Seniors whose final semester and transition to college is being disrupted by the pandemic;

Current Students who are subject to higher education's regulations, policies and processes; and

Unemployed or Furloughed Adults who need to earn new credentials and get back into the workforce quickly.

This report explores the perspectives of each of these groups and suggests a few key interventions, acknowledging that it is far from an exhaustive list. I am confident that there will be no shortage of thought leadership from our field on these matters. HCM Strategist's #EdAfterCOVID blog series and Strada Education Network's Public Viewpoint survey and webinar series are two examples of those already leading the way. My hope is that as practitioners digest these materials and the future publications that will certainly follow, they keep each of these student groups front of mind. If states and institutions hope to serve the economic and societal needs of the country in the coming months, they will need to be student-ready for all three.

So if, like me, you are eager to find essential ways to contribute as a "non-essential worker," I hope you'll join me in looking forward and continue working with unwavering resolve toward a more equitable and student-ready world.



Sarah Ancel
Founder & CEO

RISING SENIORS



No spring sports, no prom and potentially no graduation ceremony – these are devastating blows to students who have been looking forward to the final semester of their senior year with anticipation. They are also dealing with the stress of a worldwide health crisis, watching it unfold on social media. A friend, relative or they themselves may be sick, and they may have an essential job in a grocery store or at a fast food restaurant. This group of students is, undoubtedly, having one of the most unusual experiences in our nation's history – finishing high school at home. *This doesn't mean, however, that they aren't "college-ready."*

PERSISTENT CHALLENGES

When new students enter our colleges and universities, they are met with well-intentioned efforts to ensure they are ready for the rigors of the college curriculum, particularly in the core areas of math and English. This is especially true for students who attend open-access and community colleges. They are screened for readiness and, traditionally, those deemed "underprepared" have been enrolled in multi-course sequences of remediation. Multiple research studies have shown this process to be inequitable. Standardized placement tests are not predictive of academic success, and they result in underrepresented students, specifically Black students, being placed in remediation at a higher rate. Additionally, students placed in remediation have a high probability of success in college-level courses, but often never make it there – dropping out before completing their assigned gauntlet of remedial courses.

