

Transcription for
EP. 35: THE YEAR 2020 IN REVIEW

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THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED
EP. 35: THE YEAR 2020 IN REVIEW

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PAUL FAIN: Hello, welcome to the Key with IHE. We're back for a special bonus episode, about 34 episodes in the can and we thought we would roll back the tape and do a "year in review"--and what a year it was! And so I am joined by a previous guest on The Key for this special episode that you could call "The Key After Dark," that's my working title for this episode, but it's actually daytime. But I am joined now by Erin Hennessy, Vice President of TVP Communications. Erin, how are you?

ERIN HENNESSY: Hey, Paul. Happy almost end of 2020.

PAUL FAIN: Same to you. Thank you for joining me on a December 30th for this episode.

ERIN HENNESSY: Happy to be a returning champion.

PAUL FAIN: Yeah, so that was quite the year. And just so folks know, you were on the show during the peak of the "should we go online or go on campus phase," and we'll talk about that in a bit. But you and I go pretty far back in like my days, I think when I was actually like a cub reporter in the higher ed trades at the Chronicle was the first time I spoke with you. And we've discussed this over the years, but I believe our first chat was when you called me to complain about an error in the blurb I wrote, and you dispute this, though.

ERIN HENNESSY: We do dispute this. You have yet to produce any evidence that indicates that ever happened. It is interesting to me you moderated your language because usually when we talk about this I'm told I yelled at you to demand a correction, and I think anyone who knows me knows that I am much too refined and polite to ever yell at a reporter, because I have the greatest respect for what you and your colleagues do.

PAUL FAIN: That's so kind of you. You're right, I guess you do have to produce evidence when you make an accusation, and I do not have any, but I have not given up the hunt for that. I may still find that correction. But...

ERIN HENNESSY: That will be a great undertaking for you in your new role in 2021.

PAUL FAIN: [LAUGH] Well, stay tuned for that. But, you know, I can't remember exactly when this was, it may have been January, it may have been February, but I was doing some early doomscrolling on COVID and I think I reached out to you to say, whoa, what's your take on this virus thing, looking bad, and you were like, eehhh, it's a little too early to panic, Paul, but my MO is to be pretty dark in my prognostications, and so I think that was actually one of my first interactions about the virus. Do you remember that?

ERIN HENNESSY: Yeah, doesn't that feel like approximately 150 years ago? If this year has taught us anything I think it is that we should all stop prognosticating because very, very few of us were able to predict what this would actually end up looking like. We tell our crisis communication clients all the time to really keep those crisis communication plans light and flexible, because whatever list of terrible things you have in the that binder that may befall your institution or your students, you certainly aren't going to cover what actually is going to come your way, and I think COVID makes that point in a really, really striking way, that we've all thought about mumps and

we've all thought about mononucleosis and other things that are easily transmitted in residence halls and congregate living settings, but no one, absolutely no one in higher ed, I think, could have seen this coming and seen it unfold in this particular way. So I have decided to stop prognosticating about absolutely everything.

PAUL FAIN: It's a good policy, of like never Tweet. But yeah, you know, Politico pulled together the worst prognostications of 2020 I think yesterday and it's worth looking at. But, you know, to prepare for this I looked at Inside Higher Ed's "in and out" list where we kind of talk about what was "in" the previous year and what's "in" for the next year...

ERIN HENNESSY: Sure....

PAUL FAIN: And the one that we published a year ago is just totally worthless, like, and I worked on that so I can take credit for it. I mean, just not even interesting. Like everything that was a thing back then pretty much just got outshined by the big, big story. So...

ERIN HENNESSY: What was the most wildly off-base "in" that you had?

PAUL FAIN: you know, they were all so unremarkable because they were smaller tensions and disputes in ways that just didn't really rank for us in our coverage this year. You know, like nothing even stuck in my mind, it was that bad. So it just wasn't the year at all that we predicted. You know, I felt like were decent with those in previous years in at least identifying, hey, you should watch this controversy. That didn't happen this year.

