

**A Fifty-Year Examination and Analysis of Influences on Higher Education Student
Enrollment in the United States**

by

Courtney M. Burchett

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wittenberg University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Education Department

Wittenberg University

May 2024

**Wittenberg University
Honor Statement
Master of Arts in Education**

"I affirm that my work upholds the highest standards of honesty and academic integrity at Wittenberg, and that I have neither given nor received any unauthorized assistance."

Name of Candidate:

Courtney Burchett
Signature

5/1/2024
Date

Director of Graduate Studies:

Signature

Date

Abstract

I conducted qualitative research utilizing a descriptive method while also conducting an historical comparison analysis. The purpose of this research was to uncover parallels and understand the economic, population and political similarities between the 1970s/80s and the United States today, while also discovering how the current economic, population and political realities impact the recruitment and enrollment of students to higher education today. I collected data through semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews and document content analysis of a small, institution in central Ohio's higher education enrollment trends from the past decade. I interviewed a total of 13 participants, with five identifying as females and eight identifying as males, and of the 13, 12 identified as Caucasian and one as African-American. From my research I discovered that there are numerous commonalities between the 1970s/80s and the United States today and that there is a lot of uncertainty that exists for the future of higher education. I also found that the economic, political and demographic events and conditions of society directly contribute the enrollment and recruitment of students to higher education.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate my research to my supportive family, my mom, Pam, my dad, Tony, my sister, Cara, my two dogs Teddy and Frankie, and to my thesis committee. Thank you for supporting me through everything, providing words of wisdom, praise and clarity, and sharing your light with me so I can pass it onto others. If you had told me two years ago that I would be graduating with my Masters from Wittenberg University, I do not know that I would have believed it. I am appreciative of my journey, thankful for God's plan and direction, and am grateful to call Wittenberg University home again. Wittenberg truly is a special place, that has changed my life, and helped mold me into the person that I am, so thank you Wittenberg University, I am now a two-time Tiger!

Table of Contents

Chapter 1	11
Background	14
Importance	16
Research Questions	17
Definition of Terms.....	18
Summary	19
Chapter 2.....	20
Economic	20
Political	24
Population	26
Summary	30
Chapter 3.....	34
Methodology	34
Participants.....	35
Table 1	36
Setting	37
Data Collection	38
Semi Structured Interviews.....	38
Focus Group Interviews.....	39
Document Content Analysis	39
Data Analysis.....	40
Procedures.....	42
Summary	43

Chapter 4.....	44
Findings.....	44
Summary	45
Focus Group Interview	45
Table 2	46
Semi Structured Interview	49
Table 3	51
Document Data Content Analysis.....	66
Figure 1	68
Figure 2	68
Chapter 5.....	69
Discussion of Findings.....	69
Reflection.....	76
References.....	80
Appendices.....	86
Appendix A.....	86
Appendix B	87
Appendix C	88
Appendix D.....	89
Appendix E	90

List of Tables

Table 1	36
Table 2	46-48
Table 3	51-65

List of Figures

Figure 1-Total Headcount of All Students: 2014-2023	68
Figure 2- Undergraduate and Traditional Enrollment Trends: 2014-2023	68

Chapter One

Introduction

“History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.”- Mark Twain. Over the course of time, historical happenings might not be identical, but often the crux and implications of the events will be recycled amongst different generations of people. Historical proceedings frequently provide individuals with knowledge, detail, and understanding, while giving an indication into what prospective events may occur in the future. While society has evolved and people continue to change; the significance of this country’s history should not be lost on humanity as it is the history and events it is comprised of that has contributed to laying the foundation for the current status of society. Although, one cannot go back and change the past, the significance of comprehending and being knowledgeable about its historical events is essential. Ascertaining and understanding details and information regarding historical events that took place while also examining the factors that lead to the contribution of the events happening and the effect the historical events had on society is imperative. This applicable information can then be used to prepare for current situations and the future and potentially minimize or thwart continued developments from taking place.

Protests, political corruption, wars, tempestuous international relations, economic turbulence, inflation, stock market declines, landmark Supreme Court cases, debt ceilings, social justice advocacy, and the altering public perception of the value of higher education, are just a few of the analogous political and economic issues that were prevalent during the 1970s/80s and ongoing within today’s society. These momentous historical events are persistent themes throughout United States’ history and divulge historical parallels within the two specific time periods of the 1970s/80s, and today. The

notable adage stating history repeats itself, proves to have some validity and accuracy as the political, economic, and population circumstances within the aforementioned time periods have numerous commonalities. Furthermore, the history, trends, and changes that have taken place in higher education in the United States, have consistently been closely aligned and at times have been the direct result of the political, and economic conditions that were existent in the country at a specified period in time. This country's cultural landscape, along with population demographics, have been additional factors in contributing to the changing tendencies in relation to the enrollment and recruitment of high school graduates into higher education institutions. Throughout time, higher education has experienced drastic waves of enrollment fluctuations along with transformative and alternative public perceptions on the value of attending a higher education institution and earning a college degree.

Enrollment oscillations and demographic changes, have existed in higher education throughout this country's history. The variations in enrollment numbers, however, can be directly associated with the state of society. Substantial economic, and political circumstances have directly impacted citizens, ensuing in a potential higher education enrollment cliff. An enrollment cliff refers to the limited pool of high school graduates that colleges have to choose from when recruiting and enrolling students to higher education institutions (Kline, 2019). A looming, impending enrollment cliff, happened in the 1970s and 1980s, and also is a prevalent issue within higher education today. While the era of the 1970s/80s had many differences from today's society, it was within this era in which higher education began to recruit a new demographic of people to enroll in college. By tapping into a new demographic of prospective students, in

women and adult learners, higher education institutions were able to withstand the projected enrollment cliff of that era. Additionally, higher education institutions were also able to continue the enrollment of high school graduates, and prospective college-bound students in a positive trajectory without suffering from depleting enrollment numbers (Card & Lemieux, 2001).

The current conditions of today, including political, economic, societal, and public perception, contributing towards a projected enrollment cliff in upcoming years, present necessary comparison to the conditions, and circumstances that were present, and relevant during the enrollment cliff that did not happen in the 1970s/80s, but at the time was a looming issue. The comparing and contrasting of specific conditions and outcomes of the 1970s and 1980s and the enrollment cliff that was predicted to be an issue in higher education during this decade, will provide pertinent insight and information, with reference to strategies, in dealing with, and preparing for the looming 2026 enrollment cliff. The reliance on enrollment of high school students into higher education institutions is a crucial component to a colleges' success. Historical analysis of past societal conditions likened to current, with an implementation of strategies for success will provide insight, as to the similarities and differences in each historical era and possible minimization of the potential upcoming enrollment cliff, and its effect on higher education.

To better understand the future trajectory of higher education amongst a pending enrollment cliff, I am conducting qualitative research using three types of instruments. The research instruments included in this study that I used are semi-structured interviews, focus groups and document content analysis. These three research tools will help me to

identify themes and trends along with gathering and synthesizing information from higher education administration and officials. Additionally, the vast experience and variety of backgrounds that each research participant has, allows for different feedback and information to be provided when answering my research questions and learning more about each participants perspective on the impending enrollment cliff and future of higher education.

Background

I am conducting this research study as a Caucasian female in her late 30s. My professional background consists of having experience working both in the high school educational setting and at a higher education institution. Currently, I am in my second year serving as an associate director of admission at a small, private, liberal arts institution in the Midwest. My educational background consists of me earning a bachelors of arts degree in history education, serving as an athletic academic collegiate eligibility advisor at a large, public, high school for 10 years and my present role in admission. This historical analysis and research topic are a suitable fit that aligns with my past and current professional setting. Furthermore, this topic directly relates to my current role in the recruitment and enrollment of prospective students to higher education and what that looks like for the forthcoming future amidst a pending enrollment cliff.

The research study took place on a virtual platform. The virtual platform was needed as the research participants are higher education professionals both at the institution where I work, at other institutions throughout both the Midwest and the United States and consultants at notable higher education consulting agencies with professional experience working at higher education institutions. The first research method I used was

a semi-structured interview. This semi-structured interview was conducted with specific senior staff representatives from the institution in which I am employed, along with three other senior staff members at higher education institutions, and two higher education consultants. The semi-structured interviews were recorded, comprised of eight pre-scripted questions, and allowed for other questions to be asked that were relevant to the topic and conversation. The focus group interview had four participants that are my colleagues from the office of admission. Each participant has worked in higher education between two and over 20 years and provided a unique insight into their thoughts on the future of the recruitment and enrollment of prospective students. Of the participants interviewed, five are males and eight are females and of the 13 participants 12 are Caucasian, and one is African-American, and their ages range from early 30s to early 60s. The last research instrument I used is a document content analysis. In the document content analysis, I reviewed and analyzed recruitment and enrollment trends over the past 10 years from the institution in which I work. This data was directly gathered into reports from the institution's customer relationship management tool and is institutional data.

The research design I used is qualitative as it was the best research design to collect and gather necessary data to help answer my two research questions. By using the qualitative research design, I found themes and trends amongst the different interviews conducted and drew correlations to the enrollment data and future projections of higher education. I also had opportunity to compare and contrast enrollment data with historical trends, and use the information from my research to further identify and understand how the current economic, population, and political realities impact the recruitment and

enrollment of students to higher education today, and what that looks like and means for different institutions across the midwest.

Importance

The purpose of this study is to draw historical connections, and necessary comparisons to societal conditions existent in the 1970s/80s, when an enrollment cliff was looming, and draw conclusions as to what remedies can be taken to potentially halt the projected enrollment cliff of 2026. This study provides a detailed analysis of what significant societal factors directly contribute to higher education, and the recruitment, and enrollment of students. Additionally, by uncovering the commonalities, and differences existent between each era, I am able to understand what past factors and current factors have the largest impact on student recruitment, and enrollment into higher education.

The recruitment, enrollment, and retention of high school graduates, to higher education institutions have been a persistent issue throughout the history of the United States. In correlations to the country's political and economic status, the enrollment of students has changed throughout time. Due to the 2008 economic recession contributing to the declining number of births, and subsequently, a small number of high school graduates, there is a projected enrollment cliff in higher education, predicted for 2026.

The intent of this study was for me to compare and contrast the economic, political, and population similarities, and differences between the 1970s/80s and the United States today, and analyze the lessons learned from the past projected demographic cliff, and how that impacts the projected higher education enrollment cliff. This historical analysis, and analytical study is important because the projected enrollment cliff for 2026

creates a litany of potential serious issues, that could drastically affect the future of higher education. The decline in birthrates due to the Great Recession has created a smaller group of high school graduates, enrolling into higher education institutions. Along with the birth rate decline, the country is also dealing with many similarities that were prevalent during the 1970s and early 80s. High inflation, rising cost of attending college, competition amongst colleges for recruitment, and enrollment of students, social justice advocacy in society, and on college campuses, along with a waning public perception of the value of a college education, are major concerns for higher education institutions.

Research Questions

I explored two major questions throughout the course of this research.

1. What are the economic, population, and political similarities and differences between the 1970s/80s and the United States today?
2. How do the current economic, population, and political realities impact the recruitment and enrollment of students to higher education today?

The purpose of the first research question is to gather the historical information in order to make comparisons about the 1970s/80s, and today. The 1970s/80s faced an impending enrollment cliff, and by researching information as to what the conditions of society were like, it aided in drawing parallels, and conclusions to current events of today. The second research question, is important because it allows for further research to be done, in understanding how the 1970s/80s were able to withstand the predicted enrollment cliff at the time, and what potential courses of action could be taken to limit the effects of the projected 2026 enrollment cliff.

Definition of terms

I used the following terms consistently throughout the study.

