Acquia
EXPERIENCE DIGITAL FREEDOM

Higher Education

## *USING DATA TO BOOST ENROLLMENT IN A TRANSFORMED WORLD*

INTRODUCTION

It's no exaggeration. The world has dramatically changed, in every way possible. Lives have been upended. Priorities have shifted. And businesses of every type are rethinking how they do nearly everything.

Higher education certainly hasn't been spared the tumult. Every college and university is reconsidering the way they interact with students, alumni, staff and the community. Managing through the chaos and discovering a new normal that serves both the institution and its varied constituencies are the keys to long-term survival.
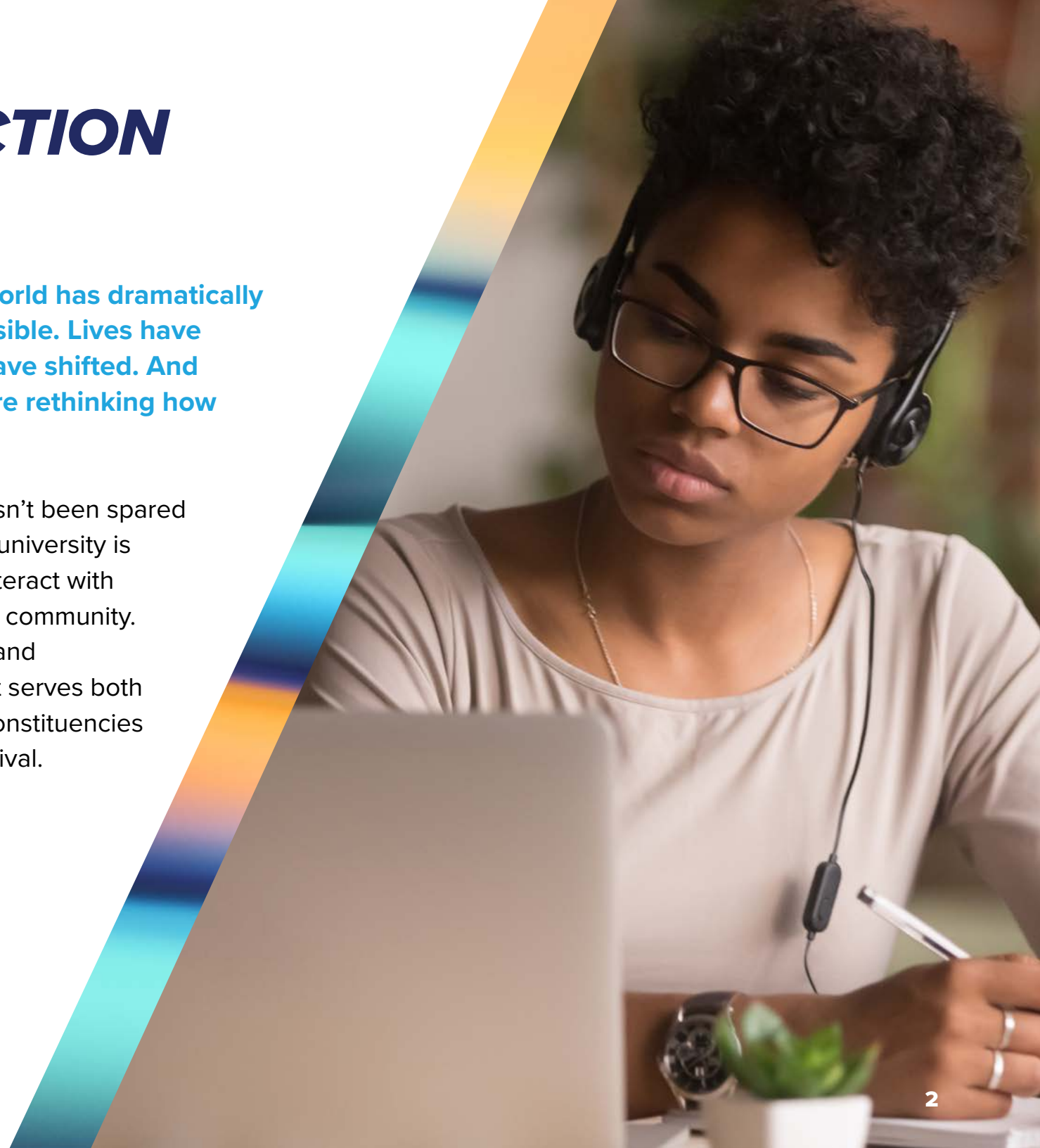
Fewer Students, Shrinking Revenues

