

Running head: Louisiana Tech University

Louisiana Tech University: The Potential Impact of COVID-19 on New-Student Application
Rates and Perceptions of the Value of Higher Education

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Contents

Executive Summary	3
Background	4
Marketing Communication Strategy Problem	5
Consumer Segment and Issues	8
Consumer Segment	8
Consumer Issues.....	9
Consumer Analysis	10
Research Focus.....	10
Primary Research Questions	10
Methods.....	10
Survey Insights.....	11
Interview Insights.....	12
Recommendations	13
Post key benefits and financial calculator widget on university website.....	14
Email campaigns targeting on-the-fence prospects.	15
Digital video SMS and email campaign.	15
Work Cited	17
Appendix A	22
Survey Questions.....	22
Louisiana Tech Recruitment Survey	25
Interview with Trée George	25
Interview with Colin Bailey Results.....	26
May 10, 2021- Monday Report	27

Executive Summary

Louisiana Tech is a competitive, mid-sized, public research university with a top-tier ranking among national universities. It tends to draw students based on its reputation for maintaining a “family” atmosphere and for ensuring that students receive the on-campus experience they need and that they have direct access to their professors. Louisiana Tech faced all of the same challenges that other colleges and universities faced in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, including declining admissions and retention rates. It must identify new determinant criteria that prospective students are applying in deciding which college to attend for the 2021-2022 academic year.

A recent, sudden uptick in first time freshman applications indicates that Louisiana Tech may be emerging as a strong, local, competitive option that offers many of the benefits of home. Survey research and interviews conducted for purposes of this study indicate that the decisions of students to attend Louisiana Tech have been less impacted by the specter of COVID-19 than anticipated. Many have delayed their decisions not because of fear of the pandemic but because of economic constraints and other cognitive uncertainties.

Louisiana Tech needs to focus its marketing communication strategy identifying and removing those remaining barriers in the perceptions of prospective students in order to meet its 2021-22 enrollment goals. It is apparent that today’s prospective students want the highest quality education in terms of prestige and selectivity at the most affordable price and with minimum financial barriers.

Background

Louisiana Tech University is a mid-sized, public research university in Ruston, Louisiana. Founded in 1894, it is recognized as a Top Tier National University in the 2020 U.S. News & World Report Best Colleges list (Louisiana Tech, 2020), a ranking based on graduation and retention rates, social mobility, graduation rate performance, academic reputation among peers, faculty resources, acceptance rates, financial resources, alumni giving, and graduate indebtedness (U.S. News, 2021). It was recognized within the last decade as one of the nation's 25 Most Affordable Colleges for both in-state and out-of-state students (Newsweek, 2012).

The university is classified as having an R2 designation based on “high research activity,” according to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (Carnegie, 2017) with degrees spanning from associates to doctoral degrees (Louisiana Tech, n.d). The Louisiana Tech Bulldogs are a Division 1 competitor in Conference USA (NCAA, 2021).

Its regional competitors are Louisiana State University, Northwestern State University, University of Louisiana at Monroe, University of Louisiana Lafayette, University of Arkansas, and Mississippi State University. (National Student Clearing House, 2020). Louisiana Tech positions itself as the higher ed destination for students who value innovation and high faculty-student engagement, claiming, “You’re more than a number here” (Home, 2021). It has successfully maintained that position among prospective students despite the COVID-19 pandemic, which has presented new challenges for colleges and universities already struggling to maintain recruitment rates in the face of changing perceptions of the value of higher education (Latham, 2020). Louisiana Tech continues to draw students based on its reputation for maintaining a “family” atmosphere and for going above and beyond to ensure that students receive the assistance they need, and have direct access to their professors (Bailey, 2020).

As of May 10, 2021, Louisiana Tech has approximately 4,960 admitted students (Fair, 2021). Historically, 40 percent of new applicants actually enroll (George, 2021). Current projections indicate a potential fall enrollment of about 1,984 students, which is 8 percent short of the university's goal of 2,100 enrollees for the fall semester.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether, and to what extent, the most influential decision-making factors are directly related to a changing external environment that continues to be shaped by the ongoing specter of COVID-19. The ultimate goal is to identify ways to increase awareness and maintain Louisiana Tech's competitive position by better communicating the value the university offers prospective students in a post-pandemic era.

