

# WT 125 White Paper

## Enrollment in Higher Education: Challenges and Management

### Abstract:

The landscape of higher education continues to be rapidly shifting. While institutions have certainly changed, the drastic and dire predictions of the past 20 years have largely not come true. Online education has had the most significant impact on higher education, although traditional campuses and course delivery have remained. Meanwhile, a transformation in student bodies has been occurring. Huge growth has occurred in minority students as a proportion of the population, more and more first generation students are on campuses than ever before, and the average age of students has continued to grow older. More students than ever before are starting in 2-year colleges in response to the growing cost of higher education. The change in student makeup will require change in higher education to serve their needs. This paper describes in more detail these changes, and suggests a path forward for West Texas A&M that will grow its service to transfer and graduate students.

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### Introduction:

A recent Gallup poll found that only 44 percent of Americans believe a college education is very important. At the same time that perception is changing, demographic shifts in the traditional college going age groups have changed, with flat or declining numbers in every region of the country except the deep south and the southwest. The types of students graduating from high school has shifted dramatically. The long foretold day of a "majority minority" population is now making its way through high schools nationwide, and for the first time, in 2018, the majority of students under the age of 18 are minority, with Hispanic and Latino students making up the largest portion of those students. The largest demographic of students graduating from high schools have parents that did not go to college, and are challenged to pay for the growing cost of higher education (Dennis, 2016).

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We are fortunate to be in a state that still has a growing base of traditional aged college going students, albeit the demographic shift described above on a national scale has been the reality in Texas for over a decade. WTAMU became a Hispanic Serving Institution in 2015. WTAMU would be unwise to feel assured of continued enrollment growth due to our geography alone. As other institutions become more and more challenged to fill their class seats, competition will increase and our local students will be recruited to various regions of the country. If higher education, and WTAMU, fails to address the growing sentiments of discontent with higher education and its value, then decline is inevitable.

There is good news in the trends in higher education. In response to the cost increases in higher education that has been unabated since the 1990's, more and more students are choosing alternative routes to a baccalaureate degree than a high school to a four year university path. While that path still provides the most robust and fulfilling college going experience, a baccalaureate degree can be obtained, at a much lower cost, by gathering credits through dual credit in high school, community colleges, and from various online and in person options. More students are enrolled in Texas 2-year colleges than in 4-year colleges, by about 100,000 students (Texas Higher Education Coordination Board, Fall 2016). Over 80% of students who start at a 2-year college express an intent to transfer, but only about 20% do. This statistic represents a huge potential for enrollment at 4-year colleges by tapping into the transfer market and facilitating success for these students.

Another growth opportunity exists in graduate programs. Americans with a baccalaureate degree have an unemployment rate half that of those with a high school diploma, and unemployment is almost nonexistent for those with a masters, doctoral or professional degree. The earnings picture is just as compelling. The median income for males age 25-34 in 2015 was \$33,000. That number jumps to \$54,700 for males with a bachelors degree, and \$64,600 for those with a masters or higher. Those are substantive differences in medians. (The median income for females is consistently about \$10,000 less than males at every educational category). (The Condition of Education Report, 2016). Many students choosing an alternate path through education will reach a point in their career where this value becomes apparent, and drawing students back into the education arena as graduate students represents an ongoing growth opportunity for WTAMU.

This paper will address the topics presented above, in addition to a discussion of the challenges and opportunities that today's technologies present in the enrollment world. Technology has impacted every industry and higher education is no different. Students

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have access to and an expectation for instant and accurate information, quick and informal communication, and responsiveness to their ever changing needs. Technology both fosters those expectations, and it empowers us to be responsive to them. The availability of data exists in ways that are new and also evolving quickly and powerfully. WTAMU must situate itself to be innovative or it will not be able to capture and educate the workforce that the future of the Texas Panhandle demands.

## **Background:**

It is important for the future of West Texas A&M and the economy of the Texas Panhandle that WTAMU continue to grow. The recent surge in enrollment has come largely on the back of online and graduate students, with the growth in resident undergraduate enrollment demonstrating/showing/trending/a slow to moderate growth pattern over the past five years, with a slight downturn in the fall of 2017. WTAMU can reach an enrollment of 15,000 students over the next 10-15 years, but it will not be through recruitment of larger and larger freshmen classes. Growth must come in three forms; 1) Transfer students, 2) Graduate students, and 3) Retaining and graduating a higher percentage of the traditional undergraduates. We must be willing to change the way we think about students and about higher education.