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the primary sources of revenue for both public and private degree-granting institutions continue to be tuition and fees, followed by government grants and contracts. Every higher education institution is facing the immediate threat of a steep decline in both of those revenue streams.

Even before the pandemic struck, higher education was already experiencing an overall decline in enrollment, sinking from a high of 25.2 million students in the 2010-2011 academic year to 21.9 million in 2018-2019. When campuses abruptly shut down in March of 2020, most higher education institutions quickly pivoted to some degree of remote learning for the remainder of the academic year. But now, they face a new challenge: 2020 enrollment.

The Future Looks ... Unclear

Institutions in different parts of the country are taking a wide range of approaches to the coming academic year, ranging from a comprehensive schedule of online-only classes to nearly normal campus activity with strict safety protocols. But even for those with detailed plans, much remains uncertain. Not the least of these is the level of tuition-paying enrollment they can expect.

25.2M

21.9M
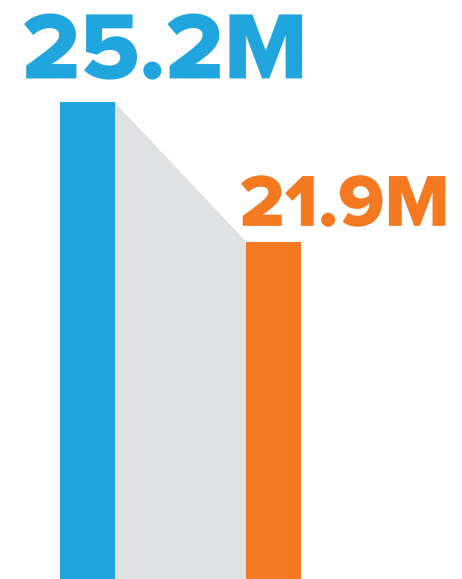
Decline in enrollment from the 2010-2011 academic year to 2018-2019.

As schools work to finalize their approaches, many incoming students are unsure of their plans, as well. According to McKinsey, more than one-fifth of new college students have changed their first-choice school, primarily due to either cost or location. Of those who've changed their minds, 44% said they wanted a school with lower costs, 30% wanted to stay closer to home and 26% wanted to avoid a COVID-19 hotspot at their first-choice school's location.

Online Classes Score Low

Importantly, the McKinsey study found low enthusiasm for a remote educational experience. Just 25% of students surveyed said they felt prepared for a remote freshman year. And, only 23% were confident they could receive a quality education through a remote-only experience.

Uncertainty about the quality of an online education connects directly to the value students expect from their tuition dollars. A full 83% of students surveyed felt strongly that they should pay significantly less for a remote education. Combine that expectation with potentially lower overall enrollment and an expected decline in lucrative foreign student enrollment, and university revenues could be facing a serious drought.

Now is the time for higher education marketers and other leaders to take steps to survive — and even thrive — in the months and years to come. Attracting, engaging and building long-term relationships with potential and current students, as well as parents, alumni and other constituencies, will be vital. Achieving those goals begins with data.

> **"How do we deepen audience understanding, when we know that our audiences are engaging in different silos, in different parts of the university?"**
>
> Melissa Bradshaw, AVP, Marketing & Chief Enablement Officer, The Ohio State University

THE RELATIONSHIP IS EVERYTHING.

In higher education, it's never been more vital to find new ways and opportunities to interact with an institution's entire ecosystem, from the curious high school senior to the tried-and-true supportive alum. Like nearly every other type of organization, colleges and universities need to innovate and adapt quickly in order to meet their constituents' rapidly shifting needs and expectations. Leveraging data to find new ways to increase engagement and build relationships is the most effective way to meet that goal.

