

# Enrollment Growth Strategies

Tips for growing enrollment by improving your brand.

BY DR. SCOTT D. MILLER AND DR. MARYLOUISE FENNELL



**D**ESPITE REPORTS OF “application inflation” — students applying to more than 10 institutions simultaneously — and the fact that some colleges interpret the increased number of applications as a sign of their growing popularity and reputation, there is a hard reality: although many students are serious about their applications at several campuses, they also may find it easier than ever to enter into the financial aid wars for the best deal before they commit to matriculating. The National Association for College Admission Counseling recently reported that the average national yield rate has declined by 13 percent over the past 10 years.

To avoid a hard landing come August when the true enrollment numbers come in, we offer some advice on how best to develop a growth strategy based on sound marketing and innovative programs.

## Commit to Growth

First, institutions need to commit to a true growth philosophy. Scott developed a strategy in the 1990s that received widespread attention in Michael K. Townsley’s *Small College Guide to Financial Health: Weathering Turbulent Times* and James L. Fisher/James V. Koch’s *The Entrepreneurial College President*. We have shared the still-relevant concept with countless institutions since with good success.

How did it work? At the time, Scott was in a congested market competing with larger, less expensive state schools within an easy drive. To differentiate his small, residential liberal arts college, he led the addition of high-impact intercollegiate athletic teams and activities to enhance the brand. If prospective students wanted to attend football games in a stadium that sat tens of thousands, they could choose a state university. But if they preferred to experience the sport more intimately (including, for athletes, the increased likelihood of playing time), they would attend the smaller private college.

## Making It Work


To make this concept work even more comprehensively, we recommend the following:

- The president must have an enrollment and student-activity vision, and serve as the primary spokesperson and advocate of the strategy.

- The college should utilize experienced counsel to develop an enrollment matrix that will control the discount rate, produce a significant return on investment and evaluate staff effectiveness. Staff evaluations should be based on specific objectives and outcomes.
- Gift dollars and, if necessary, some leveraged borrowing should be dedicated to high-impact facilities. Most colleges have completed makeovers to their athletic facilities, for example. Common features include artificial turf, lights, all-weather tracks and improved locker and weight facilities, as well as training rooms.
- Simultaneously, adding extracurricular and co-curricular activities that will utilize these facilities and boost enrollment is a wise move. A marching band is a good example, and will also support the music program.
- The revitalized facilities can enable the college to attract a new brand of coach, responsible for recruiting scholar-athletes who will be successful on and off the field or court.

## We Also Suggest:

- Reconsider the use of part-time faculty and staff in key positions. Part-time employees generally do not produce positive results in recruitment or retention.
- Create cost-effective, synergistic partnerships to support the library, learning resources and technology — all important to ensuring student success.
- Supplement traditional program growth with a modest but student-centered, nontraditional adult program. Online offerings can succeed here.
- Utilize branding and marketing dollars wisely. Although most successful brands are not created overnight, judicious use of resources can result in a highly effective, long-term strategy.
- Periodically utilize external counsel to evaluate results objectively.

Expanded, enhanced facilities and activities, and even marching bands, can create momentum and energy while boosting enrollment. Over time, they will pay for themselves (and more) with increased and sustainable enrollment levels. 

*Dr. Scott D. Miller is president of Virginia Wesleyan College. Previously, he was president of Bethany College, Wesley College and Lincoln Memorial University. He is chair of the Board of Directors of Academic Search, Inc. Dr. Marylouise Fennell, RSM, a former president of Carlow University, is senior counsel for the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) and principal of Hyatt Fennell, a higher education search firm.*