THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

'AN INFLECTION POINT'

By *Eric Hoover*

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Each spring the stress took its toll. One year, her blood pressure spiked. The next brought severe stomach problems. The following year, a panic attack sent her to the emergency room. After that, Karen Dahlstrom reached a conclusion: "My body was revolting, and my job was the cause."

That job consumed her. As executive director of admissions at Augustana College, in Rock Island, Ill., Dahlstrom helped lead an annual campaign to enroll about 700

freshmen and bring in enough revenue to keep the small Lutheran institution thriving. She loved working for her alma mater, where as an undergraduate she had found several mentors who nurtured her leadership skills. Guiding an admissions staff gave her a feeling of purpose. And the sight of students striking the ceremonial gong each spring after deciding to enroll always flooded her with happiness.

But the grueling months leading up to May 1 — the traditional deposit deadline at many selective colleges — robbed her of sleep, energy, and time with her family. Each spring, recruitment cycles overlapped: Her staffers would be hitting the road to meet high-school juniors even as they were fielding emails and calls from just-admitted seniors. Meanwhile, families would be visiting Augustana with heads full of questions. And seemingly everyone who worked for the college would ask how next year's class was shaping up.

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Dahlstrom often woke up feeling as if something heavy were weighing her down. A self-described high-achiever, she rationalized her anxiety. "This is good stress," she told herself during 60-hour weeks when work gnawed into nights and weekends. Still, her body kept telling her that something had to give. Her husband and her son — who often saw her coming home tired and distracted, taking work calls during dinner — kept telling her the same thing.

Finally, in 2021, Dahlstrom resigned from her job. At 38, she had decided that an admissions career wasn't sustainable: "I was afraid the stress was going to kill me."

Similar stories are echoing throughout the hallways of higher education. Vice presidents for enrollment, as well as admissions deans and directors, are wearing down, burning out, and leaving jobs they once loved. Though there's no way to compile a chart quantifying the churn, industry insiders describe it as significant. "We're at an inflection point," says Rick Clark, executive director of undergraduate admission at Georgia Tech. "There have always been people leaving the field, but not in the numbers we're seeing now."

"The Eye of Sauron is right in my office. You can feel it."

Some are being shoved out the door by presidents and boards. Some are resigning out of exhaustion, frustration, and disillusionment. And some who once sought top-level positions are rethinking their ambitions. "The pressures have ratcheted up tenfold," says Angel B. Pérez, chief executive of the National Association for College Admission Counseling, known as NACAC. "I talk with someone each week who's either leaving the field or considering leaving."

The field is losing top talent even as the stakes of enrollment work are getting higher. Blame the strain of recruiting incoming classes from declining numbers of high-school graduates, many with increasing financial need. The intensifying financial challenges at tuition-dependent private colleges and regional publics. The often unrealistic expectations of presidents and boards. The unquenchable thirst for prestige. The increasing turnover among admissions staffers on the front lines of recruitment. The growing scrutiny from courts, legislators, faculty, and hawk-eyed parents. The public's waning faith in the value of a degree. And the unrelenting

pressure of it all. “The Eye of Sauron is right in my office,” one enrollment official says. “You can feel it.”

This account is based on interviews with 23 current and former admissions and enrollment officials representing a diverse array of four-year colleges. Some shared their stories on the record. Others, including two who had signed nondisclosure agreements, asked to remain anonymous for fear of angering past or present employers. Nearly all described a maxed-out profession on the edge of a crisis.

And they agree that the hottest seats on campus (along with those occupied by presidents and football coaches) keep getting hotter. “It’s on fire,” a former enrollment vice president says of the profession she just left after 25 years. “My days are numbered,” a midcareer admissions official at a highly selective university tells *The Chronicle*: “Losing the joy.” One senior admissions official who was among his field’s most respected young leaders resigned midway through the current cycle: “I hit a moment when I honestly feared for my health. I wondered if this job would take years off my life, or, god, was I gonna have a heart attack? Would my child lose me to the ambitions I had created professionally?”

Dahlstrom and other veterans of the field say they’ve experienced something especially disquieting: an erosion of faith in the transformational power of higher education. Though she sought a career in admissions to help students, her disillusionment grew after taking on a leadership role. She became less confident that she was equipped to effect positive changes, at her institution or beyond, especially when it came to the challenge of expanding college access in a nation of socioeconomic disparities: “I felt like a cog in a huge machine that’s not working, yet continues to grind while only small, temporary fixes are made.”

