Anthology
power of together

Beyond the Term

How to Adapt and Respond to New Expectations
for Postsecondary Education

Global Edition

Introduction

The pandemic exacerbated a worrying trend of declining enrollment in higher education, with the looming "enrollment cliff" set to provide further challenges in the years to come. Prospective students now come from a broader range of backgrounds and lifestyles, with many balancing school, work, and family commitments, leading to an increased need for flexibility in course scheduling. This is in tension with the traditional, term-based approach that the sector follows, leaving many institutions hamstrung to address student needs and, consequently, unable to prevent declines in enrollment.

This paper reviews the key stats on enrollment decline, the causes of this regression, and the student needs that are currently unmet. It then contrasts these trends with the processes and technologies that institutions currently use to plan and schedule courses, identifying where traditional approaches are no longer fit for purpose. Finally, it looks at opportunities to improve beyond the limitations of the term-based model and the potential for education technologies to assist institutions in this pursuit.

Re-Evaluating Enrollment Strategies

It's no secret that enrollment in colleges and universities declined markedly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Total undergraduate and graduate enrollment regressed by 7.4%, or nearly 1.3 million students, between Spring 2020 and 2022, reflective of the seismic disruption caused by the pandemic [1].

> " In the aftermath of the pandemic, colleges and universities are pressed to re-evaluate their long- and short-term strategies, particularly as they relate to enrollment management and student support services. "
>
> —National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, October 2022 [2].

But pre-pandemic enrollment rates were already worrisome—the public health emergency just exacerbated a longer-term downward trend. Between 2009 and 2020, total undergraduate enrollment decreased by 9 percent, from 17.5 million to 15.9 million students [3]. The phenomenon often described as the "enrollment cliff"—where a drop in the birth rate sparked by the 2008 financial crisis impacts the number of students graduating from high school—is also soon to arrive, sparking concern that the trend of enrollment decline will continue over the coming years [4].

Recent data offers some cause for optimism. Enrollment increased by 2.5% in the Spring 2024 semester, with particularly strong gains in community colleges, which were decimated during the pandemic [5]. It is likely that this represents a stabilizing after the shockwaves of the pandemic, rather than a reversal of the macro trend of declining higher education enrollment.

Factors Impacting Enrollment

The reasons why enrollment is in decline are varied, and can differ based on the area, institution type, and a range of other considerations. There are, however, some key trends that all institutions need to be mindful of.

- **Changing student demographics.** "Traditional students" (i.e., those aged 18-24 who have continued to university after high school) are now in the minority in higher education. In fact, 85% of students are considered "post-traditional" and are a diverse group of adult learners, full-time employees, low-income students, students who commute to school, and working parents. In general, post-traditional students have one or more of the following characteristics: they delay enrollment in college after high school, they attend part time for at least part of an academic year, they work full time while also enrolled in school, they are financially independent, or they have dependents (spouse and/or children) [6]. Student populations are more diverse racially and ethnically as well, with enrollment declining among white students and rising among Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Pacific Islander students [7]. Historically underserved populations face unique challenges in their journeys through postsecondary education, and enrollment processes haven't always taken this into account.

- **Changing student preferences.** Having endured pandemic shifts to remote and hybrid learning in high school, prospective college students "continue to expect digital course offerings and flexible scheduling" and "varied course formats, schedules, credit loads, and degree types," according to a survey of high school sophomores and juniors [8].
  Flexible program options are equally important for attracting nontraditional students, who are "often balancing more responsibilities than traditional college-age students, and therefore … seek education options that fit with their life and work schedules" [9].

- **Rising numbers of stop out students.** Enrollment declines are caused not only by fewer students arriving to start a credential, but also by a worrying increase in students "stopping out" midway through. Stress is the most-cited reason when students consider "stopping out" of college [10], and the pandemic exposed a need for more effective mental health and well-being support. Traditionally underrepresented student populations, who are at greater risk of mental health conditions, may need more flexibility to persist in college and earn their degrees.

- **Increased competition.** Higher education institutions no longer have a lock on the market for students. Many alternatives offer shorter routes to credentials, career pathways, and jobs. These are often also more affordable than traditional college degrees, which many prospective learners find appealing.