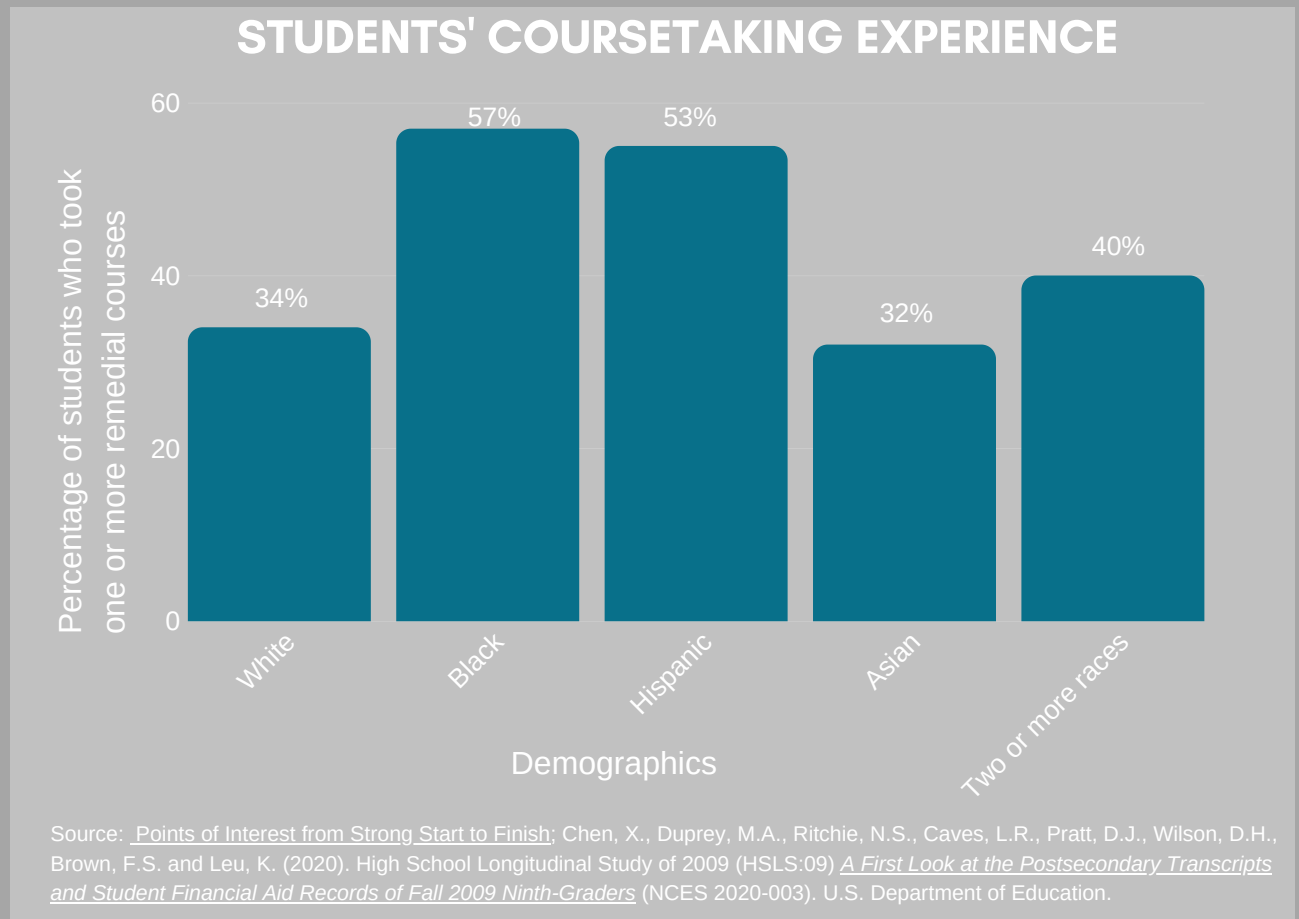


Fortunately, these systems have been in an active state of reform for over a decade. Colleges are now looking at multiple placement measures, which prioritize high school GPA over other placement screening tools, to more accurately evaluate the preparedness levels of incoming students. The placement process is increasingly being used to pinpoint which students need extra support in college-level courses, not to identify who is barred from taking them. These reforms are on the cusp of becoming the new norm across the country and have the potential to help millions of students walk across the graduation stage who otherwise might have just walked away.

POTENTIAL PITFALL: REMEDIATION RELAPSE

High school instruction has been disrupted by the pandemic. It is reasonable for those concerned with students' learning outcomes – from parents to high school principals to future college professors – to question the quality of learning in this unorthodox semester. These questions are nearly impossible to definitively answer when traditional measurements of learning, specifically letter grades and standardized test scores, will be delayed or nonexistent for many students. Colleges' own testing and evaluation processes will also be altered if on-campus summer orientations are cancelled or moved to a virtual environment.

All of these anomalies leave higher education without the standard tools for admitting students and placing them in their first college courses. Institutions might choose to trust that the learning occurred even if they can't prove it in the typical ways. Or, they will let their concerns about student preparedness lead to a “remedial relapse” in higher education.



IF WE AREN'T STUDENT-READY...

Faculty and administrators who may already have some skepticism about the validity of high school GPAs could become even more doubtful, knowing that rising seniors spent half of the previous semester in an eLearning environment or were allowed to graduate early. ACT and SAT scores may be delayed, or students may opt out of taking these tests due to financial hardship, time constraints or lack of availability. If admissions policies do not adapt, millions of students will be unable to attend their best-fit institutions.



Equally concerning, opinions on the accuracy or lack of placement measures could cause institutions to retreat back to old, flawed processes that over-place students, particularly students of color, in remediation. If institutions face an influx of students who are deemed underprepared, they could resort to reopening or expanding stand-alone remedial courses that far too often lead students to exit higher education with a lot of debt and no degree.

LEADING THE WAY



The University of California announced adjustments to admissions requirements, recognizing the barriers students and their families face as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. The measures include suspension of letter grade and standardized testing requirements for academic classes taken in winter, spring or summer terms of 2020. Students will also have flexibility in meeting registration, deposit and transcript deadlines. These actions will not lower standards, but will ensure that disruptions caused by the pandemic don't threaten students' prospects.