Yes, the pandemic forced many people to reassess the meaning of their jobs, to seek a better work-life balance. But the roots of this discontent reach deeper down. Those pressures reflect the conflicting realities within higher education, a realm of

stratospheric ambitions and deep desperation. Just about anything a college cherishes or desires, just about anything it hopes to enhance or fix, relates directly to the work done by the people in charge of bringing in new students and tuition revenue. Institutions have long heaped countless wants, needs, whims, and wishes onto their shoulders.

The weight is becoming too much to bear.

Who ends up carrying that weight matters a great deal. What admissions and enrollment leaders value, and what they're willing to stand up for, influences the goals colleges set, the strategies they pursue, and how trade-offs are balanced. Though long maligned as manipulative marketers or data-driven cutthroats, many of those leaders possess something important: The ability to see the barriers to higher education through the eyes of the people who want in.

Jennielle Médica Strother, a Latina and first-generation college graduate, sought a career in higher education to help students like herself succeed. She never forgot the loneliness she had felt on her first day as a freshman at Lon Morris College, in East Texas. After making the long drive from San Antonio by herself, she was surprised to see parents helping their sons and daughters carry boxes into dorms. Her own parents had wanted to accompany her to the campus, but she had said no: She didn't want to look like a "baby" who needed help. Nobody had told her that move-in day was a widely cherished family ritual. "It was so sad," she says. "I never wanted any other kid to feel that way."

"We all know of colleagues who gave their souls to guide an institution, and, suddenly, they were carrying a box out of their office."

Strother joined the profession in 1998, when she worked half-time as an admissions counselor while coaching volleyball at a junior college in Texas. A decade later, she landed her first vice-president position, at Seminary of the Southwest, in Austin. Later, she earned a master's degree in enrollment management and helped start #EMchat, a weekly Twitter conversation in which enrollment officials shared ideas and encouragement. The lively community eased the loneliness she and many of her counterparts describe as a core part of their work, in which numerical measures of their performance are publicly available and widely scrutinized. "When it's good, it's good," one enrollment official says. "When it's bad, everyone on campus is looking at you thinking, 'They didn't do their job.'"

The list of responsibilities that come with the job keeps getting longer and more complex. After Strother was hired as vice president for enrollment management at Concordia University Texas, in 2017, her portfolio expanded to include advising, career services, and enrollment marketing. Later, she came to oversee student services, which required getting waist-deep in persistence and retention data. Strother welcomed each new duty. As her plate got fuller, she had more opportunities to mold Concordia's strategies and shape its institutional vision: "Let me tell you, I loved it."

Strother saw herself as a community-builder. She led Concordia's successful push to become an official Hispanic-serving institution, and later wrote her doctoral dissertation on how campus leaders make sense of shifts in campus culture and institutional identity. She created Concordia Con Corazón, a campaign to foster belonging among Hispanic students and their families, and a pre-orientation program for first-generation students. She bolstered campus support services and interventions for students likely to struggle.

College access, Strother understood, isn't merely a matter of extending an acceptance. Her memory of moving into her dorm alone reminded her that institutions must communicate clearly with underrepresented students and their families during the transition to college so they don't miss a key experience, a memory they deserve:

"Breaking down walls, building bridges, being an advocate — it sustained me and kept me in this for so long."

Then the pandemic came. The ensuing disruption brought new challenges and intensified old ones. It broke all the predictive models enrollment officials have long relied on. It required nonstop work to enroll a class and hold enrollment steady. Last spring, Strother left the profession she had invested so much of herself in for a quarter-century, one she had seen as a potential path to a college presidency. "I was beyond exhausted," she says. "I couldn't see a light at the end of the tunnel. The grind had become unsustainable."

The grind is wearing many others down. A recent NACAC survey revealed that 60 percent of members at private colleges, and 55 percent at publics, said burnout was one of the top three challenges for the profession. Among all respondents, the most frequently cited challenge (38 percent) was maintaining an acceptable work/life balance.

Strother, 47, now works for the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, leading a division that oversees student-success programs statewide. She likes the work and its broad sweep. She's sleeping better, no longer waking up at 2 a.m., wondering where she will find 10 more students to meet her institution's net-revenue goal.

Nonetheless, Strother misses the vibrancy of campuses. She still tunes into #EMchat and engages with enrollment leaders. Maybe someday she will return to the field, she says, but the fit would have to be right. Over the last two decades, she has declined job offers at colleges where leaders' expectations for a quick enrollment rebound were unrealistic given the challenges that their institutions faced. "I'm good, but I'm not a magician," she says. "I can't take a magic wand and say, 'I have fixed all the turmoil that happened before my arrival.' It doesn't work that way."

The problem is that many institutional leaders seem to believe in magic. The kind that can change public perceptions of a college overnight, make eager-to-enroll students appear out of thin air, and conjure a river of new revenue to flow right through the campus. Many enrollment officials describe presidents who daydream about their colleges doubling the number of full-pay students within two or three years, of climbing into *U.S. News & World Report*'s top 50, as if it were simply a matter of will.

