# Streamlining Communication Platforms

## AND THE GROWTH OF HIGHER EDUCATION

BY DAVID VINSON, PHD

It is hardly a secret that higher education enrollment is in a state of decline, and of course the pandemic only added fuel to the fire. Overall enrollment fell 4.1% between May 2021 and May 2022, and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center notes that the total undergraduate student body has shrunk by 9.4 percent since the pandemic began. The slide in enrollment since 2018 is the steepest on record, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. But there is and continues to be an unseen benefit, one signaling a recalibration that has transformed how we approach higher education. The pandemic and the innumerable challenges it presented has made us better. We have responded with resilience and ingenuity, and we have embraced the great responsibility of keeping our students healthy and engaged.

The current landscape is that all institutions of higher education are competing for fewer students, and those who have enjoyed a competitive edge have simplified their admissions and enrollment processes. Many universities quickly adopted cloud-based solutions in 2020 to support remote learning. What we have since learned is that prospective students now expect the same modern and accessible communication channels they find elsewhere. In fact, as we have all acclimated to more flexible modes of learning, more than half of students and faculty now say they prefer a hybrid learning model that combines in-person and online education. Cloud-based technologies are transforming higher education models. They represent a viable strategy for not only putting a gradual halt to enrollment trends but of growing our campuses and facilitating more inclusive and generative learning experiences.

## Combating Enrollment Decline with Cloud-Based Solutions

Many universities still operate with legacy siloed systems and therefore lack updated communication platforms. Research shows that in select cases, students have had to interact with more than seventeen different technologies during the enrollment process—one for applications, another for financial aid, another for transcripts, and so on. Imagine their frustration and how this experience alone could deter them from enrollment. Thankfully, cloud applications help to tie disparate systems together, making communication simpler and more seamless. The most impactful digital enrollment services offer a streamlined user experience across multiple channels, from the web to text and mobile apps. These choices enhance the relationship between campus and student, supporting back-office efficiencies that eliminate manual processing for admissions personnel.

Cloud platforms in online programs are now a major asset in steadying the overall decline of enrollment numbers. By using instant messages, desktop chat, and file-sharing, universities are reworking traditional education models. Moreover, just by offering a video meeting of a session, class sizes can increase with ease; indeed, video-based sessions provide more education to more students who otherwise cannot share the space of the classroom. In 2021, nearly 60% of all postsecondary degree seekers took at least some online classes. Nearly 30% studied exclusively online. The number of students accessing online courses now exceeds pre-pandemic levels, and the United States is home to the highest number of remote learners on a global scale. Cloud-based communications providers help universities set up multichannel contact centers to engage with students through voice, video, chat, and social media. Embedded analytics also enables institutions to track communications and measure the effectiveness of channels and

messaging. Offering multilingual web chat options, text alerts, and other multichannel communications can further strengthen the student recruitment process.

Carolina University (CU), located in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, recently set enrollment records after implementing an advanced communications technology. In a sense, the university found itself trapped in 20th-century communications technology. One task in streamlining communication was to update the phone system. CU adopted a cloud-native platform with integrated voice, video meetings, and chat capabilities, and the administrative office began communicating with students using text chat capabilities—all the while still keeping cell numbers private. The Admissions office saved $50,000 the first year, enrolled most students in remote learning, and added e-sports to the athletic program. CU likewise implemented cloud technologies that made it easier for employees to work from home and communicate more

efficiently with students by text. A cloud-based communications platform can even help in recruiting international students. While international student enrollment declined during the pandemic, it is now rising again and remains an attractive market for U.S. higher education institutions.

**Protecting Personal Privacy with Cloud-First Approaches**

In a report by the 2023 *Higher Education Trend Watch*, which focuses on emergent macro trends in higher education, the #1 trending concern for IT departments is the need for increased data security and protection against threats to personal privacy. To address this issue, we are witnessing a shift in culture at the institutional level. More than ever, universities are conducting strategic planning as well as implementing new initiatives and policies to address cybersecurity challenges. These efforts include campaigns to increase cybersecurity awareness, investing in cyber

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insurance, and ramping up efforts to detect and prevent threats with regular risk assessments, phishing tests, third-party consulting and monitoring, and audits. Just as important as the cultural component of responding to data security threats, we are seeing major shifts in technology. Universities are expanding, upgrading, and adopting new technologies and security measures such as multi-factor authentication, password tools, threat detection, monitoring, ransomware protection software, and endpoint and Wi-Fi security.

Cloud-based solutions empower universities to eliminate the need for costly on-premises services. Savings can then be applied to cyber security improvements, disaster recovery, and development of testing capabilities. Integrating on-premises firewalls with cloud computing keeps processes running smoothly and accelerates disaster recovery processes. Having smart information security and a sound strategy for disaster recovery goes hand in hand with creating efficiencies for higher education institutions. A cloud-based approach helps universities maintain high security standards and compliance while also allowing them to divert resources to innovation.

## Cloud-Based Technologies and Emergency Notifications

Mass notification systems are an integral part of how higher education institutions communicate with students, faculty, and staff. Threats to campus safety—for instance, severe weather or other adverse events—must be communicated in a swift and reliable manner. Custom branded campus safety apps can deliver essential information that keeps everyone informed and ready to take needed actions. The technology market offers a variety of options for campus communication software that facilitates critical information sharing across multiple channels, such as SMS, voice, text, email, digital signage, website, social media, desktop alerts, sirens, and more. Safety apps also build relationships and student communication by empowering users to interact with campus officials to share or report timely information in a manner with which they feel most comfortable, including anonymous tip texting. Such streamlined communication extends not only to students but to contractors, parents, and other on-campus guests. Universities need only to implement an opt-in feature by text that integrates with the institution's current mass notification system.

## Further Benefits of Cloud-Based Solutions

Cloud-based solutions foster greater collaboration campus-wide, supporting heavy network traffic and simultaneous workflows. They likewise reduce the need to leverage disparate communication chains, including in-person and email. During peak administrative cycles, the cloud offers peace of mind that processes will not be hindered by increased network traffic, largely correlated with key institutional workflows such as scheduling or registration. They are inherently flexible in function and can support ebbs and flows in usage demands.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Dr. David Vinson has a PhD in English with specializations in transatlantic literature and cultural studies. He is a committed scholar, teacher, and dad. If you ever meet David, avoid the subject of soccer. His fandom borders on the truly obnoxious.