

**Bay State College of 2020:
Sustainable Strategic Solutions**

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Abstract

Over the past decade, there has been a significant shift in the way students are approaching higher education in the United States. More students are entering institutions later in life than the traditional age, wanting more technology and flexibility, and more return on their investment. Many schools as a result of the changing demographics will need to refine and reshape their strategies for recruitment and overall function in order to stay relevant and afloat. As a for-profit institution, Bay State College has adapted to the recent economic changes in enrollment trends through their expansion and growth of online classes, increased minority recruitment, robust marketing toward adult learners, and willingness to transform and grow.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, the direction and demographics of higher education in the United States has changed quite drastically. More students are looking for convenient classes (in both times offered and method of delivery), lower costs, and practical courses for a lifelong career (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014; Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009). What once worked well for most institutions across the nation is now rapidly shifting. The needs and desires of today's students are directly shaping the future for higher education in ways they never previously have, and it will be up to each individual school to tailor their missions, programs, faculty, staff, enrollment models and more to align with today's present student needs.

In particular, Bay State College, a small private for-profit institution located in Boston, has been remarkably adept at navigating the fluctuating student body and market trends. As a for-profit, they are less selective than other traditional public or private institutions and are able to concentrate their marketing funds toward promoting career-focused programs that align with many older adult learners. Given that the students of 2020 will also be non-White, looking for more online classes, greater schedule flexibility, low-cost options, and will be older than traditional-age students (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014; Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009), Bay State College appears to have a strategic model ready to meet the challenges and needs of the college-bound students of tomorrow.

Online Education

One area where Bay State College has thrived has been in online education or distance learning. According to Van Der Werf & Sabatier, "the traditional model of college is changing, as demonstrated by the proliferation of colleges (particularly for-profit institutions), hybrid class schedules with night and weekend meetings, and, most significantly, online learning" (2009, p.

3). More students today are looking for the convenience of higher education online in order to maintain employment, reduce costs, and have a flexible schedule. According to their NEAS self-study, Bay State has seen significant online education growth within the past couple years:

Consistent with the College's mission to educate career-driven students, in the spring of 2007, the College launched its first fully online courses and over 125 students chose one of the fully online courses. From 2007 to the present, Bay State College has implemented two fully on-line programs...[and] In the fall of 2012, the College offered 215 hybrid and web-supported courses. (Bay State College, 2013, p. 34)

Their goal to marry their educational mission with the upcoming proliferation of online technology into solid online degree programs and courses was a wise decision. Given that "technology utilization represents perhaps the single most influential factor in higher education operations" (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014, p. 443), Bay State College appears to be setting themselves up for future success in this burgeoning area of educational development.

Moreover, Bay State College's online student population tends to be older, nontraditional students: "most are adult learners with 71% over the age of 25" (Bay State College, 2013, p. 74). This is largely due to the fact that "a no-frills, results-oriented education plan...appeals to older students in particular" (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009, p. 28) and they often "work while going to College and, therefore, desire scheduling flexibility in the form of more course sections" (Bay State College, 2013, p. 34). Online classes have been helpful for these types of students when they are balancing more than just typical college classes – a majority of them have jobs, family responsibilities, and other obligations. As their participation in higher education has increased, their ultimate college choices will become significantly more important" (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). Part of Bay State College's 2015 Outcomes Report includes this renewed commitment to investing in technology and "build a strong brand and long-term marketing plan with increased emphasis on adult education and online" (Bay State College, 2015, p. 17). It is clear "that

students increasingly want [online education] in higher education” (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009, p. 37), and Bay State is on target to maximize this trend.

Minority Students

Traditionally, college-bound students have been reserved for the wealthy and middle class and have been, for the most part, White non-Hispanic (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014; Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009). It is projected that Hispanics will be the fastest growing college student population as “white, non-Hispanic high school graduates are expected to decline” (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009, p. 13). As a result, many schools will have to make significant changes in their admissions and recruitment strategies, as Bay State College has done.

As of fall 2012, Bay State College exemplified “a diverse population, with 20% of students identifying as Black or African-American, 11% as Hispanic, and 7% as two or more races” (Bay State College, 2013, p. 74). This means that over 38% of the total student population identified as non-White, a true testament to the institution’s commitment to increase diversity. In addition, Bay State College’s for-profit status does “help attract more minority students” (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009, p. 30), largely because other traditional institutions are more selective and less aware of what these populations need in order to succeed. Bay State College’s acceptance rate as of 2016 was reported to be 59% (U.S. News & World Report, 2016), which is higher than other selective schools. Moreover, “in order to [continue to] ensure a diverse student population, the Admissions representatives at Bay State College who work on the “outside team” visit a variety of high schools and college fairs across the Northeast. They encourage a broad representation of students to visit the campus and begin the admissions process” (Bay State College, 2013, p. 75). Their strategic plan to generate additional outreach and help bring information to often

misinformed and underrepresented student populations will help them carry their programs into the future.

