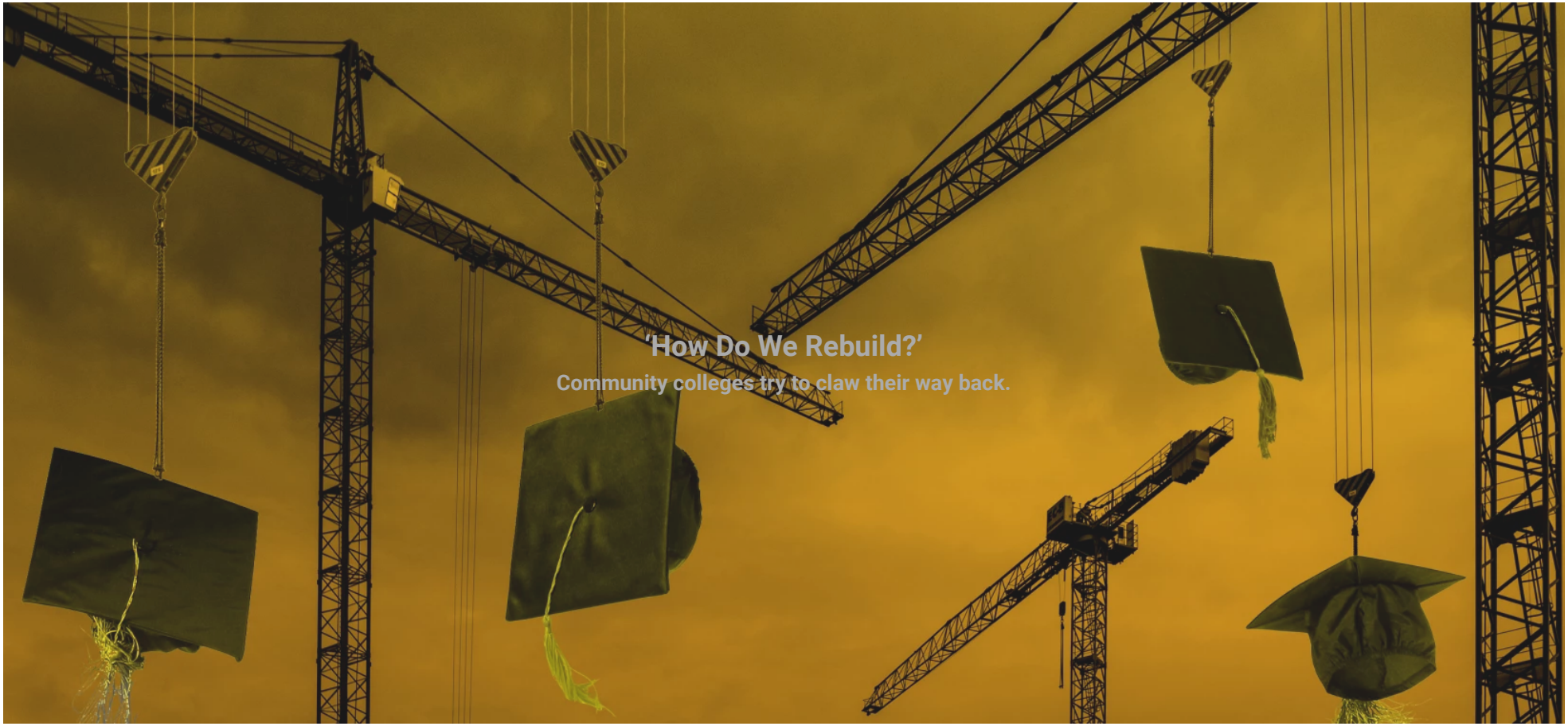
THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



COVID'S TOLL ON ENROLLMENT

By Lee Gardner

NOVEMBER 10, 2021

When schools in Shelby County, Tenn., reopened in March for the first time since the pandemic began, Shanita Brown was optimistic. With Memphis's children ending remote learning and returning to the classroom, their parents might be able to get back to their pre-Covid-19 lives — including taking classes at Southwest Tennessee Community College, where Brown is associate vice president for enrollment services.

She hoped for a turnaround. Enrollment at Southwest had dropped 22 percent in the fall of 2020 and wasn't improving. By the time schools reopened in March, applications to Southwest for the fall semester were down by 68 percent from a year earlier. But by April, after Shelby County students had been back in school for a couple of weeks, applications for fall had surged — they were still down, but only by 10 or 14 percent from the previous year, depending on the week. "Everyone was of the thought, Okay, well, everything is going back to normal," Brown says. "We were doing the happy dance."