Marketing Communication Strategy Problem

Prior to the pandemic, higher education was already receiving public criticism for high tuition rates, scandals within the industry, and a reputation for being more conducive for white, middle-to-upper class households (DOE, n.d.). Many small, private colleges/universities have been forced to close in the last several years, while others have been absorbed by other schools (Butrymowicz, 2020). Many prospective students have questioned whether the cost of attendance is truly worth the return on investment (Kerr, 2019). As the prospective student pool shrinks, the competition becomes more intense and more imperative.

In the wake of the pandemic, the entire 400-year old industry has changed very little and has been reliant on providing an "antiquated" in-person experience in terms of course delivery and on-campus student life (Latham, 2020) until COVID-19 forced schools to go online. Pre-pandemic criticisms took on new intensity as students were forced into online, asynchronous classes with little support and no tuition breaks. Additionally, traditional recruiting tactics such as in-person campus visits, large preview day events, and meetings with faculty members were

impossible. The entirety of enrollment recruitment turned to online platforms and videos to get their message to students. Louisiana Tech was no different.

Historically, Louisiana Tech's primary challenge has been low brand awareness, which impacts its ability to identify and connect with new applicants. While retention is high (87%), and alumni are very involved and financially generous (Louisiana Tech University Foundation, n.d.), Louisiana Tech is not as well-known as many of its competitors. It is often referred to as a "hidden gem" or northern Louisiana's best kept secret. Louisiana Tech has a strong basis for brand loyalty, but struggles to position itself as an attractive alternative to prospective students.

Like most institutions of higher education, Louisiana Tech was already facing recruitment and enrollment challenges prior to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic served to compound those issues, with an initial drop in 2021 application as compared with previous years. Nationally, undergraduate enrollment dropped 4 percent in the fall of 2020, while the number of freshmen enrollees declined 16 percent (Sedmak, 2020). To bolster application and enrollment rates for 2021, many schools waived application fees and test scores in 2020 and have continued that trend into 2021 (College Admissions, 2021). Louisiana Tech waived application fees but was unable to fully waive test scores as the University is regulated by the University of Louisiana System. Waiving fees potentially removed friction for students in the application process.

May 1 is known within the higher ed industry as "commitment day"—the day that high school students across the nation declare their intended university plans. Louisiana Tech's admissions staff have noticed a recent, unexplained rise in applications atypical for this time of year (specifically, 60 applications received between May 10 and 14, as compared to 41 applications received during the same time frame in 2019 before the pandemic). Louisiana

Tech's admissions staff hypothesize that students have been waiting for schools to report their plans for the upcoming academic year in terms of whether they would be returning to a traditional, on-campus model of course delivery. An alternative reason is that this year's entering class is applying later than usual due to fear caused by the fact that they essentially lost out on the traditional on-campus experience during their junior and senior years and do not want a repeat of that experience (Bailey, 2021). As vaccination rates increase and colleges/universities announce their plans for this fall, Louisiana Tech faces enrollment concerns. Louisiana Tech announced in March their plans to return to an in-person experience.

The decision-making of today's prospective students is undoubtedly impacted by external, environmental factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Choosing a college is a stressful cognitive decision under the best of circumstances. The pandemic has introduced additional affective components such as fear and uncertainty into the mix. Interestingly, those factors may actually be working in Louisiana Tech's favor. The University appears to be emerging from among its competitors as one of the "safer" options that offers many of the benefits of home—personal connection and the ability to get help when it is most needed. The fact that it is known as a competitive university gives it an added edge. While less competitive public and private colleges are seeing declining application and enrollment rates this year, the most selective four-year institutions are actually seeing record-breaking increases in application rates for 2021 (Dohl, 2021).

Louisiana Tech is especially interested in determining why many students continue to delay their decisions and application submissions. Statistically, there has been a national downward trend in applications from first-generation students and those who are financially constrained (Dohl, 2021). Many students decided to take a gap year in 2020, and there is strong

indication that many low-income students are deciding to forego college altogether, at least for the present (Adams, 2021). Louisiana Tech needs to identify whether determinant criteria have changed among its prospective students as well as to identify specific barriers that are keeping them from submitting applications for 2021 so it can better communicate the most relevant value to those who remain hesitant.