- **Baby Boomers:** A person who was born in the US between 1947 and 1961, as a result of WWII (Cambridge, 2023)
- **Cold War:** Political and economic power struggle between the United States and communist Soviet Union after WWII lasting from 1947-1991 (Britannica, 2023)
- **College:** An institution that offers post-secondary education (Britannica, 2023)
- **Demographic cliff:** The shrinking of the college-age population (Drozdowski, 2023)
- **Enrollment:** The action of putting yourself or someone else onto the official list of members of a class, college, or university (Cambridge, 2023)
- **Enrollment cliff:** Refers to a significant predicted (and in some cases precipitous) declines in the number of college-going students in a state or region of the country. (Rosowsky, 2024)
- **Great Recession:** The economic recession in the United States due to the financial crisis, and failed housing market of 2007-08. It was the longest economic downturn in the United States since the Great Depression. (Britannica, 2023)
- **Higher Education:** Education at a college or university where subjects are studied at an advanced level (Cambridge, 2023)
- **Inflation:** The rise in prices, and the decline in purchasing power (Fernando, 2023)
- **Recruitment:** The process of finding people to join an institution, company or organization (Cambridge, 2023)

- University: An institution of higher education, usually comprising a college of liberal arts and sciences and graduate and professional schools and having the authority to confer degrees in various fields of study (Britannica, 2023)
- Vietnam War: A war that took place from 1955-1975, fought between communist North Vietnam & non-communist South Vietnam (Spector, 2023)

Summary

The focus of the study and my research was to draw economic, political, and population comparisons between two different historical eras, the 1970s/80s, and today. The years of 2007-2009, are also significant in this research because they are the reasoning, and cause behind the projected enrollment cliff for 2026. This research provided significant comparison between the likenesses, and differences that exist in the era of the 1970s/80s societal conditions, and allow for analysis of what can be done in preparation, and avoidance of the looming 2026 higher education enrollment cliff.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Higher education institutions face a looming enrollment cliff in 2026, that could have an extreme effect on higher education, the American population, and society. An enrollment cliff of this magnitude was projected previously in the 1970s/80s. The political, economic, and population conditions of these two eras, are necessary for analysis, to see what similarities, and differences existed during these two time periods. The 1970s/80s was able to withstand the projected enrollment cliff that higher education was facing, by exploring new demographics of student enrollment into college. The lessons learned from the past eras, should be analyzed in regards to the direct impact they have on the recruitment, and enrollment of students to higher education today. The three prevalent areas of historical analysis, and research center around the economic, political, and population similarities and differences between the 1970s/80s, and the United States today. The literature review will address three areas related to the past, and current projected enrollment cliff. The first section will discuss research related to economics, the second section will concentrate on research about political conditions, and the third section will address research associated with population, and demographics.

Topic 1: Economic

The economic state of a country is significant and has major societal ramifications if a country's economy is unstable. When economies struggle, and people face periods of economic hardship, and uncertainties, it can create numerous challenges all throughout society. These challenges can then matriculate into larger issues, creating economic crises, and causing people to question how they are spending their money while also

being more intentional with what they are spending their money on. Moreover, the ramifications of economic instability typically lead to inflation and high unemployment thus creating major economic difficulties for governments and its citizens.

During the 1970s, there were several economic issues facing the American people and society. One of the primary issues facing the country at the time was economic inflation, and unemployment. The coined term for slow growth, high unemployment, and inflation is known as stagflation (Boyle, 2023). Stagflation, combined with vast amounts of military spending due to the Vietnam War, took a significant toll on the American economy. The government tried to respond in order to avoid continued economic downturn, by increasing government spending, and lowering interest rates. These actions were not successful, and the 1970s ended in a worldwide economic recession (Boyle, 2023). In turn, the economic issues caused universities and colleges to suffer in America, as there was a 5% enrollment decline from the 1970s to the early 1980s (Vedder, 2021). The recession due to stagflation that the country faced during that time, parallels numerous similarities to the economic state of the United States in 2022, and currently, with high inflation rates being a major issue.

Additionally, economic issues can negatively contribute to a society and individual's spending power. The oil embargo at the end of the 1970s also created a significant economic strain on America. The United States heavily relied on imported foreign oil, from the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, also known as OPEC (Verrastro & Caruso, 2013). The reliance on imported oil put the U.S. economy in a bind, and due to international conflict in the Middle East, and the U.S. supporting Israel, OPEC decided to increase the price of oil by over 70 percent, and that raised the

price of oil to \$12 per barrel (Verrastro & Caruso, 2013). This drastic increase further added to the economic issues of inflation, and unemployment faced by Americans, and it started an economic recession. Similar to inflation, this oil embargo hampered Americans' purchasing power, and spending, and created another difficult barrier for prospective students to enroll and pay for college.

The economic recession of the 1970s, trickled into the 1980s, and further contributed to the country's economic issues. The beginning of the 1980s had one of the worst economic recessions since the Great Depression. The similar issues of inflation, increasing interest rates, and unemployment, plagued the American economy. (Boyle, 2023). The increasing financial issues, created concern amongst higher education institutions. There were predictions that up to 30 percent of higher education institutions would have to close, because of the persistent economic issues of the 1970s and 1980s (Card, David & Lemieux, Thomas. 2001).

Two decades later, America suffered another crushing economic recession, in which its effects have the probability to be long lasting, and potentially contribute to the projected 2026 enrollment cliff. The Great Recession, started with the questionable loan lending practices, to borrowers, who did not have the financial means to repay their substantial home loans (Singh, 2023). Likened to past economic downturns, the increase of interest rates, coupled with the default of loans, sent the economy into a spiral. Banks in the United States, and across America lost billions of dollars and failed (Singh, 2023). The Great Recession had severe economic, and population impacts on the United States. It caused millions of Americans to lose billions of dollars in the stock market, and investments, while in turn also creating a decline in birth rates. According to research at

the University of New Hampshire (Field, 2022), the Great Recession reduced births by over 2 million, in the timespan from 2008 to 2013. The reduction in births in turn leads to a projected massive decline in available high school graduates for higher education enrollment, thus providing another factor in leading towards the looming enrollment cliff.

The current state of the American economy, has additionally caused concern for future higher education enrollment. The primary persistent economic issues include high inflation, affordability of college and societal de-valuing of a college degree. Those issues all have contributed to a 14% drop in Americans who think attending a higher education institution has a beneficial effect on the country (Salhorta, 2022). Economic affordability is a significant factor that contributes to the enrollment of high school graduates into higher education. In this current economic climate, numerous Americans do not think they can obtain a good, affordable college education (Salhorta, 2022). The continuing economic issues that impact enrollment in higher education, in congruency with an American perception of higher education declining, are major factors that will also likely contribute to the projected enrollment cliff.

The data I collected directly relates to having a better understanding of the economic realities that are prevalent in society. The data collection allows me to see the economic and financial issues and problems that are existent for prospective students and their families. Additionally, the interviews I conducted with higher education officials along with the document content analysis provided me with the opportunity to draw connections between historical happenings and the current economic status of society and examine how both directly coincide with enrollment trends. The research also allowed

me to discover themes, codes and commonalities amongst interview and focus group data collected.

Political

The varying political events, and policies that have occurred within the United States, also affect the enrollment of high school graduates into higher education institutions. Political happenings such as war, contentious international relations, laws being passed, amongst other events can create dissension amongst citizens. Additionally, depending on the details of those events and their outcomes, there can be and has been a direct correlation and connection to changes and fluctuations in enrollment in higher education. Political proceedings and policies historically have been one of the biggest factors creating higher education enrollment changes and causing oscillating public perception regarding the value of earning a higher education degree.

The biggest political scandal that took place in the 1970s, in the midst of the economic downturn was Watergate. The Watergate scandal was when the American president at the time, Richard Nixon, resigned from office, after it was discovered that Nixon organized a break-in at the Democratic National Offices, and then tried to cover it up (Kohut, 2015). This was one of the greatest presidential and political scandals of the time, and it caused Americans to lose faith in the president, and the government.

Another significant political event that took place during the 1970s was the passing of the Title IX legislation. The passing of the Civil Rights Act of Title IX, allowed for increased opportunities for women in higher education, athletics, and employment, as Title IX outlawed discrimination in federally funded education programs (WEEA, 2023). The passing of this historic legislation, enabled higher education

institutions to tap into another valuable demographic of students; women. The passing of Title IX, and the increased enrollment of women into college, was a strategy for higher education to not succumb to an enrollment cliff in the 1970s/80s.

Political strife continued to exist during the 1970s, as the United States' participation in the Vietnam War, caused public outcry, especially on college campuses. Protests happened throughout the United States, some of them even being deadly. In 1970, college students at Kent State University, in Ohio were protesting the Vietnam War, and four were killed by the National Guard (Ferenchik, 2020). The tragedy directly impacted how colleges dealt with students, and was a continued effort by college students for their voices to be heard. The anti-war demonstrations, along with the Vietnam War draft affected higher education enrollment. When the draft ended in the early 1970s male enrollment declined, and when benefits of the G.I. bill also ended, male enrollment in colleges dropped around 6% (Spector, 2023).

During the 1980s, another war was ravaging between the United States, and the Soviet Union, and it was the Cold War. The Cold War, which lasted for approximately 45 years, was not an actual war, it was a power struggle between the two most powerful countries in the world at the time. This power struggle created a massive international conflict between the world's superpowers and was centered around an arms race and conflicting views on communism. The Cold War was a major part of American society and imbedded into the fabric of American politics, the economy and American citizen's everyday living.

Ronald Reagan was the U.S. president during this time period, and Reagan was vigilant in standing against the Soviet Union. (McMahon, 1995). American citizens had

concerns about the Cold War, fearing it would turn nuclear; they also protested the 1980 Moscow Olympics (McMahon, 1995). Reagan fostered a positive relationship with the Soviet Union's president, Mikail Gorbachev, and in 1989, the Berlin Wall was torn down, symbolizing the end of the Soviet Union, and communism (McMahon, 1995). The ending of the Cold War not only lessened political tension between the United States and Soviet Union, it also allowed for technological advances to be made, and utilized, such as the internet.

Immigration policies, could also modify enrollment in higher education. The changes in immigration, have altered American society, and the way many American citizens view race. Immigrants have contributed to economic growth, and development in many major cities across America (Graduate Center, 2022). Immigrants also account for the growth in businesses, service industries, and health care (Graduate Center, 2022). The United States has always been deemed the Melting Pot, and a place where people from around the world seek refuge, and freedom. The immigrant population, could be a potential demographic to focus on, in continuing to expand future enrollment to stave off the predicted enrollment cliff.

The data I collected relates to the political status of society because it enabled me to draw direct conclusions between the current political state of the United States and its direct impact on the recruitment and enrollment of students to higher education.

Population

Over the course of United States history, marginalized groups such as women and people of color, have not been afforded the same chances as their Caucasian male counterparts. The intentional exclusion of rights and opportunities is due in part to the

way in which the United States was founded as a country, and then coupled with laws that were passed to purposefully exclude the aforesaid groups from both basic human rights and educational opportunities. The barring of women and people of color from attending higher education institutions, competing athletically on the collegiate level and having the same access to facilities, education and participation in society created a country and society where these groups were not on a level playing field. Therefore, until the 1960s, the demographic composition of students in higher education institutions was primarily comprised of Caucasian males.

Moreover, historically throughout United States history, women were not given the same rights as men, with one of those rights being the opportunity to attend college. Numerous Ivy League schools, and higher education institutions did not admit women until the 1960s, and 1970s. There was a strong national stance, amongst excluding women from enrolling in higher education. The shift in providing women with the same higher educational opportunities, as their male counterparts, in conjunction with the passing of Title IX, drastically increased the enrollment of women into college. The enrollment shift helped to counter the predicted demographic cliff, at the time, and set a historic mark in 1982, as the first time in American history, more women earned bachelor degrees than men (Carlton, 2023).