In short, modern learners are looking for flexibility. Whether their path into higher education has been traditional or not, most now seek programs which they can balance with other commitments, and institutions need to accommodate this if they're to engage new demographics and grow enrollment.

Limitations of a Term-Based Approach

While students are looking for flexibility, the processes of higher education institutions are often rigid and not fit for purpose. There are two key factors which drive this: the enrollment calendar and financial aid.

The enrollment calendar determines when and how colleges and universities can assign students to courses. The traditional calendar is term-based, typically using a semester, trimester, or quarter schedule. Terms have concrete lengths, starting and concluding at the same time every year. Courses are structured to meet credit-hour requirements within the confines of term durations. The typical course has 45 to 48 contact hours, resulting in three credit hours for students upon successful completion.

Financial aid is intrinsically connected to the enrollment calendar. Higher education is expensive; costs are typically untenable for students without financial aid. Any institution that cannot meet federal financial aid requirements is certain to see massive enrollment losses.

For students to secure financial aid, institutions must report regularly on student progress to the US Department of Education. Traditional term-based enrollment calendars keep all students' progress in lockstep, making reporting relatively easy. Most colleges and universities still operate on some form of term model to simplify scheduling, reporting, financial aid, and other academic administrative processes.

The Challenges of Shifting from Rigid to Flexible Enrollment Models

Many colleges and universities are experimenting with new modalities to compete for students and provide structures that help them succeed. These include:

- **Competency-based education (CBE)** offers flexibility for students to progress as they demonstrate mastery of content regardless of time, place, or pace of learning [11].

- **Workforce development programs** link study directly with the workplace, providing hands-on instruction and job opportunities for learners and a great talent pipeline for local employers.

- **Certificates and badges** provide recognition for attained skills, allowing students to showcase their abilities in a more dynamic way than degree completion.

But non-traditional calendars create challenges with credit-bearing courses. How can institutions fulfill reporting requirements and ensure that students receive financial aid in time for their next session if all students are completing credit hours at different times?

At a Glance: The Conundrum of Enrollment Models

Standard Term Enrollment Calendar

	Fall	Spring
Sessions	A • 16 weeks	B • 16 weeks

Non-Term Enrollment Calendars
(Sessions Overlap with Standard Term Calendar)

Sessions	C • 11 weeks	D • 11 weeks	E • 11 weeks

Sessions	F • 8 weeks	G • 8 weeks	H • 8 weeks	I • 8 weeks

Adapted from National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2005

Traditional term enrollment calendars are organized as standardized semesters, trimesters, or quarters that do not overlap.

Non-term enrollment calendars with overlapping sessions, or multiple calendars at the same institution, break that mold. But without robust administrative systems, they can create reporting challenges for institutions and disrupt financial aid for students.

Traditional and non-traditional calendars do not live alongside one another harmoniously. Attempting to combine different calendars causes reporting challenges on student status and progress to the US Department of Education, which has strict and elaborate regulations for students to remain eligible for financial aid.

For instance, in the example above, Session D overlaps with Sessions A and B. Students in Session D would have to wait until Session B reporting to receive credits for completing the course. But what if those credits were needed to demonstrate the ongoing pursuit of a program approved for financial aid or to meet prerequisites for Session E? What happens to students whose financial aid is delayed? Institutions lose timely revenues, and students could stop out.

The Promise of Non-Term Enrollment Calendars

To gain a competitive advantage, postsecondary institutions can expand or adapt their enrollment calendars. By doing so, they can attract the growing pool of nontraditional students and better respond to the needs and preferences of all learners.

> Shorter academic terms, typically eight weeks, present a promising opportunity to meet the needs of today's learners better than traditional 16-week semesters … Shorter terms often require learners to take fewer classes at once to be considered full-time students, which can help them balance work, family, and education. And if learners still need to pause their education or don't succeed on a course, they can jump back in or catch up more quickly the next term [12].

Institutions are already seeing success by moving away from the traditional term-based model. To ease life barriers that disrupted student momentum and to reduce the enrollment-to-degree duration, Odessa College in Texas switched its enrollment calendar from a 16-week semester to two eight-week terms in 2014. Two years later, the college reported a 13% increase in enrollment, and five years later, enrollment had increased by 25% [13].

