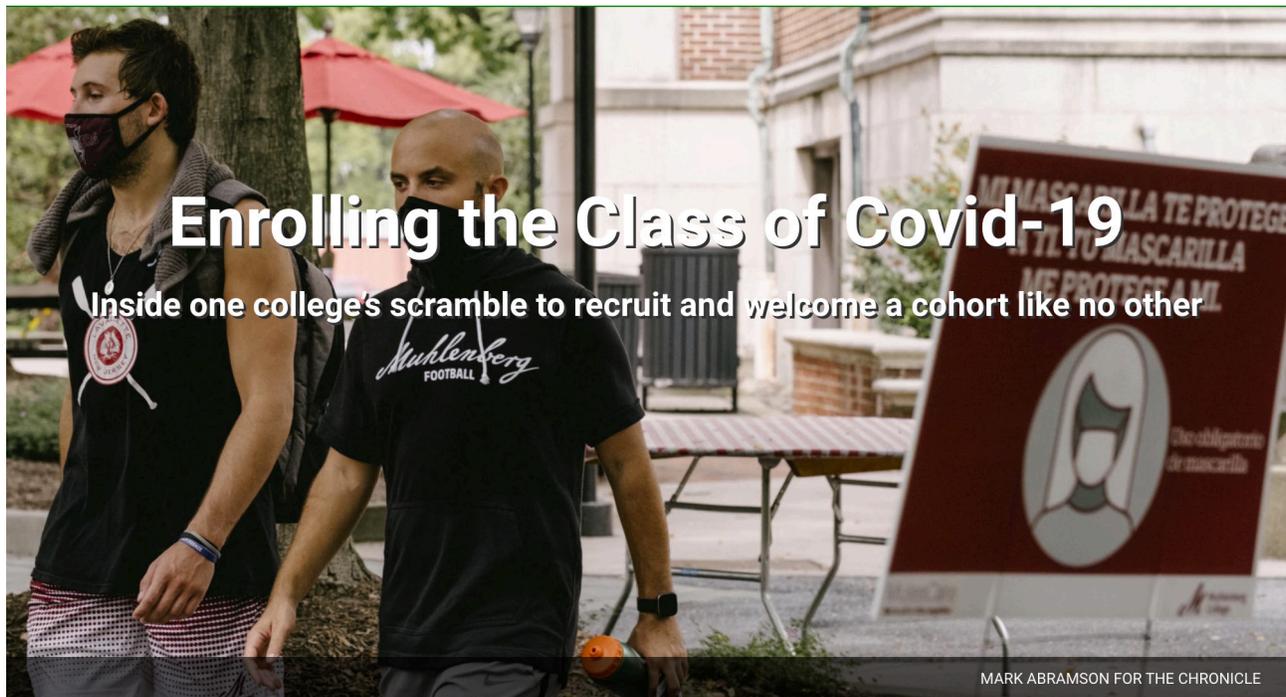


THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



By Eric Hoover
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Allentown, Pa.

In late August, Robert G. Springall looked out his office window and saw a man holding a phone chin-high. He was taking a panoramic shot of the sun-washed campus, as parents often do on move-in day. For a second, the world felt normal again.

Springall, vice president for enrollment management at Muhlenberg College, had studied spreadsheets until his eyes burned. They told him how many freshmen planned to enroll, how much revenue was at stake. But the sight of the father snapping pictures reminded him of something even more important: For many families, this was a monumental moment.

This year, though, the moment felt fragile, like the first page of a book that might dissolve in your hands. An outbreak of Covid-19 could send everyone home. The virus shredded all surety.

And it all but mocked Springall's job. A vice president for enrollment management must bend chaos into order, conquer uncertainties, and deliver The Class the College Needs. But the pandemic had blunted the tools of his trade: No predictive model accounted for a deadly, globe-crippling threat; no algorithm revealed how many freshmen would show up. Or if bringing them to campus was the right thing to do.

This is the story of how Muhlenberg — a small, tuition-dependent institution in an ultracompetitive market — navigated the spring and summer of 2020, as seen through the eyes of a seasoned enrollment official. Springall, a trim 51-year-old who typically seems jacketed in an extra layer of calm, helped lead an all-hands-on-deck campaign of constant communication, careful planning, and rapid adjustments. The college sought to preserve a sense of community, its signature offering, in a socially distanced age. Though science shaped the answer, getting through was an act of faith.

By late August, a skeptical nation was questioning colleges that had fully or partially reopened their campuses despite the raging pandemic. Students, faculty, and staff asked if their institutions had

moved too hastily, or even recklessly. Surely some did, succumbing to excessive optimism, or internal pressure to protect revenue, or external demands to keep the show going, or all of the above.

This was a test with no answer key. A behind-the-scenes look at Muhlenberg reveals the complexity of what many colleges confronted. Springall and his colleagues at Muhlenberg agonized over questions about how to balance their institutional mission with health-and-safety concerns while reimagining their offerings and trying to shore up enrollment. It was exhausting.

