



Spring 2021

## Interview with Falone Serna Regarding Student Enrollment

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## Interview Responses from Falone Serna, Vice President for Enrollment Management

1. What have been the changes to enrollment since Spring of 2020 as a result of COVID-19?

For the 20-21 year there were several students that chose to delay their enrollment or attendance after we announced that we would operate virtually. A big part of why students are willing to pay a premium to attend Whittier is because of the in-person and on-campus experience offered. Being virtual changed that dynamic and in turn had a negative impact on our enrollment for new and returning students. Additionally, many returning students took leaves of absence for a variety of reasons including not wanting to take courses online or needing to delay their education to pick up a job to help support their family financially. COVID has also impacted our pipeline of new students for the 21-22 year. We experienced a 40% decline in applications. Due to the pandemic, we were unable to host visitors on campus, which is routinely has the strongest correlation of a prospective student's likelihood to apply and enroll. The pandemic also significantly hampered our ability to engage in recruitment activities. While we were able to shift some of our recruitment activities to the virtual space, not allowing students to visit campus and not being able to engage in recruitment activities had a negative impact on our application pipeline. Additionally, most of the attrition in our applicant pool was with our California, low income, and first-generation applicants. California was one of the hardest hit states by the pandemic due to the amount of individuals working in fields that were shut down (entertainment, gig economy, hospitality, etc.). Nation-wide, the statistics have shown a disproportionate number of low income and first generation are not engaging in the college application process, and Whittier serves a high percentage of students in these populations. The 21-22 applicant pool has a significantly higher Expected Family Contribution than last year because of fewer low-income applicants.

2. What difficulties have you encountered in enrollment during the COVID-19 pandemic?

I believe I addressed this question with the above answer, but yes there have been several challenges. Whittier prides itself in making personal connections, and that starts with how we engage with and recruit prospective students and families. While we've been able to host meetings and events virtually, we haven't been able to make as many connections with prospective students as we normally would be due to us not being able to visit high schools, attend college fairs, or host on-campus tours and events. The inability to have visitors on campus is challenging because Whittier is not typically a place many people commit to sight-unseen. Fortunately, after over a year, we were allowed to resume tours on 4/12/21 on a limited basis to admitted students, and we hope to slowly expand our capacity to anyone interested by the summer. Related to this, the cancellation of the athletics season was a challenge because roughly 1/3 of our students participate in our athletics program. Initially this wasn't a huge issue because athletics were shut down for everyone nationwide, but this spring (2021) we ended up being one of the few Division III institutions that were still shut down. 4

institutions in our conference were playing sports, so this put us at a disadvantage in recruiting athletes which again is a big chunk of our new student populations. The pandemic also put a strain on international recruitment. We lost many international students because their Visas wouldn't support virtual classes. The demand to be on campus is strong this year for international students, but there is now concern about them being able to get to the states with the travel restrictions. The other challenge is that impact the pandemic has had on individuals financially. As I shared above, many have had to delay or completely change their college plans due to the financial impact the pandemic has had on their family. Lots of folks not going to college to work and help provide financial support, others are opting to attend college closer to home to save money, and others are unwilling to pay for private education due to concerns with the immediate economic outlook.

3. Did Whittier College utilize different methods to encourage enrollment? If so, what were they?

Due to the restrictions on recruitment activities and hosting visitors on campus we had to figure out ways to engage prospective students and families virtually. We upgraded our self-guided virtual tour, we invested in a platform that helps us produce student videos (that can be viewed on demand), we invested in a virtual event platform to give students a break from zoom, and we launched a podcast. Additionally, we attended a lot of virtual events hosted by high schools and Community Based Organizations. I'd also point out that prior to the pandemic we decided that we needed to strengthen our recruitment efforts in California, in particular the greater Los Angeles and Orange County areas, for both prospective first year and transfer students. As noted above, many students have decided to remain close to home for college, so this strategy makes even more sense in the current climate. An example of an initiative related to this is the California Community College Advantage program that launched in January 2021. This program offers a special tuition price of \$28,000 and guaranteed admission to any student transferring from a community college in California with a minimum 2.9 GPA and 30 completed units. Again, this program was planned prior to the pandemic, but it will likely play a key role in the success of our pandemic enrollment efforts.

4. Are there any approaches or strategies that you think will carry over past the pandemic?

One positive from the pandemic is that we learned which virtual recruitment activities work well for the prospective student in our pipeline, and these activities tend to be very cost-effective, so we will continue offering many of these opportunities even after we are able to fully resume traditional recruitment activities. Whittier attracts several out of state and international students, and many of them are unable to visit us during the application process. It's always been a challenge to meet these students where they're, but now that many of them are conditioned to engage colleges virtually we're in better position to do so. And as

mentioned, we will continue to invest more time and resources towards recruiting in-state and local students.