The impact of failure to capitalize on these opportunities cannot be overstated. The Panhandle is a geographic area set apart from the technology and business core of the state. It has its unique economy, which while diversifying, is still largely dominated by agriculture and energy. The population of the Panhandle is growing slowly, and the educational attainment of the citizens of the panhandle is lower than most other parts of the state. West Texas A&M owns the responsibility for the higher educational attainment of the Panhandle resting squarely on her shoulders, or not only will the institution suffer, but so will the entire region.

Over the course of the next 20 years West Texas A&M will evolve into a new student body which will look different. No one can predict with accuracy what the specific numbers of any types of students will be in 2035, but it is clear that the following truths will characterize the classes of the future:

- Total enrollment will include a larger percentage of students who enter the institution as a transfer student.
- Graduate students will make up a larger percentage of the student body, and most of them will be in online programs and will be working adults.
- Undergraduate enrollment will grow only moderately, but will be made up of students with a higher academic profile.

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- Enrollment of minority and first generation students will continue to rise.

Evident in these changes in the student body is the need for the university to adapt in every facet to support student success.

## **Impacts:**

### *Traditional Students*

Attracting, enrolling and meeting the needs of incoming freshmen is a consistent process. As a rite of passage, going to college has remained a coming-of-age experience, and while students' preferences may shift, their desire to find a good institutional fit has been constant. Many of those students are seeking the on-campus four-year college experience, and the University is seeking a cohort of students to maintain the vitality and tradition of campus life. Building a strong freshmen class that preserves the four-year college experience is beneficial both for the student and for the University and should remain a cornerstone of West Texas A&M University's plan for growth.

Those students who choose the four-year on-campus experience have benefits that an online student or a transfer student will not experience. A four-year experience provides students an opportunity to mature and prepare "for the working world" by putting them into situations that "turn adolescents into young adults" (Selingo, 2013). Living with roommates, setting their own schedules and generally practicing adult-like behaviors gives young people a safety net for maturing. Students on the four-year path have access to face-to-face faculty mentors. At residential hall events and academic club meetings, on-campus students build relationships with peers who will grow into colleagues, future business partners, even potential spouses. Another element of the four-year experience is experiential learning. Experiential learning can be done by researching alongside faculty, providing service to the community or studying abroad (Selingo, 2013).

Students aren't the only beneficiaries of the four-year on-campus model. While students are gaining maturity, their youthful energy feeds campus life and fuels the traditions that give a university its identity. With four years to bond with the institution, develop leadership skills and to develop their academic prowess, these students internalize the key values of their alma mater and become the future distinguished alumni, donors and supporters.

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Because the student population of West Texas A&M University is largely first-generation and, according to research by The College Board, will be less academically prepared with each class, consideration must be given to the student support structures. Taken with the fact that students reserve their right to take their business elsewhere (or nowhere) if they are unhappy with any element of their experience, and retention efforts are even more critical.

### *Transfer Students*

While the life-changing power of higher education seems to be widely accepted, more and more families are choosing institutions, at least for part of a student's college career, that allow them to lower their initial costs. Enter the widely variable population of transfer students. While there are challenges in recruiting and enrolling transfer students, even the "simple" task of defining a transfer student can be complicated, the payoff for creating a successful transfer plan is considerable. Transfer students, especially those who have earned their associate's degrees, have proven their academic preparedness. Associates degree holders are more likely to earn their bachelor's degrees. They can begin their time at the University in upper-level courses and have already learned to negotiate the climate of higher education. The University must help transfer students navigate the transfer process without complication and provide academic advising to create a pathway to degree completion.

There seems to be no argument that transfer students are valuable to the institution. However, recruiting transfer students poses challenges. Often they choose to remain anonymous until the point of application. Ultimately, the one-size-fits-all approach will not fit the nebulous, unique transfer population because there are so many categories of transfer students. To reach them, money must be invested in digital marketing to target community college campuses and to develop specific transfer communication plans with a transfer "voice" that acknowledges transfer students' varied needs and preparation. Furthermore, if the transfer population is truly going to feel at home at West Texas A&M University, a greater acceptance of transfer students must permeate campus from admissions to advising to student life and academics. It's easy to dismiss transfer students because they don't attend events or seem to make the effort to get involved on campus; however, students just have different needs and desires for their university experience. As a community, WTAMU will have to adjust to meet those needs—for childcare, for alternate class times, for course availability, for academic advising.

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These challenges cannot be accomplished in a piecemeal approach; rethinking student services and how they can be adjusted to serve all students, not just residential freshmen, will be the only way to develop a true relationship with transfer students to help them reach their academic goals while bolstering the University community.