Consumer Segment and Issues

Consumer Segment

The college student market segment is typically geographically stable and age-stable (Business, 2020). Specifically, college students are almost exclusively 18- to 24-year-olds who are educated and brand-loyal and who respond more favorably to personalized promotion than to advertising (Business, 2020). Today's college students grew up with extensive access to the Internet and are media and social media savvy (Business, 2020).

Within this broader segment, Louisiana Tech recruits 15- to 18-year-olds primarily from Louisiana and Arkansas and secondarily from Mississippi, Oklahoma, Alabama, and Florida. There is a fairly even gender split among its typical freshman classes. Generation Z recruits tend to “value authentic experiences in every aspect of their lives from their online lives to their interpersonal relationships and their education” (Campus Solutions, 2021).

The importance of the freshman class size to Louisiana Tech cannot be exaggerated. Freshman class size is a gift that keeps on giving—or keeps on taking away, as the case may be. It tends to determine institutional enrollment rates and budgetary constraints for years to come. For that reason, college recruitment practices are centered on competing for potential freshman students who are inundated with email, direct mail, social media advertisements and personal

invitations to visit the campuses of competing schools (State University, 2021). Even small, strategic, late-in-the-game measures can tip the decision-making scales among students still on the fence when it comes to choosing a college.

Consumer Issues

Due to rising costs of tuition and the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, prospective students are facing increasing financial limitations. As a result, more applicants are seeking admission to institutions that offer sizable financial aid offerings, work-study opportunities, and programs that allow them to graduate sooner (IvyWise, 2021). In-state schools like Louisiana Tech offer affordable options for local students in particular.

Today's high school seniors are especially concerned with getting the most value for their money in terms of their college education. Even before the pandemic, college students were beginning to value money more than education with succeeding generations tending to value education less and money more (Blumberg, 2017). They are well aware that a college degree does not guarantee them future financial security and that the economic value of a degree isn't what it once was (Blumberg, 2017). High-performing, low-income students were already facing barriers to pursuing their education at the college of their choice (Giancola, 2018).

Conversely, today's college students want the highest value for their money, which means they increasingly place higher value on degrees from institutions they perceive to have status and prestige, a perception largely baked on selectivity. In fact, the most selective colleges are already doing remarkably well in terms of freshman recruitment for 2021 (Jaschik, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these perceptions rather than creating them. It has increased perceptions of the value of selectivity by making it even harder to get into top colleges (Dickler, 2020). COVID-19 has further stratified the incoming freshman market segment on the

basis of income. As such, Louisiana Tech is competing for students looking for the highest quality education at the most affordable prices and with the fewest financial barriers to entry.

Consumer Analysis

Research Focus

The research conducted focuses on the impact COVID-19 has had on prospective students and higher education. COVID-19 has forced prospective students, as well as educators to consider the value and experience involved in a college education. In order to effectively reach and connect with prospective students, it is important to understand their perceptions of the University. Colleges are a business, and a significant element to their success is understanding consumer behavior and applying this information to future recruitment methods.

Primary Research Questions

- Why is there a sudden rise in new-student applications at Louisiana Tech?
- How has COVID-19 influenced decision-making among prospective Louisiana Tech students?

Methods

A survey and interview (both available in the Appendix) were conducted in order to gain a better understanding of college applications during the pandemic from a consumer and business perspective. The questionnaire was sent to approximately 17,000 current Louisiana Tech prospective students (inquiries, applicants, and admits) through an email from admissions, and resulted in 151 responses. To gain a variety of answers, the survey consisted of Likert scale questions, multiple choice, and open-ended questions. The interview focused on open-ended

LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY

questions and was conducted with Colin Bailey, the current Coordinator of Recruitment in the Office of Admissions. Bailey has been working in admissions for seven years and his expertise allowed us to identify new factors impacting student application rates, as well as, predictions for the 2021 school year.