On move-in day, Springall wore a black mask with a red M. He greeted a few families from afar: "Welcome! Great to have you here." None of them could've known how deeply he meant it after 22 doubt-ridden weeks.

It was going to be a good year. Springall believed that in February, after Muhlenberg received a total of 4,543 applications — an 8-percent increase over 2019. With nearly 50 more early-decision commitments than the previous year, the college was poised to exceed its goal of 550 freshmen.

At a staff party for a colleague, Springall ended up with a small bottle of Korbel champagne, which he carried back to his office and stuck in the minifridge. He would pop the cork on the first day of classes this fall, he figured, to celebrate the big Class of 2024.

Then Covid-19 came. Muhlenberg, which had been tracking the spread of the virus, announced its closing on March 10, before many colleges did the same. The campus newspaper called the announcement "catastrophic." Students and parents emailed administrators to express their outrage, saying that the threat of the virus was being exaggerated, that young people weren't really at risk.

Most students had to leave the campus by March 14. Four days later, Pennsylvania reported its first Covid-19 death.

As the nation shut down, Muhlenberg's admissions office kept turning the wheels of the admissions process. Staff members stayed on the campus to assemble and mail packets for nearly 2,800 accepted regular-decision applicants. Even in a digital world, many teenagers like holding a letter in their hands.

One problem: Those letters, many of which Melissa Falk, dean of admissions and financial aid, had already signed, referred to an April 18 on-campus event for accepted students. No one knew if the college would reopen by then. So admissions officers yanked the invitations from each packet. Falk drafted a new letter, printed 800 copies, and signed each of them again.

Enrolling a class is a major chore. Springall found it harder each year to meet goals for revenue and student diversity while also increasing academic quality. Muhlenberg lies in the Lehigh Valley, crowded with small, comparable colleges, on the eastern side of a state with a declining number of high-school graduates.

What makes Muhlenberg special, Springall believes, can also make it a tough sell in a world fixated on big-name colleges and easy-to-visualize career paths. Applicants with "self-actualization" on their list of priorities just might love the place. But they're kind of rare.

Muhlenberg, with about 2,000 students, occupies higher education's vast middle tier. Last year it accepted 66 percent of its applicants. Its sticker price was about \$69,000 a year; its average net price was about half that.

Though heavy discounting is a necessity, it can't prevent surprises. Last fall, Muhlenberg planned for 570 freshmen but ended up with 538. A record proportion of those who had sent deposits — 69 students in all — weren't enrolled by the deadline to add or drop classes. They had either deferred their admission or bowed out. Summer melt, it's called.

Now the pandemic threatened to cause even greater melt. Early surveys suggested that many colleges would see their incoming classes shrink by at least 10 to 20 percent. Springall had worked in the field

for 27 years, at Muhlenberg for three. But this was Year One of a new reality.

Flexibility would be crucial, he knew. In late March, he convinced the college to push the May 1 deposit deadline back a month, as several institutions had already done. Many families reeling from the pandemic would surely need more time, he figured; the sooner the college made the change, the less likely anyone might perceive it as a desperate response to a dearth of deposits.

The unfolding crisis focused Springall. He feared that in a week or a month, he would realize that he should have done X ... today. Monday through Friday he woke early and made coffee, sitting down at the computer in his home office by 7 a.m., often before showering, before shaking all the sleep from his limbs.

Each day he joined the rest of the senior staff for a 9 a.m. meeting that sometimes lasted until noon. At first administrators were in emergency mode, weighing immediate questions, like whether to cancel commencement.

During one discussion in April, though, a colleague turned the conversation toward the future: "What if we're not back in the fall?"

Springall felt as if a storm cloud were spreading across his ceiling. While the meeting continued, he and Kent A. Dyer, the chief business officer, traded messages about the potential financial impact of a semester with no students on the campus.

Springall punched buttons on his calculator, roughing out the annual room-and-board charges, the number of on-campus students.

$\$12,000 \times 1,800 = \21.6 million.

Oh, he thought.

The pandemic forced Muhlenberg to ask itself a question: Who are we?

Falk, an alumna of the college, knew it as close-knit and "disarmingly friendly," a campus where students approach visitors just to give them directions from one tree-shaded corner to another. The college's comforting sense of place has long been a selling point.

The challenge: Conveying such virtues at a time when the nation was in lockdown. "We need to get our hands on these kids," Falk told her staff, "to make sure they know we're still here even though the world is upside-down."

So the admissions office softened the tone of its communications. The usual salesmanship wouldn't be right, Falk thought, when prospective students were anxious, upset, worried. "You can be certain of Muhlenberg" was the subject line of an April email exemplifying the college's attempt to be gentle even as it encouraged students who hadn't committed to do so — and soon. The message explained that the deadline for requesting a deferral had been extended until move-in day, that freshmen might be allowed to bring cars because of Covid-19, and that those committing by May 1 could move in early (which then seemed doable).



MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE CHRONICLE

Rob Springall, vice president for enrollment management at Muhlenberg, and Melissa Falk, dean of admissions and financial aid. The college had to reach out to applicants, she said, "to make sure they know we're still here even though the world is upside-down."

This spring, colleges had to scrap their existing “yield” campaigns to lock in the freshman class. Deprived of the opportunity for in-person interaction, Muhlenberg’s admissions office doubled down on virtual events. It invited accepted students to schedule one-on-one chats with admissions officers. It recruited professors to teach sample classes allowing prospective students to interact with instructors. It turned over its Instagram account to current students who fielded questions from accepted applicants.

One day, Muhlenberg hosted a virtual meet-up for prospective students in the Southeast. When Josh Benson, in Durham, N.C., logged in, he already had a favorable impression of the college. He liked that Tara Nelan, regional director of admissions for the Southeast, had handed him a cupcake when they met for his official interview, in October; she knew it was his birthday. This spring he noticed that the college had sent him more-detailed Covid-19 updates than the other institutions on his list had, which made him feel as if he were already a student there.

Nonetheless, Benson was leaning toward attending another college when the video chat began. Then, Matt Steiner, a Muhlenberg senior from Florida, expressed an interest in him, asked about his trumpet playing, and suggested he could join a band on the campus. After hearing that Benson shared his fondness for Moe’s Southwest Grill, a chain restaurant, Steiner suggested that the two of them would go out to eat together this fall.

That casual invitation, perhaps more than anything else, swayed Benson: “He treated me like I could just be another friend of his.” He committed to Muhlenberg the next day.

Perhaps the admission staff’s most essential task was to reimagine its annual on-campus event for accepted students. It’s called Through the Red Doors, a nod to the bright-red entrances of Muhlenberg’s buildings. The all-day event is an intimate welcome meant to give families a sense of life on the campus. Springall calls it “Black Friday”: Each year the college gets dozens of commitments on the spot from enthusiastic families who line up to pay the \$400 deposit fee.

Now that, too, would have to be virtual. Chelsea Schoen, associate director of admissions, led the staff in retooling the event for the Zoom era. They scheduled a week of programming, including a career-center webinar and a discussion of campus life led by current students. On Saturday, April 18, the college offered five faculty panels, each on a different academic theme, back-to-back.

At an admissions staff meeting the following Monday, Schoen shared some encouraging data: 217 prospective students had logged in for the Saturday event. But they had submitted more questions than professors could answer in a one-hour session. There was no lining up after a virtual panel.

So Schoen developed a process for downloading each question, determining which prospective student had asked it, and ensuring that the appropriate person, be it a professor or an admissions officer, responded by midweek. “We have their attention, we have their energy, we’ve just got to go capitalize on it now,” she said. “It’s important to make sure students know ‘We hear you. ... Now we’re going to help get you an answer.’”

At the end of the meeting, Springall acknowledged the staff’s hard work. “I couldn’t be more proud of this team,” he said. “Thank you so much, everybody, for doing what you’re doing. It’s just been knocked out of the park.”

He was inspired by his colleagues’ energy, but he knew that they were tired — and that there was cause for concern. Days earlier, the total number of commitments had fallen off last year’s pace for the first time, which made him feel as if a lead in a big game were slipping away.

On April 30, Muhlenberg had 410 deposits, 86 fewer than at that point the year before. During the second week of May, the college received just one or two deposits a day. For every Josh Benson who had committed, there were handfuls of accepted students who were just ... standing ... pat.

Many families, Springall suspected, were delaying their final decisions because of a still-unanswered

question: Would the college bring students to the campus this fall?

Springall wanted to believe that Muhlenberg could safely do just that. But then one day he called his father, a trained mathematician, who shared a blunt assessment of the college's predicament in a world without a vaccine.

We're dealing with a medical problem, a science problem, Tom Springall told his son. Until science delivers solutions, we're not going back to normal ways of learning and being together.

Covid-19 essentially sneered at the liberal-arts college experience, the side-by-side mentoring and small-group discussions that blossom on cozy campuses where even the architecture encourages intimacy. Most classrooms at Muhlenberg were meant to hold 30 students. But 30 socially distanced students?

Even at less than 100-percent occupancy, his father said, the logician in me says you can't do it.

Those words deflated Springall, who had majored in computer science and shared his father's analytical nature. Nonetheless, enrollment leaders must embrace hope while confronting reality. His job required him to tackle the next task, to compartmentalize instead of getting lost in worry.

Springall conferred daily with Kathleen E. Harring, the college's president. Often they felt as if they were running two colleges, the one that already existed and the hypothetical one that might exist in the fall. Would it be virtual? Would there be football? What about ...?