TO BE STUDENT-READY:

Institutions should:

- Suspend the use of standardized tests for admissions and widely publicize the change to students and families.
- Honor admissions offers regardless of final transcript grades or credit/no credit designations.
- Place students directly into college-level courses. Use multiple measures placement with an emphasis on high school GPA to determine who needs additional support in those courses. If no GPA is available, rely on students' self-reported grades.
- Increase the number of corequisite support courses in mathematics and English. Prohibit the re-establishment or expansion of stand-alone developmental courses.

States should:

- Strengthen their developmental education policies by including multiple measures for placement and aggressively phasing out stand-alone developmental courses.
- Ensure state outcomes-based funding formulas reward gateway course completion and de-incentivize stand-alone developmental education.
- Collect and publicize real-time data, disaggregated by race and region, about placement and outcomes of students in this cohort.

CURRENT STUDENTS



At some point, life will get in the way for most students in higher education. Rarely does life get in the way for ALL students at the same time, as it has this semester. Students who may have benefitted from in-person lectures and study groups before are now navigating the unfamiliar world of distance learning. They may not own a computer or have access to WiFi or a printer at home. They may be unexpectedly unemployed, losing income that helps to pay for their tuition and fees. Add to these myriad issues the possibility that students may be home-schooling children, caring for ill loved ones or sick themselves. *Under these extreme circumstances, students' academic performance may suffer, but that shouldn't mean the end of their college dreams.*

PERSISTENT CHALLENGES

Every part of the higher education system, from the federal government to individual campuses, has policies and procedures that are used to ensure students are learning and progressing. These policies provide a quality control mechanism for the field to prevent fraud or inefficient allocation of resources. At the same time, they are not designed to account for life circumstances. A student who has to drop all of their courses because of illness or emergency typically finds the process to re-enroll and secure financial aid to be filled with struggles, even more so if they still owe a balance on their bursar account.

POTENTIAL PITFALL: PENALIZING POLICIES

The academic, economic and health impacts of the pandemic will almost certainly lead to an unusually high number of mid-semester withdrawals, course failures and outstanding bursar balances from Spring 2020, all of which have the potential to trigger a policy mechanism that automatically prevents re-enrollment in the future.

Some of these policies are federal, most notably Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) guidelines for Pell grants and student loans. While there has already been some amendment to these federal regulations, state and institutional policy also has the potential to restrict or prevent students from continuing their college journey. States and institutions could wait to assess the potential fallout. Or, they could use their authority to move quickly and ensure maximum flexibility for students in the policies they control.

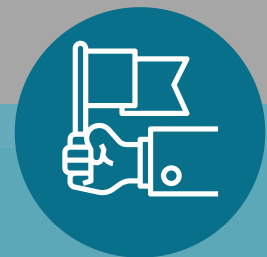


IF WE AREN'T STUDENT-READY...

Without swift policy and process change in Summer 2020, many students who have been affected by this pandemic will have to navigate one or more of these policies, making it difficult for them to re-enroll. If “special circumstance” exceptions or appeals exist in the policy, students who pursue them will likely find themselves in a long queue with hundreds or thousands of others needing the same consideration.

The processes for handling these kinds of case-specific requests are typically very labor-intensive and rely on individual judgment calls. That fact has two key implications: First, these processes are not easily scalable, which means institutions can quickly find themselves understaffed and overwhelmed by the unusually high case volume. Second, without extreme clarity and consistency around how decisions are made, implicit bias could lead to some students being held to an impossibly high standard, while others are given the benefit of the doubt.

LEADING THE WAY



The West Virginia Higher Education Commission and Council for Community and Technical College System has voted to provide students with greater flexibility in accessing and renewing state financial aid programs. Since students have to adjust to a different delivery method of classroom instruction, the Commission suspended GPA requirements to renew multiple scholarships.

TO BE STUDENT-READY:

Colleges and universities should:

- Waive financial holds for students with unpaid bursar balances. Allow them to re-enroll next semester and pay the balance in installments.
- Examine their Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) policy and criteria for academic and financial holds. Modify them to the fullest extent possible to automatically allow students to re-enroll and access financial aid.
- Where standard policy cannot automatically handle such cases, develop a highly visible and streamlined appeals process.
- Add staff to the appeals process and provide mandatory implicit bias training.
- Establish or expand emergency aid programs to help students with short-term financial needs. Be broad in the definition of which students can benefit and the items that can be covered and expedite the application and award processes.

