

Central Connecticut State University
Admissions Review, Preliminary Findings
October 1, 2021

Charge from President Toro

On August 26 President Toro created the Admissions Review Team to conduct a full review of our undergraduate and graduate admissions processes and procedures, beginning with marketing and recruitment all the way through new student and transfer student onboarding, in response to Fall 2021 preliminary enrollment figures indicating that our headcount enrollment is down 10 percent compared to the same timepoint last year, the first day of the Fall 2020 semester. President Toro emphasized that new student enrollment is only one facet of our enrollment challenge this fall and that she is working with the Provost and Deans to identify and address student retention issues.

Following the review team's charge, Associate Vice President of Enrollment Management Karissa Peckham announced her resignation on September 22. President Toro appointed Christina Robinson, Associate Vice President of Graduate Studies, Research, and Faculty Development to temporarily lead the Enrollment Management Division. President Toro requested that the Admissions and Onboarding Review Team continue our work and deliver an initial summary of our findings on October 1. The team will continue to request and review information that will inform the team and a supplemental report will be submitted at a later date.

Background

Central Connecticut State University (CCSU, Central) is part of the Connecticut State Colleges and University (CSCU) System and is the largest of the four state universities. In recent years, Central has made many advances across several fronts. In the last ten years, our minority enrollment has increased 12 percent while our 4-year graduation rate has increased ten percent. The University has shown greater flexibility in the modality of its academic offerings, has added new programs in the STEM fields such as Cybersecurity and Electrical Engineering, has a new Applied Innovation Hub, a CAVE lab, and created an Esports Center that has three competitive teams.

Nonetheless, enrollment at Central is now a concern. The number of students graduating from public high schools in New England has been declining for many years and is expected to continue to decline. In Connecticut, these declines are even more pronounced. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the number of Connecticut students graduating from a public high school is projected to decline an additional 10.8 percent between now and 2026-27. These data become even more concerning when coupled with the following statistic: 93 percent of CCSU's entering freshmen class are from Connecticut. The decline in the number of high school graduates has been reflected in the enrollment at all institutions within the CSCU System. Within the four state universities, CCSU had the second smallest decline in enrollment between Fall 2017 and Fall 2020. However, in Fall 2021, CCSU had the largest decline in enrollment, not only amongst the state universities but within the CSCU System and is the only institution to have a decrease in graduate enrollment. Central's enrollment is now the lowest it has been since before 1975.

Maintaining enrollment is not only critical to ensuring CCSU continues to meet its Mission and Vision, but enrollment also reflects the financial health of the University. CCSU has two primary sources of revenue – state appropriation and tuition and fees – which account for 40 percent and 46 percent of revenue, respectively. Both sources are tied directly to enrollment, as is the third largest source of revenue, which is students living on campus.

Central's enrollment for Fall 2021 is 9,653 students, a decrease of 999 students from Fall 2020. This significant decline is a huge blow to the University's fiscal health. To help put this into perspective, on average, each student generates approximately \$10,000 and the decline in enrollment approximates a \$10M decrease in expected revenue.

As of this date, the Federal CARES Act funding that CCSU has benefited from these past two years, will not be available in fiscal year 2022-23. Preliminary analyses indicate that in order for CCSU to not incur additional budget cuts (or hold-backs) next year, beyond the \$15.1M already in place, enrollment in Fall 2022 will need to increase by nearly ten percent and Central will need an additional 700 students living on campus, compared to Fall 2021.

There are two ways that CCSU can increase enrollment. The first is to recruit more students including new freshmen, transfer, and graduate students. Research has also shown that there are opportunities to recruit more adult learners and more minority students, particularly Latino students as they represent 64 percent of K-12 students in the region. The second way CCSU can increase enrollment is by improving the retention of our students, at all levels. The Fall 2020 class had the second lowest retention rate in more than 20 years – 28 percent of our new freshmen did not come back to CCSU for a second year.

The current decline in enrollment – including the smallest incoming class and lowest first-year retention rate in decades – will take many years and a lot of work to overcome. With these facts in mind, the task force was charged with reviewing the admissions and on-boarding processes and procedures. The findings and observations as well as a summary of who was interviewed and data collected follow.

Review Team Process

The review team first met on Monday, August 30 to review our charge and formulate an approach. We continued to meet 3-5+ times weekly through our initial deadline of October 1.

