Enrollment yields becoming ever harder to meet

A decline in high school graduates and students applying to more institutions are what one expert sees as the two main reasons more colleges and universities are struggling to meet their admission yield targets.

The average yield rate among four-year colleges and universities fell from 42.9 percent in 2009 to 36.9 percent in 2012, according to the National Association for College Admission Counseling's "State of College Admission 2013" report.

At the time of the research, 28 percent of students were applying to seven or more schools, up from about 14 percent a decade before. As students submit more applications, yields simultaneously decline and become harder to predict, says Michael Reilly, executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

High school graduation numbers are also making the landscape more complex. The number of seniors graduating high school will continue to decline through 2020 in 29 states, and will remain relatively flat in 12 other states, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education reported in "Knocking at the College Door" (2012).

Fewer high school graduates is a situation that creates more competition among schools, which in turn sweeten financial-aid offers late in the admissions cycle to attract students. "If your competitors are changing their financial-aid packaging strategies, it makes it more difficult to predict your yield," Reilly says.

Universities can also attempt to accelerate enrollment by tapping their waitlist and accepting more transfer and international students. But Don Hossler, a professor of educational leadership and policy studies at **Indiana University**, advises prudence when considering such measures. "Those kinds of things are a risk because the more you change your profile, especially in the downward direction, the less likely you will be in high demand in following years," says Hossler, who also is former editor of the newsletter Enrollment Management Review.

Recent years have seen a few cases of universities missing yield that reportedly resulted in the loss of millions of dollars in revenue. "If you miss yield for a class by 10 percent, you can't just increase the next class 20 percent because you have limitations on class and course sizes," Reilly says. "So missing yield once can be something that challenges an institution for four or five years."

In extreme cases, yield issues can result in someone within the admissions department being fired. "I've seen it happen a couple of times recently, and I would guess that it's going to happen more" as yields become harder to predict, Reilly says.

But Hossler says that should

happen only when yields are missed a few years in a row. "A good enrollment management organization will have various indicators they can use to give them a sense of how the yield is looking," he says. "The earlier the admissions department gives their president, provost or CFO a heads-up, the more time they have to find out what's happening at peer institutions and perhaps make adjustments. That kind of information and those kinds of explanations are what could keep an admissions officer in good standing."

—Chris Nicholson

DATA POINT

77%

—Students who applied to at least three colleges or universities in 2012, compared to 67% in 2002

Source: "State of College Admission 2013" report (released in 2014), National Association for College Admission Counseling

HASHTAG HIGHLIGHT

#iHeartAPU—*Azusa Pacific University* in California first used the hashtag in 2011 to hype up orientation, where students get T-shirts with the phrase. Incoming, current and prospective students and alumni were using #iHeartAPU year-round, so a new hashtag—#APUBound—was introduced in 2013. That one is now used to interact with students in the months leading up to orientation. APU also promotes a countdown clock that gives incoming students a fun way to share the number of days, hours, minutes and seconds until they're on campus. Spokesperson Allison Oster says #iHeartAPU is now spotted more frequently on Twitter than the @AzusaPacific handle.

—Melissa Ezarik