Harring, a social psychologist who has taught public-health courses, studied Covid-19 daily. She listened to podcasts about virology, kept in close touch with local public-health authorities, and dialed into regular calls with state officials advising colleges.

She concluded that her campus could reopen only if it had access to frequent testing with rapid results. Muhlenberg developed a three-pronged strategy: It would work with local partners to conduct testing of symptomatic students; test everyone who had been in contact with them; and commit to "surveillance testing" of asymptomatic students.

Health-and-safety concerns dovetailed with discussions of the college's mission. A faculty-and-staff committee assessing various reopening scenarios assessed the potential impact of each one on academic pursuits, campus life, buildings, and so on. How could the college remain a welcoming, enjoyable place to learn and live?

Muhlenberg, like other colleges, isn't just a collection of bricks and boilers. It became a shelter, too. After the campus closed, in March, 200 students received permission to stay in campus housing. About 40 would stay over the summer, including international students and one young man whose permanent address was the same as Muhlenberg's because, as he told The Chronicle, he had no home to which to return.



MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE CHRONICLE

Rob Springall, vice president for enrollment management: He would reflect on how little control he had over many crucial outcomes.

As May went on, the college weighed financial questions. The pandemic had cost it about \$3 million so far, Haring wrote in an email to the campus. Room-and-board refunds, canceled summer programs, remote-learning expenses: All represented losses.

An early estimate pegged the cost of bringing all students back in the fall at \$3.5 million. That included the cost of renting a block of nearby hotel rooms where students who tested positive for Covid-19 could immediately quarantine. The college also renovated all of its bathrooms, installing hands-free faucets and urinals.

In late May, Muhlenberg announced full and partial furloughs for June and July. Of 124 staffers affected, three worked in the admissions office. Springall contacted them one by one to break the news: half-pay, two months.

He reassured each of his colleagues as best he could. "You're still 100 percent of the team," he said, "just not 100 percent of the schedule."

Embrace hope while confronting reality.

Springall remained hopeful, but that day, reality stung.

Enrollment management is a widely misunderstood profession. Those who oversee the recruitment and retention of college students have been described as villains "ruining American higher education" and "screwing the poor kids" via ruthless, revenue-enhancing tactics. "There's this idea that we don't care about education," one enrollment manager told *The Chronicle* in 2016, "that we would sell our soul to meet the institution's goals."

But that description doesn't fit Springall. He is known at Muhlenberg as a numbers guy who's good with people, an ethical strategist who has helped increase the college's once-paltry enrollment of Pell-eligible students (nearly 20 percent of the Class of 2022). Haring, the president, says he's effective because he builds relationships and knows how to collaborate: "Those two things don't always happen in higher education."

Falk, the admissions dean, has depended on Springall to convey clear and sometimes urgent messages, "like a town crier," to other campus leaders. Explaining to the provost, for instance, why it is crucial for professors to get online with prospective students in the evenings this spring. An enrollment leader's job, a colleague from another division says, is to "weave a thread from a student's first connection with the college all the way through to graduation."

This spring, Springall pushed an idea that required campuswide coordination: Offering 100 incoming students the opportunity to enroll in a free online course of their choosing over the summer. He and Falk hatched the plan after Muhlenberg announced that all summer courses would be virtual, meaning that anyone, anywhere could participate. Offering first-year students the opportunity to take a for-credit course before move-in day seemed like a good way to meaningfully engage them. All the better if it helped reel in a few undecided students and, perhaps, reduce summer melt.

The college just had to figure out how to pay for it. The School of Continuing Studies, which runs summer courses, told Springall that it would need \$500 per student to make the plan work. So he called Rebekkah L. Brown, vice president for advancement, and said, "We need \$100,000."

He and Falk wanted to extend the option to 100 returning students as well, especially those thrown off course by the pandemic, those with great financial need, or anyone else who might need help staying on track to graduate.

Within 10 days, the college had raised the \$100,000 for the Muhlenberg Extended Learning Program, which the college promoted in its "You can be certain of Muhlenberg" email to uncommitted students.

More than 200 incoming freshmen applied. All but three of those who started a course would complete it.

The college also offered 75 free spots in “Foundations for Student Success,” a required, noncredit course. Incoming students snapped up all those virtual seats as well. All but three of those who took a for-credit or noncredit course would end up matriculating in August.

Before Covid-19, Springall said, offering summer classes to rising freshmen wouldn’t have crossed his mind. Now it might become a permanent fixture. It was a meaningful offering, he believed, because it wasn’t “just an admissions tactic.”

And admissions tactics sometimes fall flat. After reading this spring that some prospective students were second-guessing their plans to enroll at a college far from home because of Covid-19, Springall devised a strategy: contacting high-school seniors within a 50-mile radius to announce that Muhlenberg was “reopening” its admission application to students seeking “a close-to-home option.”