But enrollment leaders can't deliver miracles, says Ken Anselment, who spent nearly 11 years as vice president for enrollment and communication at Lawrence University, in Wisconsin. "A single VP for enrollment is not the reason why an institution's fortunes rise and fall," he says. "It's not like a head coach who comes in, recruits his own players, and builds a program. The factors beyond an enrollment leader's control are significant: market realities, campus politics, demographics, deferred maintenance. Often, there's a business problem, a broader economic problem."

That's not to say all enrollment officials are equally effective. Some are exceptionally great at their jobs: They're sharp strategists with quantitative skills who excel at team-building, communicating, and balancing priorities, such as increasing revenue and socioeconomic diversity. That's how many people in the field describe Anselment, who left Lawrence last year to work for RHB, an enrollment-consulting firm. Often, he says, "colleges believe that they've got a marketing problem, not a programming problem."

Bob Johnson calls this "best-kept secret" thinking. "There are still too many presidents who want their college to be the Harvard of Naperville, Illinois," he says. "They think that if only their institution weren't this best-kept secret, everything would be OK." Such notions, says Johnson, a longtime consultant and former chief enrollment official, often lead to a "glorious, $350,000 branding campaign" that might or might not help a college much, if at all. Any institution can pay to plaster giant signs in an airport terminal for a year. "But chances are you need to do it for five years," Johnson

says. “If you don’t have the patience and commitment to get it to work over an extended period of time, that’s where many branding efforts fall apart.”

“Five years ago, students and families were questioning the cost of higher ed. Now they’re questioning the purpose of it.”

And in any case, the best branding campaign isn’t necessarily a solution. Presidents and boards often don’t understand what’s possible and what’s not, the limits of their resources, and the recruitment challenges in their backyard, many current and former enrollment officials say. Regional public universities and not-so-selective private colleges in, say, Michigan, aren’t going to start pulling in hordes of students from California and Texas — or China, for that matter. “Every public can’t expand out-of-state recruitment,” Johnson says. “Every private can’t become a national brand.”

But presidents, provosts, and boards have many reasons to worry at a time when the demographic cliff looms over higher education. Nationally, the number of high-school graduates is expected to peak in 2025 or 2026, then decline steadily for a decade. In some regions, the drop will be steeper than others; New England and the Great Lakes have been seeing such declines for years. Also, the mix of prospective students is shifting. Going forward, fewer high-school graduates will be white, fewer will be affluent, and more college applicants will have significant financial need. “The gold mine is running out of gold,” Johnson says.

A vice president for enrollment at a regional public university where headcount has been declining for more than a decade describes his job like this: “There’s so much that’s out of my control.” Traditionally two-thirds of the institution’s students enroll as transfers, many from a nearby community college — where enrollments have been

tanking for the last few years. After taking the job not long ago, the official said, he made the obvious moves to attract more first-time, first-year students: purchasing more names of prospects, visiting more high schools, developing more relationships with college advisers.

But many factors are working against him. For one thing, the institution is now offering more than half its classes online. "It's a dead campus," he says. Though he has told faculty members he needs their help at recruitment events, many have resisted: "A lot them think that's not in the scope of what they have to do, but students who visit don't want an admissions kid talking with them — they want faculty." Accommodating more students coming straight from high school will require the university to offer more lower-level courses — a shift that takes time at slow-to-change institutions. "I thrive on a challenge," he says, "but it's frustrating that some people refuse to look beyond the enrollment numbers and see what we're up against here."

Throughout the nation, the R-word — revenue — looms over everything. At most colleges, enrollment leaders lead an endless hunt for it. "The single biggest difference between now and even a decade ago is the reality for many institutions that growing revenue is so much more difficult," says Chris Lydon, interim vice president for enrollment management at La Salle University. Over his 40 years working at private colleges, he has seen the tuition-discounting wars intensify. "You've got many institutions that may be at their residence-hall capacity, but they've discounted their way to flat or declining revenue. With the pandemic and the inflation that followed, it's nearly impossible for institutions to be able to do everything as well as they used to without more money. The insatiable need for more revenue makes this a particularly precarious time for enrollment leaders."

In an industry eager for saviors, an enrollment leader can become a scapegoat almost overnight when bottom-line goals aren't met. "We all know of colleagues who gave their souls to guide an institution," Lydon says, "and, suddenly, they were carrying a box out of their office."