In America, there is also a long history of excluding historically marginalized groups from equal access to educational opportunities. In the 1970s/80s, changes were made to the college enrollment, and admission process. In the late 1960s, the affirmative action policy was enacted, to provide more higher educational opportunities to students of color (Carlton, 2023). The policy was met with discourse, however proven effective,

by the 1980s, the number of black students enrolled in higher education institutions increased by over 800,000 from the late 1960s (Cross & Slater, 1999). The legislation provided higher educational enrollment opportunities for students from historically marginalized backgrounds. Additionally, it allowed for an influx of students of color to enroll in college, while providing them with their rightful educational opportunities. In June 2023, the Supreme Court ruled to effectively end affirmative action. Higher education institutions can no longer consider race when making an admission decision for a prospective student (Nittle, 2023). It was the Supreme Court Case, *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. vs Harvard*, that overturned the use of affirmative action in the college admission processes. The case cited that the Harvard admission office discriminated against Asian American applicants, and violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act (AACCP, 2023). The overturning of affirmative action decision could potentially drastically change the number of applications colleges receive from students of diverse backgrounds, change the quantity of students from diverse backgrounds that are accepted, and in turn, alter the makeup, and demographics of colleges, and higher education institutions across the country.

Engaging, and utilizing non-traditional student demographics also helped to minimize the projected enrollment cliff of the 1970s/80s. The enrollment of adult students in higher education institutions grew drastically during this era, and it assisted in enrollment, and with quelling projected enrollment concerns. During a twenty-year time, span, from the 1970s to 1990s, adult students, who are students considered to be over the age of 24, grew 25% in higher education enrollment (Jacobs & Stoner-Eby, 1998). There was also a drastic increase in the enrollment of women, while enrollment of white men

dropped between 1970s/80s (Jacobs & Stoner-Eby,1998). Educational efforts, specifically focusing on certain demographics led to the influx of those specified demographics in higher education enrollment.

Population fluctuation, and trends have been linked, and directly aligned with present societal conditions. A time period in American history, where there was a great decrease in birth, and fertility rates was from 2007-2009, during the Great Recession. Data trends show that while birth rates were sporadic during this time period, there was a national decline over a five-year time span, with a 5% decrease from 2007-2012 (Percheski & Kimbro, 2013). While there was altering birth rates amongst different demographics, the overall data concluded that financial and economic hardships play a direct part in attributing to fertility rates, and national birthing trends (Percheski & Kimbro, 2013).

The projected enrollment cliff for 2026 directly coincides with the low birth rates due to the Great Recession. Forecasts for the future expect a major decline in undergraduate enrollment in higher education institutions. It is expected that four-year undergraduate institutions, that are not considered amongst the nation's elite, could lose over 10% of its students by the year 2029. (Kline, 2019). Geographically, the Northeast region of the United States will suffer from the greatest enrollment issues, because that is where the largest number of coll and institutions are located (Kline, 2019). The annual number of births per 1,000 women of childbearing age dropped to its lowest, 63, in 2012, due to the Great Recession, and the birthrate has not since recovered (Kline, 2019). The lack of high school graduates in the upcoming years, is forecasted to create a student enrollment shortage in higher education institutions.

The data I collected is directly associated with the demographic and population trends to the political status of society. The data collection and document content analysis provided me with the opportunity analyze, investigate and draw conclusions as to how drastic changes in demographics and population directly affect the recruitment and enrollment of prospective students to higher education institutions.

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed literature that was relevant to the research problems, based on the economic, population, and political similarities and differences between the 1970s/80s, and the United States today.

The political, economic, and population societal conditions of the 1970s/80s had a society grasping to figure out what remedies could be taken, to ensure that higher education enrollment did not suffer due to an impending demographic cliff. During this historical time frame, the generation known as “Baby Boomers”, made up of people born after WWII, from the years 1946-1964, were heading to college in droves (Clarke, 2022). However, there were numerous economic, and political events that happened, that could have drastically changed college enrollment.

The 1970s was a decade that experienced an unprecedented era of inflation, in part due to the country’s involvement in the Vietnam War. Along with the country’s rapid military spending, an oil embargo in 1979 caused the cost of gas to almost triple, subsequently ending the decade, with the country in a worldwide economic recession (Boyle, 2023). In addition to the economic issues, there were also prevalent societal, and political issues. In American leadership, the Watergate Scandal, led to the resignation of the president at the time, Richard Nixon. There was also a continuation from the 1960s,

of historically marginalized communities advocating for equal rights. In promotion of women's rights, the groundbreaking legislation of Roe v. Wade passed, protecting a pregnant women's right to have an abortion. Additionally, the passing of Title IX of the Civil Rights Act, legally outlawed discrimination on the basis of sex, opening the door for women to participate in athletics, and eventually leading to the growth of women in enrollment in higher education. During this decade, there was also continued advocacy of equal rights for historically marginalized communities, such as the black community, and the LGBTQ community (Sample, 2021). Furthermore, across the country, the anti-Vietnam war sentiment continued, and throughout college campuses, there were protests against the war, and many periods of angst and unrest. The most notable protest took place at Kent State University, in Ohio, where armed National Guard members weaponized tear gas, and bullets to stop a Vietnam War protest, and it culminated in the deaths of four students, with numerous others being injured (Kesslen, 2020). The 1970s was an era of instability, and civil discontent. Moreover, the economic uncertainties faced by many Americans, in combination with political turmoil, and violence, and unrest amongst students at many college campuses, created reservations, and apprehension concerning the affordability of attending college, and a students' and family's desire to enroll in higher education.

That uncertainty intensified in the 1980s. During this time period, America was in the midst of dealing with the Cold War, and combating communism, while also experiencing economic discontent. At the beginning of the decade, the country was still in an economic recession, due to the inflation issues of the 1970s, and the rise of unemployment (Summa, 2021). Women in national leadership positions grew, as Sandra

Day O'Connor became the first female Supreme Court Justice, and Sally Ride became the first U.S. woman astronaut (SEC, 2022). Some of these factors led to concerns about a drastic decline in the number of students enrolling in higher education institutions, while others provided national hope, and encouragement with the inclusion of women in positions of national power, and prestige.

Economic problems, and issues, have been a consistent factor in contributing to the instability of enrollment into higher education institutions. In 2008, America suffered from a severe financial recession, known as the Great Recession due to the collapse of the housing market. The housing market collapsed due to poor lending practices, where lenders loaned excessive amounts of money to borrowers, who did not have the financial capability of paying back the loan. Risky spending, and investment, specifically in the housing market also contributed to the world's financial collapse (Field, 2022).

Borrowers then began to default on their loans. The defaults on the high-risk loans, had a crippling effect on banking, not only in the United States, but also throughout the world.

Due to the Great Recession, over 8 million Americans lost their jobs, and American households lost over 19 million dollars as the stock market tumbled. (Boyle, 2023). The dire economic situation that the Great Recession left many families in, directly contributed to the declining birth rate numbers in the United States, beginning in 2007 (Livingston & Cohn, 2010). Nationally, there was an annual rise in birth

rates, and then beginning in 2008, birth rates fell 2%, and continued to decline.

Characteristically, birth rates are directly associated with economic conditions, and from 2007 to 2009, the number of births declined by nearly 1,500, and birthrates continued to decline until 2011 (Livingston & Cohn, 2010). During the Great Recession, birth rates

dropped a total of 23%, which in turn has led to a vast decrease in the sheer number of recent high school graduates available to attend college. (Reinwald & Jarrett, 2024).

While the Great Recession was taking place, birth rates, might not have been the primary cause of concern, however, the combination of less babies born, beginning in 2008, and the current economic, and political instability that was existent, are all contributory, and significant factors leading to a projected enrollment cliff of 2026. The drop-in birth rates beginning in 2008, has now led to a limited number of college-age students, for enrollment in higher education. Data suggests that beginning in 2025, the number of 18-year-old, high school graduates, will decrease by 15%, spanning into another future four years. (Drozdowski, 2023). With the decline, colleges, and universities, are projected to be vying for the same students for recruitment, and enrollment into higher education institutions.

Different specific historical events, and happenings were reviewed, and analyzed in this chapter providing context as to the research questions. The review was divided into three parts, with part one focusing on economics, part two focusing on political conditions, and part three centering on population and demographics. The next chapter will focus on methodology, and research.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to analyze and better understand the future trajectory of the recruitment and enrollment of prospective students to higher education amidst a projected looming enrollment cliff. The focus of this research was to also gather historical data in comparing societal conditions of the 1970s/80s to today, and the affect those circumstances have upon the enrollment of students into higher education institutions in the upcoming future. The research I conducted is important because it provided a better understanding concerning the economic, population, and political similarities and differences between the 1970s/80s and the United States today, and it also explored how the current economic, population, and political realities impact the recruitment and enrollment of students to higher education both presently and for the future. I conducted qualitative research using a descriptive method which is an approach that explains a happening or event with the goal to collect information about the occurrence being researched. Qualitative research is a research technique that allows for the investigation and surveyance of people regarding different social problems (Creswell, 2014). I conducted qualitative research using a descriptive method because it was the best form of data collection to use in my research as it allowed me to understand and gather information from veterans in higher education, regarding the future of the recruitment and enrollment of prospective students to higher education with an impending enrollment cliff on the horizon. The three forms of qualitative research methodologies I used consisted of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and enrollment data document analysis.

Participants

There are nine members of senior staff representing various higher education institutions throughout the Midwest and United States that I interviewed in a semi-structured interview format. There are also four members of an admission department that I interviewed in a focus group. Each participant submitted their consent through email format. The participants were both my colleagues and representatives from other higher education institutions. All of the participants in both the semi-structured and focus group interviews make-up a convenience sample (Creswell, 2014). The participants that made up the convenience sample were selected due to their experience in higher education, along with the type of institution where they work, their respective experience in higher education. Five of the participants identify as males, and eight identify as females. Of the 13 participants 12 identify as Caucasian and one identifies as African American. The participants ranged in the age from 32 years old to 61 years old. All of the participants have worked in higher education for at least three years, with each having experience in various roles in addition to the role they currently have. See details in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Participant Information

<u>Name</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Research Method</u>
<u>Mark</u>	<u>58</u>	<u>Caucasian- White</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Semi-Structured Interview</u>
<u>Jeff</u>	<u>61</u>	<u>Caucasian- White</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Semi-Structured Interview</u>
<u>Nick</u>	<u>58</u>	<u>Caucasian- White</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Semi-Structured Interview</u>
<u>Tony</u>	<u>53</u>	<u>Caucasian-White</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Semi-Structured Interview</u>
<u>Rob</u>	<u>36</u>	<u>Caucasian-White</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Semi-Structured Interview</u>
<u>Molly</u>	<u>46</u>	<u>Caucasian-White</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Semi-Structured Interview</u>
<u>Kara</u>	<u>33</u>	<u>Caucasian-White</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Semi-Structured Interview</u>
<u>Amber</u>	<u>44</u>	<u>African American-Black</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Semi-Structured Interview</u>
<u>Emma</u>	<u>36</u>	<u>Caucasian-White</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Semi-Structured Interview</u>
<u>Mia</u>	<u>32</u>	<u>Caucasian-White</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Focus Group</u>
<u>Jackie</u>	<u>44</u>	<u>Caucasian-White</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Focus Group</u>
<u>Anne</u>	<u>46</u>	<u>Caucasian-White</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Focus Group</u>
<u>Sue</u>	<u>58</u>	<u>Caucasian-White</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Focus Group</u>

NOTE: All names are pseudonyms.

Setting

The research took place both in person and virtually. The research happened on two different platforms because some of the research participants were in close proximity to me and the other research participants are in cities spread out throughout the midwest and the continental United States. Additionally, the document data content analysis portion of the research took place primarily in my office located in a mid-size midwest city in central Ohio.

The in-person research took place at a small-liberal arts institution within an average size midwestern city in Ohio. The campus is comprised of approximately 1250 undergraduate students with 80% of the students enrolled in the institution identifying as Caucasian or White, and 20% as students of color. Within the 20% students of color, there are student representatives from nine different countries across the world. The demographics of the students enrolled at the institution where the research took place are a similar reflection of the participants from that respective institution that participated in the semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews.