For me, it was real from the get-go, but in April when it had really gotten serious in New York and New Jersey and Connecticut, I was really a New York Daily News op ed by Michael Yarbrough, this is a professor of law and society at CUNY's John Jay's College of Criminal Justice. He was writing about the impact of the virus in April on his class, and so he wrote six students in the class, or about 25 percent had had COVID-19 cases confirmed, 16 students, so that's over 60 percent, reported more than 30 total family members testing positive, and six students were mourning the loss of family members or close friends. And, you know, that piece made the rounds and the New Yorker wrote about it, but, you know, it showed that virus had come to higher ed.

ERIN HENNESSY: Yeah, in very stark and profound ways, and I am grateful for Professor Yarbrough for sharing what he did about this students, because I think it was really easy still at that time this is somewhere else, this is something else, this is New York. This isn't where I am, this is an issue that is affecting a particular type of institution. And I am grateful that he was willing to step forward and share what he did about his students' experience, because I think for those folks really paying attention at that point, it made it very, very real to say this is what my students are grappling with, not just their own particular health but that of their family, that of their networks and their support systems, of their children, of their parents. I think that was really a seminal piece and I think when we will look back with a bit more hindsight, you know, maybe this year or next year, it's really going to emphasize that our faculty members were seeing this first and foremost in their classrooms and seeing the impact that it was having on their students.

PAUL FAIN: Absolutely. And that piece, I think, showed, hey, the rest of the country, this may be what you're dealing with soon.

ERIN HENNESSY: Yeah.

PAUL FAIN: So in August, Marjorie Valbrun, our managing editor at Inside Higher Ed, she wrote about Professor Yarbrough, and in August she and I interviewed him, and Paula-Camila Caceres, one of his students who ran a project with that class to kind of analyze the impacts of the virus on her fellow students. So I'm going to roll the tape now to hear what they had to say in August.

PAULA-CAMILA CACERES: [A] lot of people are like putting aside sort of the like correctness of things and just pursuing like brutal honesty, because that's what needed. And like, yes, transparency is a word that's like thrown

around through like all bureaucracies, but there's never real transparency unless people really demand it. And I think that's what a lot of people are demanding right now, specifically....

PAUL FAIN: That was Paula-Camila. Here's Professor Yarborough.

MICHAEL YARBROUGH: There was a piece that someone wrote, I think in Boston Review, that talked about a culture of toxic positivity among academic administrators. And I think that was apt. I think that sometimes management has an impulse to focus on the positive. And I think that's understandable and to some extent should be done.

But I think it can erode trust among the faculty, staff, and students when administrators are not acknowledging in a real way the challenges that people are facing, or not acknowledging directly that people are dying, that people are, you know, dangerously ill. And I think once trust is eroded, it's going to be hard to get back.

PAUL FAIN: So that was the first time I'd heard the term "toxic positivity" in this context. It wasn't the last. And a few months later I talked with Michael Sorrell, President of Paul Quinn College in Texas and actually mentioned that term, and said he really like it. And he went on to be pretty critical of some of his peers among college presidents and how transparent they were about the decision to reopen. I'm going to play that tape, and I'm also going to play Elfred Anthony Pinkard, the President of Wilberforce University, an HBCU in Ohio. We talked about the other side of that coin, of trying to keep positive and to encourage faculty, staff, and students. You know, one of the reasons I talked with President Pinkard was by that point in October, it has become clear that mental health and anxiety was probably the top barrier to students sticking with it, even beyond finances. So let's roll that tape.

Here's President Sorrell...

MICHAEL SORRELL: The best interest of the student is to be honest about the pandemic, right? And to say, we have no idea what we're dealing with, all right. We don't even know what this is going to do to you long term. But here's what we do know. We've built you all a bunch of really cool stuff that you weren't going to come here if we didn't have, so the debt service is owed on these things. If we don't have you on campus, we can't pay for the shiny climbing walls and the lazy rivers that you guys wanted, right? And we didn't have the self-discipline to tell you no.

PAUL FAIN: Here's President Pinkard from Wilberforce talking about he was communicating with the University students.

ELFRED ANTHONY PINKARD: I also say to them you're young and you're resilient. That is part of being young. That you will get through this, that this pandemic will not be with us forever. It's not. We can look at history and see that it's not going to be forever.

PAUL FAIN: All right, Erin. So as a communicator, not an easy time to strike that balance as you can hear from these comments.