Review Team Interviews Conducted

- Karissa Peckham, AVP Enrollment Management (September 3)
- Nilvio Perez, departing Associate Director of Recruitment & Admissions (September 8)
- Larry Hall, Director of Recruitment & Admissions (September 9)
- Pat Gardner, Director of Graduate Recruitment & Admissions (September 10)
- Cristalyn Vargas, Assistant Director of Graduate Recruitment & Admissions (September 13)
- Maria Santilli, Director of New Student Programs (September 14)
- Adina Elfant, Director of Undergraduate Advising (September 17)
- Christine Moauro, Director of Marketing (September 20 & September 28)
- Deans and AVP Christina Robinson (September 21)
- Myrna Garcia-Bowen, Director of Academic Articulations and Partnerships (September 21)
- Janice Palmer, Interim AVP Communication and Logistics (September 22)

- Criminology and Criminal Justice faculty group meeting (September 24)

Faculty & Staff Admissions and New Student Onboarding Feedback Survey

- The survey was e-mailed to:
 - All Graduate Program Directors
 - All staff in Enrollment Management, Advising, Marketing, & Communications (excluding those who were interviewed by the team)
- As of September 29, 33 responses have been received to general questions that asked faculty and staff about their perceptions of the greatest challenges, opportunities for improvement and needs related to student recruitment, admissions and onboarding.

Student Admissions Feedback Survey Distributed

- The survey was e-mailed to all first-year undergraduate students and a group of MBA graduate students
- The survey asked students to identify positive and negative experiences during the admission and onboarding process.
- As of September 29, 69 responses have been received.

Additional Documents and Data Collected by the Review Team

- Those interviewed by the review team were asked to provide copies of standard communications, process maps, procedural documentation, action plans, recommendations, reports, or any other related documentation from their units that would be useful to the review team.
- Using Microsoft Teams, a comprehensive electronic repository was created by the review team of all files submitted from each department. Hard copies of printed materials or other marketing and promotional materials were also gathered.

Admissions File Review

- A sample of approximately 40-50 applicants from the Fall 2021 application cycle, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, were selected for a focused review. The Directors of Admission were each asked to provide the process details, timeline and copies of student communication and any internal communication regarding each student's application process.
- The review team requested that the Directors of Admission provide this information no later than October 8.
- The review team also requested the average number of undergraduate inquiries for a typical Fall admissions cycle and the percentage or estimated number of inquiries converted to applicants. The email request was sent to the AVP of Enrollment Management and the Director of Undergraduate Admissions on September 28, 2021.

Review Findings

Undergraduate Admissions and Onboarding

- **Recruitment:** lack of strong marketing of our benefits and strengths
 - The first step in increasing our enrollment is improving our recruitment. Based on conversations we had with many different individuals (staff, administrators, faculty), one of the main areas for improvement is to market CCSU better. More specifically, the quantity of our marketing needs to increase (more outreach, more visibility) but our quality (selling ourselves better) needs to improve.
 - CCSU has many strong areas to promote but it isn't happening, examples include: low student to faculty ratio; high percentage full time faculty; students taught by faculty rather than graduate students, a variety of student organizations; central location in state; events and speakers on campus, etc.
 - Admissions counselors are not made aware of upcoming events, speakers, and other opportunities that they could then share with prospective students
 - Faculty in particular expressed disappointment that we are not regularly in the local papers, listed on the CCSU daily newsletter, highlighted on the news.
 - All communication to recruited students lacks a personalized touch. According to parents who were interviewed, their sons/daughters felt truly wanted and valued by other institutions (i.e., key draft pick), but the communications from CCSU left them feeling not as valued or wanted.
 - We have limited recruitment efforts focused on minority populations
 - One goal in our Strategic Plan is to become a Hispanic Serving Institution, yet recruitment and outreach to this population is limited and needs greater investment.
 - The Latino population is the fastest growing minority population in Connecticut and 64% of K-12 students in the region are Latino.
 - Not enough focus on recruitment at the Community Colleges and with adult learners
 - Currently one staff member focused on community college transfer students.
 - Limited sessions held at community colleges.
 - Adult or Non-Traditional Learners.
 - We do not offer enough flexible program delivery (online, hybrid, mini term, weekend, accelerated, etc.) for this population.
 - There are several different forms and methods of inquiring about CCSU.
 - This has led to disorganization and missed opportunities for recruitment. For example, a form created in Jotform was recently discovered to have nearly 3,000 unanswered leads. These leads were not automatically imported to Prospect Management System, and it became clear no one from Enrollment Management had exported them. The planned move into the Slate CRM and improved coordination and communication should prevent this from happening again.