The colleges are dealing with the fallout of inequities as manifested and magnified through the pandemic. They may be doing so for years to come.

But the students didn't come in the numbers hoped for, to any of Southwest's six locations in the Memphis area, including its Union Avenue campus in central Memphis, just steps from historic Sun Studios, or its Macon Cove campus on the workaday fringes of town. The college's fall headcount was down 2.6 percent from the fall of 2020, to about 7,100 students, in early October. The college's leaders had planned the institution's budget for the 2022 fiscal year based on a modestly hopeful 1 percent enrollment increase, so "that's a hit for us," says Tracy D. Hall, the president. After nearly two years of enrollment and budget setbacks, the institution now faces a projected $10-million shortfall on a $65-million annual operating budget.

Community colleges and those they often serve — especially people of color and those in lower-income communities — have suffered disproportionately during the pandemic. While white-collar workers were often able to set up a laptop on their dining-room table and keep doing their job, many blue-collar laborers were let go, or kept working outside the home at higher risk of exposure to the virus. The impact on community-college enrollment nationwide was enormous. (About 60 percent of Southwest's students are Black, and 7 percent are Latinx; nearly 70 percent are eligible for Pell Grants.)

Meanwhile, life has returned to something like normal on many four-year campuses — the closest four-year public institution to Southwest, the University of Memphis, saw its undergraduate enrollment remain flat between the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2020, according to federal data. (Preliminary figures for this fall show an undergraduate-enrollment decline of about 4 percent from a year earlier.) But many community colleges are still dealing with the fallout of social inequities as manifested and magnified through the pandemic, and they may be doing so for years to come.

An analysis of U.S. Census data by the Community College Research Center in the fall of 2020 found that 40 percent of households that included members with community-college plans were canceling them, more than double the rate for households with four-year college plans. That's an "extraordinarily high number," says Thomas Brock, director of the center and a co-author of the analysis. The foremost reason given for staying away from community college, he adds, was "concerns about the virus — either they caught it, they were worried about catching it, or someone in their household had it."

Anecdotally, students stopped attending Southwest during the pandemic for what's become a litany of familiar reasons. In addition to job losses and health concerns, many students ended up caring for a sick family member or are parents themselves and had to help their kids learn from home every day. Some didn't have access to a computer or reliable Wi-Fi or had to share the one machine available at home. Some students struggled with grief over lost loved ones, stress, or mental-health issues.

Leaders at Southwest have taken many steps, big and small, to bring students back to the college while also grappling with longstanding structural challenges that make life difficult for community colleges and those they hope to educate. As part of that process, it has confronted some of the shortcomings institutions of its kind often face and has begun to ponder changes that in some cases may be long overdue.

The Steepest Decline

Even though its enrollment was relatively stable this year, Southwest has still experienced the largest drop in headcount among Tennessee's community colleges since 2019.

College	Fall 2019	Fall 2020	Fall 2021	% Change (2019-21)
Chattanooga State	8,148	7,604	6,575	−19
Cleveland State	3,383	3,101	3,161	−7
Columbia State	6,455	6,056	5,387	−17
Dyersburg State	2,849	2,732	2,778	−3
Jackson State	4,946	4,293	3,938	−20
Motlow State	7,023	6,566	5,852	−17
Nashville State	8,019	7,101	6,647	−17
Northeast State	6,100	5,460	5,205	−15
Pellissippi State	10,800	9,463	8,835	−18
Roane State	6,016	5,329	4,775	−21
Southwest	9,433	7,371	7,177	−24
Volunteer State	9,227	8,884	7,417	−20
Walters State	6,327	5,766	5,379	−15

Data for 2021 are preliminary and unedited.
Source: The College System of Tennessee; Southwest Tennessee Community College • Created with Datawrapper

As the pandemic spread in the spring of 2020, leaders at Southwest did what they could to keep students engaged and enrolled. But one thing the college learned early on is that the challenges of Covid-19 are so steep and complex that simple remedies may not be enough.

Southwest offered students who weren't eligible for either of the state's two tuition-free community-college programs a take-three-classes-get-a-fourth-free deal, supported financially by the institution's foundation. It was intended to encourage students to remain enrolled or return, but only six students signed up. Leaders spent the unused funds on 3,500 laptops to provide free of charge to students who might not have one at home. More than a third went unclaimed.