ERIN HENNESSY: No, you're absolutely right. And I think for leadership, that has been the biggest challenge. Positive is sort of the default. We want to keep people motivated and engaged, and help them feel that there is something they can do to work their way through this crisis. And there's a light at the end of the tunnel and I swear to you it's not an oncoming train.

It's also, it's a lot easier to write the positive message, the nuanced, balanced, here's what we know, here's what we don't, but I encourage you to stick with this message is harder. It takes more time to write it, it takes more time to read it, and we can't always be sure that our students, that our faculty, that our staff are going to read that long, nuanced email. We're not a society that does that. We are a society that doomscrolls, finds that worst thing, and runs off into the closet to hide from it. and I don't blame anyone for having that reaction.

I also think what we are seeing in this crisis more than anything else... You know, we wrote a sort of

end-of-the-year blog post at TVP Coms where we talked about that fact that this is a crisis that didn't hit one institution, it hit every institution. And it didn't hit institutions, it hit the staff, the faculty, the students, their parents, their children, their grandmothers, grandfathers, friends, this was encompassing in terms of its impact. And I think that anxiety drove a lot of the decisions that everyone made, including leadership to figure out how to talk about this, to figure out how to absorb information about this, and so I'm not surprised that a lot of leaders leaned in on a straight positive message to try and keep students motivated, engaged, and moving forward.

Again, the nuance is harder, particularly when you don't know what the nuances are yet. Day to day, early in this situation, those nuances changed. I can't touch a door handle, I shouldn't touch a door handle. You know, every single week it felt like we were getting new directives and new information. And it's hard to track that and then follow that up to communications to then share with the communities.

So I think that was an enormous challenge early on, and I'm delighted that Paula-Camila called out that concept of toxic positivity. It was also one I hadn't heard before but I think now is making the rounds. And I think they did a really admirable job of flagging for all of us the need to find that balance as hard as it was and to continue to push that balance in all of our communications with everyone we're reaching out to during this pandemic.

PAUL FAIN: Absolutely. One of the pieces, you know... Looking back at April, how different we felt about so many things. You know, all of us know that in our personal lives, like being out on the street, you know, you would kind of stay at least 50 feet away from someone was the CDC guidelines. Now we know that's less of an issue. And so everybody has kind of learned, and it's hard to remember what we were feeling exactly in April.

ERIN HENNESSY: Yeah. I don't think we were even in mask mandate in April.

PAUL FAIN: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And it's still, I think, for a lot of places, you know, you had politicians calling it a New York thing, it's not going to come here, I think a lot of people were still in that phase. But, you know, I remember Professor Yarbrough's piece in the New York Daily News did a great job of saying, which higher ed are we talking about here? You know, a lot of the coverage back then was residential campuses, and what are they going to do? And the students are leaving, and now they're at home with their wealthy parents on Zoom. And he made the point that you can't make enough that about 15 percent of American college students are residential at this point. So like anything, you know, there is no higher ed you can talk about here.

ERIN HENNESSY: Right, just as there's no media you can talk about either. I think what we have seen in this pandemic more than anything else is a continued bifurcation, because it certainly isn't new. But more stark or better understood bifurcation between haves and have-nots. Purdue can do things that Wilberforce can't do. All of these large research institutions have a foot up on every other institution in the country because of their access to in-house expertise, like an epidemiology department, like a medical school. These kinds of resources can't be overemphasized in a situation like this, and those kinds of resources, unless there are really good partnerships probably already in place aren't going to be used to help that small, religiously affiliated teeny tiny institution somewhere in the Midwest or the community college in fill-in-the-blank state. It really became this very stark understanding of the institutions that were going to come through this the best were the ones that were already doing the best in terms of resources, terms of access, in terms of just sheer financial ability to take what's coming at you and roll with it for a semester or two. And that's isn't the case with the vast majority of our institutions.