- The large variety of home-grown systems to receive student inquiries offers too many opportunities for inconsistent information and required maintenance.
 - The inquiry form is lengthy and requires considerable information that is unnecessary or duplicative at this stage.
- Current recruitment and marketing materials have information that is dated or outdated, in need of editing, and does not showcase our exciting offerings. For example, the expansion of our engineering programs coupled with the Applied Innovation Hub (sometimes referred to as the new engineering building), Esports, or nationally recognized faculty.
 - Dated marketing material has a limited shelf life (i.e., tuition and fees).

➤ **Enrollment and Onboarding**

- The timeline and enrollment management plans are unclear or not communicated internally.
 - A comprehensive strategic enrollment plan that clearly outlines a timeline for student communication is needed and should be shared with staff in all divisions.
 - There is no clear undergraduate or graduate marketing plan or email flow that details what should be sent out, when they should be sent and to whom.
 - There is currently no reporting on enrollment data and conversion rates showing the number of inquiries to applications. Current reporting includes the number of students who applied, were admitted, and then enrolled. These reports reflect raw numbers but lack any ratios, such as yield, making it difficult to fully gauge the status in comparison to prior years.
 - It is difficult to track when, where and why potential students are lost.
 - Time from inquiry to response, application to response, etc. is not included in standard reporting, making it difficult to gauge effectiveness.
- Issues with placement tests
 - Often taken too late and causes registration issues for students.
 - There appear to be significant delays in advisors accessing test results, this impacts their ability to accurately advise and register students.
 - Signing up for placement tests can cause confusion, as students get invited to take the English test but must be proactive and register themselves for Math.
 - Not requiring SAT scores anymore also created inconsistencies: not sending in scores might place students in different courses than expected, delaying graduation.
- New Student Orientation
 - The New Student Programs Office has changed reporting channels four times in three years.
 - Currently, faculty are not heavily involved during these programs, resulting in a lack of student and faculty interaction until the first day of classes.

- The pendulum between involvement of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs has swung both ways rather than having a balanced approach that includes all relevant divisions.

➤ **Communication and Coordination**

- Lack of communication and coordination between staff in different areas.
 - Staff in one division or office do not always share information with staff from other offices or divisions. Admissions is not always aware of initiatives and goals from academic departments, marketing, and student activities, etc.
- Communication issues with students
 - Information sent to students is not contingent on when they confirm. The later they confirm, the closer together the information needs to be sent, so they can still complete the process in a timely manner.
 - For example, the sequence of emails is scheduled to be sent every two weeks regardless if a student confirms in May or August.
 - Communication with students can be problematic: Many students use their high school provided email address for communications with CCSU but lose access after graduating.

➤ **Family engagement: Unclear whose responsibility this is**

- Incoming first year students are heavily influenced by parents and families. Outreach to families is a missing component of our recruitment and onboarding structure, though it is unclear who is responsible for creating and coordinating these communications.
- Communication with parents is not robust enough, other universities have more outreach and information, including timelines, on their website and included in newsletters.

➤ **Staffing**

- The lack of a comprehensive plan contributes to the inability to share resources, expertise, and leverage staff.

Graduate Admissions and Onboarding

➤ **Internal Admissions Processes/Timelines:**

- There were delays/perceived long wait time for applicant reviews/decision/communication out to students. There is a lag between when a student completes his/her application and when the academic department is made aware of the application.
- Incomplete applications are not consistently followed up with a personalized communication.
- Each program has different admission requirements resulting in complicated review and decision-making process for the admission staff.

- Conditional or alternate program admission is done via appeal process after an initial denial of the program.
 - Students who have met most of the admissions criteria but may be lacking a prerequisite course for admission into a specific academic program are sent a letter that denies their admission. The letter is generic and does not address why the student has been denied, nor does it encourage the student to appeal the decision. Students have been denied admission when they could have been conditionally admitted with the stipulation that the requirement be met.
- Lack of flexible admission criteria for students who have been out of school for an extended period but possess stackable credentials or other appropriate professional qualifications.