A jockey whipping a horse at full gallop. This image comes to mind when enrollment leaders describe the demands that colleges make on their staff. It's a realm in which enough is never enough, in which the strongest freshman class ever is expected annually. "It's always been, 'Make it bigger, faster, stronger, and better every year' in this profession," says Courtney Minden, who left her job as vice president for enrollment management at Babson College last year to start her own consulting business. "Then after Covid hit, things became much more complex. Five years ago, students and families were questioning the cost of higher ed. Now they're questioning the purpose of it."

It's no wonder that the professional mood seems somber. WittKieffer, an executive search firm, recently surveyed nearly 200 chief enrollment officials: 58 percent said they were optimistic about the future of the field, down from 83 percent in 2018. What else might explain that decline?

Strother, the former vice president at Concordia Texas, says Covid-era crises stoked longstanding frustrations within the field. Perhaps the most prevalent of them involves institutional leaders asking enrollment officials to do more with less. It's common, she says, for colleges to tell enrollment leaders that they must expand enrollment in, say, four specific majors — only to provide no additional staff, funding, or technology in support of such goals: "That expectation is there all the time, that pressure to produce without any new resources. We like to rise to the challenge, and so we ask our staff to do more and focus on multiple priorities, to be creative and think outside the box. When colleges get used to that, it can be abused."

A disconnect between institutional resources and goals can undermine an admissions office's success. After starting at the University of Alabama at Birmingham in 2014, Tyler Peterson helped revamp its recruitment strategies. UAB hired several regional admissions officers in a handful of Southern cities, plus California. It emphasized the strength of its pre-med programs and touted the virtues of its urban setting. It brought

in high-school counselors to learn more about the campus. And it put more money into scholarships.

All those strategies helped UAB increase its freshman class to 2,300 students in 2019, up from 1,600 students three years earlier. But just as UAB was on a growth trajectory, Peterson says, the administration in 2021 decided to reduce spending on scholarships significantly for the incoming Class of 2022. "That, more than anything, probably wore me down the most," Peterson says. "You can't allocate resources elsewhere and still expect the same results. We pulled back on spending too soon, before we could establish a stronger brand and sustain success in our markets."

Peterson, who was then executive director for admissions, financial aid, and scholarships, saw the frustration on his staff's faces when they heard about the shift in financial-aid strategy. "Goals have to be somewhat attainable, but when they're not, people lose motivation," he says, "It's hard to stand up in a room full of 40 admissions folks and say, 'We got this,' while knowing that we're going to lose students we previously might have enrolled." Sure enough, the university enrolled 2,217 freshmen in 2022, down from 2,415 a year earlier — a 9-percent drop.

Though Peterson disagreed with that particular decision, he loved UAB. He loved leading a multi-generational admissions team, helping his employees develop skills, and interacting with students. But during the pandemic, he considered the toll that the job and its relentless performance measurements were taking on him. "It felt like a constant immovable object that you keep pushing up a hill," he says of admissions work. "You make a little bit of progress, and then it slides down the hill on you. I was asking myself, 'Is my potential unhappiness worth this calling? Is it worth this great endeavor to open up the gates of college access to hundreds, thousands, of people?'"

Peterson always expected to work in higher education forever. He had earned a master's degree in marketing, then a doctorate in organizational change and leadership, so he could move up the administrative ladder. In 2020 he was elected

president of the Southern Association for College Admission Counseling. But later, he realized something: He had developed a robust skill set that would translate to other fields. Feeling that he had more to give and eager to find a place that valued it, he left UAB in 2022 to become vice president for talent and culture at Interior Elements, a commercial furniture dealer and design firm.

Peterson, 44, loves the job. Recently, he came home from work and told his wife that he had been laughing a lot with his colleagues. He hadn't been able to say that for a long time.

When an enrollment job opens up, there's no guarantee that qualified applicants will line up to apply. "It's a buyer's market right now, with more open positions out there than leaders to fill them," says Amy Crutchfield, a senior partner with WittKieffer, which has conducted more than 130 enrollment searches over the last five years. "Every institution is looking for just about the same thing." Namely, a tested enrollment leader with a lot of experience and a record of success, which is to say, a track record of meeting or exceeding institutional goals for enrollment growth.

Yet Crutchfield has cautioned clients that a narrow definition of success could factor out promising applicants. "If you're looking at candidates from a public flagship where enrollment has skyrocketed, that's one thing," she says. "But if you're looking at candidates from regional publics, those who bring that experience will be pretty few and far between. We're seeing some clients resetting their expectations in response to new realities." For some colleges, after all, flat enrollments are the new "up."

Typically, enrollment leaders considering a move seek a 10- to 20-percent salary increase, a larger portfolio, and a good sense for what the president or provost they'll report to is like, Crutchfield says. "We're also seeing enrollment leaders who are passionate about college access moving toward mission-based institutions that are more aligned with their values and can give them a real sense of purpose."