Participants in the study completed either semi-structured or focus groups interviews between January and March 2024 and each interview lasted between approximately 30 and 60 minutes. For all of the semi-structured interview participants that were spread out throughout the United States, I interviewed them via Microsoft Teams, and recorded their interview responses. Each interview took place at various times throughout the day (Monday-Friday), in conjunction with what worked best with each participants' schedule. Even though three of the four focus group participants work on campus in my office, I interviewed the focus group via Microsoft Teams.

Data Collection

The selection of the research design is important to ensure that the research, participants, data collection, document data analysis and procedures all directly align with the answering the intended research questions. The selection of a research design correlates with the research problem and the problems that the researcher is wanting to solve (Creswell, 2014). In the current study I utilized the descriptive method, which is an approach that examines a current situation and its contributing factors. Descriptive research is also research that examines different variables contributing to a condition or phenomenon. (Creswell, 2014). To successfully conduct qualitative research through the descriptive method research design, I examined the current state of the situation and determined three research instruments that are the best usage of data collection for me to answer my research questions. Below, I thoroughly explain each of the three data collection methods.

Semi-Structured Interviews

I designed the semi-structured interview questions based around my two research questions and the answers, information and data that I wanted to obtain from this study. I began the semi-structured interviews with having the participant state their name, institution and position within that institution. I then stated an introductory statement that acknowledged the participants agreement in participating in the study and told the participants that I wanted them to add any additional insights and information beyond the questions I asked. I also obtained verbal consent for recording the interview. I asked a variety of questions in the interviews, which can be found in the interview schedule

located in Appendix A. The conversation throughout the interview was very organic and allowed for me to gather both genuine and factual feedback from higher education professionals.

Focus Group Interviews

I also created the focus group interview questions based on my two research questions and made the questions so that they would help me gather useful information and data from my study. I interviewed the participants on Microsoft Teams. The focus group interview questions were centered around those specific participants' experiences at the institution in which they all are employed. Similar to the semi-structured interview questions, I started the discussion by thanking the participants for agreeing to participate and informing them that it was a conversational style format, and they could add additional information outside of the questions I asked. I asked a variety of questions throughout the interview which can be found in the interview schedule located in Appendix B. The combination of co-workers all from the same office and institutional setting created rich conversation and allowed for me to gain valuable insight and information.

Document Content Analysis

I used document content analysis as a research tool to answer my two research questions. I analyzed enrollment data from an institution located in central Ohio. The enrollment data spanned across ten years and included information about prospective students' geographic region and hometown, their gender, race, socio-economic status and parental status. I analyzed the changes and fluctuations in the recruitment and enrollment

of prospective students at the institution, and then I compared them to the political, economic and demographic changes and shifts of society throughout that decade.

When creating each of these research instruments and analyzing enrollment data, I created face validity on each of the interview schedules by having an expert in the field of higher education review and critique these interview schedules prior to implementation. In the semi-structured and focus group interviews I recorded each interview through Microsoft Teams and had it transcribed in order to assure accuracy in the gathering and analyzing of information. I also interviewed a variety of different higher education officials and constituents to make sure there were different demographics represented. I also selected representatives from varying higher education institutions, that had drastic student population and enrollment differences from one another, along with selecting representatives from well-known higher education consultant agencies. Additionally, the document data content analysis document was verified as authentic enrollment information from an accredited four-year institution.

The semi-structured interview format and questions can be found in Appendix A, the focus group interview format and questions can be found in Appendix B, and the document data content analysis can be found in Appendix C.

Data Analysis

Since I conducted qualitative research using a descriptive method, I used themes, codes and patterns through the means of an audio index from the semi-structured and focus groups interviews and historical comparisons for my data analysis. These qualitative data analysis tools were implemented within each of my research instruments and allowed me to gather and compile results that helped me to answer my two research questions. I describe each type of my data analysis in the sections below.

With the consent of the participants, I recorded both the semi-structured interviews and the focus group discussion. After I completed all of the interviews and focus group discussion, I then created a table combining the interviews, that examined the theme of the interview topic, the codes, excerpts from the interview data along with time stamp from the recording.

I uncovered and organized the codes I created by carefully listening and re-listening to each interview and focus group participant's feedback. I then wrote down words, phrases and topics that commonly occurred while noting specific existent themes. After vigilant and detailed listening and writing of the participants' feedback I then compiled a list of all the pertinent codes and combined some of the similar codes together to create a smaller, more concise list. I then put the commonly occurring words with the correct themes, while also adding in specific excerpts and quotes from the interviews and the participants name, institution, date and time in which that information was stated. The themes, codes and patterns that I created primarily centered around the topics of recruitment and enrollment challenges, strategies and changes, the future of higher education, the current political and economic societal states, and looming 2026 demographic cliff.

The creation of the detailed table from the interviews with themes, codes and patterns help to address my research questions because it combines all of the information gathered from the semi-structured interviews and focus group responses and allows me to analyze common responses and themes, while streamlining the information. The grouping of data from the responses also primarily helped me to focus on better understanding how the current economic, population and political realities impact the

recruitment and enrollment of students to higher education today, by hearing the different insights and perspectives from higher education officials across an array of institutions.

Through the document content analysis, I compared and contrasted the different political, economic and population changes and happenings present in society, in correlation with enrollment changes dating back to 2014. I also directly correlated political, economic and population changes that took place in the 1970s and 1980s and associated them with the events from the past decade to analyze their impact on enrollment. This research tool greatly helped me to answer my first research question in understanding the economic, population and political similarities between the 1970s/80s and the United States today.

Procedures

I began my study after I received approval from Wittenberg University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The first step I took was emailing all of the selected semi-structured and focus group participants a consent form with a desired due date. After I received all of the consent forms, via email, I then scheduled a date, time, location and platform for the semi-structured interviews. I also coordinated a date and time that worked for the focus group participants to meet, both in person and virtually. During each interview I asked the participant if they consented to the interview being recorded. After I met with and interviewed each participant, I then created an audio index consistent of themes, codes, patterns, interview data excerpts and time stamps to analyze the data and gather information to help me best answer my research questions. The interviewing of semi-structured participants and the focus group took place over an eight-week time period, from January – March 2024. After I completed the semi-structured and focus

group interviews, along with the document content analysis, I then used qualitative research methods to uncover my findings.

Summary

I administered qualitative research using a descriptive method while conducting an historical comparison analysis to identify and understand the economic, population and political similarities between the 1970s/80s and the United States today and obtain information on how the current economic, population and political realities impact the recruitment and enrollment of students to higher education today. I collected data through semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews and document content analysis of a small, institution in central Ohio's higher education enrollment trends from the past decade. The next chapter outlines the findings from my research.

Chapter 4

Findings

The subject of my research is to draw historical connections, and necessary comparisons to societal conditions that existed in the 1970s/80s to current present day. I did this by conducting focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews and discovering patterns through a document data analysis of institutional enrollment trends over the course of the past decade that align with past and current population, economic and historical happenings. My research also surmised as to what remedies can be taken to potentially halt the projected enrollment cliff of 2026. This study provides a detailed analysis of what significant societal factors directly contribute to higher education, and the recruitment, and enrollment of students, with a specific emphasis on analyzing past and current economic, population and political realities and their impact on higher education. It also uncovered findings of what issues are facing all higher education institutions, and those problems that are specific to smaller, private liberal arts institutions pertaining to the recruitment and enrollment of undergraduate students. Additionally, it compared the economic, population and political similarities and differences between the 1970s/80s and today. I will use this chapter to present my research findings from the three research tools I implemented during my study.

Summary

Focus Group Interview

Table 1 illustrates data collected from the focus group interview. Table 1 shows common themes uncovered throughout the interview and specifically provides interview data and quotations from questions that the participants answered. Table 1 also helped to answer my second research question, which asked, how do the current economic, population, and political realities impact the recruitment and enrollment of students to higher education today. Table 1 exhibits persistent themes that were evident from the interview, while also explaining the codes within those themes, identifying the number of times that code existed in the interview, and details relevant quotations from the interview to support the theme. The common themes that were prevalent throughout the focus group interview were uncertainty about the future of the institution, the vast change in the type of students that are being recruited and enrolled at the institution, in regards to socio-economic status and demographics, and the persistent institutional barriers that are relevant that provide numerous challenges amongst the shadow of a looming enrollment cliff. These common themes give insight as to how a pending enrollment cliff might drastically impact small, private, liberal arts institutions.

Table 2
Themes

Themes	Codes	Interview Data	Quotations
<p>Theme 1: Participants talking about uncertainty of higher education and uncertainty of the future of the institution where they work, initiatives being taken to incentivizes recruitment of prospective students and larger recruitment measures.</p>	<p>Theme 1: Code: 1 Confusion of institution’s identity.</p>	<p>Theme1: Code 1: Data 1: 9 (Confusion)</p>	<p>“We are not competitive with other schools within our mileage when it comes to those incentives.</p>
	<p>Theme 1: Code: 2 Questioning the institutions future and its ability to adapt.</p>	<p>Theme 1: Code 2: Data 1: 10 (Adaptability)</p>	<p>“I don’t think we have kept up with the times ... gap of not having new age appealing programs.”</p>
	<p>Theme 1: Code: 3 Analyzing strategic planning that the institution is implementing and questioning if that is enough.</p>	<p>Theme 1: Code 3: Data 1: 9 (Strategic planning)</p>	<p>“Thinking about all the ways that we support and increase undergraduate recruitment but we need to think bigger.”</p>
<p>Theme 2: Participants discussing the type of students that are being recruited, changes in recruitment and enrollment, and life events that have changed enrollment.</p>	<p>Theme 2: Code: 1 Discussing the rapidly changing economic profile of prospective students and their family’s socio-economic status.</p>	<p>Theme 2: Code 1: Data 1: 12 (Socio economic)</p>	<p>“And now I think intentionally even we’re recruiting a little more of the extremes of the opposite end of the spectrum, so the haves and the have nots and the middle is harder to recruit.”</p>
	<p>Theme 2: Code: 2 Analyzing students’ willingness to go to college out of state and/or further away from home and their families changing social dynamics.</p>	<p>Theme 2: Code 2: Data 1: 28 (Social change)</p>	<p>“One of the things that we saw a lot in 90s and 2000s was a willingness to come from out of state to college here versus now, we’re kind of narrowing that.”</p>
	<p>Theme 2: Code: 5 Recognizing how a family’s financial situation plays a crucial role in the</p>	<p>Theme 2: Code 5 Data 1: 18 (Financial Stress)</p>	<p>“I think we are seeing a bit of a trend with families who maybe they’re dual income, maybe they make a</p>

Table 2 Continued

	<p>college-decision making process, especially at private institutions, and how university initiatives make it difficult for lower income families out of state to afford their institution.</p>		<p>lot of money, but it's never been their intention to support their students long-term academic aspirations.”</p> <p>“When I look at Charlotte (NC) parents selecting the schools where I know the kids can afford to pay because they're not getting the Tiger Opportunity Grant, they're paying out of pocket.”</p>
<p>Theme 3: Participants identifying institutional barriers that are existent at their university, along with identifying new educational trends and the ever-changing needs of students.</p>	<p>Theme 3: Code 1 Uncovering ideas to incorporate and target different demographics of students and being flexible with course offerings and meeting different student's needs.</p>	<p>Data 1:1 (Academic programs)</p>	<p>“I think we also need to differentiate our student body because the growing areas right now are graduate programs, adult students, and the students who kind of follow that non-traditional path. But hand in hand with that is being able to offer evening and online courses so you know thinking about ways that we can be competitive.”</p>
	<p>Theme 3: Code 2: Examining students' varying backgrounds and how the demographics of students is changing and what needs to happen on campus to support students.</p>	<p>Data 1:3 (Student supportiveness)</p>	<p>“One of the things we have to think about even just outside of where they're coming from physically, is that the overall race and ethnicity demographics of the US is changing as well and making sure</p>

Table 2 Continud

we have the support systems.”