PAUL FAIN: Yep, and as everybody's heard by now, you know, one way to look at COVID is it's a truth revealer. You know, it shows existing problems and in a much more stark light. And, you know, I think to your point about the elite, highly selective institutions, the R-1s, you know, in the early coverage of the pandemic, we were helped by them at IHE because they knew what was coming. At Stanford and MIT, University of Washington, you know, when they started making moves to restrict gathering sizes or class sizes, you know, we would ask them, Lila Burke and others at IHE, you know, where did you get this, and it's our infectious disease experts are telling us, advising us that gatherings over 15 are a problem. So they had that advantage too.

Let's go forward to May when the California State University System, obviously 500,000 students, one of the most

important, largest university systems in the country. Its Chancellor Tim White made the decision to go forward with a fully distant fall, a largely remote fall, some small number of students returning to campuses. To us, that was a big bomb dropped on American higher ed. It got a lot of media coverage. You know, from your end of the kind of media-coms side of things, what was that like when you were working with institutions. I mean, did they see that news and did it affect kind of their planning in any way or their communications?

ERIN HENNESSY: That's a great question. A lot of the institutions that we work with certainly tracked that decision, I think, both because it was perceived as being quote-unquote "so early." They also tracked that decision simply because of the size of the system, obviously, and because of their, frankly, their respect for Tim White and for his leadership of the system at that point. I don't know how many institutions looked at it and said, oh man, this should affect our thinking, but I do think that a lot of college and university presidents looked at that decision and said this just made my messaging job harder, regardless of what the decision I'm about to make is, unless it was also a completely remote fall semester, I now have to swim against that current.

And I think it was interesting to watch a lot of colleges and universities across the country say, track what other institutions are doing, whether they were peers or aspirational, or, you know, the big institution in my state, whatever it was, and not necessarily say, that's where things are going and we need to be there, because there are so many differences in the kinds of students served and the kinds of institution and the mission and all of those things. But more, how is this going to impact my ability to communicate what I need to communicate to students, to parents, for the most traditionally aged populations, but to students overall.

Because our students, as we know, are extremely savvy consumers in a lot of ways, and they're also tracking all of these decisions and are empowered by the way that we position ourselves to be very customer service oriented in a competitive marketplace. We've trained our students to say, hang on a second. This place down the road is doing this and why aren't we? They're very engaged in pushing back on leadership decisions that they disagree with or that they don't fully understand why we made them.

And I think that sort of goes back to when we make these decisions as institutions, we need to say here's why, here's how, here's how we got there. That kind of transparency isn't necessarily going to win everybody over but at least we have something to point to say here's how we've made the decision. You might not like it, but I'm going to open with you about how we got there.

PAUL FAIN: Yeah, and you know, that whole interview with Tim White is worth a listen if you're interested in that. I was, I think, our most downloaded episode as well, which may be not a surprise.

ERIN HENNESSY: Yeah, it was a great conversation. And I think he made the case of here's what I'm thinking about as I make this big decision that I'm sure he was very cognizant was going to have repercussions across the state of California and across the county, to say, we have a workforce of X tens of thousands of people, in addition to a student body of this size, we have to take the responsibility of how we interact with our communities very seriously. And I think he did a great job being transparent about what drove that decision.

PAUL FAIN: We're going to run a little snippet of Chancellor's White's thoughts in May. But before we do, my colleague Rick Seltzer wrote about him recently in December. One of his quotes really stuck with me that, you know, he wanted to make a decision that he was sure he would be proud of, looking back. Even if it was the wrong one, he'd be okay with it and that was the remote call. So let's cue that tape.

TIM WHITE: And everybody's going to have to make decisions that make sense to them. I would just implore people to not be in denial about the seriousness of this issue and to not be planning sort of a few months in advance or one term in advance, but really put sort of a two-year horizon on this thing.

PAUL FAIN: All right, so after Tim White made his call, many other institutions made theirs. Sometimes it took a little longer than others. But by the end of the summer, we had a pretty good sense of how remote the fall was going to be.

During that time there was a lot of questions about the impact on enrollments nationwide, and, you know, making projections about what's going to happen in a pandemic is tough, but, you know, the previous recessions, because we were already in a recession at point, maybe even a depression folks thought. You know, there's that counter-cyclical impact where recession tend to encourage more students to go back to college, particularly at open access institutions, lower income folks, working adults, to kind of skill up to kind of ride out the recession or to find a job after they've been displaced. You have wealthier students who are staying home, who may do a year or a semester at their local community college or regional public. So some folks were really thinking that community colleges and AACSCU-type institutions would see a big bump in enrollment.