In order to achieve such a symbiotic relationship between University and student in a time of shrinking population in the Texas Panhandle and loss of faith in the value of a college education, there must be coordinated recruitment and retention efforts by enrollment management and academics. The goal should be to reach and maintain a critical mass of around 1500 freshmen each fall while attracting the proven academic talents of transfer students. This goal must be met by offering academic programs and advising students seek, by strategically increasing selectivity and diversity within the freshman class and by keeping in mind the factors that influence all students' decisions to enroll. Highest among students' deciding factors are cost, financial aid and academic reputation (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017). West Texas A&M University has historically been an affordable institution; increasing costs beyond students' ability to pay will certainly issue in an era of decline, so every effort must be made to keep costs low and to communicate those efforts to families. Furthermore, the University's commitment to academic quality must be enhanced and advertised. Students must have confidence that they will have access both to the classes they need when they need them and to the faculty who are paramount to students' learning.

## *Graduate Students*

Graduate Enrollment at West Texas A&M University currently constitutes over 25% of the total enrollment at the university. Graduate numbers have grown tremendously since Fall 2012. In Fall 2012, graduate enrollment was 1,366 while in Fall 2017 enrollment had risen to 2,581. Much of this growth has been in the College of Business and in online courses. Approximately 98% of graduate students are taking all online courses.

The quality of online courses will be critical in serving this diverse population who may never even step foot on campus until graduation. According to Watson, Bishop, & Ferdinand-James, online graduate students want instructors to ". . . 1) be available and responsive to students, 2) engage/interact with students, 3) provide prompt feedback, 4) foster interaction/communication among students and instructor, 5) provide expectations, 6) provide learning guidance, 7) organize course, 8) provide meaningful coursework, 9) provide synchronous sessions, and 10) use various instructional methods." The University will be challenged to have continuous monitoring and quality

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controls in place to ensure faculty teaching online courses have the resources and training to create content that meets the needs of students while delivering quality content supporting the learning process. Programs such as “Quality Matters” can provide resources for review, improvement and certification of quality.

## *Student Debt*

Student debt is a current hot topic throughout the country. Return on investment is critical to today’s students and it is important that the university be able to document and show that there is value in investing the time and money to earn a masters or doctoral degree. While the potential for increased earnings varies by occupation, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there is a \$12,000/year earnings difference between those who have earned a bachelor’s degree and those with a master’s (Torpey & Terrell, 2015). Investment in a higher level of educational attainment also provides some insurance against the threat of unemployment when the economy is faced with a recession.

## *Technology*

Technology will continue to play a huge roll in our everyday lives. From the days where home computers were almost nonexistent to bag phones in cars being all the rage, technology continues to advance at lightning fast speeds and the world of higher education is no exception. According to World Wide Learn the first full online program began in 1981 at the Western Behavioral Schiences Institue’s School of Management and Strategic Studies (Miller, 2014). Online education has grown from a single online program to entire institutions of higher education that operates solely online and Gen Z will continue to push the boundaries on learning. Gen Z, also known as the “digital generation” is the generation who has grown up fully immersed in the online world (Kozinsky, 2017). With information at the touch of their fingers at home, at woek, in the car or on the beach, they view their education no differently than everyday life.

“Gen Z-ers tend to embrace social learning environments, where they can be hands-on and directly involved in the learning process” (Kozinsky, 2017). This is a vastly different learning style than their baby boomer and Gen X predecessors. The day of teachers lecturing to a test while students vigorously take notes are gone with no signs of ever returning thus changing the stage of learning in higher education forever. Studies show that more than half of Gen Z generation learn by doing, as compared to seeing/listening.

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In Kozinsky (2017), Gen Z

expect[s] that these learning tools be available on-demand and with low barriers to access. For them, learning isn't limited to just the classroom; it's something that can take place at anytime, anywhere.... For them, technology has always been a fully integrated experience into every part of their lives. And they don't think education should be any different. They believe they should be able to seamlessly connect academic experiences to personal experiences through these same tools.

As we look forward to 2035 we know that technology will continue to play a vital role in higher education and we as an institution must continue to find ways to be at the forefront. Online education in 2017 is vastly different than it was five years ago and almost unrecognizable to where it began in 1981.