Beyond just building engagement, institutions are developing new ways to increase enthusiasm and interest by delivering more and better digital experiences and resources. Remote learning, interactive campus tours, 3D dorm-room tours and much more are all available or within reach.

Data is both the opportunity and the challenge. Many institutions are finding that a customer data platform (CDP) is the key to unlocking the data that will drive a better, more productive experience.

WHY DOES EDU NEED A CDP?

Higher ed institutions typically use a wide range of marketing communications systems, each of which gathers and holds data. These systems, which can include call centers, business intelligence units, CRM platforms and many others, typically remain siloed. The valuable data they hold is isolated and unavailable to the rest of the engagement channels.

A CDP breaks down those barriers and enables the entire institution to utilize and benefit from a comprehensive data repository — and for institutions to harness unified data intelligence engage with constituents across the entire lifecycle.

When the full array of data is unlocked and available across the institution, it can be used to fuel a seamless, continuous experience for every constituent, across all channels.

While the use of a CDP is still fairly new to the higher education world, usage is growing quickly. And today's new reality will certainly hasten that growth. The use cases most frequently seen in education today include:

— Optimizing spending and improving precision in targeting.
— Designing more effective campaigns that hypertarget a specific microsegment, with the goal of increasing desired outcomes.
— Creating personalized experiences based on predicted future preferences to increase desired actions, such as encouraging continuing education, deepening enrollment and increasing activity engagement.
— Predicting the likelihood of future engagement and targeting personalized messaging to drive action.

THE POWER OF PERSONAS

One of the most valuable benefits of the volume and depth of data a CDP provides is the ability to develop detailed, accurate personas, which can serve as the cornerstone of a successful communications strategy.

Personas enable marketers to understand behaviors, actions and preferences in a deeper, more useful way. They can be exceedingly useful to higher education marketers, who are tasked with engaging with multiple constituencies, including alumni, parents, potential students and the communities in which they live. Data-based personas streamline and improve the process of communicating with each of these segments in the manner most meaningful to them.

In higher education, effective personas lead to more meaningful communications and increased conversions in the forms of enrollment, engagement, donations and more. Every higher education institution must address multiple audiences and understanding each one, in detail, is the path to increased engagement.

"We have 26 macro audiences — those are not segments. Personas give us a huge opportunity, especially with our alumni and our donors, because their intentions are not widely understood or known. A CDP helps us understand those people, so we can find the facet of the university that moves them and speak to that."

Melissa Bradshaw, AVP, Marketing &
Chief Marketing Enablement Officer, Ohio State University

INCREASING REGULATIONS BOOST CDP VALUE

As consumers become more aware of the amount and types of data collected by organizations of all types, they're increasingly demanding regulations on how that data is used, shared and protected. And those regulations are becoming reality. Among the most prominent is the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which sets guidelines for the collection and processing of personal information related to any EU citizen — including European students studying at American institutions. New regulations, such as the California Consumer Privacy Act, are close on the GDPR's heels.

Increased regulations makes having well-organized and fully accessible data even more vital. For any institution, complying with data regulations begins with knowing what data they hold and where it's located. Only then can the organization establish the protocols necessary to ensure compliance and avoid costly penalties and lasting reputational damage.

SETTING PRIORITIES IS JOB #1

When a higher education institution puts a CDP in place, the possibilities become apparent quickly. With all of their data finally accessible from a single source and the ability to craft detailed personas and produce highly targeted, effective communication strategies, the next challenge arises: Where to begin?

Because any higher education institution serves multiple constituencies, prioritization can be difficult. Facing an extremely likely decline in revenue, many universities are focused on their enrollment pipeline. Engaging with a potential student early in their consideration process presents the opportunity for multiple conversions across the lifecycle: from curious browser, to enthusiastic student, to supportive alumni.

