EAB

Virtual Enrollment Audit Report

Prepared for Compton College
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Community College Executive Forum

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Introduction to the Virtual Enrollment Audit

For Many Students, Onboarding Is a Complex Web of Services

Every year, many community colleges lose over half of all applicants before the semester even begins. Despite efforts to improve customer service and create more welcoming environments, community colleges still require students to navigate complex processes and policies. Mazes of offices, forms, and new terms can discourage students and delay their progress toward enrollment.
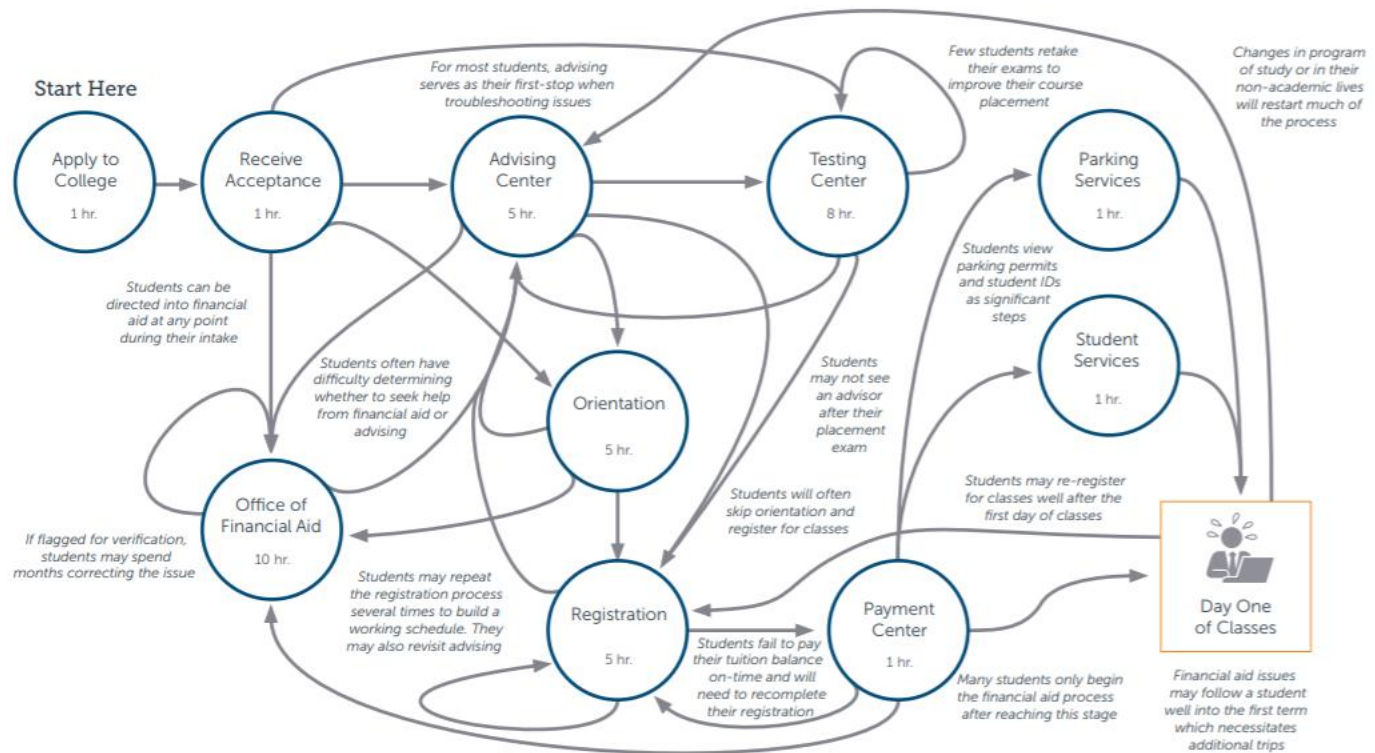
EAB's Virtual Enrollment Audit Guides Institutions to Right-Set Onboarding Processes

In the wake of COVID-19, the college website and virtual enrollment process have replaced the physical functions of the campus and staff. These changes have maintained the hurdles to enrollment listed above, have accentuated those hurdles, or even provided new obstacles to students. Beyond updating your website, community colleges must also update enrollment processes for this new remote reality. This audit, which is adapted from EAB's Enrollment Pain Points (Secret Shopper) Audit Service, audits institutions' virtual enrollment and onboarding function. This report highlights the most pertinent problems and suggests best-practice solutions.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Audit Overview

The Virtual Enrollment Audit and Report

The Virtual Enrollment Audit breaks down the enrollment process into seven categories, listed below, that students complete virtually before the first day of class. A "secret shopper" (i.e., an EAB researcher) attempts these seven steps with a goal of getting as far through the college enrollment pipeline as possible guided solely by staff, students, or resources provided by the website and virtual communications. Ideally, to replicate the student experience as closely as possible, this shopper had limited knowledge of the institution and its inner workings. The shopper adopted the persona of an adult learner looking to complete a postsecondary degree.

