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The Agile College: How Institutions Successfully Navigate Demographic Changes

Nathan D. Grawe (2021)
John Hopkins University Press
Reviewed by Andrew J. Cornelius, M.S.Ed.

Higher education institutions are confronting predictions of population decline, demographic shifts of the college-going population, and a growing skepticism of higher education's purpose. Nathan Grawe (2021), in *The Agile College: How Institutions Successfully Navigate Demographic Changes*, examines large scale national data impacting future enrollment trends and provides practical measures to support student success upon admission. Grawe suggests that projections are not current reality and higher education institutions have the ability to shape their future. This data-driven text suggests that institutions should be aware of geographical, economic, and student success practices that increase and sustain enrollment efforts. Grawe frames the book in two parts, covering "Demographic Pressures" and "The Response of Higher Education." He uses national data sets to argue that there is no "one solution," but institutions are responsible for crafting their future and fate.

Part I, "Demographic Pressures," includes broad statistical data regarding population shifts within the United States that can impact higher education enrollment. This statistical data reveals information leading up to the mid-2030s. Grawe specifically draws on data from the High School Longitudinal Study (HSLs) when examining population shifts. Grawe does not only provide broad population data for the entire country but also breaks down the population shifts by geographical regions. This is central to Grawe's encouragement and warning for institutions. Grawe encourages institutional leadership to look at demographic shifts through the lens of adaptation and change, not viewing

them as stagnant or “destined.” Instead of conflating all enrollment declines forecasted as applicable to all institutions, Grawe advocates for institutions to contextualize to their geographic and institutional identity in forecasting demographic shifts.

Student populations are becoming more diverse. Grawe attributes shifting demographics to migration, immigration, and increased pathways to success for certain student populations. Examining migration and immigration patterns is seminal to the thesis of this text. Grawe localizes migration and immigration through geographic regions and institutional type. Due to high costs of living on the coasts, migration has increased toward the South and has decreased in the Northeast and West coasts. The migration patterns situate higher education institutions in the South with a higher chance to enroll students whose families have migrated. Yet, “the West appears the most auspicious region for four-year institutions followed by the South” (p. 33). The two analyses presented above point to the complexity of “one size fits all” models of college enrollment predictions. Institutional type, student type, immigration, and migration realities all impact each college and university differently.

Instead of finding the “one solution,” Grawe reveals ways for institutions to localize efforts to enroll and retain the current college students. Part II, “The Response of Higher Education,” examines the intersections of shifting demographics and institutional response. With demographic shifts in mind, Grawe offers readers topics of focus to support enrollment initiatives, evaluate student engagement efforts, and guidance when discussing long term strategies for institutions. Grawe begins this section of the book by framing admissions and financial aid policies as mechanisms of support and barriers to access. Grawe offers creative solutions being implemented by institutions such as targeted recruitment programs, tuition resets, and new ways of providing loan repayment to help bolster enrollment numbers.

The chapters situated in Part II address tangible ways institutions can better engage students. Grawe does this by providing case studies and examples of institutions who have executed programs or initiatives that have bolstered retention. It is important to note that Grawe examines current institutions who are modeling successful strategies that increase retention; he is not constructing new initiatives or approaches. Grawe does an exceptional job providing examples from all institutional types and regions when identifying student support and retention practices.

The final chapters of Part II reveal larger trends taking place within

the U.S. higher education system as a whole. This includes institutional “downsizing,” mergers, and reprioritization of program offerings. Grawe concludes the text by providing examples of policy work at both the institutional and national level related to student loan reform and building great pathways from two-year to four-year institutions. He challenges the reader not to look at demographic shifts as a doomsday prediction but reminds us that institutional leadership will have to address these concerns to remain stable in the next few years.

Student development professionals should read this text to understand regional demographic shifts impacting their specific enrollment populations. Specifically, Christian student development professionals should take this volume seriously as it relates to the implementation of retention strategies surrounding underrepresented groups among all college-going populations. This is specifically important for those institutions who are tuition driven and rely on both enrollment and retention to sustain the university. In the Gospel of Luke, Christ is seen on the outside, in margins of society, caring for the individual. Christian higher education professionals should mirror this practice by examining policies that create systemic barriers and implementing practices that support those who have historically been denied access to higher education. Grawe provides examples of institutions who understand their student populations and their needs. Before implementing broad policy changes, institutions should be aware of their own demographics and students’ needs.

The mission of Christian higher education institutions and Christian higher education professionals often aligns with the principles listed in *The Agile College*. Specifically, Grawe argues that remaining student-centered may drive institutional reform and, therefore, create a place where all students can succeed. Higher education professionals should not be scared of the demographic changes but should look at this change as potential space to better serve students that will create a sustainable future for higher education institutions. It is not a matter of “if” higher education institutions will be impacted by the demographic shifts. It is a matter of “when” and “how” the university leadership and Christian higher education professionals will respond and improve because of this demographic impact.

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