Adrienne Amador Oddi is one of them. A first-generation college graduate, she's an outspoken advocate for underrepresented students. In 2020, while serving as dean of admissions and financial aid at Trinity College, a selective liberal-arts institution in Hartford, Conn., she wrote a column urging her counterparts at other colleges to commit to a change in mind-set that might help diversify their campuses: "We can examine our practices and ask ourselves: Who is here? Who is missing? … It's our responsibility to nurture the souls of our institutions." The following year, she became vice president for strategic enrollment and communications at Queens University of Charlotte, which accepts about two-thirds of its applicants. "We get to say yes to more students," she says. "Higher education should not be difficult to access."

Oddi, 36, welcomed the chance to work with Daniel G. Lugo, president of Queens, who understands the complexities of enrollment. Previously, he served as vice president and dean of admission and financial aid at Franklin & Marshall College, in Pennsylvania, and associate dean of admissions at Carleton College, in Minnesota. Though he rejects the notion of an enrollment savior, he acknowledges its appeal: "It's easier for a president and board to wrap their minds around that. It's harder to say 'Hey, in this market, we're providing a redundant product that isn't better than anyone else's.' It's even harder to say 'We've got to fix that."

Lugo says he hired Oddi not to tell the university's story better, but to help ensure that it has a compelling one. A big part of that story will involve the Charlotte Talent Initiative: Queens, in partnership with Mecklenburg County, N.C., has created a new cohort-based career pipeline program for graduates of low-income high schools in Charlotte.

Oddi and Lugo both describe their relationship as strong. She appreciates the ways he often acknowledges the hot seat that she occupies. "I feel like we're in this together," she says. "It doesn't mean that we don't disagree sometimes. It doesn't mean he's differently ambitious from other presidents with whom I've worked before. He might

ask me a thousand questions about whatever decision I'm making. But there's a trust factor. I know he's going to have my back."

Queens had hoped to enroll 330 first-year students last fall. It ended up with 305. Though Oddi and Lugo were both disappointed by the result, he didn't call her down to the principal's office for a talking-to, nor did they spend much time lamenting it. Instead, Oddi says, he asked her what resources she needed to hit an even bigger goal that, in the end, they both agreed on: 385 first-year students this fall. "It wasn't just 'Hit 385,'" Oddi says. Together, they discussed a plan to bump up the institution's discount rate, increase funding for campus-visit programming, make more phone calls to prospects, and so on. "My job," Oddi says, "is to help people understand what it takes to get to the goal."

And Lugo's job, he says, is to help ensure that the college's entire senior leadership team owns the success or failure of a given enrollment strategy: "If you're a VP for enrollment, you really need to feel like that president is in it with you, not just sitting there demanding results. Are they willing to roll up their sleeves with you, to really wrestle with the trade-offs of myriad goals that everyone wants?"

At a time when enrollment leaders are burning out, many of them worry about who will replace them. After all, younger members of the profession have been bailing out like mad.

There's an old saying entry-level admissions officers often hear when they're hired: You'll either be in the field for three years or 30. "Now, we get them for three years, if we're lucky," says Minden, the former vice president at Babson. One ex-admissions director says, "When I would get an admissions officer for 18 months, it felt like a win."

Turnover among younger staffers has always been a constant in admissions. But the pandemic super-charged it, according to every current and former enrollment leader who spoke with *The Chronicle* for this article. They describe it as one of the biggest

challenges they've had to confront since the pandemic began, if not the biggest. During the first two years of the pandemic, the University of Denver had to replace nearly 60 percent of its admissions and financial-aid staff, with some positions turning over more than once, says Todd Rinehart, vice chancellor for enrollment. "People were leaving at every time of the year," he says. "It's really hard to train someone who comes in midyear, during the busiest part of the cycle."

It's more than a hassle. "I lose sleep over this," Rinehart says. "A VP for enrollment can get only so much done on their own. We're only as successful as our staff is successful. If you don't have enough staff to read all the applications and host large visit programs, it impacts the institution itself."

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Minden recalls three admissions officers who had been eager to work for Babson. But after just a few months, they left for corporate-recruitment jobs that paid higher salaries that would help them pay off their student loans. "Traditionally, many young admissions officers went on to grad school or jobs in college counseling," Minden says. "Now, they are leaving for Ernst & Young and Deloitte, companies that are coming to them saying, 'We need a college recruiter, we will give you the work/life balance you are seeking, and we will pay you a lot more.' We tell admissions officers how great working for a college is, but then we saddle them with low salaries and long hours."