In early May, the college emailed the offer to 20,000 students. It netted just one applicant, who was accepted — and later declined.

As summer neared, Springall reflected on how little control he had over many crucial outcomes. Even in a normal year, his job depended on countless personal choices made by students and families for myriad reasons.

One thing he could control: when to lace up his blue running shoes with the gold accents.

Springall, a devoted runner, had registered for a half-marathon in Allentown this spring, but, like everything else, it was canceled. So one Saturday in May, he got up early and drove to the high school where the race would’ve started. At 7 a.m., he stood in the silence and sang “The Star-Spangled Banner” to himself. There was no starting gun, so he whispered: “Bang!”

Then he took off.

While chugging along, a metaphor occurred to him. *These days, we are all running alone, trying to find the thing that gives us a little adrenaline.*

He ran the full 13.1 miles in two hours, four minutes, and six seconds — eight minutes off his goal.

Falling short there didn’t really matter. But failing to reel in 550 freshmen would have serious consequences.

Muhlenberg needed to hit that target, or come close, to generate the revenue it would need to help cover its expenses. A smaller-than-expected freshman class would prove especially consequential, because the college enrolls relatively few full-time transfer students, who can help plug budgetary holes. If the Class of 2024 came in too light, Muhlenberg would have to live with it for 365 days.

Springall was thinking about work by the time he got back home. A few miles away, on the second floor of the administration building, his minifridge sat unplugged. It contained a few cans of Coke Zero and one long-untouched bottle of Korbel.

At last, June arrived. On the 2nd, Springall logged into his computer first thing to check the updated tally of enrollment commitments. Then he sent a Slack message to the senior administrators: “Admissions update: 555 net deposits.”

His colleagues responded with a party emoji, a thumbs-up emoji, a “Nice job.”

“Thank you,” Springall wrote back, “but it’s about the team and everyone on campus.”

Two things tempered his enthusiasm. There was still plenty of time for students to change their minds. And the college had yet to announce its plans for the fall.

Families were clamoring for answers. Administrators didn’t want to keep them waiting for long. But

given the unpredictability of Covid-19 and the likelihood that guidance from health officials would continue to evolve, deciding soon seemed unwise.

Even the near future seemed far off. Springall, sharing a home with his wife, Karen, and nine cats, put it like this: “Right now we’re all living the same way cats live — there’s just yesterday, today, and tomorrow.”

In late June, citing guidance from local, state, and federal health agencies, Muhlenberg announced that it would bring all students to the campus this fall. A few days later, Springall, sporting a red bow-tie, emceed an evening webinar for incoming students and parents, who flooded administrators with written questions.

How will students socialize?

Can you explain the difference between asynchronous and synchronous learning?

Will parents be allowed to visit?

Administrators offered thorough but at times tenuous descriptions of their plans for campus life in what Harring, the president, called “a brand-new world.”

Springall kept working. He savored moments of camaraderie. Like the day he toured the admissions building with colleagues to better understand how the space could safely welcome visitors once the campus reopened. After an admissions officer handed him a T-shirt, he climbed the towering bronze statue of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, the college’s namesake, and wrapped it around the proud fellow’s face — a makeshift mask. The enrollment manager gave him a bear hug for good measure.



MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE CHRONICLE

Rob Springall wraps a makeshift mask around the statue of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, the college’s namesake.

There were tense moments, too. During one senior-staff meeting, Springall felt that a couple of people were getting hung up on a blistering message from a father who was upset that the college had canceled in-person commencement ceremonies in October. Stepping out of character, the enrollment manager dropped an f-bomb, telling his colleagues that the man, a local business owner, was crushed that he wouldn’t get to see his daughter in a cap and gown. “It seems like we’re not being sympathetic right now,” he said. “Let’s sympathize with the parent, and move the conversation on.” Sometimes an enrollment manager must remind administrators to stop and consider how their decisions affect families.

Still, Springall was on the same page with other campus leaders. He shared their enthusiasm on the night of the webinar for students and families. But that enthusiasm didn’t last long. In early July, Pennsylvania announced its largest one-day increase in Covid-19 cases in three weeks. Gov. Tom Wolf, a Democrat, then reimposed statewide restrictions on bars, restaurants, and indoor gatherings. The Centennial Conference suspended fall sports, erasing Muhlenberg’s football season, which would affect 25 first-year students planning to suit up for the Mules. And Dickinson College, a competing liberal-arts institution in Carlisle, Pa., announced that it would go fully remote this fall, which gave Muhlenberg officials pause.

They were engaged in a balancing act while standing on a moving floor. Each day they considered the wishes of students and families hoping for a full — and safe — return to the college. But they were absorbing more and more information that diminished the likelihood of that outcome.