Southwest allotted part of the $16 million the institution received from the federal pandemic bailout to erase outstanding debt students had with the college that might keep them from re-enrolling. (Southwest also erased the debt of students who had already graduated to enable them to use their transcripts in their job searches.) Many of the 810 students reached during one calling campaign didn't believe the call was real. "There are so many scams out there now that you have to convince them," says Jeannie Smith, the chief financial officer. Southwest wiped out about $775,000 in institutional debt, and nearly 600 students re-enrolled for the fall of 2021.

Southwest, like many community colleges, has in recent years put more of an emphasis on "high touch" practices to keep its students enrolled and on track, says Jacqueline Faulkner, vice president for student affairs. Such practices have continued, and intensified, during the pandemic. The college has drafted employees to conduct a series of phone campaigns "to hear specifically, from students, what was the barrier, and often

it was extremely small," Faulkner says — getting connected to child care on campus or a free transit card. Such efforts account for "why we have maintained as flat as we are, in comparison to some of our peer institutions," she adds.

For students no longer at the institution "there's no one story," says Cory L. Major, associate vice president for retention and student success. Some may be just a few credit hours shy of graduating. Others may have quit, discouraged by online learning or by college-level work in general. A few may have transferred to other institutions.

Major started at Southwest in August, and quickly began pulling together data from a variety of mostly incompatible sources to try to parse the financial and academic factors affecting students, like whether they were enrolled in Tennessee Promise or Tennessee Reconnect, the two state programs that make community-college tuition free for, respectively, recent high-school graduates and many older students returning to school. Data indicate that the Tennessee Promise program may have helped students during the pandemic — there are more recent high-school graduates taking advantage of the program enrolled at Southwest now than before the pandemic (see chart). But the Tennessee Reconnect scholarship didn't result in the same boost for older students, and enrollment among those eligible fell.

"It would be a mistake to think, I just need to wait this out."

Major also analyzed students' financial-aid status, their academic standing and degree progress, and other variables. For weeks, he says, it was "a whole lot of spreadsheeting." Now the college can look at its students, the 2019 cohort in particular, Major says, "and track down where that that cohort breaks out in terms of students who have already graduated, students who are in the pipeline to graduate, and students who, with some nudging, potentially could be crossing the finish line before this academic year is over."

About 300 students landed in the latter category, and it's there that Major is focusing much of his attention these days. He is finding that some of the students who could graduate this year have been held back by some minor administrative hurdle — demonstrating satisfactory academic progress for their financial aid or filling out forms. Major and his staff can help with that. Others have indicated they're not interested in coming back if they might have to take classes online. "We're actually beginning to do the same thing with the fall 2020 cohort," he adds.

Even if Southwest can't bring back all, or even most, of the students who stopped attending during the pandemic, "our hope is to get them back in communication with us so that we can document some of those reasons why they're sitting out at the moment, or what their plans are," Major says. But just getting in touch with them can be a challenge. The students the institution serves are often transient in nature, and "in the midst of the pandemic, their life circumstances changed, phone numbers changed, addresses changed, work situations changed," he says. "The communications flow was severed for some of those students."

While Major reaches out to former students, Brown, the enrollment vice president, does so to future students, a job also made tougher by Covid-19. The best tool Brown and her recruiters have is visiting high schools and other events, to talk up Southwest's programs and walk students and their parents through the application and financial-aid process. "When the pandemic hit and the schools went remote, we lost that," she says. With everything going on, Brown and her staff at first struggled to schedule even virtual events. Applications plunged by two-thirds.

Once Shelby County Schools reopened in March, Brown and her recruiters raced to schedule a calendar of high-school visits, campus tours, and financial-aid events. The pace hasn't let up, she says: "We're getting in as many schools, getting as many students applied, getting as many informational days on the books as possible."

Free College Maintained Its Appeal for Traditional-Age Students

Southwest's net enrollment of students in Tennessee Promise, a free-tuition program for high-school graduates, has increased since the start of the pandemic.

Source: Southwest Tennessee Community College • Created with Datawrapper

The pandemic has forced changes in how Southwest operates, and some of them have illuminated new ways of working that may turn out to be desirable — even lasting.

Take advising, for example. The advising staff at Southwest talks about "peak season" the way waiters and cooks talk about "dinner rush." In the three weeks leading up to the beginning of a semester, most of the college's students will need to check in with the advising office for help with registering for classes. Before Covid-19, there might be "40 or 50 students in the hallway" at the office's usual 4:30 closing time, says Ronald Claxton, interim director of advising, and "the wait time was, like, an hour to two hours and a half." Being done for the day at 8:30 or 9 wasn't unusual.