Here's one of higher education's not-so-secret secrets: The young men and women tasked with selling higher education convincingly to prospective students typically earn a lot less than their counterparts in advancement. "We pay admissions officers an

abysmal salary," says Pérez, the chief executive of NACAC, "and we ask them to do an incredible amount of work and bring in a ton of revenue."

Peterson, the former admissions director at UAB, recalls hiring entry-level staffers at $31,000 a year, which didn't go very far even in a city with a relatively low cost of living. Many of those staffers, he says, waited tables and delivered groceries on the side. Admissions officers are salespeople, he says, "but they're not making sales money in higher ed." One enrollment vice president recalls trying to secure a $5,000 raise for each of two admissions officers making $25,000 a year at the public university where he previously worked. The institution declined to approve those raises within days of announcing a multimillion-dollar contract extension for its football coach: "That was a moment when I said, 'Man, I don't know about this place.'" That experience informed his decision to seek a new job.

Low pay isn't the only frustration. Some younger staffers are seeing how hard their supervisors are working, how stressed they are, and asking, "Do I want this for myself?" It's happening at tuition-dependent colleges that must claw for every applicant, as well as at wealthy, prestigious institutions that have an abundance of them. "Many younger professionals are concerned about the disconnect they see," Rinehart says. "They buy into the mission of universities, but then they struggle when they don't see our day-to-day practices aligning with that mission, or when they see us pursuing goals that are in conflict with each other, such as lowering the discount rate and expanding access."

Some young admissions officers seek opportunities to effect change in higher education in ways that campus-based jobs typically don't allow them to do. "Admissions work is not work that often facilitates deep reflection, because you're flying a mile a minute," says Jonathan Gowin. A first-generation college graduate from rural Pennsylvania, he was a 2021 recipient of NACAC's Rising Star Award for young professionals. Last spring, he left Carnegie Mellon University to work for the New England Board of Higher Education, where he directs a program that provides

financial assistance to students attending out-of-state colleges. “It’s been rewarding to step back,” he says, “and see higher ed from a more systemic kind of level.”

Gowin, 29, keeps in touch with early-career admissions officers, many of whom are grappling with whether to stick with the profession: “They believe in the work, in what higher ed stands, for, but they’re questioning whether they’re going to be able to live their life the way they want to in this field.” Sure, they’re concerned about pay and work-life balance, but he sees a deeper challenge, too: “How do you maintain the idealism and optimism central to the work of admissions while balancing it with organizational pragmatism you need to keep an institution functioning?”

And that’s where he thinks directors, deans, and enrollment officials play an important role. “They have to show the younger people who are in these pivotal jobs, ‘This is what we’re striving for, this is how you are contributing, this is the impact of your work to the institution.’ If that slips, it’s really unfortunate.”

“I would cringe every year when we would brag about how low the admit rate was. … I didn’t want that to be my gauge of success anymore. It was so toxic.”

At some highly selective campuses, the relentless pursuit of incrementally better numbers associated with prestige can demoralize a staff. One former admissions official who worked at a highly selective college for many years enjoyed traveling, giving presentations, and hosting virtual events. “I was putting my soul and passion into it,” he says. He loved meeting prospective students and dazzling them with descriptions of an institution he knew well and admired deeply. For a long time he

figured that he would be among a wave of millennials who rose to the top of the enrollment field. “One of the next stalwarts,” he says.

But over the years his feelings changed. What he describes as his institutional leaders’ fixation with admissions metrics — the acceptance rate, average SAT score of incoming classes — wore him down: “I would cringe every year when we would brag about how low the admit rate was. This obsession with numbers wasn’t why I got into the field,” he says. “I didn’t want that to be my gauge of success anymore. It was so toxic.”

Not wanting to relocate, he decided against applying for other jobs in admissions. Last year, he took a remote position for a company he likes — a job, he says, that feels like just a job, not an obsession. “What keeps me up at night?” he asks. “Nothing anymore.”

It’s important to understand what drives people out of a profession. But it’s just as important to know what pulls them into it and sustains them over time. For Alan T. Paynter, as for so many others, relationships were everything.

Paynter, who was the first in his family to finish high school, stumbled into an admissions job at Lebanon Valley College in 2001, a few years after graduating from college. The main draw: the opportunity to earn a master’s degree at a reduced rate. Early on, at a professional conference in Pennsylvania, he first heard the line about new hires sticking around for either three years or 30. He raised his hand and said that he would be gone after three. Wrong.

After seven years at Lebanon Valley, Paynter moved on to Dickinson College, where he coordinated multicultural recruitment before being promoted to associate director of admissions. He liked engaging with young people and helping them overcome challenges. And he drew inspiration from many of the admissions leaders he befriended. Among them was the legendary Darryl Jones, who, like Paynter, is Black.