Finally, Muhlenberg's leaders decided that their plan was no longer viable. The virus had changed too many circumstances. The college would not be able to execute the robust testing protocol it had devised, because surging cases had limited local capacity. As it turned out, there would be a seven-to-10-day turnaround time for asymptomatic testing, which defeated its purpose.

At the end of July, Muhlenberg announced that it would allow only incoming students and a limited number of returning students on the campus this fall. And they would go home two weeks early, at Thanksgiving.

Administrators had debated the possibility of a virtual-only semester for all students, Haring said, but they feared that it would hinder freshmen's academic and co-curricular development during the crucial start to college. The mission was to educate them in-person.

Each first-year student would have a single room and, for the most part, take online courses with some in-person instruction and small-group activities. Faculty members would determine the course modality. Any student could opt for remote learning. The college announced that it would hold tuition at the 2019-20 rate, and reduce room-and board charges for nonremote students, who would be on the campus for 13 weeks, not 15.

When the email announcing the college's decision went out, Springall felt a knot tighten in his stomach. He knew that many students and parents would feel devastated. Dozens did lash out in emails and phone calls to campus officials.

Muhlenberg's administrators had moved deliberately all summer, doing what they could to preserve the intricate plan for a fully in-person fall ... right up until that plan unraveled. But there was an inevitable downside to that deliberateness — and to the timing of the decision, which came later than that of many other colleges.

"It just felt like a blindside," said Matt Steiner, the senior from Florida. "We were being told that there was this perfect plan, that we were all going to be on campus, until a few weeks before the semester. They waited too long. It was hard not to think this was all financial, a way to lock in kids."

Though Springall disputed that notion, he understood students' frustrations. He wished he could stand in front of them with his head bowed and tell them, "If there was another way, we would do it."

Some freshmen backed out of their commitments. Springall watched the deposit total dip to 545, hold at 544 for two weeks, and then fall to 541. One student, citing Covid-19, told the college that she would take a gap year and enroll in the fall of 2021.

Maybe more students would do the same. Maybe the number of young people testing positive for Covid-19 was persuading some students to sit out for a semester or two. Or maybe the reality of a fall full of Zoom classes and socially distanced gatherings and too-quiet quads was sinking in.

Springall recalled what his father had said about Covid-19: *Until science delivers solutions, we're not going back to normal ways of learning and being together.*

A college's finances are an elaborate puzzle. The pandemic blew the pieces apart.

After Muhlenberg decided to bring just a small fraction of students to the campus this fall, Gregory S. Mitton, the financial-aid director, knew he would have to scramble. After all, Muhlenberg previously intended to build aid packages for 2020-21 on a total cost of attendance of \$69,090 — including tuition, room and board, plus fees — for on-campus students. When the college froze tuition at the 2019-20 level, its stay-at-home total became \$54,315 — a difference of nearly \$15,000 per student. Administrators figured there would be about 1,300 upperclassmen studying remotely.

Over 72 hours, Mitton and his colleagues recalculated aid packages for each sophomore, junior, and senior based on a new cost of attendance. The college didn't reduce families' aid packages dollar-for-dollar; a typical reduction was \$10,000 to \$11,000.

Still, after receiving their packages, in August, dozens of parents called to ask why their aid had been decreased from the previous year. Because, Mitton told them as politely as he could, your costs have been reduced significantly.

After 38 years on the job, Mitton knew how to explain the complexities of financial aid. He also knew how to listen. For months he had been hearing from anxious parents who had been laid off or furloughed in the wake of Covid-19. Others feared they might lose their jobs soon. In March and April, his office fielded nearly 250 financial-aid appeals from parents of prospective students (last year the total was 75 to 100). Some callers just needed someone to yell at, cry to, or blame. “I’ve seen the dark side,” he would say later.

Circumstances necessitated new ways of communicating with families. In previous years, a hundred or more parents would line up at a table just to ask the financial-aid staff a few questions during Through the Red Doors, the on-campus event for accepted students. After it was canceled, Springall insisted that the college find a way to replace those interactions.

So Muhlenberg set up an online scheduling system allowing parents to book a one-on-one, 15-minute chat with Mitton or Falk, the admissions dean. The two did 228 calls in a month. Those chats, Mitton believed, helped him build rapport with parents, allowing for more-humane discussions of what they were going through — and what the college was up against.

Muhlenberg’s \$300-million endowment is less than half that of nearby Lafayette College, and less than a quarter of neighboring Lehigh University’s. About 90 percent of Muhlenberg’s students receive at least some institutional aid or a tuition discount. The college meets the full need — usually, through a combination of institutional aid, grants, and loans — for about 90 percent of the students it helps. Those circumstances, Mitton said, meant that the college couldn’t help every family as much as he would like.

And this year, evaluating appeals became even more difficult. That’s because the formulas and policies for assessing a family’s need are backward-looking: A 2018 tax return can’t capture the pain that parents who had just lost income were feeling in 2020. A handful of families who previously weren’t eligible for Pell Grants discovered that, suddenly, they were.