When the pandemic sent everything online, staff members scrambled to find ways to continue advising effectively. Many students don't have computers, and advising over the phone proved a challenge. Often, "when you call them, they're in the grocery store or they're somewhere where they can't talk," Claxton says. If they can talk, they're talking on the device they need to use to register. "It's very hard to show them how to do it on the phone," he says.

Eventually, the advising office asked the college's marketing and communications team to come up with a short video advising students on how to register, which is sent out in an email with suggested courses, further instructions, and links. "Very seldom do they call back and say, I'm lost," Claxton says.

With the advent of vaccines and the lifting of some Covid-19 restrictions, the advising staff returned to their offices this summer and geared up for a different sort of peak season. They took in-person appointments in the open spaces of the computer labs on the Macon Cove and Union Avenue campuses, which allowed the financial-aid office to set up socially distant counseling sessions, too.

Jhona Gipson was happy to be back in her office advising students, even if it was behind a tall plexiglass screen. Working in the office again produced an unexpected benefit: She got to leave for the day at 4:30 once during peak season, which has never happened in her five years at Southwest. Before then, things had gotten a little lonely — and more difficult — working from home, away from her coworkers and the students. "My days were longer working from home than they were on campus, but we were able to reach more people in that way." She knows that online advising was easier for some of her students who are parents, too.

The online format also benefited students seeking help with financial aid. Before the pandemic, they would have needed to come to campus before 6 p.m. Felecia N. Bohanon, the college's specialist in charge of Tennessee Reconnect, thinks that the online financial-aid option may simply work better for students who might not be able to leave work at 5 or can't afford aftercare for school-age children. "Virtual was more convenient," she says.

The online option seems to work for all kinds of students. When the financial-aid team returned to campus in August, Bohanon opened up her schedule for in-person appointments. For the first week, no one registered to see her. She told her supervisor she wanted to add online appointments again, and reserved 8 a.m. to noon for online and the rest of the day for in-person walk-ins. "In the morning when I come in — full," she says. Afternoon? Nothing." Now her schedule is full every day, but all her appointments are virtual.

The push-and-pull between in-person and online courses continues for students at Southwest, but it may be starting to shift toward the latter. One of the pieces of conventional wisdom about community colleges during the pandemic is that students often dislike or fear online learning — a refrain repeated often at Southwest. But more than a year and a half after colleges transitioned to large-scale distance learning, many of the students at Southwest who persisted have begun to favor online sections over the nearly 40 percent of courses being taught in person.

In the early stages of enrollment for the fall of 2021, about 60 percent of students were registering for courses taught on campus. As the start of the semester drew near, that "completely flipped," says Faulkner, the student-affairs vice president. "We have about 68 percent of our students who are online even though we offered the courses on campus." She speculates that students may have felt forced into online courses at first, but that they have now grown accustomed to them and appreciate the flexibility they offer.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE CHRONICLE; PHOTOS BY ISTOCK

Professors have adapted, too. After initial pushback from some of the more senior faculty members, says Kendricks D. Hooker, vice president for academic affairs, 100 percent of the instructors at Southwest have completed online teaching training, and most now have several semesters' experience.

The preference for online courses is not only a matter of convenience but of health. Vaccines or no, many Southwest students simply may not yet feel safe being back on campus. A survey of more than 120,000 community-college students in the spring of 2021 by the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin found that 74 percent of Black students had tried to avoid situations on campus where they couldn't stay more than six feet from another person, compared with 53 percent of white students who said the same. The survey also found that 62 percent of women were more likely to avoid such situations compared with 55 percent of men; Southwest's student body is 67 percent female.

Some students have returned to campus despite their worries. Both of Tarik Wilkins's parents caught Covid-19, as did four of his friends, and his grandfather died last year from an illness unrelated to the pandemic. Two of his three classes at Southwest this semester are held in person. He lives with his grandmother, and the loss of his grandfather has made him especially anxious about bringing the virus home to her. "I've got the vaccines, I'm trying to take every precaution that I can," Wilkins, 24, says, "but it's been nerve-racking, because it's really been hitting close."