➤ **Staffing**

- There has been insufficient staffing and frequent turnover in Graduate Admissions which has resulted in greater reliance on student workers. This results in a lack of consistency and need for continuous training in graduate admissions. This process negatively impacts response time and processing of materials and may cause longer time to respond to web inquiries from the prospective students.

➤ **Technology and manual processing**

- Graduate program coordinators frequently reported difficulty using the *WebNow* system for processing applications and admissions decisions.
 - Faculty find the program to be clunky and difficult to use. They also have difficulty accessing the program from off-campus locations further delaying time to decisions.
- There is a high reliance on manual processes.
 - The lists of applicants, inquiries and registrations for open house are all managed manually.

➤ **Communication with students and with academic departments**

- For several years, the decision to host in-person orientation sessions for graduate students has been inconsistent. The absence of an in-person orientation leaves students disconnected from the campus community and unsure of resources, policies, and procedures.
- There is limited coordination and communication among graduate program directors, deans, department chairs, and graduate admission and recruitment staff.
 - Frequent program and curriculum changes are not always communicated to graduate admissions staff.
 - The process for prioritizing which programs should be most prominently marketed is not always determined with all stakeholders in the room (i.e., deans, marketing, program coordinators, etc.).

- Coordination between faculty program coordinators and graduate admissions during the summer is inconsistent and sometimes not existent.
 - This can lead to a significant delay in the admissions process for students and may ultimately negatively impact enrollment numbers.
- Outreach
 - Communicating in a personalized manner to current undergraduate students regarding the potential of a graduate degree at CCSU is a missed opportunity to increase graduate enrollment.
 - Faculty are taking advantage of the opportunity to attract new students at conferences but are not necessarily trained in admissions processes.
 - Graduate admissions lacks the necessary staff and resources to attend community events that would allow them to reach a more diverse population.
- The social media presence of graduate programs is inconsistent.
 - There is insufficient exposure across social media platforms.
 - Administration of the social media platforms is inadequate with a lack of fast responses and replies to inquiries or messages of prospective students.
 - The social media platforms have infrequent updating and posting of engaging content.
- Students have difficulty navigating the Graduate Admissions website.
- Many graduate students do not learn about opportunities to receive financial assistance in a timely manner, this could influence their decision to enroll or apply.

Marketing and Communications

➤ Organizational Structure of Marketing and Communications

- The organization of Marketing and Communications has changed 4 times in the last 5 years. This inconsistency has contributed to a lack of a formal enrollment marketing strategy or communication plans.
 - The department structure was recently split into two separate groups: Institutional Marketing and Communications. The split of the department appears to have further eroded the ability of both departments to effectively contribute to enrollment marketing and communications.
 - The split between departments, as well as the creation of the Enrollment Management unit, has led to unclear responsibilities surrounding ownership and coordination of enrollment marketing and communications. These two departments have limited resources and need to work closely because of shared goals.

➤ **Staffing of Marketing and Communications**

- Both Marketing and Communications departments currently work with very limited staff. There are vacancies in both departments. Previous staff departures, such as an Administrative Assistant who left CCSU in early 2020, have not been refilled.
- In addition to enrollment marketing, the current Marketing Department is also charged with all other marketing and design services for the university, including Advancement and Alumni. At some other institutions, there is a separate Enrollment Marketing department with the sole responsibility of managing enrollment marketing and communications and an Institutional Marketing department with an emphasis on promoting the university.
- Despite being split into separate departments, Marketing and Communications have a shared budget where the majority is used for enrollment related marketing.
- CCSU's Marketing and Communications departments are very small compared to the other CSUs, despite being the largest institution.
 - Other CSU marketing and communications staffing levels:
 - [Eastern:](#)
 - Student population: 4,321
 - University Relations (Marketing & Communications) Staff: 10
 - Western:
 - Student population: 4,808
 - [University publications & design staff:](#) 4
 - [University Relations Staff:](#) 4
 - Website (managed through IT): 5
 - [Southern:](#)
 - Student Population: 8,788
 - Integrated Communications & Marketing Staff: 13
 - Central:
 - Student Population: 9,653
 - Institutional Marketing Staff: 5
 - Director of Marketing
 - Coordinator of Design and Publications (on leave)
 - Assistant Manager of Internet Services
 - News Writer/Editor
 - Marketing and Communications Assistant
 - Communications: 2
 - AVP of Communications and Logistics
 - University Writer/Editor
 - Media Center: 1
 - Media Technician