Mitton and his colleagues had to use professional judgment, assessing each family’s circumstances on a case-by-case basis. Was the job loss permanent? Was there severance? Were they eligible for Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation? The answers helped him determine what to do next.

Mitton asked several parents to submit their 2019 tax returns and complete a special form asking them to estimate as best they could what their 2020 tax returns would look like. In some cases, Muhlenberg increased aid awards — by as much as \$8,000 to \$10,000 — for those who thought their income would drop significantly. One family, which was living on \$600 a week in federal assistance after losing two incomes, saw its aid award increase by \$18,000, allowing the student to enroll.

But some families walked away. One father, a dentist from Virginia, earned more than \$500,000 annually before Covid-19. This year, after his practice closed, his income plummeted. Though that was a big change, Mitton explained, it didn’t alter the college’s calculation of the family’s financial need. Muhlenberg lost that student.

A college can do many things to build and maintain a community, but none of it is enough if a family can’t afford the price of membership, or feels entitled to more aid than a college can or chooses to give.

One in six freshmen won’t show up.

Twenty-five percent will take a gap year.

No one’s gonna move into a dorm room just to take online courses.

Such predictions rained down all spring and summer, and they weren't entirely wrong. Some students who had planned to study on a four-year campus this fall chose to stay home and take virtual courses. Or they took the semester off. Or started at a two-year college. Or got a job. All because Covid-19 had made a normal semester impossible.

Muhlenberg invested in making the most of an imperfect fall. Over the summer, Lora Taub dean for digital learning, led intensive workshops for full- and part-time faculty members that emphasized active learning, student engagement, and community-building in, she said, "spaces mostly defined by distance and disconnect."

Those sessions drew rave reviews from professors, and some said they were getting to know their students this fall more easily than before. Instead of relying on them to stop by during office hours, instructors were setting aside time for one-on-one or small-group chats.

Students had mixed opinions. After classes started, some said virtual learning was getting old fast. One sophomore tweeted a complaint about "paying \$70k for Zoom."

Josh Benson, the freshman from Durham, was happy with his instructors and the quality of virtual classes, but he lamented the constraints of digital interaction. "It's not the same experience as meeting someone in-person," he said. "It's hard to get to know people, to make a side joke." And he wouldn't get to go out to dinner with Matt Steiner, the student he had met in the virtual meet-up.



MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE CHRONICLE

Veda Bridgelal, a first-year student at Muhlenberg, joins classmates in a socially distanced lunch in the main dining hall. "It's better than nothing," she says of campus life so far. "I'm happy to have something."

grateful for a new experience, a change of scenery, especially after the pandemic had destroyed their senior year, canceled their prom, and stranded them at home. One of those students was Veda Bridgelal, a freshman at Muhlenberg.

In late August, she ate at a picnic table criss-crossed with black-and-yellow tape to keep people from sitting too closely together. She squinted in the late-afternoon sun and described how she had screamed with joy upon hearing that Muhlenberg would allow freshmen to live on the campus this fall. She couldn't have handled another semester at home.

Bridgelal, from Jamaica, N.Y., worked at a gas station 25 hours a week in high school. She continued

Steiner, a senior, was studying remotely this fall. Though he described Muhlenberg as an amazing place, he was frustrated. He believed that the college should have reduced tuition when it switched to online instruction. "This is not the same education," he said. "You can't argue that it's even close. Not when students can just turn off their camera and play Xbox during classes."

Some of his professors greeted him by name during virtual discussions; others seemed not to know it. He couldn't walk up to any of them after class ended. He missed that. A college could overcome some of the disadvantages of distance, but not all of them.

Still, many members of the high-school Class of 2020 were

working there during Covid-19, saving for college and a MacBook. Often she helped her mother, an immigrant from Trinidad and Tobago, decode financial documents and tax forms.

A substantial aid package enabled her to attend Muhlenberg, where she plans to major in accounting or finance. She had seen how the lack of a college degree kept her mother — a customer-service rep at a bank — from getting higher-paying jobs. “Her story is my big motivation,” she said. “I wanted to go to a liberal-arts college so I can grow and get past that point and not feel stuck.”

After her high school switched to virtual instruction this spring, Bridgelal lost her motivation. The class salutatorian, she contended with a bad internet connection and an old, unreliable computer while trying to keep her Zoom screen from freezing up. Sitting in her small bedroom day after day, she felt stuck.

This summer, Bridgelal bought the MacBook. She took “Foundations for Student Success,” the required course that Muhlenberg offered free online, as part of the program Springall had helped create. She learned about financial planning, setting goals, and social-change models. The experience energized her: “I felt like I was part of a community again.”