“We want to make sure that we have the right support systems for all students of all backgrounds.

Theme 3: Code 3
Discussing actions that should have been taken years ago to help with future recruitment

Data 1: 1
Data 1: 1
(Missed opportunities)

“We’re too far down the side of the hill meaning we didn’t do enough stuff early enough to capitalize ... and getting and having funding.”

Table 1 presents interesting information and responses that participants view to be issues and major points of notice when recruiting and enrolling students to higher education institutions, specifically their smaller, private, liberal arts institution. The biggest takeaways from this data are the agreeance of the participants regarding their institution struggling to maintain its identity but also adapt and prepare for the future. Also, common discussion and answers regarding the change in the type of student that is being recruited to their institution, how that has transformed throughout the years and the financial stresses families face, while also navigating the impact of the pandemic. The data in Table 1 also highlights the importance of future strategic planning so that small, private, liberal arts institutions can remain open while also dealing with the challenges a demographic cliff presents. Furthermore, it also explains the importance of the student experience at the institution, while emphasizing the significance of making sure the institution is staying true to its mission and is highly aware of educational trends and mass societal changes and perspectives regarding higher education.

Semi-Structured Interview

Table 2 illustrates data collected from the nine semi-structured interviews. Table 2 displays evident themes that were persistent throughout each interview, along with providing interview data and quotes that directly relate to the themes. Similar to Table 1, Table 2, also helps to answer both of my research questions, which are, what are the economic, population, and political similarities and differences between the 1970s/80s and the United States today, and how do the current economic, population, and political realities impact the recruitment and enrollment of students to higher education today. Table 2 also shows common threads, and themes that were existent in each of the nine

interviews, while also detailing certain codes within those themes and specifying the number of times that code existed throughout each of the interviews combined, while also supplying relevant quotations from the interview to support the theme. Table 2 has quite a lot of themes, with differing codes, as it is a combination of information from nine different interviews and the participants responses.

Table 3

Themes	Codes	Interview Data	Quotations
Theme 1: Participants discuss the issues that economic, societal, and political challenges have created in higher education while also putting institutional officials in a challenging position as to how their institution can adapt, while creating a certain element of skepticism.	Theme 1: Code: 1 Participants specifically discuss uncertainty in the future of higher education, with direct correlation to economic and political issues in the United States.	Theme1: Code 1 Data 1:70 (Uncertainty)	<p>“Yeah it has created a lot of uncertainty. It has put us in a position where we have had to reduce the number of things we do, primarily academic programs, but also some extracurricular programs.”</p> <p>“I think on the academic side, at a traditional liberal arts institution, faculty wrestle with what relevant programs would attract students is a piece. I don’t know given the historical nature of the liberal arts and faculty governance, that it’s evolving quick enough to meet the need.”</p> <p>“Now I’m at a public university where it’s a little different and what I think we’re seeing is with some uncertainty about the value of college.”</p>

Table 3 Continued

**Theme 1: Code: 2
Participants**

identify hesitation regarding the effectiveness of residential institutions implementing online learning changes and the public's altering perception on the value of higher education.

**Theme1: Code 2
Data 1:15**

(Skepticism/Value)

“And so I think there’s this tension that is definitely impacting people’s view on the value of higher education both in terms of intrinsic but also financial.”

“And so I think there’s this sense that higher ED isn’t paying off in the way that students think it should be, which again, it has not been proven.”

“So, for example, I personally am skeptical that most four year traditionally residential colleges are going to have a lot of success in the online student market in the near term.”

“We spent the entire time for 70 years telling everybody that college is the way through it and now we’re saying maybe not.”

Table 3 Continued

Theme 1: Code: 3
Looking at how institutions can adapt for the future in order to be competitive with recruitment and enrollment of students and identifying the needs of students.

Theme 1: Code: 3 Data: 10
(Adaptability)

“We’re looking at who the successful students are (at current institution) and trying to mirror those same characteristics as best as we can, but also understanding that we have to take some risks and go outside of our Midwest, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana.

“And so institutions that can strategically invest there (mental health needs) are going to be able to evolve with the generation and needs of students differently.”

“So looking at online, yeah, flexibility, those types of courses, but then also looking at graduate programs that we are going to have to generate revenue from a loss in the undergraduate population.”

“Thinking about the demographic cliff, it’s doing all of those things and then figuring out, you know, 17 new things to do because there is not ever one silver bullet that brings in the class.”

Table 3 Continued

Theme 2

Participants examine and discuss pertinent financial issues that prospective students and their families face on both a national and state level, while also discussing socio-economic factors and trends and changes within different generations.

Theme 2: Code: 1
Identifying economic factors that contribute to students' decision-making process, along with financial stressors that institutions' are facing.

Theme 2
Code: 1
Data: 18
(Financial stress)

“It has put us in a position where we have had to reduce the number of things we do, primarily academic programs, but also some extracurricular programs and other things.”

“Whatever the statistic is, right of inflation, and I think I had heard last night, it's like families are 11% of their disposable income on groceries. And so you think about what does that mean and then what is leftover for families to have in their pocketbooks to be able to consider helping their, you know, child or loved ones, whoever that might be, attend college.”

“It hasn't helped one bit for all of us with the FAFSA issues going on that had been kicked down the road for a number of years.”

“And so, in an effort to be competitive, colleges are having to do more financially for the wealthiest

Table 3 Continued

students, which they really can't afford to do because they also have to do more for the less wealthy students, you know then over time, as cost increase, in general, the investment in federal and state student financial aid has not kept pace even a little bit."

"And so the real definition for strong (classes) is gonna have to shift to the one that bring in enough money for me to pay the bills."

Theme 2: Code: 2
 Recognizing the changing demographics of college-going students, and the changes in economic classes, along with the generational wealth changes and the challenges surrounding funding for college for different demographics.

Theme 2: Code 2: Data: 9
 (Socio Economics)

"One of the largest has been demographic changes in terms of college going populations so deep increases in first Gen student populations, students from underrepresented populations and minority groups and Black and Hispanic as primary growth areas. And then in terms of Pell eligible students, you know, so indicators of lower socioeconomic

Table 3 Continued

status. And so that's the widest shift that I have noticed in terms of recruitment enrollment.

“So that difference is gonna be on the affluent students who have the ability to cross state lines in order to go to college.”

“And so, in an effort to be competitive, colleges are having to do more financially for the wealthiest students, which they can't really afford to do because they also have to do more for the less wealthy students. And then you know, then over time, as costs increase, in general, the investment in federal and state student financial aid has not kept pace even a little bit.”

“And what you will see is the definition of strong is going to shift to the right number of students that produces the revenue at this level to pay my bills, which frankly

Table 3 Continued

you probably heard the expression murky middle in the past. so what that typically means the population of people whose academics were good not great, whose financials are fine, not poor, but not wealthy. Their academics are just good enough, but not good enough to get scholarship money and their financials are good enough to afford the university, but low enough to get a lot of help. well, that person essentially, they're rewarded for being the middle, is they get to pay everything."

Theme 2: Code 3
Identifying the major changes between generations when it comes to attending college, college expectations, and outcomes, and generational differences when it comes to college.

Theme 2: Code: 3
Data: 6
(Generational trends)

"If you think about it from a generational shift, the students that we are recruiting today often have elder millennial or Gen X parents who also fully believed in the dream of American higher education, but also had pretty predatory loan practices that used to be in place."

Table 3 Continued

“And there’s the question of do I want my son or daughter to have the same debt that I have still? again it’s up to institutions to be able to help families understand the value of higher Ed.

“That’s directly related to generational trends around what they expect out of a residential experience or a college experience.”

“I think with the value of a college degree with the investment and how much money .. in the loan you know how much money people are willing to take out and take on loans. I think it’s a direct reflection of this generation of parents, but also students that went through the Great Recession or were born shortly after and grew up developmentally with impacts of it. and this less risk averse in terms of loans and financial obligations that then is trickling down

Table 3 Continued

<p>Theme 3 Participants discuss the challenges in planning and preparing for the future at their respective institutions, while also identifying major strategic planning measures, how decisions are being made and what schools need to do in order to be successful to withstand the demographic cliff. They also discuss financial implications of the demographic cliff.</p>	<p>Theme 3: Code: 1 Examining current market demands and trends in order to increase undergraduate recruitment and plan for new and different academic and campus programs.</p>	<p>Theme: 3 Code: 1 Data: 9 (Strategic planning)</p>	<p>into what they want and value higher ED or the cost of it or those items.”</p> <p>“And what I mean by that is right sizing financially budget wise operations on an enrollment and strategically building out new recruitment pipelines and if anything, I Think the past year or two, I’ve seen more movement from institutions of higher education of how do we build programs that are attractive to new populations or how do we target different areas or how do we build bridge programs. And in my opinion it’s too late that needed to be done five plus years ago to anticipate.</p> <p>“So I do think you know you will see we are seeing a pinch where institutions are getting to a point where their enrollments have drastically decreased, which impacts the bottom line or ability to operate when they’re tuition driven and</p>
--	--	---	--

Table 3 Continued

you see that with institutions closing and merging but it got ahead of them.”

“Colleges need to think strategically about the student populations and the program portfolio mix.”

Theme 3: Code: 2
Explaining the decision-making process in trying to keep institutions afloat amongst the pending enrollment cliff and what new programs are being created.

**Theme: 3:
Code: 2
Data: 7**
(Decision-making)

“And then there’s a term that I use called academic packaging, where institutions need to continue to find programs where you already have infrastructure that Don’t add additional costs to to the over, but where you can marry those programs together where you can see additional student demand that can result in enrollment or overall enrollment growth.”

“I’ve done a lot of work in institutional transformation or what are the factors that help institutions transform and I think if I think about institutions that have transformed, they’ve been responsive to factors in the external environment, economic or

Table 3 Continued

demographic.”

“We’re constantly evaluating new athletic programs that can be part of the recruitment mix.”

Theme 3: Code: 3
Discussing partnerships, programs, and collaboration both on campuses and with varying institutions in order to continue to grow and evolve amongst enrollment challenges.

Theme 3
Code: 3
Data: 6
(Collaboration)

“I really think what I’m talking about when I say innovate is evolve, but maybe we need to evolve at a faster rate and then you know, we need to partner, we need to make sure sure we’ve got good partners where we had partners in the past and we need to look for new places where partners can bring resources and capabilities to us that we can’t create on our own.”

“So I’m starting to see people talking about and thinking about being creative that means collaboration in ways that maybe we haven’t considered before we might need to find out a way to kind of partner.”

Table 3 Continued

Theme 4

Participants identify the societal pressures, current events and the affect that social elements, including government initiatives have on the recruitment of students and higher education as a whole.

Theme 4: Code: 1
Identifying different types of pressures that are existent in deciding whether or not to go to college, what college to attend and what those factors consist of.

Theme: 4
Code: 1
Data: 5
(Societal pressures)

“Even more is sort of the current social climate and polarized climate of the value of higher education. And so I think there’s this tension and in public sphere, and you see it in politics today of whether that’s attacks against DEI or people viewing colleges as indoctrinating or on the flip side, the value of college is to solely get a job versus the value of college is to create good citizens, critical thinkers, to then go on and enter the World, post college.”

Theme 4: Code: 2
Examining the affect that social and societal happenings have on recruiting and enrolling students to college.

Theme: 4
Code: 2
Data: 5
(Social impact)

“We’re working with a generation of students with fewer siblings, and so, you know, the demands that they have and Their expectations with respect to college are changing.”

“Major decline in that time period since I came into higher Ed in public confidence in the value of college, I think that is having a significant impact on

Table 3 Continued

recruitment.”