He had worked at nearby Gettysburg College since 1985, and was widely known as a champion of college access (Paynter's children came to call him "Uncle Darryl"). "Their energy was infectious," he says of the many mentors he looked up to. "I thought, 'I can make the same impact as these people.'"

"On any given day I could bring you hundreds of Black and Brown kids out of New York City or Philly with a 4.0 GPA, but we still couldn't enroll most of them because they don't have enough money."

Paynter wanted to stick around for 30 years, keep climbing the admissions ladder, and become director, maybe even a dean. But year after year, he wondered if he would get the chance. When the pandemic hit, Paynter, then in his mid-40s, thought, "Man, is this ever going to happen for me?" Discouraged, he bought two lawn mowers, figuring he would become a landscaper. But his son encouraged him to apply for the open director position at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, in Geneva, N.Y.. He got the job.

In September 2020, Paynter stepped into a challenging situation. Hobart and William Smith had enrolled 458 first-year students in 2019, down from 631 in 2015; over that period, applications fell to about 3,500, from about 4,500. The number of high-school graduates in western New York was shrinking. After Covid, the admissions world had gone virtual, but he was shocked by Hobart and William Smith's modest virtual presence. He saw a need to re-establish relationships with feeder high schools in the region.

Paynter also had to hire replacements for several admissions officers who had left while trying to retain those who weren't sure about sticking around. "The expectations never stop," Paynter says. "Whether you have the same staff or have to bring in a new staff, the goal is still X number of applications, you need to make it happen. If someone on your team leaves mid-cycle, the goals are still the same."

Paynter worked nights and weekends, his eyes glued to email, while leading a short-staffed operation. Though the applicant pool grew and more students enrolled, those numbers fell short of trustees' goals for first-year enrollment and revenue.

Sometimes, Paynter, who came from a low-income background, would consider the inequities he knew all too well but mostly felt powerless to fix. There he was, busting his tail at an institution struggling to fill seats, in a nation full of qualified, deserving students who don't see a path to college: "I would think, 'On any given day I could bring you hundreds of Black and Brown kids out of New York City or Philly with a 4.0 GPA, but we still couldn't enroll most of them because they don't have enough money.'"

The pressure never relented. Paynter struggled with how to keep his staff informed without overwhelming them, how to explain the stakes of their work without freaking them out: "How do you tell a 22-year-old that if you don't go out there and lose sleep just like I am, some people on this campus are going to lose their jobs?"

Paynter gained weight. His blood pressure shot up. One day he fell down — he couldn't explain why — and had to go to the ER. Finally, he and his wife decided it was time for a change. He left Hobart and William Smith in January to become director of college counseling at Sacred Heart Academy Bryn Mawr, in Pennsylvania. "I wanted my life back," he says. This past Presidents' Day, Paynter had the day off for the first time in decades. He spent part of it at Home Depot, buying what he needed to build a deck.

Though Paynter says he's happier and healthier since changing jobs, he often reflects on the profession he left. "I did love it," he says. "I love it now."

One of the best parts was meeting students from all over, hearing about their dreams, playing a small part in their journey to college. Sometimes, when he goes on Facebook and sees what some of them are doing now, he'll think, "Wow, this is why I did it."

But he worries that it has become harder for young admissions officers to build such relationships: "So many other factors now impact your ability to just be passionate about making a difference in another young person's life." The ever-increasing pressures on admissions staffs often stand in the way of that. "Entry-level people, they're coming in and being asked to go straight through the fire with very little support and training," Paynter says. "There's a disconnect between them and the senior-level people with so much on their plate. It's harder to help facilitate that passion that they will need to stick around for 30 years."

Paynter had tried to emulate his mentors. He hopes that he didn't lead any of his admissions officers astray by encouraging them to grind, grind, grind. He will always feel bad, he says, about the ones he couldn't motivate the same way that his own bosses once motivated him.

Back in 2008, Paynter received several emails that he would never forget. They came from his boss, Robert J. Massa, then vice president for enrollment and college relations at Dickinson, who made a point of encouraging new staffers to make their mark in the profession. He wanted them to know that he would support them, help them grow, and reward them for good work.

Massa's emails made Paynter feel like he was in the right place, doing the right thing. One sentence in particular still glows in his mind: "You've got a future in this field."

It was true. For a while.

