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What is the Demographic Cliff & Why Should I Care?

Dear Colleague –

It is a simple question. What is the demographic cliff? There is a simple answer. It is the reality that the number of traditional-age students in the U.S. is expected to peak in 2025 or 2026 and then decline precipitously. What this means for higher education and for Drexel is a much more complicated issue. Why? As this [article from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*](#) notes, national numbers do not tell the whole story. We need to pay attention to geography, institutional type and demographics. In addition, higher education is facing headwinds of a different sort that will affect our future. In this reflection, I try to make sense of the demographic cliff, the current environment in higher education and what it might mean for us, and to suggest some steps we might consider to continue to thrive.

To begin with some broader context, it is helpful to note that scholars and pundits have been predicting the demise of higher education for decades. (This [article](#) from the *Chronicle* provides a nice overview of this history.) And yet, we are still here. So, what is different this time? Why might we want to heed the warning signs? From my vantage point there are so many significant changes, including the demographic cliff, that it makes sense to take note. In addition to a dwindling supply of college-bound 18 year-olds, the sector faces other challenges, as this excellent [article](#) notes. We face a world in which new competitors are flooding the marketplace, where the very model of “seat time” and “credits” is being upended by self-paced credentials and skill acquisition, and confidence in the value of what traditional higher education offers is at, perhaps, an all-time low.

What does this mean for Drexel? Stating the obvious, Drexel is not a small liberal arts college tied to a traditional educational model – those institutions most at risk in our region. We are a dynamic urban research university with a distinctive mission and approach that is well-matched to this moment. Moreover, we have a terrific strategic plan. Our mission has been connected to the world around us from our founding, and our Co-op program is one of the oldest and best in the nation, insulating us a bit from the critique that higher education is obsolete and out of touch. Unlike many other institutions, we *already* have strong and meaningful connections with employers, nonprofits and our community. How we leverage these strengths in the coming years will make all the difference.

Together, there are steps we can take to address these demographic and cultural sea changes, such as redoubling recruiting efforts, especially in regions of the country less affected by the demographic changes;

ensuring our programs are accessible and meet the market and students' needs; and making some changes to how we approach our work in our classrooms to most effectively leverage our considerable strengths. Below are three of my suggestions:

1. Focus on **supporting student success** rather than trying to weed students out.

There is a difference between holding students to well-articulated high standards and using classrooms and sorting mechanisms to see who is good enough to "make it." There is no place, at Drexel or elsewhere in the current education market, for a system that weeds admitted students out. We work hard to attract and recruit students who will thrive at Drexel. We have already invested in them by selecting them and making every effort to make sure they attend. Let's do all we can to help them meet appropriately high standards and succeed. It may mean adapting your pedagogy to incorporate engaged learning strategies and other evidence-based pedagogies that have been shown to reduce achievement gaps and increase knowledge retention and transfer. It may also mean rethinking our assessments so that our grades reflect more than just how well our students' cram for tests. To help you think through how best to make this shift in your particular course or discipline, the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) offers [individualized consultations](#). We know not 100% of students will be successful due to circumstances beyond our control, but we do have control over our classrooms and pedagogies; these should never be the barrier preventing student success.

2. Focus on **student learning** rather than delivering content.

The university of the past awarded grades and credentials largely based on a "seat time" standard – if you came to class and did what you were supposed to do, you progressed. The university of the future must be focused on outcomes rather than time and process. It must focus on learning rather than teaching. Rather than thinking about delivering specific content knowledge, faculty need to consider how to promote learning and what our colleague and Drexel Teaching Academy graduate, Associate Professor Eric Brewe, calls "knowledge synthesis." Drexel has significant resources to support this effort. For example, the 57 [Drexel Teaching Academy](#) graduates have completed a 10-week program aimed at developing their pedagogical expertise and empowering them to share their knowledge and skills with colleagues. In addition, all new faculty participate in a year-long [New Dragons Faculty Learning Community](#), and the TLC partners with the Office of Equality and Diversity to offer the [Drexel Institute for Inclusive and Equitable Teaching](#).

3. Focus on making the **value of the classroom experience clear and compelling** to students.

In my view, one of the most underappreciated dimensions critical to learning is motivation. This [article](#) provides a good overview of the role of motivation in learning, specifically what instructors can do to increase student motivation. "Because I told you to" never worked for me as a parent or as a teacher. When we expect students to enter every class motivated to do the work just because they enrolled in the course, we are missing an enormous opportunity – an opportunity to engage students and help them to understand *why* this particular class ought to matter to them and how they can succeed. When students understand why what they are learning is critical to *their* goals, they will be better able to master skills and content. At Drexel, faculty may be better able to do this by meaningfully connecting their courses to co-op experiences or students' lived experiences. Both the [Lindy Center for Civic Engagement](#) and the [Steinbright Career Development Center](#) as well as [The Pennoni Honors College](#) have programs and people who can help faculty to more explicitly link

their classroom teaching to “real life” as a way to help students find their motivation.

The stakes for higher education could not be higher. Even though economists still indicate that the return on investment for an earned degree is substantial and potentially life changing, our students have reason to carefully scrutinize the value of what they are paying for. Student debt in the U.S. tripled between 2001 and 2016, and one third of our students are Pell Grant eligible meaning that they have exceptionally high levels of economic need. Our students and families expect and deserve good value and a high-quality education. Determining what we can do to meet our wonderful students where they are and take them where they want and need to be is certainly a worthy effort.

Warm regards,

Erin

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