“COVID, you know, I think really had was kind of significant inflection point as well in terms of shaking things up and then you know all of the waterfall challenges resulting from the demographic challenges and intensifying competition.”

Theme 4: Code: 3 **Theme: 4**
Discussing the impact **Code: 3**
that political **Data:3**
initiatives, current **(Current**
events and the **Events)**
national narrative
regarding higher
education has had on
recruitment and
enrollment of
prospective students.

“So you have the media messages converging with the economy and it just I feel like there are a lot of pieces where higher education is having a hard time winning right now and you think about you know Claudine Gay from Harvard leaving like all of these different pieces again which have been so polarized and media it’s how families intake higher education.”

“They’re hearing In the media today from people that don’t trust anyway, do I don’t think it’s going to make somebody say maybe I should never go to

Table 3 Continued

<p>Theme 5 Participants discuss the overall changes that are existent in higher education, including students' academic preparedness, technology shifts, and concerns they have overall and for the future.</p>	<p>Theme 5: Code: 1 Explaining and expressing different concerns regarding higher education and issues it faces.</p>	<p>Theme: 5 Code: 1 Data: 7 (Concerns)</p>	<p>college because today he's, my governor.”</p> <p>“So that actually is a larger concern to me than the demographic cliff, because more and more students are deciding not to go.”</p> <p>“There's no sort of Precedent to help us figure out what happens if FAFSA submissions are down by 60%.”</p> <p>“It's getting tougher and tougher, especially against tuition increases that are creeping up because of inflation.”</p>
	<p>Theme: 5: Code: 2 Discussing the level of academic preparedness prospective students' have when applying to college, along with their college-level skills like writing and the affect CCP classes have.</p>	<p>Theme: 5 Code: 2 Data: 5 (Academic preparation)</p>	<p>“And there are typically programs that identify are high achieving students who might be a little more prepared for the rigor of university life.”</p> <p>“So if we ever want our retention to be at a certain level, it will be very difficult for us to achieve that when students are are coming to school for not the right reasons.”</p>

Table 3 Continued

Theme 5: Code: 3
Examining how technology has changed over time and how that has affected recruitment of prospective students and controlling of the narrative regarding specific institutions.

Theme: 5
Code: 3
Data: 4
(Technological change)

“It’s pretty remarkable because students are wanting a very hyper-personalized approach because think of the last 13 years how technology has changed, how Facebook, social media, all of these outlets have changed how we interact as consumers. Students have changed along that same pathway, and so, they want Amazon approach, but they also don’t want it to take forever to get there.”

“So, in 2000, for example, and I think just seeing the shift of technology of cell phones of you know, whether it’s a preference of, you know, receiving a text versus a call, making sure, that you’re still sending snail mail home so that the family members see it.”

Table 2 shows a variety of themes, codes and data points within those codes that the participants address within their interviews. While the themes range from uncertainty of the future of higher education, the profile and demographic of the prospective students being recruited, to institutional barriers, financial issues, societal pressures, generational trends and overall changes in higher education, all of them correlate to the current and historical happenings directly aligned with political, economic and population events and trends. The biggest points of discussion learned from this data is that all participants have similar thoughts and statements regarding the current climate and future of higher education. While the participants represent a variety of higher education institutions and constituencies, are located all over the country, and recruit different demographics of students, there are many common threads existent within the interviews. Political initiatives and narratives surrounding the value of higher education, along with economic issues, such as FAFSA delays and inflation, coupled with a smaller pool of college-bound students has created a large amount of uncertainty for the current status and future predictions of the sustainability of certain institutions and higher education as a whole.

Document Data Content Analyses

The two graphs below are from a data set from a small, private, liberal arts institution, located in the Midwest United States. The graphs show the total headcount of all students from 2014 to 2023 and the enrollment trends ranging from 2014 to 2023.

In the first graph there is evident fluctuations in the total number of all students over the course of a nine-year period. This drastic change in total headcount of all students is likely attributed to a variety of external factors relating to economic and political trends, along with government leadership. Additionally, during the years of 2014

to 2019, the American perception of the value of higher education was still high and the economy was relatively stable. The noticeable change and drop in the total headcount of all students directly aligns with the COVID-19 pandemic. The uncertainty that was persistent during this timeframe, along with the massive overhaul of the delivery of education through online platforms, combined with worldwide health measures and major economic downturns, directly attribute to the beginning of the decline of total students and the enrollment of traditional undergraduate students.

The growth and change in technology and the creation of new jobs that are not requiring students to attend college in order to get employment has added additional implications when recruiting, enrolling and retaining prospective undergraduate students to higher education institutions. Moreover, when the total headcount and number of traditional undergraduate students begins to decline starting in 2016, it is displaying the shift in the American public in regards to higher education, while it also brings into question, if prospective students are pursuing different educational opportunities, outside of the traditional undergraduate experience, in order to obtain their degree.

Figure 1

Total Headcount All Students: 2014-2023

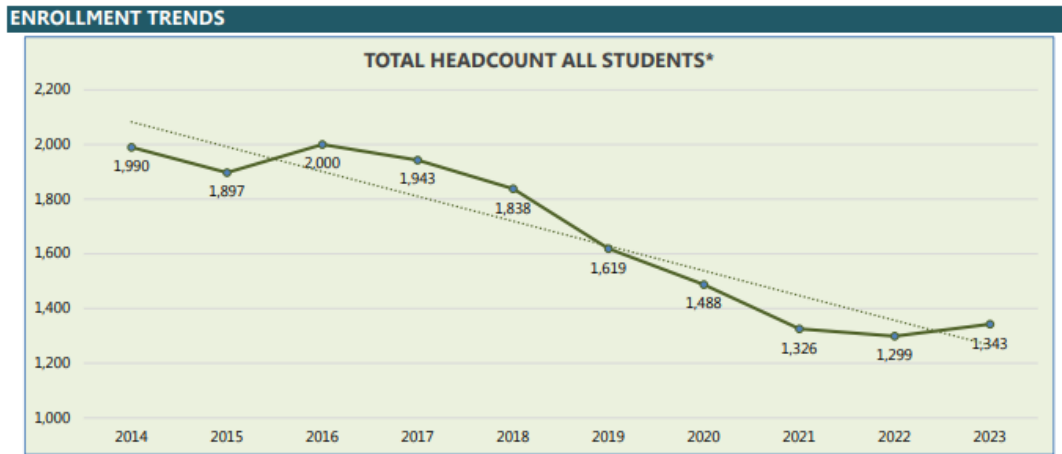
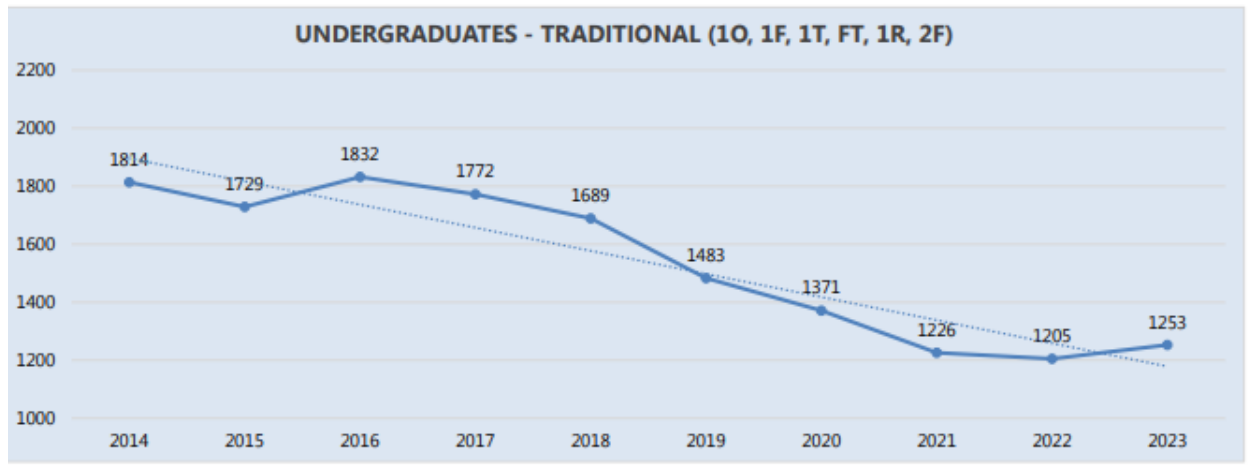


Figure 2

Undergraduate and Traditional Enrollment Trends: 2014-2023



The two graphs are very telling as to how past, present and future economic; population and political realities and current societal events and happenings directly impact the recruitment, enrollment and retention of students to higher education. (Wittenberg University, 2023). The next chapter outlines the discussion of my findings and reflections in my research along with summarizing the entirety of my research.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The subject of my study and research was to further understand and uncover historical linkages, comparisons and connections, to the economic, population and political realities of the 1970s/80s and today. Furthermore, the subject of my research also examined how those realities directly impact the recruitment and enrollment of students to higher education currently, and in the future, amongst the shadow of a pending demographic cliff.

Discussion of Findings

My findings in Chapter 4 provided great insight as to the many commonalities that are existent between the 1970s/80s and the looming enrollment cliff that was once a projected issue, to the current and future state of higher education and anticipated enrollment cliff of 2026. From my research I found that there were numerous economic, population and political similarities between the 1970s/80s and the United States today, and there is a direct correlation with the events that take place within society, specifically economic, population and political realities and their impact on the recruitment and enrollment of students to higher education.

The findings from my research were similar to what I discovered in my literature review on the three topics of economic, political and population. I was successfully able to compare historical events to current events in each of these topics and tie in my research findings related to the affects that each of these subjects have on higher education. I think my findings were similar to all of the different literature I reviewed, because throughout time it can be assessed that history can be repetitive and current

events and happenings can mirror past ones that have taken place. It might not necessarily happen in the exact same event or in sequential order, but historically it is not uncommon for similar events to take place decades apart. Also, I found that the effect that these events have on higher education has been similar whether it was the 1970s/80 or heading into the 2026 looming enrollment cliff. The biggest difference that I project to take place is the largest percentage of enrollment decline in the upcoming years from the 1970s/80s, and I foresee a historic number of institutions having to close within the next five years due to the enrollment cliff and other persistent economic factors.

It can be determined that the primary significant factor in shaping societal and higher education institutional success is the current state of the economy. The economy is the utmost decisive factor because it directly impacts consumers in the college decision-making process, which in my research, the consumers are prospective students and their families. Historically, when an economy struggles, there is a direct correlation with stagnant and declining enrollment rates. Economic challenges within a society create immense uncertainty, instability and people really are careful in deciding how to spend their money. During the era of the 1970s/80s there were a myriad of economic issues that plagued the United States. Those issues ranged from massive economic inflation, worldwide recession, limited consumer purchasing power and this led to a decline in college enrollment. Advance to 2008, when the world suffered from the Great Recession, the massive housing market crisis, which led to a drastic decline in birthrates which is now the current reason for the expected 2026 enrollment cliff. Furthermore, currently the United States is still reeling and suffering from the COVID 19 pandemic and its longstanding effects, which put a huge economic strain on everyone. Presently,

Americans are also dealing with inflation issues, making purchasing everyday goods and deciding whether to make larger purchases, much more challenging. These factors combined with families hesitant to take out loans for college, while questioning colleges' value and exploring cheaper higher education alternatives, have created a wide range of economic issues for higher education institutions.

As I discovered throughout my research, through the three research methodologies, the common themes of uncertainty, skepticism, confusion, adaptability, strategic planning, socio-economic changes, social change, generational trends, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, cultural changes, financial stressors (both on prospective families and institutions), changing academic programs and student supports, are all directly correlated to the economic, political and population state of the United States. Furthermore, each of these themes have a direct impact on the present and future of higher education.