One concern that troubles Bay State College is the significant debt that minority students accrue. “For-profit colleges, in almost all cases, offer financial aid solely in the form of loans. As a result, the average graduate of a for-profit college has debt almost twice as high as graduates of any other category of college...the debt load on students is likely to be a hindrance to the growth” (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009, p. 31) of for-profits like Bay State. According to their Self-Study, Bay State College is working diligently to improve on loan default rates:

Bay State College promotes financial literacy and transparent practices. A requirement of graduation is to attend the Graduate Year Experience during which extensive one-on-one exit loan counseling is provided utilizing actual aggregate debt for each student. Once a student separates from the College, they are provided with continued personalized support and debt counseling through our own Default Prevention Coordinator and through Champion College Solutions, a third party default preventions servicer. (Bay State College, 2013, p. 74)

In addition, the College vowed to offer Financial Literacy Workshops to further increase students’ awareness of funding and payments (Bay State College, 2013). Efforts such as these are slated to forge stronger cognizance of student payment and debt responsibilities.

Non-traditional Adult Learners

Bay State College’s status as a for-profit institution has helped pave the way for this new wave of students: non-traditional older learners. For-profits are notorious for being “more nimble and pick[ing] up on trends in the marketplace more quickly” (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009, p. 30). They are able to offer career-focused programs and have historically been less selective and more adept at recognizing market shifts than traditional two- and four-year institutions. According to recent statistics, “for-profit college students are [now] predominantly working adults” (p. 29) and “will...crave personalization and convenience” (p. 9), especially when they

will likely have obligations to attend to outside of their education, and working adults are growing in numbers (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). As many admissions officers have noted in a Chronicle Research Services study, “fewer than half of the respondents think that at least 80 percent of students will be full time by 2020” (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009, p. 32). This may be in large part because “the adult student market will be the fastest-growing one in higher education for the foreseeable future” (p. 48). Adult learners want education to obtain better careers or higher-paying positions, all at their own convenience. This will be a huge potential market area for growth in the coming years.

Specifically at Bay State College, it appears that although full-time enrollment is slowly receding, there has been a steady increase from 2010 to 2013 in terms of the number of enrolled part-time students: 343 to 405 (Bay State College, 2013, p. 118). Many of these students are those working adults as previously mentioned – they are busy maintaining employment while attempting to further or begin their educations, usually online or in the evenings as those are more opportune times (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014; Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009). Especially for this population, “convenience and support are critical for success” (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009, p. 49), and Bay State College has taken notice to tailor their programs accordingly.

In addition to searching for conveniently-timed classes, they are also looking for programs that are career-focused and will answer the question many students today are wondering: “What is the return on investment in higher education for me personally, and for society in general?” (p. 29). Today’s and future students will want courses that provide a valid and profitable career path. The 2008 recession brought with it financial austerity and an influx of adults returning to the education sector to expand on their skills and knowledge. As jobs decreased, competition increased, and it was back-to-school for many of those who lost their

positions. As has always been Bay State College's mission, their academic programs were designed to initialize and sustain lifelong careers in economically-valuable areas such as business, hospitality, criminal justice, nursing and physical therapy assistant (Bay State College, 2013). In their Self-Study, it seems they delivered on their academic enrichment promise as the categories of course content, challenge, preparation of chosen field, and quality of instruction each experienced an increase in the positive response rate (p. 4). This data suggests that these adult learners were attracted to Bay State College because of the potential to receive a quality education and career preparation. As a for-profit institution, Bay State's focus on economically-sustainable programs was a clear draw for adult learners, and will likely play a role in their increased enrollment in the future.

Conclusion

In 2020, the college student population will be drastically different than in years past. Colleges as a result "must adapt to a new breed of student...[that] will demand an education on their terms and will be seeking a technology-based customized approach" (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009, p. 52). Bay State College has proven that their online education division, their recruitment of more minority students, and their career-focused program marketing toward adult learners has increased their longevity in an increasingly competitive higher education circuit. Despite these positive trends, the institution needs to work on providing financial literacy training to their students to decrease debt and work on increasing overall enrollment. Overall, Bay State College has demonstrated their ability to stay beyond today into tomorrow.

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