Survey Insights

Academics, size, affordability, student life, and local town activities are the main factors that led to interest in Louisiana Tech. The results demonstrated what initially drew prospective students to this university: 70% academics, 50% said scholarships/affordability, 40% said the size of the university, 36% said student life, 24% said local town restaurant & activities. Louisiana Tech has several areas that excel in attracting new students. The majority of survey respondents (80%) prefer a mid-sized school with 5,000-15,000 students and a public school for their education. This size of a college is extremely important and determines how close of a relationship students can develop with their classmates and professors. Many respondents (76%) were in-state and believe that they are “more likely to find a job with a college career,” with 47% agreeing and 28% strongly agreeing. Prospective students can see the value in a college education, and are able to save the most money by attending public universities within their state. Being in-state allows students to feel comfortable being more familiar with the area, which encourages their participation in local activities.

COVID-19 did not discourage prospective students from attending Louisiana Tech. Participants were asked to respond to the following statement, “COVID-19 discouraged me from going away to college,” and 48% strongly disagreed and 27% disagreed. Respondents expressed that COVID-19 did not alter their decision to attend college. This led to the next statement, “The threat of COVID-19 is making it harder for me to decide which college to attend” and 48%

LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY

strongly disagreed and 23% disagreed. COVID-19 did not significantly increase difficulties for these prospective students; however, it did lead to some students waiting longer to commit to a college. The survey revealed that 18% of respondents were undecided with their college decision. Some of the reasons for their concerns were not COVID-19 related (31%); were waiting to see which schools will be in-person this fall (14%); or they were concerned classes would be online due to COVID-19. Some students were struggling with finances throughout their college decision making process. One participant wrote, “I am trying to see how much more scholarship money I can receive from outside donors in hopes of attending college out of state.” The survey results show that finances had a larger influence on college decisions than COVID-19.

Interview Insights

There are opportunities to grow in Louisiana Tech’s marketing. The interview with Colin Bailey provided essential information from the admission’s perspective. Bailey expressed the importance of “mailers and emails” when connecting with prospective students and families. He also expressed the importance of expanding Louisiana Tech’s advertisements, “Something new should be buying advertisements on Billboards. Some of our other local universities do this and it seems to have an impact. “Louisiana Tech has the resources to take their marketing to the next level. This would have a significant impact on the amount of students being reached and lead to more school visits.

Students are staying in-state and close to home. Bailey believes the rise in applications at Louisiana Tech is due to prospective students recognizing that “you don’t need to go out of state to get an unparalleled educational experience.” Louisiana Tech has resources available such as the Bulldog Achievement Resource Center (BARC) that helps students excel throughout their

college experience and post-college in their career. Louisiana Tech has created a family atmosphere where students can form impactful relationships with each other and also their professors. This is an experience that is difficult to find at larger universities, which is why Louisiana Tech's medium size is a perfect fit for many prospective students. Many students deciding to stay in-state was also due to financial reasons. Staying close to home during COVID-19 allowed students to save money by commuting while their classes were online. Louisiana Tech plans to return to in-person classes for Fall 2021. Bailey also noticed that many college applications were being submitted later compared to previous years, "I believe this was due to stress and being overwhelmed due to how their daily high school routine has been. Some students missed nearly all of the ACT test as well." Louisiana Tech will still be requiring ACT scores to be submitted, but many universities are currently test optional. This could have led to students considering different colleges, and Bailey stated this did not have a heavy impact on Louisiana Tech's applications.

Recommendations

Data collected from both primary and secondary research indicate that the pandemic has not significantly contributed to students' decision to attend Louisiana Tech, but has made the application process longer as students await news from other universities. Instead, it is largely due to financial constraints as students debate whether Louisiana Tech is worth the investment or if they should attend other competing schools. It's clear that Louisiana Tech offers a competitive local option that can give students a first-rate education so close to home. However, the issue is how can Louisiana Tech emphasize this concept and spread awareness to prospective students in high schools surrounding Ruston, Louisiana.

Insights depict that finances have a greater influence on college decisions than COVID-19, as previously mentioned. Louisiana Tech's 2020-21 in-state tuition was \$10,851 and \$19,794 for out-of-state students (Louisiana Tech, 2020). Out-of-state students who are legacies (one or both parents are alumni) or have a GPA of 2.5 and 23 ACT score qualify for the Bulldog Out-of-State Scholarship, which waives out-of-state fees. In-state students may qualify for the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS), "a program of state scholarships for Louisiana Public Colleges and Universities (LOSFA, 2021)." Additionally, students may qualify for merit scholarships ranging from \$2,000 - \$9,500/year. In 2019, Louisiana Tech was rated Louisiana's Best College Value by *Forbes* Magazine for the fourth year in a row. It is clear that the issue is not Louisiana Tech's affordability but how this value is communicated. As such, our recommendations are as follows.