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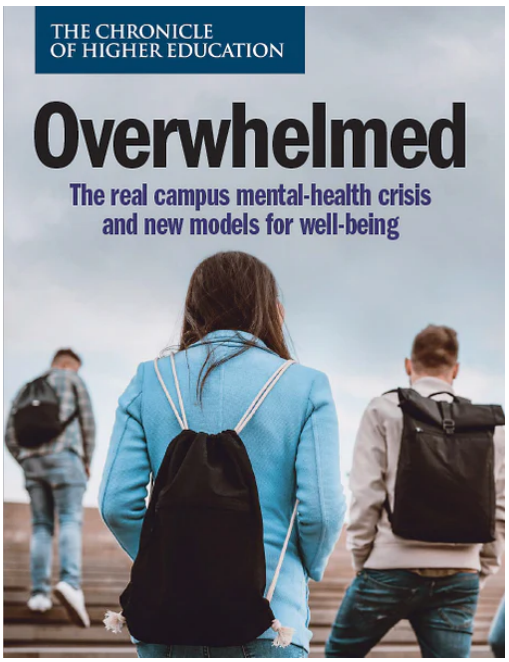
We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT | THE WORKPLACE

Eric Hoover

Eric Hoover writes about the challenges of getting to, and through, college. Follow him on Twitter @erichoov, or email him, at eric.hoover@chronicle.com.

IN THE CHRONICLE STORE



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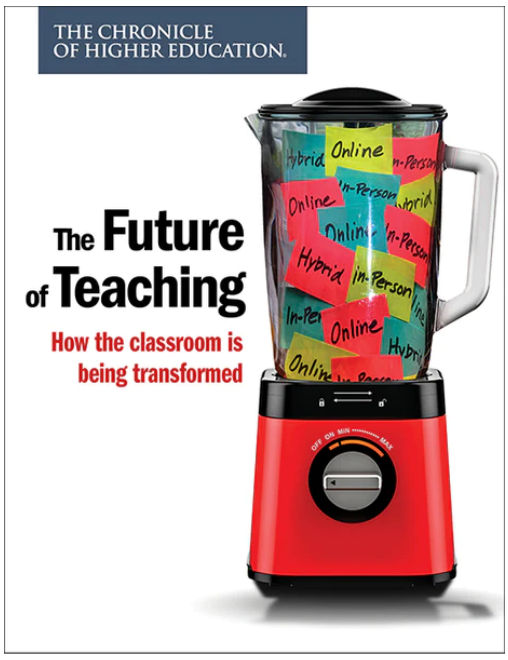

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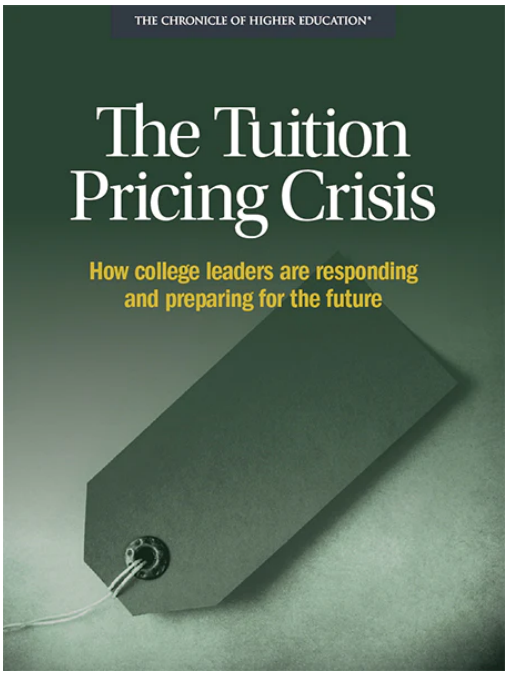

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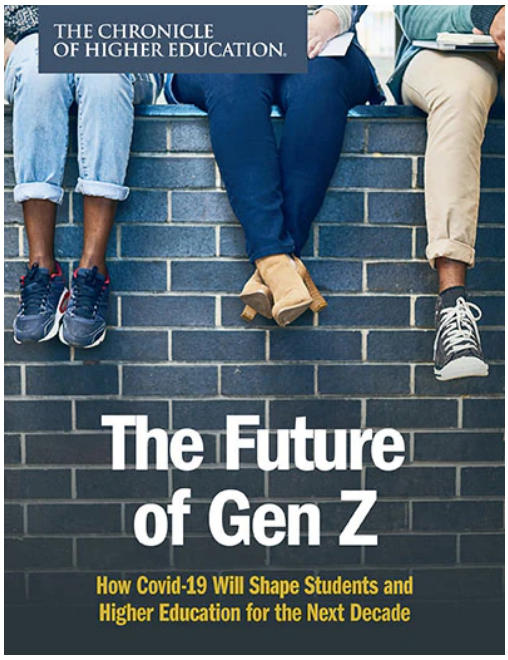

The Future of Gen Z