One frustration for Southwest's administration and faculty is that the recent drops in enrollment have undone years of progress. In 2014, shortly before Hall took over as president at Southwest in 2015, the college commissioned a consultant's report on improving its performance. One of the things that college leaders heard overwhelmingly from students, community partners, the local school district, and even employees is that students faced too much red tape, Hall says. "It was just difficult to get in and out of Southwest." She got personal feedback early in her presidency when she went into local stores wearing college paraphernalia. "I'd hear all these bad horror stories from people about how they felt about Southwest," she says. "It got to a point where I'm like, Oh, let me take off my nametag, because I just need some eggs."

The report led to institutional soul-searching, and reforms. With the help of Achieving the Dream, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving community-college success, Southwest's leaders set to work in 2016 on improving its enrollment and graduation rates. The institution adopted a case-management system, where every incoming student was assigned a "care team" — a specific person in enrollment, in financial aid, in advising, and on the faculty to form "their circle of support," Hall says. Instead of calling an office and asking for help, students call and ask for the person they know by name.

Southwest made headway. Enrollment rose by 10 percent in 2017, and about 3 percent the year after. The college's three-year retention rate climbed above 50 percent for the first time in institutional memory. "And then Covid," Hall says. "And so now it's about, how do we rebuild?"

The college's pandemic shift to remote learning has given it online capacity that could come in handy once things return to something like normal.

While some processes and services at Southwest have changed, others still might need changing. The preference some students are showing for online courses during the pandemic may signal a need to rethink how, and when, classes are offered. What programs the college offers and how it offers them are already under consideration as part of an academic master-planning process now underway, says Hooker, the vice president for academic affairs. More than a third of Southwest's students were 25 or older in 2018, and many are parents or working or both. "We can't just say that from 8 to 12 that's when classes are available at Southwest," Hooker says. "We can no longer say that, based upon seat hours, you can come to school two nights per week, and at the end of the semester, you've only earned three [credit] hours." Southwest has already instituted special three-week accelerated courses, he adds, to help students "actually see that they're making benchmarks along the way toward completion of a degree."

The college's move to remote learning at the beginning of the pandemic has given it online capacity that could come in handy once things return to something like normal. Derrick Jones, 22, signed up for online sections of his criminology courses this fall rather than in-person sections not because he's worried about contracting Covid-19, but because they work better with his job on the night shift for an area law-enforcement agency. "Working 12-hour shifts, when I come home, I don't immediately want to have to get prepared for a class," he says. "I'm

not saying I'm glad Covid happened, but I am glad that it brought more opportunities for people like myself who work a lot and have different schedules compared to the 9 to 5."

Advising may need to be changed, too. Some students are comfortable speaking up on their own behalf to an institution, "and then for others, culturally, there is less of an impetus to be able to be a self-advocate," says Pamela L. Eddy, a professor of higher education at the College of William & Mary and an affiliate faculty member at the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at North Carolina State University. "We often see the people that might need the most help asking for it the least."

Community colleges need to make the most of the opportunities they have to check in with their students, says Linda L. Garcia, executive director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement: "In the advising session, are we asking students, 'Okay, what are some possible challenges that you are afraid to experience? Let's talk about those fears. Let's talk about those challenges." Advisers should demystify the college process as much as possible, including the advising — Garcia recommends providing an advising syllabus that includes information on available support services. Such information can also help faculty members, especially part-time instructors who may not be familiar with the support options, "to also ask that question, What will help you be successful in my course?" she says.

Even as he works to reconnect with students who left college during the pandemic, Major, the associate vice president for retention, knows the importance of intervening with current students early and often. He recounts a recent conversation with a student who had signed up for online classes for the fall but at midterm was struggling. The student planned to drop out. "When I asked him if he looked at his syllabus for his classes," Major recalls, "he said, 'I've heard that word before. What is that?'"

The syllabus revealed that most of the student's coursework was still outstanding, and he had plenty of time to make a passing grade, with some in-person tutoring and other assistance from the college's academic success center. "But because it says 'F' at midterm, he's ready to quit college," Major says. "We're having to reshape ourselves and our practices, our infrastructure, to put our interventions in students' way, as opposed to having them come and opt in for help." With spring registration starting in November, Major's office is preparing to connect with current students who don't register for next semester: "We're not going to wait."

Southwest's leaders are focused on their students and staff, but they can't ignore the policies governing their institution, or the bottom line.

The state and the federal governments have made changes during the pandemic that have made life easier for students, but sometimes those changes have meant more complexity for administrators. For example, the state waived some of the requirements for Tennessee Reconnect, the free-community-college program for older students. They no longer had to take six credit hours each semester or maintain a 2.0 grade-point average to remain eligible. But because of the way the college's financial-aid-management software is set up, anytime Tennessee Reconnect students are enrolled in less than six hours of courses, the system classifies them as ineligible, says Bohanan, the financial-aid specialist. She spent about a month going through the records of almost 2,000 students, manually approving their aid one at a time. But the flexibility allowed many students to stay enrolled.