States should:

- Decouple their state financial aid eligibility from the federal government's.
- Temporarily revise or suspend any credit completion or GPA requirements for renewal of state scholarships.
- Provide block grants to institutions to administer emergency aid programs.

UNEMPLOYED OR FURLOUGHED WORKERS



Lost profits, lost wages and lost jobs – the economic shock waves of this health crisis will be felt intensely by business owners and their employees. The vast majority of unemployed and furloughed workers who enroll in institutions to earn degrees or credentials won't fit the mold of a "traditional" student. They will be older, more diverse and will likely have a more complex set of responsibilities – spouses, children and mortgages. They might be first-time students or returning adult students who are deciding to give college another chance after dropping out last year or long ago. *These students will still need to provide for their families through part-time or temporary work, but that shouldn't mean a longer or more difficult path to a credential.*

PERSISTENT CHALLENGES

Very few of our higher education institutions were built with the needs of older students and students of color in mind. Certain policies and processes seem antiquated, illogical or inequitable if we view them through these students' eyes. Despite efforts around diversity and inclusion, campus culture is still evolving to be more reflective of the increased number of adult students and students of color.



A variety of things signal to these students that this experience was not designed for them, from class times that cluster between 10 am and 3 pm to faculty and staff that are less diverse than the student body. It is not surprising that their graduation rates are lower, especially for those students in notoriously inefficient part-time schedules.

POTENTIAL PITFALL: SCALING SYSTEM FAILURE

The challenges for adults and students of color on our campuses are not new and are definitely not caused by the pandemic. What is new is how prevalent these so-called “non-traditional” students will be in our virtual and in-person classrooms. Those affected economically by the pandemic will be older than the typical college student but also likely be more racially diverse. In a typical economic downturn, Black and LatinX workers are harder-hit, and the early numbers point to the same trend in 2020. This particular crisis exposes another type of privilege that is disproportionately enjoyed by white Americans – jobs that can be performed remotely. Fewer Black and LatinX workers have these kind of jobs, thus making it more likely they will be laid off or furloughed during the pandemic.

With record unemployment claims and the expectation that those numbers will continue to grow, higher education has the opportunity to attract a lot of the recently unemployed to finish credentials they started long ago or facilitate a full career change.

They may need to provide for their families through part-time or temporary work. Still, they will have no time to waste en route to their degree. Their future livelihood and that of their families will depend on their ability to get a quality credential and move toward their desired field of work quickly.

Traditional higher education structures have often led to the exact opposite outcome – students with extended time to degree or no degree at all. As we expect to serve more older students and students of color, placing more students into an unchanged structure will further exacerbate the inequitable effects of the pandemic, rather than help to solve them. Institutions could reorient to serve these students. Or, they could welcome them into a system that's likely to fail them.

61%

A **majority** of Americans already have lost jobs, income, or work hours.



1 in 3 Americans (34%) believe they would need more education or training to replace a lost job with one that pays a similar wage or salary.

64%

Of those who believe they need more education or training, **nearly two-thirds** would look for a job in a different career field.

IF WE AREN'T STUDENT-READY...

Students who have previous college credit could provide their transcript only to discover that most of their credits won't transfer or are "expired" – a policy rooted in the presumption that if students learned something too many years ago, they no longer know it.

It could also be the case that students enter with substantial amount of college-level, credit-worthy knowledge from workforce experience or military certifications and the institution neglects to tell them they can have it evaluated for credit. Our adult students and unemployed workers may be advised into a part-time schedule without knowing that graduation is half a decade away. They may be placed in stand-alone developmental courses that extend their time and cost to degree. They may not be able to access financial aid because they have an unpaid federal student loan or because they graduated high school more than two years ago.

If we are not ready for them, they may not be able to come back at all. Those who do may experience so much frustration that they choose to leave the moment their job comes back or their dreams seem too far away.