The drive for a seamless learning experience has presented a type of cross roads to higher education. The push for all online degrees that allow instant/constant access to learning materials coupled with the desire for hands on learning; can leave those of us in higher education grasping for a technology or online solution that will allow or accommodate both. "If education is viewed as a vehicle for advancing the global economy, then it must be the North Star that guides societies to the next big thing, illuminating new ideas that solve pressing challenges and creating opportunities to shape a better future. To achieve this, WTAMU will not only need to recruit incoming classes; freshman, transfer and graduate both traditional on campus and online, that can shape this direction but also employ faculty willing to lead the way and embrace what the current generation of students needs to excel. "With students inventing, iterating, and collaborating regularly, instructors have been transplanted from their position as "sage on the stage" to "guide on the side"... Programs that recognize and scale positive teaching practices are a necessity. (Adams et al, 2017).

Traditionally speaking, some institutions of higher education have not always been at the forefront of new technology and many take years for things to trickle down or take hold as current practice. Redesigned learning spaces, blending learning designs, continuous updates to the IT infrastructure and the appropriate funding to complete these tasks will be crucial to WT's continued success from now through 2035.

## *Community Impacts*

WTAMU is a critical piece of the Canyon-Amarillo economy, and must continue to be so in the future. Changing enrollment will impact the relationship in a variety of ways.

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WTAMU is committed to continuing a robust residential educational experience for a core of traditional students. Those students remain connected to a campus living experience, and will also spend time in the surrounding communities. The city of Canyon has an opportunity to capture a larger percentage of these students' entertainment and living expenses as it continues to provide attractive venues for them. This benefits students by facilitating a close-knit living-learning community that extends throughout and beyond the limits of the campus.

As more and more transfer and graduate students are attracted, some will add to and enhance the on campus living experience. However, upper-class and graduate students traditionally live off campus in greater numbers, meaning demand for local housing, both in Canyon and Amarillo, will increase as enrollment increases. Further, more and more of them will have families and need employment, furthering the potential economic impact of these students.

## *Impacts on University Management*

Changing the nature of the student body will impact the university profoundly and deeply. Two particular and foreseeable changes are worthy of discussion in this paper, 1) Administrative changes needed to support the strategic plan; 2) Academic changes needed to support students.

Administratively, the recruiting and admissions staff must change and scale itself to drive the new strategic directions of the plan. The current operation is built to recruit traditional freshmen out of high school. Transfer and graduate students have a very different decision path when choosing an institution. The recruiting function must be responsive to student needs, speedy, accurate, and service oriented. WTAMU must have staff empowered to provide students the information they need, when they need it, so that we can facilitate the decision to attend at the time they are ready to make a decision. Transfer and graduate students typically choose based on a smaller number of factors than freshmen. They will be focused on particular academic programs, they need convenience, and a cost structure that is clear. WTAMU must be prepared to provide those to ease the pathway into the university. We must also further shift resources and staffing to serve the needs of these new students. Improving our services to meet these needs will improve service for all.

Academically, a greater number of upperclass students changes the demands on class loads and faculty. Fewer students taking core curriculum and more taking upper level courses will require a nimble and responsive academic administration in order to

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provide the classes students need, when they need them, in order to avoid delaying graduation. The university may be challenged to hire qualified faculty and must plan ahead to meet the academic demands of the future students. Online delivery, which continues to grow and which already makes up a majority of graduate hours, will continue to be a significant portion of total course hours.

## **Recommendations/Suggested Next Steps:**

West Texas A&M must include in its WT125 Strategic plan a clear vision to meet the changing needs of students today. The planks of that plan must include:

- Maintain and attract an increasingly high qualified core class of tradition, residential freshmen, who will study at WT for their entire four years and graduate.
- Attract a large number of transfer and graduate students. West Texas A&M should be a first choice transfer institution for the four local community college districts, and should create strategic pipelines from the larger state and regional districts for study in programs that make sense for WT.
- Develop graduate programs that will serve and enhance the workforce in the Panhandle.
- Grow internship programs for an increasing number of upperclass students, to benefit the students as well as increase opportunities for students to gain full time employment in the Panhandle upon graduation.
- Support the initiatives through academic and administrative changes that will facilitate the plan, including an investment in the technologies required to compete and innovate in today's enrollment market.

**Conclusion:** It is important for the future of West Texas A&M and the economy of the Texas Panhandle that WTAMU continue to grow. The recent surge in enrollment has come largely on the back of online and graduate students, with the growth in resident undergraduate enrollment demonstrating/trending a slow to moderate growth pattern over the past five years (with a slight downturn in the fall of 2017). WTAMU can reach an enrollment of 15,000 students over the next 10-15 years, but it will not be through recruitment of larger and larger freshmen classes. Growth must come in three forms; 1) Transfer students, 2) Graduate students, and 3) Retaining and graduating a higher percentage of the traditional undergraduates. We must be willing to change the way we think about students and about higher education.

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