From my research, one of the biggest points to note is that now there are more students and families that have radically different socioeconomic statuses. Prospective students and families are now on opposite ends of the economic spectrum. Lower income students, have the availability of government funding, such as Pell Grants, while higher income families or full paying families are not worried about the cost of college and the middle-income family is footing the bill and questioning if they should take out loans and/or fund their students college education. The prospective students who are now looking at attending college, are kids of parents that suffered from predatory loan practices, and there is much consideration in making the decision if it is worth it to take out a loan, and what that looks like in the terms of what is the actual value of a college

degree and what is the students' return on investment. The research also shows that economic stressors put a direct strain on institutions, and institutions have had to take cost effective measures in reducing and cutting programs. Institutions rely on the enrollment of undergraduate students in order to stay open, and when the economy is not doing well and there is a public perception questioning the value and cost of college it leads to immense unsettlement for both the current and future. Adding to the economic strife, there are now FAFSA delays which are stalling students' decisions on making a college selection. One of the most interesting points that I gathered from my research was that when asking participants what their respective institution was doing to recruit and enroll strong classes, many responses alluded to the word strong, being interchangeable with enrollment classes filled with students who are able to pay the bill, because that is how they foresee institutions surviving the demographic cliff.

Along with the economic status of a country having high importance in the college decision-making process, the population and demographic make-up, along with societal decisions and challenges also greatly affect enrollment in higher education institutions. Historically, marginalized groups of people, such as women and people of color had limited rights and were not afforded the opportunity to attend higher education institutions. The era of the 1970s/80s changed that with the implementation of new laws such as Title IX and affirmative action. That era also expanded into including adult learners in the college educational process. This was also an era where students were encouraged to attend college, and the personal, educational and societal benefits of attending college, were well know and publicized. Historical events also cause future implications when it comes to enrollment, and because of the Great Recession and the

immense decline in birth rates, now higher education is facing an enrollment cliff. There is a limited number of high school graduates, and an even smaller number of those graduates who are college bound. There are also different options for students to attend college, outside of the traditional residential college experience.

My research allowed me to draw numerous conclusions as to the impact that population and society has on college enrollment. The biggest question I took away from this portion of the research was the unknown is real. Institutions are struggling with determining what new populations to target for enrollment, because at this point, most people have had some sort of college experience. A common theme that participants stated was in order to stay competitive, institutions must evolve with this generation and the ever-changing needs of its students. We are in a very instantaneous, consumer-based society, and students are the consumers, so institutions have to meet their diverse demands. Additionally, another trend in the research was the growth of first-generation students enrolling in and showing interest in college and increase in enrollment from underrepresented populations. Participants said this then lead to institutions needing to make sure they have met the needs of all of their students and provided appropriate resources on campus. Along with these themes, another commonality discussed in my interviews was the impact of technology on prospective students and the level of student preparedness for college rigor.

Population and societal trends also directly align with the characteristics of certain generations. In this instance, it is evident from historical analysis and research that this generation of students is different from the generations that preceded it. They have changed viewpoints regarding the value of college, there are also limited number of

available high school graduates, due to a decrease in birth rates, and this generation of students are going to make their college decision based on an institution that meets their holistic needs, and not just enrolling in college to say they are going to college.

The final factor that plays a significant role in the complexities of historical events and higher education institutions current and future success is the political events that take place and government initiatives that are implemented. Most of the participants that I interviewed stated that current political state has had a direct effect on their institutions. This is also true for the era of the 1970s/80s. This era was extremely tumultuous, filled with political scandals such as Watergate, the historic passing of Title IX, protests of the Vietnam War, and war drafts, along with the Cold War existent in the background. Watergate and the wars lead to distrust and uncertainty within the government, and also caused protests on college campuses around the United States, and in some cases even deaths. These events directly affected college enrollment and took the forefront on the minds of the American people.

Similar to the political events of the 1970s/80s, currently Americans are also dealing with a variety of political issues that have affected the college decision-making process. The uncertainty, divisiveness and polarization within the American government and its leadership has caused a strain on higher education institutions. There have also been significant legislature moves such as the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and the overturning of affirmative action, which depending on states stances on these issues, can ultimately change the trajectory of where a student decides to attend college, or if they decide to attend at all. Additionally, the current Israel/Palestine conflict has led to protests on college campuses and has created a further divide amongst people and

political parties. These happenings combined with the contentious United States and Russia relationship and the implementation of immigration policies, has created numerous societal issues.

In my research, the biggest theme in this topic was surrounding the uncertainty and skepticism of the value of earning a college degree and if a college degree was necessary in order to be employed and get a good job. The uncertainty is due to the narrative that has been pushed throughout both political parties and a variety of media outlets. This narrative has enlarged the generational mindset shift, where for decades we were telling students college is the way, and now the national narrative is asking if college is worth it? There have also been national attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives and people gaining the negative perception of a college education coupled with thinking a college education brainwashes students or can be used as propaganda. In addition to trying to withstand all of the other issues facing higher education, now institutions are having to take back the narrative of why college is important in a person's growth and its societal benefits. Participants also stated that FAFSA delays have greatly hampered the recruitment of this year's current class, as financial aid packages are not yet able to be created for families. Moreover, from my research, higher education institutions are having to be innovative, and figure out ways to reinvigorate current programs and/or change with market demand, and assess how current and future job availability and creation aligns with their program offerings. There are many different political factors that institutions are having to juggle for the current and present in order to stay competitive and afloat.

My research and study added a new perspective to the topic. It creates a historical connection of pertinent events and aligns them with present realities and issues that affect higher education enrollment. My study also showed the direct correlation between the economic, population and historical events that take place in a country and what that means for recruitment of students and higher education as a whole. It also provides insight as to what the 1970s/80s was able to do to withstand an enrollment cliff, and what that might look like for current higher education institutions to do the same.

Reflection

The study and research process as a whole was successful. I was able to effectively gather and interview my focus group participants, my semi-structured interview participants, along with completing a strong document data content analysis. Reflecting on the entire process, it was interesting gathering information and interviewing the variety of participants. The focus group conversation started out informative, however, since the participants are senior level members of the admission team at the institution where I work and their direct supervisor was part of the group, some of the conversation turned more into initiatives and ideas that could be implemented instead of focusing on the larger questions being asked. The initiatives suggested were things like providing more incentives for students to visit campus, making it more affordable for students out-of-state to attend Wittenberg, the creation of new academic and athletic programs, and the addition of more revenue-generating graduate programs. I did struggle to get participation from higher education officials outside of the institution where I am employed, so, I had to alter my initial plan of who I was going to interview. It was challenging getting responses from senior level staff at other institutions, however I was

able to eventually interview 11, instead of 10 higher education officials, that were located all throughout the United States. The location of the participants along with the differences in the type of institutions where they work, and their experiences in higher education gave me a lot of valuable research information and different perspectives on the economic, population and political issues facing higher education, while also learning that all higher education institutions, whether public or private are dealing with similar problems. In hindsight, I would have cast a wider net earlier in asking for senior staff participation from other institutions and I might have reconsidered the members of my focus group.

The implications of my study are that it is evident that my historical analysis and research has exposed commonalities throughout history revolving around the effect of economic, population and political issues on higher education. My research highlights the problem that all higher education officials know to be existent and that is the looming enrollment cliff and what can be done to tame its effects. The major question that my findings left me with is, what do we do next, and who is the group or groups of students that we target in order to sustain higher education? The key piece of information that I gathered from this research is that there is not a clear answer as to what needs to be done in order for institutions to survive the enrollment cliff. Many of the participants listed a variety of solutions, such as, new academic programs, expanding current recruitment efforts and incentives, adapting to the current student demographic through new initiatives, and collaborating with other institutions, however, many of these ideas will likely not bring instantaneous success or revenue to help schools to combat their financial

issues. Many of the challenges that are persistent in higher education are outside of the control of institutions and its purview.

I recommend that a future researcher takes my historical analysis and expands upon it. I would love to see this topic re-visited 5-10 years down the line and see what the exact impact the enrollment cliff had on higher education institutions and then how the alignment of higher education institutions is connected with a society's economic, population and political events. I would also like to see a researcher include more relevant data and research about enrollment trends and projections for the future of higher education.

I have learned a lot throughout the entirety of the research process. I have had the opportunity to really research and understand exactly how society and events affect higher education. I have been able to learn and gather new information and perspectives on higher education and the entire process has been extremely thought provoking. I am not only invested in this topic but also very interested to see where society is moving forward as a whole in the terms of higher education support and how the decisions made will affect current and future generations of people. An educated society is a good society, and this research process has taught me that there are a lot of differing views revolving around getting a college education.

The limitation of my study are that I was limited to the type of participants in my interviews. There was not a large amount of diversity, also a limitation was that my focus group participants and four members of my semi-structured interviews represented a small, private, liberal arts institution where I am employed. Another limitation in my

research was the length of time for my study. It was challenging to schedule and interview participants and get them to respond within an appropriate time frame.

The enrollment and recruitment of prospective students has been an ever-growing issue in higher education, and due to an economic recession in 2008, there is a projected enrollment cliff for 2026, shrinking the pool of high school graduates. The intent of my research was to compare and contrast the 1970s/80s to today and the economic, political and population similarities and differences between these two eras. My two research questions were what are the economic, population, and political similarities and differences between the 1970s/80s and the United States today, and how do the current economic, population, and political realities impact the recruitment and enrollment of students to higher education today? My research methodology consisted of conducting focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews and completing a data document content analysis. The historical and current economic state and issues, along with the findings from my research exhibit that there are economic, population and political similarities and differences between the 1970s/80s and the United States today. Furthermore, the current economic, population and political realities have a direct effect on the impact and enrollment of students to higher education, not only for the present but most importantly the future.

References

- American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy. (2023). AACP Brief: Supreme Court Cases for “Students for Fair Admissions, Inc.” <https://www.aacp.org/article/aacp-brief-supreme-court-cases-students-fair-admissions-inc>
- Barr, A. & Turner, S. (2013). Expanding enrollments and contracting state budgets: the effect of the great recession on higher education. *The Annals of the American Academy*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0002716213500035>
- Boyle, M. 2023. (2008) Recession: What it was and what caused it. *Investopedia*. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/g/great-recession.asp#:~:text=As%20a%20result%20of%20the,U.S.%20Department%20of%20the%20Treasury>.
- Boyle, M. (2023). Stagflation in the 1970s. *Investopedia*. <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/economics/08/1970-stagflation.asp#:~:text=Stagflation%20in%20the%201970s%20combined,currency%20rates%20contributed%20to%20stagflation>.
- Bryan, M. (2013). The Great Inflation. *Federal Reserve History*. <https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/great-inflation>
- Cambridge Dictionary. (2023). Enrollment Definition. *Cambridge University Press Assessment*. [https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/English\(United States\)/enrollment](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/English(United%20States)/enrollment)

- Card, D. & Lemieux, T. (2001). Dropout and enrollment trends in the postwar period: What went wrong in the 1970s? *National Bureau of Economic Research*.
<https://www.nber.org/system/files/chapters/c10694/c10694.pdf>
- Carlton, G. (2023). A history of women in higher education. *Best Colleges*.
<https://www.bestcolleges.com/news/analysis/2021/03/21/history-women-higher-education/>
- Clarke, C. (2022). Baby Boomer: Definition, years, date range, retirement & preparation. *Investopedia*. https://www.investopedia.com/terms/b/baby_boomer.asp
- Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J.D. (2014). Research design (6th ed.). *Sage*
- Cross, T. & Slater, R. (1999). Only the onset of affirmative action explains the explosive growth in black enrollments in higher education. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2999332>
- Drozdzowski, M. (2023). Looming enrollment cliff poses serious threat to colleges. *Best Colleges*. <https://www.bestcolleges.com/news/analysis/looming-enrollment-cliff-poses-serious-threat-to-colleges/#:~:text=Thanks%20to%20lower%20birthrates%20during,geographic%20region%20and%20institutional%20type.>
- Ferenchik, M. (2020). Kent State shootings on May 4, 1970, still shape Ohio colleges 50 years later. *The Columbus Dispatch*.
<https://stories.usatodaynetwork.com/kentstate50yearslater/kent-state-may-4-shootings-still-impact-ohios-college-campuses/>

- Fernando, J. (2023). Inflation: What it is, how it can be controlled, and extreme examples. *Investopedia*. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/i/inflation.asp>
- Field, A. (2022). What caused the great recession? Understanding the key factors that led to one of the worst economic downturns in US history. *Personal Finance*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/personal-finance/what-caused-the-great-recession#:~:text=The%20Great%20Recession%2C%20one%20of,led%20to%20the%20economic%20crisis.>
- Foner, N. (2022) How immigration changed U.S. society. *CUNY Graduate Center*. <https://www.gc.cuny.edu/news/how-immigration-changed-us-society#:~:text=Immigrants%20by%20their%20sheer%20numbers,slowing%20population%20loss%20and%20in>
- Geiger, R. (1980). The changing demand for higher education in the seventies: adaptations within three national systems. *Higher Education*. Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 255-276 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3446392?seq=3>
- Jacobs, J. A. (1996). Gender inequality and higher education. *Annual Review of Sociology*. Vol. 22, pp 153-185 https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev.soc.22.1.153#_i2
- Jacobs, J & Stoner E. (1998). Adult enrollment and educational attainment. *SAGE Social Science Collection*. Vol. 559, pp 91-108 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0002716298559001008>
- Johnson, K. 2014. The hidden cost of the recession. Two million fewer births and still counting. *University of New Hampshire. Casey School of Public Policy*.

