

**Data Plan: College Enrollment and Non-traditional Degree Path Awareness**

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**Context:**

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the state of college enrollments in the United States has suffered a noted, and continuing loss. When faced with economic, socio-economic, and personal strife, students are delaying their higher education, and in doing so, increasing the likelihood of leaving it all together. In this paper, we'll lay out a plan to understand more about the current state of enrollments, as well measure our student's awareness of 'non-traditional', and often more affordable degree programs. Using the data, we can begin to formulate an understanding and solution to a generations sinking investment in higher education.

For this context, I will define traditional 4-year degrees as any enrollment at a college or university intending to result in a bachelor's degree after approximately 4 years. I will therefore define non-traditional paths as:

- Associates degree programs at community colleges (that can be transferred to larger institutions)
- Certificate programs
- Online/Hybrid programs

The goal of this data plan and subsequent inquiries and action plans is to approach the next chapter of education in the US in a more economically sustainable way. The focus of this data plan is therefore split between collecting a foundational understanding of enrollment, while also assessing the current student knowledge of college alternatives that they may find more compatible with work, and ultimately more affordable.

## Approach:

This data plan can be defined as Action Research. I use this distinction because the concept was triggered by both the problem of an economically unsustainable culture of higher ed in the US, as well as the present reality of decreased enrollments. If our ultimate goal then is to prevent a dramatic decline in the level of education in our population, we need to create a solution to unattainable education, and make it more achievable to enroll after college. Action Research is defined as “hypotheses/research questions derive from more general theoretical propositions”( Mc Millan & Wergin, 1998). At the moment, I am seeking to understand and validate the general theoretical proposition that an increased understanding of flexible degree paths may increase college enrollment in the US.

The next steps after gathering the data around enrollment decline (as well as non-traditional degree path literacy) are to analyze the collected data and attempt to validate a causal relationship between enrollment declines, and a lack of understanding around the flexibility that college can, in reality, present in it’s modern iteration. Traditional, is not a term used lightly, as we’re attempting to learn more about how the traditional mindset around 4-year, in-person universities may be stifling sustainable college enrollment for our nation’s youth.

## Questions:

To begin to gather and assess this date, we will include the follow inquiries and strategies of inquiry.

Category of Inquiry	Question	Medium	Audience and Data Collection Plan
Enrollment Patterns	How has the enrollment in a college or university changed since the Spring of 2019?	Collected data from available state and private institutions around publicly available enrollment numbers	The data will assess the actions of HS seniors, and will not need to be collected, but rather coded and analyzed based on existing research.

Category of Inquiry	Question	Medium	Audience and Data Collection Plan
Non-traditional Degree Path Awareness	<p>Indicate the degree to which you considered the following, 1 being not at all 10 being a great deal:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enrolling in a 4-year degree program at a University or College</li> <li>• Enrolling in an online degree program</li> <li>• Exploring Certificate programs, rather than a full degree</li> <li>• Not pursuing my studies at this time</li> </ul>	Survey Question, Likert Scale.	This survey will be administered to HS seniors at the end of their academic school year over a one-month period in the state of Massachusetts. The survey will be emailed to students, or texted if possible. The format will mimic the satisfaction surveys sent out by companies like Grubhub following restaurant orders—quick and easy!

### Data Collection Plan:

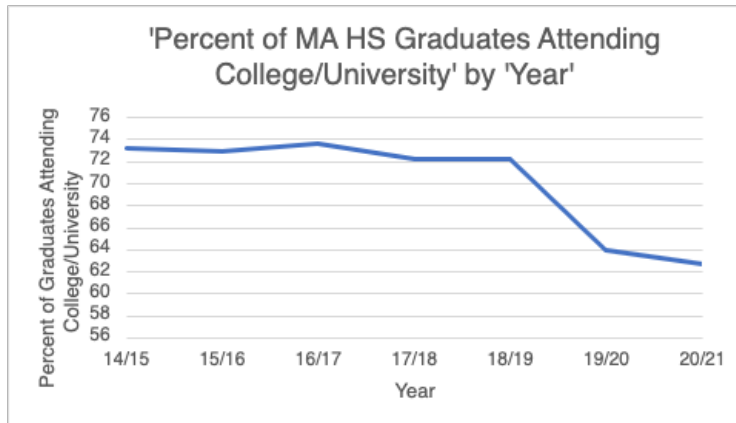
In addition to the strategies outlined above, our data will be coded and presented in excel to allow for the clearest visuals and potentiality for uncovering a causal relationship in play.

Most importantly, we will also leverage the racial and ethnic distribution provided to us by the enrollment data within the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. A full mockup of visualizations will seek to understand if the decrease in enrollment is disproportionately effecting our communities of color.

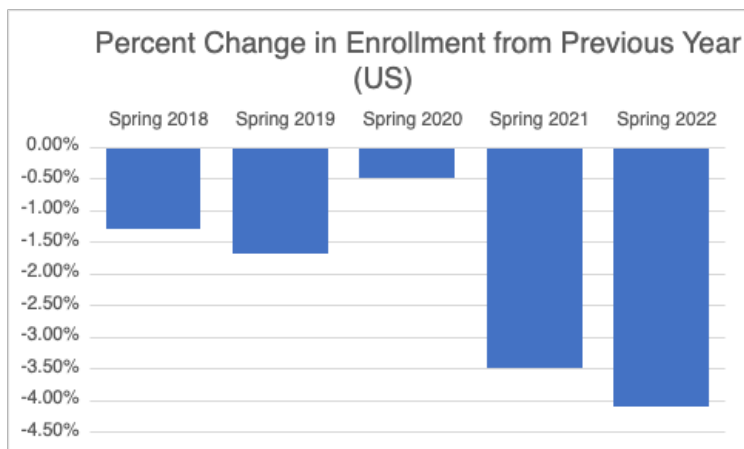
The data collection initiated in this study with the survey questions above, will also feature the standard introductory request for demographic identifiers. We will then have the ability to understand if minority communities are properly equipped with the information needed to navigate affordable, and flexible education opportunities. This information and context will be essential to creating a proportionate, and action-based treatment plan for anemic enrollments and education-finance literacy.

### Visualization Plan:

The below examples are early renderings of the foundational enrollment knowledge discussed above. It is particularly alarming to note the enrollment decline in both models following the beginning of the pandemic.



Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022



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## References

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