Post key benefits and financial calculator widget on university website.

Student recruits in the decision-making stage are focused on three primary factors when it comes to choosing a college: majors, finances, and location (Financing Report, 2020). The university website homepage should highlight key benefits including selectivity, quality education, and unique locational benefits along with a widget that allows visitors to calculate net cost of attendance that factors in potential financial aid support (Financing Report, 2020). The university should make sure its site is optimized for local search based on keywords such as "affordable colleges" and "top colleges" for Louisiana, Mississippi, and other surrounding states. It should also ensure that the site is mobile-responsive and that key features targeting imminent decision-makers appear above the fold on mobile views.

Email campaigns targeting on-the-fence prospects.

The top three most effective outreach strategies for public institutions targeting new recruits are email communications, text-messaging, and mobile-responsive websites (Recruitment Practices, 2020). The most effective follow-up contact methods for public institutions are email messages, particularly those that include links to a personalized URL (Recruitment Practices, 2020). The university should text and email on-the-fence recruits with a campaign that positions the university as the best value for the money close to home. The email should include personalized links to the website widget that allows students to calculate net cost and financial aid packages and that demonstrates how easy it is to apply and qualify for scholarships and financial aid. Friction in the scholarship and financial aid application process should be reduced as much as possible. The campaign should prominently feature evidence of the university's selectivity, including current rankings and testimonials from students who have chosen the university because of the top-quality, competitive education it offers.

Digital video SMS and email campaign.

Generation Z is especially responsive to video promotion and is particularly accessible via promotional text messages (Recruitment Practices, 2020). The university should create short videos featuring students talking about how excited they were to get accepted at Louisiana Tech, how easy it was to apply for scholarships and financial aid, and how at home they felt when they arrived on campus. Follow-up videos could feature current students giving short tours of their favorite study or hang-out places on or around campus. Links to the videos should be sent to potential recruits via text message. The videos themselves should include personalized swipe-down links to the website scholarship and financial aid calculator widget as well as an application call-to-action button. Ideally, COVID-19 should receive little, if any, mention, as it is

LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY

not a primary point of concern, and most students hope for a “normal” campus experience for 2021. By creating a more encompassing digital presence, Louisiana Tech can leverage digital word-of-mouth (Solomon, 2020).

It is our belief that Louisiana Tech University can increase their admissions numbers and meet their goal of 2,100 by implementing these recommendations in their communication plan.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

Survey Link: <https://forms.gle/KKTLeu2UxaDXzFkZ6>

Part 1: Applying to Colleges (likert scale)

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neutral
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

1. College tuition is priced fairly.
2. College is necessary for a successful career.
3. I am more likely to find a job with a college career.
4. College education is worth the price.
5. I plan on paying for my college tuition.
6. My parents plan on paying for my college tuition.
7. COVID-19 discouraged me from going away to college.
8. The threat of COVID-19 is making it harder for me to decide which college to attend.

9. What size school would you prefer?

- Small (less than 5,000)
- Mid-sized (5,000 - 15,000)
- Large (More than 15,000)

10. What type of education would you prefer?

- Private with no religious affiliation
- Private with religious affiliation
- Public

11. What kind of surrounding environment would you like for your college experience?

- Small, college town
- Rural
- Urban
- City

Part 2: Applying Louisiana Tech

12. Identify five (5) of the following factors that you most closely associate with Louisiana Tech.

- Location (close to home)