<https://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1230&context=carsey#:~:text=Nearly%202.3%20million%20fewer%20babies,in%20nearly%20500%2C000%20fewer%20births.>

Kotler, P. & Murphy, P. (1981). Strategic planning for higher education. *Ohio State University Press Journal of Higher Education*.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00221546.1981.11778119?journalCode=uhej20>

Kline, M. (2019). The looming higher ed enrollment cliff. *College and University Professional Association for Human Resources*.

<https://www.cupahr.org/issue/feature/higher-ed-enrollment-cliff/>

Livingston, G. & Cohn, D. (2010) u.s. birth rate decline linked to recession. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2010/04/06/us-birth-rate-decline-linked-to-recession/>

McMahon, R. (1995). Making sense of American foreign policy during the Reagan years. *Diplomatic History*. Vol. 19, Issue 2, pp 367-384.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1995.tb00663.x>

Nielsen, B. (2021). A decade in history: important events of the 1970s. *Historic Newspapers*.

<https://www.investopedia.com/articles/economics/08/1970-stagflation.asp#:~:text=Stagflation%20in%20the%201970s%20combined,currency%20rates%20contributed%20to%20stagflation.>

- Nittle, N. (2023). The Supreme Court ends affirmative action in college admissions. *The 19th News*. <https://19thnews.org/2023/06/supreme-court-overturms-affirmative-action-college-admissions/>
- Percheski, C. & Kimbro, R. (2019) How did the great recession affect fertility? *University of Wisconsin*. <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/foc302g.pdf>
- Reinwald, Jarrett. (2024, February 29) Drive College Enrollment with Technology, Data, and a Human Touch. *Intuition*.
- Rosowsky, David. (2024, February 3). The Cliffs of Higher Ed: Who's Going Over and Why? *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidrosowsky/2024/02/03/the-cliffs-of-higher-ed-whos-going-over-and-why/?sh=49ec94755498>
- Salhotra, P. (2022). A growing number of Americans are questioning the value of going to college. *National Public Radio*.
<https://www.npr.org/2022/07/26/1113816868/more-americans-are-questioning-whether-college-has-a-positive-impact>
- Singh, M. (2023). The 2007-2008 financial crisis in review. *Investopedia*.
<https://www.investopedia.com/articles/economics/09/financial-crisis-review.asp>
- Spector, R. (2023). Vietnam War 1954-1975. *Britannica*.
<https://www.britannica.com/event/Vietnam-War>
- Summa, J. (2021). From booms to bailouts: the banking crisis of the 1980s. *Investopedia*.
<https://www.investopedia.com/articles/financial-theory/banking-crisis-1980s.asp>

Vedder, R. (2021). The impact of the coming economic downturn on universities.

Independent Institute. <https://www.independent.org/news/article.asp?id=13627>

Women's Educational Equity Act, 2023. Title IX before & after. *WEEA Equity Resource Center*.

<https://www2.edc.org/womensequity/resource/title9/before.htm#:~:text=In%201973%2C%2043%25%20of%20female,grew%20to%2063%25%20in%201994.>

Verrastro, F. & Caruso, G. (2013). The Arab oil embargo- 40 years later. *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/arab-oil-embargo-40-years-later>

Wittenberg University (2023). Fall Census Historical Databook, Enrollment and Demographics. *Wittenberg University*.

<https://www.wittenberg.edu/sites/default/files/media/provost/23FA-CENSUS-HISTORICAL-REPORT.pdf>

Appendix A

Semi- Structured Interview Questions

Name:

Institution:

Position with the Institution:

Introductory Segment: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I would like this to be conversational, so please feel free to add additional insights and information beyond the questions I ask. Is it okay if I record our conversation? Thank you, let's begin.

1. How long have you been working in higher education, and what changes have you seen at your respective institution (s) in the terms of recruitment and enrollment of undergraduate students?
2. What impact has the current economic state had on your institution or do you foresee it having?
3. What impact has the current political state had on your institution, or do you foresee it having?
4. What measures or changes is your institution implementing to prepare for the potential demographic cliff in higher education?
5. How do you predict the future of higher education changing in the near future?
6. To continue the enrollment of strong classes to your institution, are there different populations of students that your institution is targeting for recruitment and enrollment or new academic programs that your institution plans to implement?
7. What do you see being the biggest hindrance or impact on the recruitment and enrollment of students into higher education at your institution?
8. Any other comments or pieces of information you would like to add?

Closing Segment: Thank you so much for your time and for participating in this interview. Your feedback is valuable, and will assist me throughout my research process.

Appendix B

Focus Group Interview Questions:

Introductory Segment: Thank you all for agreeing to participate in this focus group. I would like this to be conversational, so please feel free to add additional insights and information beyond the questions I ask. Is it okay if I record our conversation? Thank you, let's begin.

Names:

Position with the Institution:

1. How long have you been working in your current role within admission?
2. What significant changes have you seen withing the recruitment and enrollment of students at Wittenberg?
3. What initiatives and programs have you seen work well when recruiting and enrolling prospective students?
4. What changes do you think should be implemented to be competitive with other institutions to recruit students?
5. How do you think Wittenberg should prepare for a potential demographic cliff?
6. What would you like to see Wittenberg do to diversify the recruitment of students?
7. Butler University in Indianapolis recently announced the addition of a 2-year degree program, aimed to make college more affordable. How do you think a program like this would be received at Wittenberg, and do you think there are benefits in pursuing a 2-year program at Wittenberg?
8. What academic programs do you think Wittenberg should add, or changes should be made academically to expand the recruitment and enrollment of prospective students?
9. How do you think Wittenberg offering an online program would impact the recruitment and enrollment of prospective students?
10. Any other comments or pieces of information you would like to add?

Closing Segment: Thank you so much for everyone's time and for participating in this focus group. All of your feedback is valuable, and will assist me throughout my research process.

Appendix C

Recruitment/Consent Form

Hi (Insert Participant's Name)

I hope you are doing well.

My name is Courtney Burchett, and I am an associate director of admission at Wittenberg, who is enrolled in Wittenberg University's Master of Arts in Educational Leadership program.

I am conducting research for my thesis, which examines the economic, population and political similarities and differences between the 1970s/80s and the United States today, and how do the current economic, population, and political realities impact the recruitment and enrollment of students to higher education today. Additionally, my thesis examines the pending looming enrollment cliff, and what preventative measures can be taken to ensure the continued enrollment of strong classes of prospective students to higher education institutions.

With your experience in higher education, and position at the (insert institution/company), your feedback and knowledge on this topic will be extremely valuable to my research.

Please see the attached consent form for the study and respond to this email by Tuesday, February 27, 2024, to let me know whether you are willing to participate in the study. Your email response will constitute a digital "signature" indicating that you have read and understand the study and that you are 18 years old or older.

The interview will take a total of 30 minutes.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

If you are willing to participate, I will follow up with correspondence regarding a date/time for the interview.

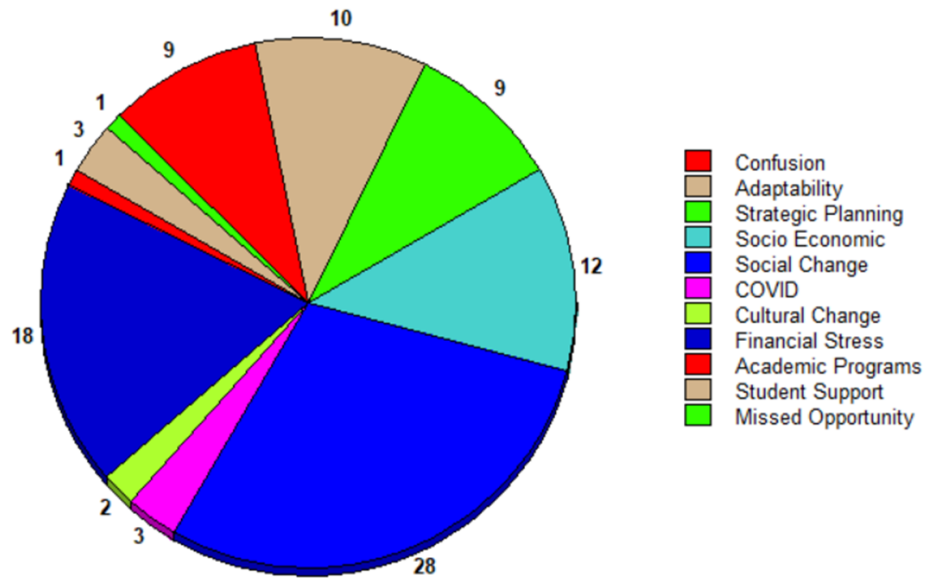
Thank you,

Courtney

Appendix D

Focus Group Common Themes

Focus Group Interview Common Themes



Confusion (9)

Adaptability (10)

Strategic Planning (9)

Socio Economic (12)

Social Change (28)

COVID (3)

Cultural Change (2)

Financial Stress (18)

Academic Programs (1)

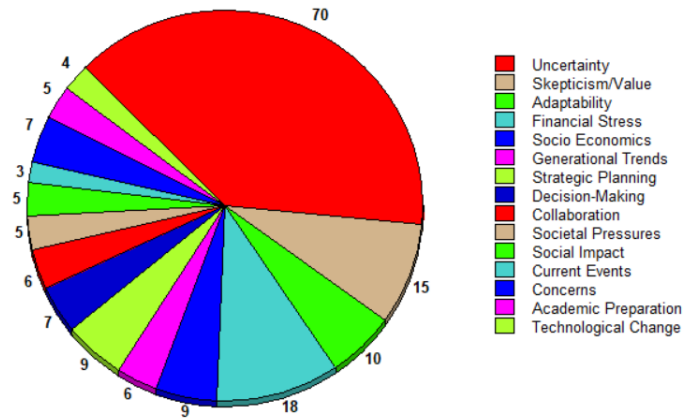
Student Support (3)

Missed Opportunity (1)

Appendix E

Semi Structure Interview Common Themes

Semi Structure Interview Common Themes



Uncertainty (70)

Skepticism/Value (15)

Adaptability (10)

Financial Stress (18)

Socio Economics (9)

Generational Trends (6)

Strategic Planning (9)

Decision- Making (7)

Collaboration (6)

Societal Pressures (5)

Social Impact (5)

Current Events (3)

Concerns (7)

Academic Preparation (5)

Technological Change (4)