But rolling back the tape, which I'm going to do here in a minute, if you were listening to The Key, you couldn't have been too surprised by the news that, in fact, actually the impact was far worse in terms of continued enrollment for lower- income Black and Latino students, particularly at community colleges. So I'm going to play, first, Steve Johnson, the President of Sinclair Community College in April talking about that, and then Kim Cook, the executive Director of the National College Attainment Network in June, talking NCAN's efforts to track FAFSA, the federal financial aid form renewal, and filling out for the first time how many students were doing that compared to previous years. And then finally, Barbara Brittingham, who I spoke with in July, who had just stepped down, who had just retired that week as President of the New England Commission of Higher Education, which is a regional accreditor. Here we go.

Here's Sinclair's Steve Johnson.

STEVE JOHNSON: [T]hey're sticking with us and they're finishing out their programs of study and finish out the term. But we're getting indications that there are probably 25 to 30 percent don't really like online, and so they're probably going to sit out subsequent terms until they can go face to face.

PAUL FAIN: And here's Kim Cook from NCAN.

KIM COOK: Everything about this journey is uncertain to many of our students. And when you layer on additional uncertainty of questions about is it worth it? What will it look like? And quite frankly, will I be safe? Will I have the tools? You know, we heard from many of our students who had to pivot to virtual learning to end their senior year of high school, they struggled with an ability to have available devices and available internet access, and thinking about paying thousands of dollars to do that again for college, it creates a lot of uncertainty.

PAUL FAIN: And finally, here's Barbara Brittingham.

BARBARA BRITTINGHAM: I'm very concerned about colleges and universities, and I think both public and independent. And again, I don't think anybody knows. But I know that there are some that could be easily destabilized by just, you know, an enrollment upset that comes along. I think that if the number of institutions, as you suggest, pull back and are now going to go virtual is large, what the public reaction to that is going to be is hard to predict. I have a theory that there are students out there now making multiple deposits. So when I hear so many presidents say that their deposits are up, it makes me nervous, because I think they can't be up everywhere without people making multiple deposits, given the environment that we're in now. I think one reason colleges don't really know is that, and that may change over the next several weeks, but for a long time and still now, I think families don't know, students don't know what they're going to do. And if they don't know, then the colleges can't know.

PAUL FAIN: All right, so listening to that, Erin, it's easier in hindsight to say, of course, but particularly Steve Johnson saying we're seeing 25, 30 percent of students, serving a community college student, don't want to go online in the fall for a variety of reasons. Probably shouldn't have been a surprise to folks that, you know, a large chunk of our most vulnerable students would be leaving American higher education in the fall.

ERIN HENNESSY: Yeah, I think you're absolutely right. And, you know, I'll footnote my earlier statement that 99.9

percent of prognosticators are wrong. These folks and some of the other folks I know you talked to during the year were 100 percent right. There was absolutely a wave that we didn't see coming.

And I keep going back to this notion that there were so many things to track and to follow, and that a lot of folks missed these enrollment declines as they were sort of headed towards us because there were so many other things to focus on, and because, you know, higher education, we look to the evidence and the prior cases and say, well, what happens before is going to happen again. And we clearly were, a lot of folks were, and myself included, caught off guard by these developing numbers when we really shouldn't have been.

Again, this wasn't just a recession, this wasn't just an impact on the employment sector, this was, and is still, an enormous societal impact beyond just the economic indicators. And so it probably shouldn't have surprised us that folks felt so overwhelmed, felt so vulnerable in so many different ways that they said, what I'm going to do right now is sit tight and try and keep myself and my family safe and healthy. And while it would be great to upskill, I need to get through the first couple of months of this and get indication that I'm going to be okay, that me and mine are going to be okay.

PAUL FAIN: Correct, that hierarchy of needs. Yes, I need to figure out what I'm going to do in my career when I'm losing wages or losing a job, but also need to figure out how to take care of my family to ride out a quarantine, took precedence. And then like I said before, an increasing body of data showed that uncertainty itself and anxiety was a huge barrier for folks. [CROSSTALK]

ERIN HENNESSY: Yeah, and I think...