As Lindsay Miles, Director of Digital Communications, Advancement and Alumni Engagement at Emory University, explains, "We're focused on pipeline development. If a student is engaged with our university while they're here, they'll be more likely to become engaged alumni. If we have those robust engagement touchpoints, it transcends just what we're putting out there. Because we could sync with our admissions team, student organizations and other areas, we would be able to create a more robust, comprehensive, consistent experience."

"We meet people where they are. If the channel where we'll find current students is TikTok, we'll explore a TikTok strategy. We'll do what we need to do."

Lindsey Miles, Director of Digital Communications, Advancement,
& Alumni Engagement, Emory University

PIVOT, PIVOT, PIVOT

Historically, the implementation process for new ideas and systems in higher education has been slow, to say the least. Now, with massive change occurring on a seemingly daily basis, agility has never been more important. Institutions are discovering the importance of boosting their agility, so they can try new approaches that meet quickly shifting circumstances.

As Lindsay Miles of Emory University says, "This is an opportunity to help move the needle. You have nothing to lose. People want engagement, and our daily habits are changing. We're all plugged in, all the time. We're looking at the test cases we've always wanted to try."

Increasingly, higher education marketers are learning that keeping data accessible and organized is the most effective way to ensure they're always prepared to pivot. And, many of them are looking to a CDP. As David Raab, founder of the Customer Data Platform Institute (CDPI) explains, "We've seen tremendous acceleration. There's more openness to experimentation, and a little more forgiveness."

In the current tumult, people want things immediately, presenting marketers with an opportunity to leverage data in new ways, on a much broader scale. As higher education audiences mature from digitally savvy to digital natives, their expectations increase. Now is the time to make the bold moves that will enable the institution to keep pace.

GETTING A CDP OFF THE GROUND

In any organization, the process of implementing a CDP typically includes crawl, walk and run phases. The process of drawing from all available resources to build unified profiles could take as long as a year to complete, but initial benefits may be seen in just two to three months. In order to ensure a solid foundation, the initial steps of the process need deep attention to detail.

According to David Raab of the CDPI, once an organization has implemented a CDP and has their data in one place, they'll typically execute a series of tasks. Each effort builds on the last, while increasing in complexity and demonstrating more value.

1   **Data Analysis**

2   **Predictive Modeling**

3   **Improved Segmentation of Outbound Communications**

4   **Real-Time Interactions**

5   **Cross-Channel Orchestration**

The most successful implementations begin with alignment across IT, marketing and any other division or department that leverages customer data. Early top-level buy-in is also crucial to success. A CDP can be a significant investment with a significant payoff. Once the system is in place, there are no limits. Users can bring in an infinite amount of data from more sources and leverage that information for a limitless number of use cases.

In comparison to a custom-built data solution, a CDP also offers important flexibility. Custom solutions can be extremely labor-intensive, normally can't scale without additional resources and often can't provide the agility that's so important right now.

HIGHER ED IS STEPPING UP

While the future is anything but certain, it seems clear that now is the time higher education institutions need to take control of their data — all of it — and put it to work in new and innovative ways. The deeper, more productive engagements that will enable institutions to survive and thrive in an uncertain future begin with an accurate and thorough understanding of constituents. Today, a CDP is the quickest route to the streamlined, comprehensive, actionable data that delivers those insights.

THE ACQUIA APPROACH

In today's unpredictable environment, higher education institutions increasingly recognize the immense value of truly accessible, actionable data. And, more and more of them are considering a move to a CDP. Acquia CDP is a best-in-class solution that streamlines the process of unleashing data, and enables education marketers to determine the most effective ways to communicate with the multiple audiences they serve.

To determine if Acquia CDP may be right for you, ask yourself these questions:

— Is all of your data accessible from a single source?

— Is your data consistently accurate and current?

— Can you easily access your data at any time?

— Can you identify your most valuable audiences?

— Does your data help you improve your digital experiences and drive growth?

If you've answered "no" to any of these questions, a robust CDP may be an invaluable addition to your marketing toolkit.

Contact us to learn more.

CONTACT ACQUIA

To learn about how Acquia can help you deliver a consumer-first experience, please contact us at sales@acquia.com.

Acquia