Alternatives to the Term-Based Approach

There are a few different paths that institutions are employing to strike a balance between the flexibility that students are after and the barriers of the enrollment calendar and financial aid.

- **Standard term with modules.** Some institutions are working around standard seasonal semesters, trimesters, or quarters by breaking up terms into modules. Modules do not have to adhere to standard lengths or content. If the modules in a term meet credit-hour or CBE requirements, they can be reported as traditional terms.

- **Non-standard terms.** Coursework is still offered within the confines of terms, but these terms do not adhere to traditional semesters, trimesters, or quarters. Like standard terms, however, they are scheduled at set periods on the calendar, and they do not overlap.

- **Equal non-standard terms** are of the same duration, such as a calendar filled with six-week courses.

- **Unequal non-standard terms** are of different durations, such as a summer with three six-week terms and a full-term fall semester.

- **Non-term programs** enroll students who identify a class or course of study, pay for it, and attend. Non-term programs come in three primary varieties:

  - **Clock-hour non-terms.** Programs measure progress in clock hours rather than credit hours. English as a Second Language programs are a prime example.

  - **Flexible non-terms.** Programs measured in credit hours that do not begin and end within a standard term, such as self-paced courses and programs that overlap multiple terms, can be considered non-term. Sequential courses that are not confined to a term also can be considered non-term.

  - **Subscription.** Students pay a set fee on a regular basis to gain access to a library of classes. This model is highly popular outside of education, with Coursera, Udemy, and edX, for example. Some universities are seeking ways to provide a similar experience.

New models and variations of these models continue to emerge across higher education. But they present a two-fold challenge for institutions that encompasses enrollment, scheduling, reporting, and financial aid.

- How do you customize legacy, term-based student information systems (SIS) to accommodate non-traditional enrollment calendars?
- How do you manage a mix of standard and non-standard enrollment calendars, some with adaptations?

Barriers to Flexible Enrollment Models

Business systems
and processes
52% of institutions
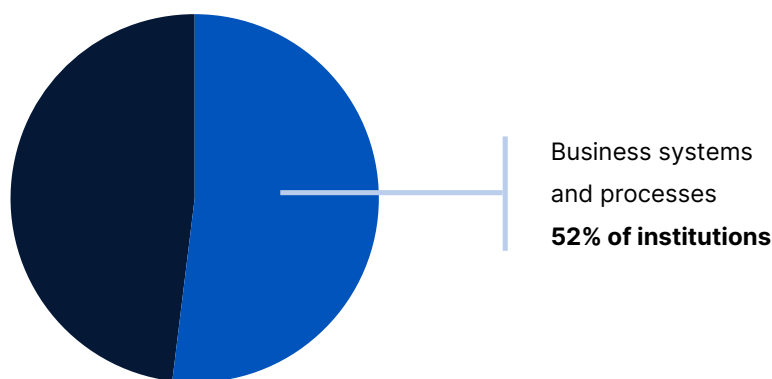
There are perceived barriers to adopting one alternative program that is gaining traction in higher education and fits well with flexible enrollment models: competency-based education. The 2020 AIR survey found that 52% of institutions with existing CBE programs, or those in the process of implementing programs, cited "business systems and processes" as barriers.

Anthology Breaks Down Enrollment Barriers

Anthology offers the one SIS that can help institutions overcome the key barriers to flexible enrollment models — business systems and processes — and provide a competitive advantage in a challenging market.

Central Arizona College (CAC) implemented Anthology® Student, which centralized their enrollment management, curriculum management, course scheduling, academic records, student progress monitoring, and degree processing. Before implementing Student, registration staff spent most of their time manually tracking and managing learner course schedules and degree progress. After go-live, the drastic increase in learner self-service allowed the registration and enrollment staff to focus their attention on the progress of learners through their degree programs.