PAUL FAIN: Go ahead.

ERIN HENNESSY: I'm sorry. I think that the other thing is we can talk about the value of upskilling and preparing yourself for a different job or a different career field. In this case, it wasn't like there were a ton of jobs available that were going fallow and we just needed more skilled workers to fill them. This was an economic disruption that was felt by every sector of the economy. Every industry was impacted, every industry was shedding jobs. Higher ed itself has shed an enormous number of jobs over the last 10 months and I think it's going to get worse as we head into 2021 and on from there as we see the real impact of enrollment challenges, exacerbated by demographic changes as well.

PAUL FAIN: And let's not forget about the looming state budget crisis that most states are going to face, given tax revenues. So, Happy New Year's, folks!

ERIN HENNESSY: Right. It will all be better in 2021 except all the things that won't be.

PAUL FAIN: Yeah but there are reasons for hope. And we know a few more things about all of this than we did before, and, you know, there is that vaccine, those vaccines. That's not this show. So...

ERIN HENNESSY: [LAUGH]

PAUL FAIN: So I do think, though, that it really became clear listening to the back catalog of episodes that there were a lot of truths that we knew that just got a lot more clear to folks. And, you know, that gets at some of the disproportionate impact on enrollments. I mean, of course, you know, as we all know now, wealthy Americans are doing pretty well, they're doing better, working from home, saving more money. So, you know, but that is just not felt by everybody else.

So I'm going to turn to a couple of interviews that get into that idea of kind of the exposing and accelerating existing problems and the speed of change as well. The first one is Lorelle Epinosa. She was at the time Vice President for Research at the American Council on Education. I was speaking with her in June just as she was leaving to go be a program director at the Sloane Foundation.

So here's Lorelle Espinosa, speaking in June about emerging data on the disproportionate impact of the crisis on Black, Latino, and low-income Americans.

LORELLE ESPINOSA: And, you know, when you already have that pre-existing condition that we talked about, and then you layer on a pandemic, you know, what do you think is going to happen? I mean, this is it. This should surprise nobody, actually. Anybody who is surprised by this, they should take a big step back and examine their assumptions and the lens through which they look at the world. This is perfectly, you know, really something we should have expected. And so the question is, yeah, where is the action? And, you know, I would challenge leaders to think about what they should expect for the fall, you know, what they should expect for the next several years, and be real about that and start to create solutions before they get to the crisis, before, you know, we're at the end where you can hardly turn back.

PAUL FAIN: And it wasn't, you know, Lorelle was talking about the broad impacts of the pandemic. You know, at that time in June, there were multiple crises college leaders were dealing with, of course, the students, and everybody. The racial reckoning that really went to the next level after the killing of George Floyd was roiling campuses, colleges, the whole country. And so I'm going to turn to President Pinkard at Wilberforce on that issue, which his take on it was, again, this was exposing existing problems.

ELFRED ANTHONY PINKARD: George Floyd brought into bold focus what every Black person in America has always known, including our students. And so this was a pivotal moment for them, but not in the way that you might imagine. This did not increase their anxiety. In fact, in some ways this was an affirmation for what they have been experiencing. What was different was the fact that others who were not African American were now recognizing what they have always known in their lives.

PAUL FAIN: And now higher ed itself, higher ed the industry, really, none of the challenges it's facing are entirely new. But they do seem more extreme now. And I spoke with Paul LeBlanc, the President of Southern New Hampshire University, one of the nation's largest. He was also the board chair at ACE at the time. This is, we spoke in May about some of that question of what is this going to do to higher ed in the next stretch, and he had some strong thoughts there.

PAUL LEBLANC: [T]here are bunch of things we knew were true long before the pandemic. So we knew that higher education was too expensive for too many people. That is not news. We knew that our business models were increasingly broken. That is not news. We knew that online had better and better quality. That's not news. We know that a generation of learners who are digital natives are increasingly comfortable being served with digital tech solutions. That's not news. We knew that states had underfunded their public institutions for years and years. That's not news.