The federal government's decision to relax financial-aid verification requirements removed one of the most common hurdles confronting students enrolling at Southwest. "It's such a cumbersome process," Brock, of the Community College Research Center, says of verification, which requires students to provide several additional forms, including tax documents, and parental signatures. "For a lot of students, particularly if they have complicated relationships with their parents and have to provide all the parents' data, it can be an insurmountable barrier."

Covid-19 made the process even more onerous by making it virtual. Students — who often lacked computers or reliable Wi-Fi at home — needed to upload documents, and many of them were baffled "'JPEG? PDF?'" says Sherita D. Robertson, director of financial aid. "You hear all the time, 'What are you talking about?'"

The U.S. Department of Education's decision to temporarily halt verification for most information was cause for relief, says Robertson. She's seen the verification process get so frustrating that "a student will just say: Okay, forget about it. I'll just find a job," she says. Without verification, "It was easier with us onboarding students."

The full effect of recent years' drops in enrollment on Southwest's financial health remains to be seen. Like other community colleges operated under the Tennessee Board of Regents, Southwest receives about half of its funding from the state and the other half from tuition and fees — Tennessee is one of 13 states in which community colleges receive no local support. The plunge in enrollment has led to a $10-million budget gap. If enrollment continues at this diminished level long enough, it could carry ramifications for the level of state support the college receives as well. Tennessee awards support based on performance metrics, including enrollment and graduation rates, calculated on three-year rolling averages — and the pandemic has already begun squashing those averages.

Worries about longer-term budget impacts may be premature. Despite the performance-funding model, "any immediate, substantive impacts in state funding to the community college sector are so far undetected," wrote Steven Gentile, chief policy officer for the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, in a statement to *The Chronicle*. "There's a grace period, if you will, or a glide slope, for times where enrollment is significantly interrupted," says Lou Hanemann, chief of staff for the commission. In fact, the state's community colleges could receive more money from the state next year if a request for an additional $90 million in recurring funds is approved by the commission and the General Assembly. That would mean a 4.6-percent increase to Southwest's state support, or about $1.2 million.

In the short term, the $16 million from the federal government's Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund — half of which was earmarked for students — has helped the institution weather Covid-19 and stave off the worst financial impacts of its pandemic shortfall. Southwest has not had to lay off any employees or face any other serious privations, but the federal dollars are "one-time funding," says Hall, the president, "so we have monies to sustain us for this year and perhaps an additional year, but we have to really tighten the belt." College leadership is currently looking at ways to make cuts to the budget that will "sustain and stabilize the institution but not weaken it, and that's difficult," she adds. "We want to have a stable institution. The needs of Memphis have not stopped. They've increased."

"After Covid" remains maddeningly indefinite, but that may be what it takes to start to restore Southwest's enrollment to what it once was. Brown, the enrollment administrator, has spoken to scores parents and students at recent events, including many who were still on the fence about returning to college. "Some of them say it's just not safe to come back," she says. "How do you work with that — 'I don't feel safe'? We have online learning, but we also heard students say, 'I don't think I'll do well with online learning.'"

Southwest and other community colleges may just have to wait out Covid. Even if the virus doesn't completely go away, the risks may get lower and people may become more accustomed to living with it. "I really think that's going to be the biggest thing, is time," Brown says, "and people feeling it's safe to completely return to, we won't call it normal, but like the new normal."

If there's one thing community colleges should not do, says Eddy, of William & Mary, it's go back to normal. "It would be a mistake to think, I just need to wait this out to come to a time where we're going to have more openness," she says. After a decade of gradually declining enrollments, the pandemic has brought community colleges to an inflection point where they have a chance to — may even be impelled to — make some changes, many perhaps overdue.

Eddy is hopeful about how community colleges will fare. After all, they are meant to adapt to their communities, and "I think we're going to see some institutions come out and be real leaders in rethinking and reimagining what's possible."

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

COMMUNITY COLLEGES | ADMINISTRATION | LEADERSHIP | ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT | STUDENT LIFE

Lee Gardner

Lee Gardner writes about the management of colleges and universities, higher-education marketing, and other topics. Follow him on Twitter @_lee_g, or email him at lee.gardner@chronicle.com.