Anthology Student is uniquely designed to support varied enrollment models that today's modern student demands. Offered as a flexible, cloud-based student information system (SIS) and enterprise resource planning (ERP) solution that promotes student success from acceptance to graduation, Anthology Student incorporates critical academic tools like degree auditing, academic planning, and financial aid management out-of-the-box. Premium selections allow institutions to extend the platform into broader financial management, faculty workload management, and even operating payroll, completing an institution's enterprise resource planning needs. These tools make it easy for an institution to deliver a personalized learning experience from enrollment through graduation, including through:

- **Offering Flexible Academic Programs.** Anthology Student is the only SIS on the market that offers a single, centralized solution for standard, non-standard, and non-term academic programs. Anthology Student doesn't organize students by what term they are in, but by what educational goal they are trying to achieve. Any courses, modules, badges, or other experiences they pursue on their journey toward a credential can be tracked, regardless of an institution's type of enrollment calendar (or calendars). This extends beyond a single campus as well. Anthology Student can unify reporting and processes for multi-campus institutions, even if individual campuses have their own unique programs or business processes.

- **Improving the Student Academic Experiences.** Anthology Student intelligently leverages data to promote student success. The robust, SaaS-based SIS offers early, data-driven alerts to identify and help at-risk students. Intuitive student progress reports trigger intervention strategies and personalized support plans to enlist academic services based on student needs. It also enables institutions to manage internships and externships within career services in order to strategically match students to employment opportunities. Anthology Student is built to guide students by making choices clear and processes light in navigating a path to graduation. It helps students focus on their academic journey, whether they are a traditional, on-campus student or a nontraditional, online student.

- **Modernizing Operations and Processes.** Anthology Student frees faculty, staff, and administrators from manual processes. Institutions are often weighed down by decades of institutional processes that slow operations, burden staff, and increase cost. By moving to a truly SaaS-based solution, Anthology Student will help your institution streamline those manual processes with industry best practices and workflows to save time, money, and headaches, enabling your staff to spend more time with the students.

Anthology partners with institutions to design a comprehensive strategy to align an institution's technology and tools with their enrollment calendar(s) and develop policies, processes, and practices that support the institution and its students. Anthology is with you every step of the way from design to implementation and on-going success. Learn more at www.anthology.com/student.

About Anthology

Anthology delivers education and technology solutions so that students can reach their full potential and learning institutions thrive. Millions of students around the world are supported throughout their education journey via Anthology's ecosystem of SaaS solutions and supporting services, including the award-winning Blackboard® (LMS), Anthology® Student (SIS/ERP), and Anthology® Reach (CRM). Through the Power of Together, we are uniquely inspiring educators and institutions with innovation that is meaningful, simple, and intelligent to help customers redefine what's possible and create life-changing opportunities for people everywhere. www.anthology.com.

References:

[1] National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (May 26, 2020.) Current Term Enrollment Estimates: Spring 2022.

[2] National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (Oct. 20, 2022.) Stay Informed.

[3] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (PEDS), Spring 2010 through Spring 2021, Fall Enrollment component. Enrollment in Degree-Granting Institutions Projection Model, through 2030. See Digest of Education Statistics 2021, table 303.70.

[4] Bauman, Dan. (Feb. 7, 2024) "Colleges Were Already Bracing for an 'Enrollment Cliff.' Now There Might Be a Second One." The Chronicle of Higher Education.

[5] National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (May 22, 2024.) Current Term Enrollment Estimates: Spring 2024.

[6] Postsecondary National Policy Institute. (Sept. 26, 2021.) Factsheet: Post-Traditional Students in Higher Education.

[7] National Center for Education Statistics. (2022.) Postbaccalaureate Enrollment. Condition of Education. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

[8] Hanover Research. (2022.) 2022 National Prospective Student Survey.

[9] Hanover Research. (January 2018.) Strategies for Attracting and Supporting Nontraditional Students.

[10] Gallup & Lumina Foundation. (2022.) The State of Higher Education 2022 Report.

[11] Blackboard. (2015.) Competency-Based Education (CBE). Higher Education's Answer to the Call for Change.

[12] Stout, K. A., & Shaver, T. (Oct. 1, 2021.) "Obliterating the Academic Calendar Is the Easy Part." Times Higher Education.

[13] Achieving the Dream. (July 6, 2021.) "Shorter Terms at Odessa College: 'An Overnight Success Several Years in the Making.'"