- Location (far from home)
- Location (where friends are going)
- Size of the university (large)
- Size of the university (medium)
- Size of the university (small)
- Setting (urban)
- Setting (rural/suburban)
- Competitive reputation (low admission rate)
- Departmental reputation (e.g., Biology, Engineering)
- Variety of curriculum choices
- Study-abroad opportunities
- Student to faculty ratio (opportunities for close interaction with faculty)
- On-campus course delivery
- Potential for online or hybrid course delivery
- On-campus facilities and amenities
- Career preparation and opportunities
- Scholarships/affordability
- Potential for indebtedness
- Student life/extracurricular activities
- Sports participation opportunities
- Opportunities for on- or near-campus employment
- Active nightlife/parties
- Greek life
- Meal plans
- Demographics
- Quality of professors
- Other (fill in)

13. How did you hear about Louisiana Tech? (select all that apply)

- Guidance Counselor
- College Fair
- Social Media
- Parents/Guardians
- Friends
- Other (fill in)

14. Select from the following all the factors that initially drew you to Louisiana Tech.

- Local town restaurants and activities
- Size of the university
- Academics
- Scholarships/Affordability
- Student life
- Other (fill in)

15. Is Louisiana Tech in-state or out-of-state for you?

- In-state

- Out-of-state

16. Was it hard to find information on Louisiana Tech?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

17. Approximately, when do you plan on committing to your college of choice?

- I have already decided on Louisiana Tech.
- I have already decided on another college/university.
- I will make a decision this summer.
- I am deferring my college education for a year.
- I am not going to college.

18. I have not yet decided on a school because:

- I am concerned that classes will be online due to COVID-19.
- I am concerned that I will not be able to make friends due to COVID-19.
- I am waiting to see what schools will be in-person this fall.
- My concerns are not related to COVID-19.

19. If you answered other to the questions above, please explain

Part 3: Demographic Questions

20. What gender do you identify with?

- Female
- Male
- Other (fill in)

21. What is your age?

- 18
- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22+

22. What is your ethnicity?

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White

23. What is your household income?

- Under \$20,000
- \$20,001-\$40,000
- \$40,001-\$60,000
- \$60,001-\$80,000
- \$80,001-\$100,000
- \$100,001+

Louisiana Tech Recruitment Survey

1. What factors have traditionally driven freshman decisions to apply to Louisiana Tech pre-covid?
2. What new factors seem to be driving freshman decisions to apply to Louisiana Tech post-COVID-19?
3. What new concerns are freshmen expressing about applying for college in general?
4. What new concerns are they expressing about applying to Louisiana Tech specifically?
5. Any other new/surprising trends in application rates that you've noticed?
6. Any hunches as to what factors are driving those new trends?
7. Do you think COVID has had a permanent impact on the college student decision-making process?
8. How has COVID-19 changed the way recruiters connect and reach potential students?

Interview with Trée George

Trée George is the Director of Admissions for Louisiana Tech University. He is in fourth year at the University and comes with six previous year of experience from Louisiana State University. His responses to the goals are below.

1. What percent of admitted students typically enroll? 40 percent.
2. What is the 2021-22 enrollment goal? 2,100.

Interview with Colin Bailey Results

Colin Bailey is the Coordinator of Recruitment for Louisiana Tech University's Office of Undergraduate Admissions. He is a 2010 graduate from the University and has worked in Admissions for the past seven years. In his time with Louisiana Tech, he has seen three promotions.

Responses below are paraphrased.

1. One thing the university can and should be more effective at is marketing our strengths. Pushing out more mailers and emails. Something new should be buying adds on Billboards. Some of our other local universities do this and it seems to have an impact. Fortunately we have resources and now more people in place to take our marketing campaign to the next level.
2. Applications are rising at Tech because students are learning that you don't need to go out of state to get an unparalleled educational experience. We have resources available to keep students on a path of success. Ex. Bulldog Achievement Resource Center(BARC). Students also love our "family" atmosphere. We go above and beyond to help our students when asked. Students can actually meet professors and attend office hours. It's very difficult to get this at larger universities.
3. For a few students, I believe they decided to stay closer to home. Why pay for a dorm room if you're taking online classes? Fortunately, we plan to be back in-person for the Fall 2021. We have also noticed that more students were applying much later for college than previous years. I believe this was due to stress and being overwhelmed due to how their daily high school routine has been. Some students missed nearly all of the ACT test as well. While we still require the ACT, some universities went test-optional. While we didn't lose many because of this, I'm sure some of our out-of-state students might have looked at other universities that were test optional.

May 10, 2021- Monday Report

[illegible]