Using the Audit, the shopper uncovered pain points in Compton College's virtual enrollment process. Using these results and notes provided by the secret shopper, EAB researchers developed the following report.

Our aim in this customized report is to give institutions a third-party perspective on their onboarding processes, with resources at the end to guide discussion of the results with the appropriate staff or task force on campus. This report identifies the biggest pain points in Compton College's virtual enrollment process and provides focused advice and resources to swiftly fix these issues. Additionally, the report lists a bibliography of other resources and an opportunity for follow up for more assistance.

The researcher completed all seven onboarding steps during the five-day auditing period. In addition to the following pain points, the researcher would also like to note your institution met nearly all the Welcome and Website Navigation and Orientation criteria of the audit.

Onboarding Steps Assessed in a Virtual Secret Shopper Audit

Welcome and Website Navigation

Application and Admissions

Financial Aid and Costs

Advising and Career Counseling

Scheduling and Registration

Orientation

Post-Registration Engagement

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Virtual Enrollment Pain Points

The Largest Pain Points for Compton College (CC)

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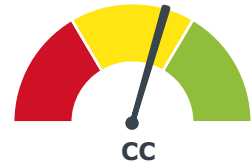
Application and Admissions

Largest hurdles identified:

- While the EAB researcher was immediately notified of acceptance, he was not provided with an ID number until two days after applying.
- While the EAB researcher received an email that included instructions for activating his student account and registering for classes, the email did not contain a step-by-step list outlining further onboarding steps (e.g., attending orientation, meeting with a counselor).
- The EAB researcher did not receive nudges through calls or text messages to complete further onboarding steps after applying.
- The EAB researcher was not provided with help choosing a major (e.g., a link to a career quiz) before or after applying.

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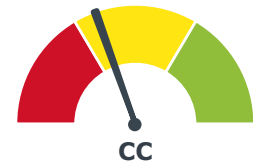
Advising and Career Counseling

Largest hurdles identified:

- Post application communications do not proactively instruct students to schedule a counseling appointment.
- Despite scheduling a 30-minute counseling appointment, the EAB researcher was not provided the opportunity to discuss career goals or best courses outside of first semester general education requirements. The counselor instructed the researcher to independently register for two classes and schedule another appointment for career advising later in the semester.
- The counselor did not thoroughly explain several key distinctions in a jargon-free manner (e.g., full- versus part-time status, full semester versus mid-term (8-week) classes).
- The EAB researcher was not asked about expected off campus commitments and responsibilities during the counseling appointment.
- Although the "Program Mapper" page provides sample program maps, the EAB researcher was not directed to view program maps that chart courses from day one to completion.

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Virtual Enrollment Pain Points (Cont.)

The Largest Pain Points for Compton College (CC)

3

CC
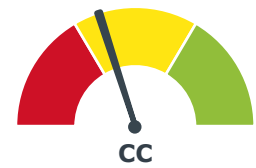
Scheduling and Registration

Largest hurdles identified:

- The "How to Register" page is not easily accessible from the homepage. Students must click on "Admissions and Records" under the "Admissions" tab and subsequently locate the page within 21 options listed under the "Navigation" menu.

- The "How to Register" page includes jargon that may be confusing or overwhelming to new students (e.g., "Ticket Time," "Tier," "Enrollment Priorities").

- Course scheduling and registration resources do not provide instructions or explain important considerations for building a schedule (e.g., general education requirements, transferrable credits).

- Course scheduling and registration resources do not explain the difference between part- and full-time status and the consequences for financial aid and completion timelines.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

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Resources and Advice to Fix Pain Points (1 of 2)

Immediately Address Onboarding Issues

1 **Application and Admissions**

– **Provide student identification numbers upon acceptance.** Many colleges send student ID numbers immediately with acceptance. **Houston Community College** provides students missing a Social Security Number with a unique "P-Number" (i.e., a temporary institution-specific number) so students can proceed through onboarding without delay. This allows new students to complete the next steps of enrollment on the same day as their application.

  • Tool: Immediate ID Provision

– **Provide students a list of enrollment steps with guidance on each step immediately after the application, as well as through email communication.** For example, students submitting online applications to **Allegany College of Maryland** immediately view a webpage with instructions on the remaining steps left in the college enrollment process. This checklist enables students to plan ahead and feel like they're making progress towards enrollment

  • Tool: Sample Enrollment Checklist

– **View the following resources to nudge prospective students through onboarding steps and promote timely enrollment:**

  • Tool: Tips for Texting Students and Parents

  • Tool: Sample Text Message Nudge Calendar

2 **Advising and Career Counseling**

– **Make career goals the center of the advising discussion.** Discussing course placement provides another opportunity to help the applicant see how the college connects them to their career goals, and it promotes a successful academic career without unnecessary courses or changes in major.