The pandemic, it's like rocket fuel to all of those truths. So you can't wait. Like if you are going to try to sort of navigate these waters, you can't wait. You have to figure now. All of our governance processes are slow processes of the past, when we had the luxury of time. No one has the luxury of time.

PAUL FAIN: So listening to all that, was there anything that we should have been surprised by? I mean, it feels like so much of the challenges that we're all hearing about now were ones that were there before, they're just worse now.

ERIN HENNESSY: Yeah. You know, I go back to Lorelle's point. None of this is new. We have been struggling to serve low-income first generation, underrepresented students on our campuses for ages, for ages and ages, and the data all bear it out. The data can, you know, indicate there are some institutions that are really moving the needle here, are doing great work. They also tend to be the institutions that are going to be most directly impacted by the state budget cuts that you mentioned previously, that are going to be most impacted by this demographic cliff. They are the institutions that are doing the most with the least, and this is going to set back their ability to serve those students. But, no, none of this is surprising. It shouldn't be. And I'm not sure how we continue to hold the ground

we gained as we move forward when the resources that the industry has are just going to be so constrained as we move through 2021, 2022, honestly, probably out to 2025 at the least.

PAUL FAIN: Absolutely. And, you know, when you talk to somebody like Paul LeBlanc in April, or at least that was May, the urgency that they were feeling about accelerating their plans, I mean, this is not sit on your laurels university, they had big plans in works. And, you know, were moving up the timeline for three years, four years to doing it in one. That was big discounting on their campus-based programs. You know, I think that's the case for a lot of institutions where, you know, you see the Arizona States, the Western Governors, the SNU's doing well online because they did well online before. And that's a simple way of looking at that. But I think nobody's slowing down now, even in institutions that have ridden this out pretty well.

ERIN HENNESSY: Yeah, and I think you and I have had a ton of conversations over the years about what the next big disruption to higher education is going to be. And for a hot minute, it was MOOCS, and before that it was online education. And while these things sort of changed the industry at the edges, we didn't see the big sort of existential disruption that COVID has brought to all of our doorsteps.

What I think that means is a couple of things. I think this is the thing that will change a lot of opinions about the efficacy and the value and the worth on online education. I think it will also put some institutions in a position where, if they haven't already laid the groundwork for an online presence and an online delivery of courses, they're too far behind the 8-ball at this point.

You know, we've had this conversation back in the heady days of MOOC-a-palouza when we talked about MOOCS in online education aren't just the professor at the front of the room talking into a video camera. It's a different way of teaching, it's a different way of learning. So institutions that are feeling suddenly motivated and like this is going to be the thing that saves their bottom line, I worry they are too far behind the 8-ball and it is going to exacerbate pressures on those kinds of institutions, again, in a sort of existential way in the reckoning that everyone has predicted has been coming for years and years and years, I think will be accelerated and we're going to see a lot more closures in 2021.

You know, this podcast could be six hours long and probably you and I would be the only ones who would listen to it. But there is so much to talk about around what admissions for fall semester looks like. I feel like the admissions folks we're talking to are back, you know, in the 1990s when I was an admissions officer just waiting by the mailbox to see what happens. All of the tools and apps and data analytics that we've invested in over the years aren't telling us much. And folks are going to grab for whatever they think will help them recruit students or retain students, and help students progress toward a degree. But for the ones that are just thinking about that now, I'm worried it's too late.

PAUL FAIN: Yes, and I'm going to roll one last little snippet here. You know, looking forward, I'm just trying to think about the pieces that I haven't heard as much about that seemed really important and, frankly, alarming. And this is a little snippet from an interview I did in June with Johnny Taylor, the President and CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management. And Taylor's also the former president and CEO of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, so let's listen to what he had to say.

Here's Taylor in June talking about the disruption of pre-K-12 schools and what that might mean for higher ed.

JOHNNY TAYLOR:...which means a total year out of a kid's education. This is disastrous. And I don't think there's enough of a conversation being had about what you're going to need to do when that kid shows up on your college campus. And you can't just say that I won't admit them, because there's already a shortage of students coming to college anyway because of the birthrate problem. Higher ed has got to figure out now what it's going to do. Because the PK to 12 problem is going to become their problem very soon.