In her first week at Muhlenberg, Bridgelal attended an outdoor showing of *Monsters University* on the campus, stuffed a brown teddy bear at a “stuff-a-plush” event, and made friends over meals at tables with plexiglass partitions. All those experiences resulted from many hours of staff planning for an unprecedented semester.

“It’s better than nothing,” she said of campus life so far. “I’m happy to have something.”

There were challenges, though. Despite the aid from Muhlenberg, she said, paying for college would be tough; she deemed the T-shirts in the campus bookstore too expensive. Though she was bonding with other students in Emerging Leaders, a program for underrepresented students, being on a mostly white campus was a big adjustment.

Muhlenberg was randomly testing a tenth of its students for Covid-19 each week. Bridgelal worried about an outbreak — having to pack her stuff and take a bus home. Though students were wearing masks and keeping distant, she said, some weren’t doing so all the time.

Her socializing had mostly been limited to the library and the Red Room, the student lounge under the dining hall: “We do the same thing over and over.”

But she really liked the food. Each day students had to click an app on their phones and complete a “self-assessment” designed to screen for Covid-19 symptoms. A green check mark (“Cleared to Enter”) was required to access the dining hall.

After 5 p.m., Bridgelal walked in, presented her student ID, and showed the green check mark to a staffer in full-body protective gear, who then held an instant-read thermometer close to the freshman’s forehead. *Ding!*

Bridgelal took her chicken sandwich and fries over to a big white tent, where she ate with a few other students, each seated at a separate table.

It’s better than nothing.

Each admissions cycle begins with hope, ambitions, and goals. It ends with a final tally.

On the last Thursday in August, Springall was taking stock of six exhausting months. Through the window of his office, he could see students jogging past, a delivery truck arriving — small signs of a campus coming back to life. He was still gathering data and trying to gauge the impact of Covid-19.

Here's what the numbers would look like after September 7, the add/drop deadline:

Muhlenberg, which had hoped to enroll 550 freshmen, ended up with 517. Of those, about 460 had moved into dorms. The rest were commuting or studying remotely. Eight more planned to enroll this spring.

The summer-melt total of 66 — a bit lower than last year — comprised students who had deferred their admission (39) or backed out (27).

A total of 128 returning students — instead of the usual 20 or 30 — had taken a leave of absence, with most planning to return in the spring. Nine had withdrawn from the college.

Overall, full-time enrollment was 3 percent lower than what Muhlenberg had projected in June.

The financial impact of all that was difficult to measure. A big chunk of students wouldn't pay for room-and-board this fall — but that would also reduce the college's costs (food, utilities, and so on).

Muhlenberg's preliminary calculation: Revenue would be about 11 percent lower than it expected in June (projected revenue for the current fiscal year was \$100 million). That hurt.

Still, administrators felt, the pain could've been much worse. And this year especially, success in admissions isn't something one could fully quantify.

After a day of meetings, Springall sat down on the steps of a campus building and surveyed the tidy green grass before him. There was no number for the sense of accomplishment he felt, but, still, he felt it. Muhlenberg had created a virtual version of just about everything it offers, including a new virtual "driving tour" of the campus that families could enjoy from their couches. He and his colleagues had built and maintained many connections, rethinking how a college links one person with another. They had effectively recruited students through computer screens. "This helped us overcome a bias that residential colleges have against doing things virtually, the sense that 'Oh, we can't do that because we're this face-to-face college,'" he said. "We've got to meet people where they are."

Springall was pleased when an instructor teaching a first-year seminar told him how great the students were: "If they're all like this, then great job!" Still, he wished the college could have hit its goal of 550 freshmen. Enrollment managers, even low-key ones like him, are competitors — if not with one another then with the forces of reality always working against many colleges. This year those forces were overwhelming.

Above all, Springall was proud of the admissions and financial-aid team for keeping the first-year class engaged amid uncertainty. At a virtual staff retreat in June, Haring, the college's president, made a surprise appearance on Zoom to thank them for their hard work. In the end, an enrollment leader is powerless without the often-overlooked staffers who stitch together a class, creating the community that will sustain the college. "We're just conductors, trying to coordinate and cajole," Springall said. "My bare hands don't enroll more than a few students."

At 6 p.m., the carillon in the Haas Bell Tower played Muhlenberg's alma mater, filling the air with silvery music-box chimes. Then the campus turned quiet again. Over by the student union, a scene captured the hope and peril of the fall semester: A dozen chattering freshmen gathered at the taped-off picnic tables, and though they all wore masks, some stood close together.

Their time at Muhlenberg was just beginning, but Springall's would soon end. He had accepted an offer to become executive director for undergraduate admissions at Pennsylvania State University — a big job, a new challenge. Still, the thought of leaving the close-knit campus made him sad. He would spend the last few weeks helping the admissions staff plan for the first full recruitment cycle of the Covid-19 era. He would pack up the books and photographs in his office. And he would have to decide what to do with the bottle of Korbel in his minifridge, still waiting for a celebration.