– **Proactively discuss student's off-campus commitments and responsibilities.** Most community college students are part-time and juggling many responsibilities. Discussing these needs aids student success and show that the college can help students reach their goals even with a hectic schedule.

– **Reassure students that their classes directly contribute to their goals.** A complete advising discussion provides confidence to applicants that their courses are a best fit for their needs and goals and guides toward timely completion.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

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Immediately Address Onboarding Issues

3 **Scheduling and Registration**

- **Walk students through how to build a schedule.**
  - Tool: Meta Major Scheduling Menus

- **Acknowledge students' off-campus commitments and responsibilities in online resources.** Most community college students are part-time and juggling many responsibilities. Highlighting these difficulties aids student success and shows that the college can help students reach their goals even with a hectic schedule.

- **Make note of the consequences of part-time status on financial aid and completion timelines.**

- **Ensure scheduling and registration resources are easily accessible.** For example, **Waukesha County Technical College** lists registration steps for various types of students on its "Registration Steps" page. Students can also access this page via several other admissions pages.

- **Clarify higher-ed jargon and explain the difference between part and full-time status, and the consequences for financial aid and completion timelines.**
  - Tool: Jargon Reduction Audit
  - Tool: Higher Ed Terminology Translation Exercise
  - Tool: Higher Ed Jargon Reduction Exercise

Special Considerations for the COVID Era

This section goes beyond the onboarding process, but these practices lead students to a successful semester and play an oversized role in student success.

- **Remind students of their first day of class and class time for each course.** Many students finish scheduling with a vague idea of when their classes start. Even when this information is clear, students often become distracted by more pertinent issues in the time between registration and the first day of class. Especially in a virtual, pandemic environment, reminders like this are one step of many that lead to a successful semester.

- **Have course instructors introduce themselves and explain class and technology protocols prior to the first day of class.** Especially with a remote course, students may need additional preparation for the first day. This engagement provides students a sense of welcome, sets them up for success on their first day, and provides an additional reminder about when class begins.

- **Ensure instructors or support staff immediately reach out to students who miss the first day of class.** Failure to attend the first class can unnecessarily lead a student to stop out and should serve as a clear indicator of a need for support services. Reaching out to these students to make sure they have what they need to be successful, and ensuring they know they will not be punished for missing the class, can get many students back on track.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Discussion Questions

Diagnostic Questions to Identify Next Steps

1 **What have we learned from COVID-19 about designing and improving our onboarding processes going forward?** Regardless of in-person or remote classes, COVID-19 has changed the way colleges operate at all levels. What new processes or changes are here to stay for onboarding?

2 **What do we need to fix in our enrollment pipeline?** What are the problems of the student experience? What do we need to do to make our onboarding process more student centric? Are any problems unique to the virtual enrollment process?

3 **What changes will we make immediately?** Considering this report and other input, what requires immediate action? What changes are likely to have the most outsized impact?

4 **What long-term changes to onboarding are we going to address going forward?** Some changes may require significant investment or training, or there may be more pressing needs for the current enrollment cycle. What efforts will we prioritize next, potentially for a return to in-person operations?

Further Reading

CCEF Resources and Services to Support Your COVID-19 Enrollment Needs

Researchers consulted EAB's internal and online research libraries for the audit. Below are the primary sources for our enrollment best practices and tools. Team members looking to learn more are encouraged to read these studies and toolkits or reach out to your Strategic Leader to learn more.

Onboarding and Enrollment

⟫ **Eliminating Enrollment Pain Points**

STUDY and TOOLKIT

Students struggle to navigate the community college intake process, from application to the first day of classes, encountering obstacles that prevent them from ever setting foot in the classroom. This study and toolkit will help streamline your enrollment process and increase applicant conversion rates.

⟫ **Preventing Early Attrition**

STUDY and TOOLKIT

This study and toolkit examine how to prevent early attrition by supporting optimal financial decisions, guiding intentional academic decisions, and minimizing first semester dropout.

⟫ **The Shifting Enrollment Landscape**

STUDY and TOOLKIT

This study explores how to target your outreach and recruitment activities to two key types of students: those new to higher education and those with many college options.

Guided Pathways

⟫ **Achieving Pathways Goals with Student-Centered Design**

STUDY AND TOOLKIT

Guided Pathways was billed as an opportunity to improve student completion and community college sustainability, but implementation of this model varies widely. Use this study and toolkit to launch or improve upon your Guided Pathways efforts.

Virtual Presence

⟫ **Web and Mobile Audit**

AUDIT and REPORT

Our Web Presence and Mobile Site Audit has been updated to include a COVID-19 scan. We will evaluate your website and program landing pages and provide a customized report aimed to give you a third-party perspective on how to optimize your online presence.

> ▶ **Contact Your Strategic Leader for a Deeper Dive**
>
> - EAB researchers will walk through all our enrollment strategies, further discuss pain points identified in this audit, and troubleshoot to determine the best strategies for your institution.