➤ **Social Media & Digital Marketing**

- Neither Marketing nor Communications has a full-time digital marketing staff member to manage social media and digital advertising. There is great marketing potential in utilizing social media and paid digital advertising properly.
- There are upwards of 150 social media accounts associated with CCSU, with no overarching guidelines for their use. These accounts are created and run by various academic and administrative departments, as well as student groups, without sufficient official oversight nor guidance on branding.
- CCSU's lack of a consistent social media presence was frequently identified as a significant missed opportunity during recruitment and onboarding cycles.
- Social media should be used to tell the CCSU story, share our accomplishments, highlight exciting, new, or innovative things happening at CCSU and give prospective students a sense of how exciting it is to be on our campus and part of the CCSU family.
- Social media should be used to engage with parents and family members of current and prospective students along with other influencers, such as school counselors.
- A previous digital marketing campaign was outsourced through an external marketing agency and did not have the desired impact. Additionally, the agency did not work collaboratively with existing marketing or communications departments, resulting in a lack of brand consistency.

➤ **Internal Coordination of Enrollment Marketing and Communications Activities**

- Our interviewees frequently cited disconnected marketing and communication strategies. Individual units often create and manage their own communication plans with varying levels of coordination or collaboration between other units.
- Individual units often design and create their own letters and publications. This has resulted in inconsistent quality, mixed messages, and overall dilution of the CCSU brand.
 - Without sufficient staffing in Marketing and Communications to support the marketing needs of the university, it has resulted in a culture where departments and programs have taken these critical activities into their own hands.
- CCSU has not had a comprehensive marketing and communications brand guide that needs to be communicated with all those involved with enrollment marketing and communications activities. The creation of consistent program sheets is the foundation to create a baseline of program specific marketing collateral and web content. The lack of a comprehensive plan has hindered our ability to focus our limited marketing resources to programs or initiatives that have been vetted and prioritized through an internal planning process.
- The ongoing implementation of the Slate CRM software presents an important opportunity to better coordinate and potentially standardize inquiry management and enrollment marketing and communication campaigns to prospective and incoming students.

Summary

Currently there is no comprehensive strategic enrollment marketing and communications plan or master communication flow for all enrollment marketing and communications activities for recruitment through the new student onboarding process, the associated timeline, and responsible parties. This has resulted in a lack of internal awareness and coordination of communication that has gone out to students from various departments during the admissions and onboarding process. In addition, the lack of communication and coordination has caused frustration for all parties involved.

Despite best efforts by individual departments and staff, CCSU's recruitment and admissions efforts have been impacted by the lack of sufficient marketing and communications, resources, ineffective use of technology, and the lack of a comprehensive communication timeline and strategy. This siloed approach to recruitment, admissions, and onboarding has resulted in a disjointed internal effort and an inconsistent experience for students.

CCSU has not institutionalized current best practices in recruitment and admissions to remain competitive with other institutions that have better developed and more robust recruitment strategies. We've missed opportunities to expand our recruitment of minority and transfer students, adult learners, graduate students, and students interested in STEM by not promoting our successes and offerings. Further, and we have missed opportunities to highlight some of the great things our students have accomplished under the leadership of the faculty and staff.

The supplemental report will focus on the audit findings for selected undergraduate and graduate applicants as well as the communication timeline for onboarding students and then the advising and registration process.

We appreciate all the hard work of our staff and faculty in the admissions and onboarding process. We believe with increased communication, a strategic marketing and communication plan, and better utilization of our resources, we will all benefit from the increased enrollment and success of our students.

Review Team Members

- Leah Frosceno, Marketing and Communication Assistant, Institutional Marketing
- Jillian Holt, Associate Registrar
- Yvonne Kirby, AVP Planning and Institutional Research
- Chris Lee, Faculty in Management and Organization
- Beth Merenstein, Faculty in Sociology, Presidential Fellow
- Patrick Tucker, Registrar