LEADING THE WAY

MN Reconnect, in partnership with Minnesota State Colleges and Universities and with support from Lumina Foundation, supports adult learners with specialized advising from a “navigator” who connects them with available resources such as childcare services.

Additionally, students enrolled in a MN Reconnect institution are eligible to apply for a scholarship of up to \$1,000 which, in addition to federal and state grants, can help pay for tuition, books or assist with childcare or transportation costs.

TO BE STUDENT-READY:

Colleges and universities should:

- Identify all the ways under current policy that a student's previous credits could be excluded. Revise any policy that can be made more generous without impacting academic rigor or quality standards, therefore articulating as many previous college credits possible to the respective degree or credential.
- Establish or enhance policy to allow students to receive credit for prior learning. Provide every adult student with a standard process and start-to-finish guidance to help them maximize the credit they receive and shorten their path to graduation.

- Implement an accelerated term structure that allows students to finish faster, even if they can only take one or two courses at a time.
- Avoid placing students in stand-alone developmental education courses. Deploy a corequisite model instead for adults who may need additional support to succeed in college-level math and English courses. (*See also Rising Seniors.*)

States should:

- Review their financial aid programs to ensure funding is accessible to adult students. Remove requirements that students enroll within a certain number of years after high school and eligibility clocks that keep ticking even if a student has stopped out.
- Allow state financial aid to pay costs associated with credit for prior learning.
- Provide easy-to-understand information about career opportunities and offer support to help prospective students navigate educational options.



TAKING THE NEXT STEP

GET ORGANIZED

Make sure the right people are at the table and that they focus on both immediate and longer-term issues.

Does your state have an emergency response leadership team? Is higher education represented?

- ✓ If so, higher education representatives should engage SHEEO agency staff, institutions, representatives from social support networks, philanthropies and others to develop a concrete, forward-focused policy agenda that can be brought to the emergency response team.
- ✓ If not, state higher education executive officers can still develop the recommended policy agenda and bring it to the Governor or state response team for consideration.

Does each institution have an emergency response team? Are all areas of institutional leadership and management included?

- ✓ If so, ensure that conversations extend focus beyond just the most immediate issues to plan for the issues that will arise in coming months.
- ✓ If not, create or expand the response team to include and/or actively solicit input from faculty, student services professionals, staff from financial aid, bursar, and the registrar, librarians, maintenance workers, and students themselves.
- ✓ Either way, root discussions in how the institution will be ready for each of the three student groups discussed in this report.

TAKING THE NEXT STEP

GET STARTED

Take swift action to put in place the most critical measures.

Board of Governors and Administration:

- ✓ Review admissions policies and make swift adjustments that will benefit students.
- ✓ Reprioritize budgets to carve out funds to create or expand emergency aid programs.
- ✓ Make plans to add an accelerated term structure to accommodate students who must quickly get back into the workplace.

Faculty:

- ✓ Create a plan for faculty senate to expedite the adoption of curricular adjustments and/or policy revisions necessary in response to the pandemic.
- ✓ Design a multiple measures placement policy and immediately implement it.
- ✓ Design and scale corequisite courses to increase student success in gateway math and English courses.

Student Services:

- ✓ Identify all appeals and special exceptions processes that the institution offers and assess staffing and capacity. Plan for high volume.
- ✓ Actively monitor new or revised policies and procedures. Immediately inform all front-line staff and develop a comprehensive plan to communicate these changes to students.
- ✓ Inventory currently approved opportunities for prior learning assessments and incorporate this information in new student orientation.

TAKING THE NEXT STEP

State Policy Staff:

- ✓ Review financial aid program rules and requirements and ensure each of the three populations discussed in this report can easily access funds. Decouple eligibility from federal eligibility if necessary.
- ✓ Reach out to other states with multiple measures placement policies, get a copy of their language and customize it for your state.
- ✓ Explore and implement a way for state financial aid to pay for credits for prior learning.



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Student-Ready Strategies (SRS) is a consulting and technical assistance organization that believes all students can succeed and supports state, regional and institutional efforts to ensure they do. SRS partners, plans and problem-solves with colleges and universities as they evolve to ensure the success of diverse students with complex lives. Learn more at studentreadystrategies.com.