PAUL FAIN: So, you know, I think we all know more than ever before that if you care about higher ed or work in it, you need to need to care about what happens after college, you need to pay attention to the job market, and

employers and employment outcomes. But you also have to know what's going on in K-12. And there is a big, big problem in K-12. If you haven't been reading the news with students missing school and, of course, the impact begin felt worst by lower-income Black and Latino students. And what that means about college access.

ERIN HENNESSY: Yeah, and it's, again, an issue we've been talking about and been cognizant of for years. And higher ed has in many ways stepped in to help support school systems that are under-resourced to help build pipelines and pathways from the high school classrooms in our most challenged communities to our campuses. Those efforts, again, need to be redoubled, with what resources I couldn't tell you because it's going to get tougher and tougher. I feel like coming out of this, higher ed is going to have so many number 1 absolutely vital priorities and have so few resources to dedicate to them. You hope that you start to see some of the creativity and innovation that our sector is known for answering those challenges, but, again, I'm not predicting anything moving forward anymore ever again. But those PK-12 students who are in the pipeline now, this is not next year's problem. This is not the graduating senior class figuring out if they can take SAT or ACT exams, and how they explain changed performance and remote education. This is a problem with sophomores and freshmen and eight graders, and I look at my nine-year-old nephew and say, this is going to have an impact on him by the time that he reaches the college classroom. What that's going to be, I can't tell you. But this is not just a one, two, or three-year problem, this is generational and probably multigenerational.

PAUL FAIN: You know, pretty much every episode of The Key, when I would start the interview, folks would talk about, you know, I may be interrupted like by a child or by a pet. And, you know, as a working parent myself with a five-year-old doing online kindergarten, I could commiserate and I often did. And to me it just always hit me that like, if this is hard for me, who has it about as good as you can have it in this society, what is that like for folks out there who have multiple children, work in multiple jobs, or even lost a job, you know, just unbelievable. And I think we just cannot talk enough about the impact on those children. You know, I think there's a kind of Apollo Project for society next year, I hope that's in the running.

ERIN HENNESSY: Yeah, agreed. I, to your point, am very cognizant, perhaps now more the ever before, of the number of privileges that I come to this work with. I watch my colleagues who are doing the same thing that you're doing, educating their kids and running a business. And it's staggering. And when you layer additional challenges on top of that, it's sobering. It really is sobering. And this is our future, and somewhere out there staring into a Google Classroom is a future president of the United States. And it really is something to think about, that this is going to be a defining part of these kids development and growth and personal history.

PAUL FAIN: Well, watching my five-year-old when the teacher's assistant's computer freezes, and she and her fellow classmates pull out the snacks that they've been hiding, because you're not allowed to have snacks, and they sing a little song, You are frozen, you are frozen... I saw this multiple times. It showed to me that there's a sophistication that that's just staggering. So on the plus side, I'm going to be asking my five-year-old for help with Zoom in a matter of months, if not before. [CHUCKLE]

Well, you know, that's going to do it for this episode and for The Key under my host duties. So I want to thank you, Erin, for doing this, you know, depending on, you know, nt prognostications for 2021, but if I come back to podcasting, hopefully, I can have you on to talk about the latest social media outrage or something that's a little less difficult than this year, but I appreciate you reviewing this with me.

ERIN HENNESSY: That would nice. And, Paul, the odds are high that you'll probably cut this, but I'd be remiss if I didn't say what an absolute gift this podcast has been to all of us who care about this industry, and the fact that you conceived it and birthed it, and have raised it over the last 10 months, and brought together some really spectacular minds to help us all think through what we're dealing with this year. It's really been a great act of service on your part. You are an absolute delight to work with. I'm grateful to call you a friend, and we'll be wishing every good thing for you in whatever is next.

PAUL FAIN: Thanks, Erin. I may cut that and that's the beauty of being a podcast host. You can just kind of cut some stuff. I really appreciate it. you know, the idea with the podcast was to harness some of the increased reader

interest in what we were doing early in the pandemic and to really shine more of a spotlight on vulnerable students and the impact on them. So I appreciate all the folks who came on to answer my vague 30,000-foot questions about this fast-moving, incredible time that we've all lived through. And thanks to all of you for listening as well. Happy New Year's!

[MUSIC]