

Students’ Perceptions of College Affordability and Impact on Enrollment

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Overview

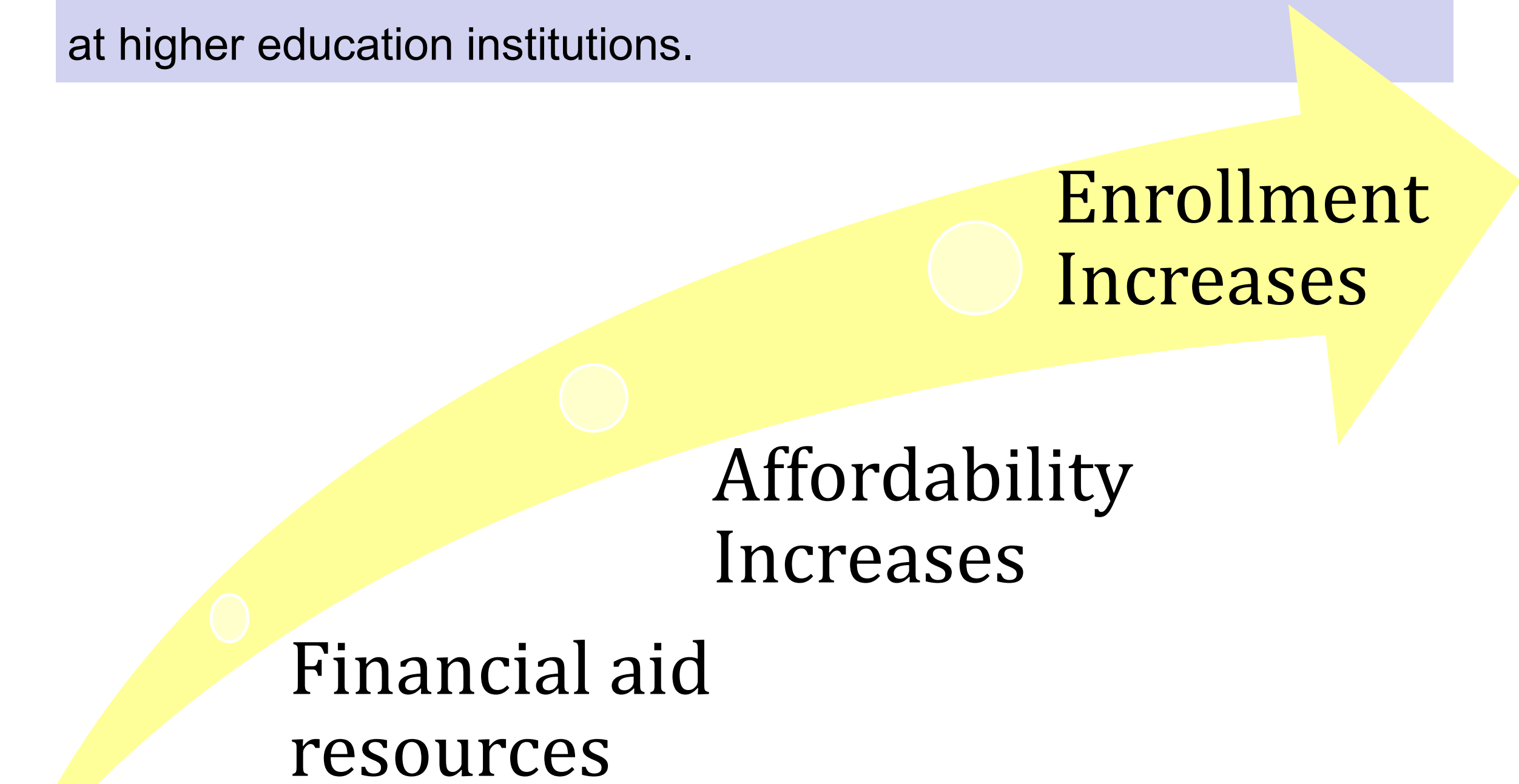
Economic hardships due to the COVID-19 pandemic hindered students’ ability to pay for college tuition, causing many students and families additional financial struggles. Universities and colleges cannot easily assist students by lowering tuition costs or providing large financial aid subsidies, as these adjustments could further decrease the institution’s revenue. Financial aid has shown to have a positive influence on student enrollment and retention rates (Castleman & Long, 2013; Kerr, 2020; Leeds & DesJardins, 2014; MacCallum, 2018), however universities must find ways to allocate institutional dollars to students with the greatest need in order to maximize revenue. An online survey was distributed to traditional undergraduate students to gain more information about their perceptions of college affordability and how these perceptions influence their enrollment decisions.

Methodology

- ❖ A sample of 20% of total traditional undergraduate population enrolled full time in Spring 2021 semester were invited to participate.
- ❖ An online Qualtrics survey was distributed to 480 undergraduate students. The survey consisted of eight questions related to students’ perceptions of college affordability, financial aid awards, and enrollment decisions

Significance for Higher Education

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges faced declining enrollment trends from the record enrollment high in 2010, but the National Center for Education Statistics (College Ave, 2019) predicted enrollment would remain relatively flat from 2018 to 2028. However, a global pandemic was not included in these enrollment predictions. Understanding what students define as affordable for college tuition can benefit awarding strategies and revenue models at higher education institutions.



Research Questions

1. How do students currently perceive the affordability of their institution?
2. How does college affordability play a role in students’ decisions to remain enrolled at their university?

Results

- ❖ 73 undergraduate students completed the survey
- ❖ **Affordability perceptions**
 - Most students said they somewhat disagreed with the statement “My college is affordable for me and/or my family.”
 - Among the 60 responses, students reported an average of \$15,150 as an affordable amount to pay for college. Answers ranged from \$0 to \$35,000
- ❖ **Enrollment decisions**
 - Majority of students indicated they somewhat disagree with the statement “I would remain enrolled in college even if it were no longer affordable.”
 - Net price influenced decision to enroll at the current college

Implications

Trends in responses indicate that affordability and net price play a key role in students’ decisions to enroll in their respective colleges. However, “affordability” still remains a subjective perception as students’ answers about what amount is affordable to pay for college tuition greatly differed. Financial aid decreases net price, suggesting that financial aid resources can help college tuition become more affordable for students and families, increasing enrollment and revenue for universities.