

ENROLLMENT MANAGER

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ENROLLMENT GROWTH STRATEGIES FOR NEW REALITIES

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After the excitement of college graduation ceremonies has subsided, within the enrollment operation summer affords little time for relaxation. Among the priorities: concluding and assessing the most recent student-recruitment cycle, and implementing the enrollment strategy for the coming year.

Despite 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 philosophy based on sound marketing and innovative programs.

First, let's survey the landscape.

At a recent discussion about enrollment trends and practices hosted by the Council of Independent Colleges at its annual Presidents Institute, countless veteran presidents commented on the intensity of the student-recruitment process and the need for new practices. The bottom line is that institutions can no longer rely on the traditional cycle of buying tens of thousands of names from testing services, bombarding prospects with letters, emails, and phone calls, and closing the deal with an impressive pre-award.

One key reason is—you guessed it—the Internet. By putting impressive information at a student's fingertips within seconds, online "view books" (including fancy campus virtual tours) are a game-changer.

Second is the budget reality. In earlier columns we suggested that private colleges and universities with endowments under \$100 million should have a "critical mass" (full-time residential enrollments) of at least 1,500. This is necessary to drive the operating budget and provide the services necessary for a high-performing, student-centered college or university.

Finally, 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.

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ENROLLMENT GROWTH STRATEGIES FOR NEW REALITIES CONTINUED:

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.

Such strategies need not impact quality. In fact, a review of the top national liberal arts colleges in last year's "U.S. News and World Report" reveals that some of the top-ranked colleges have many athletic teams (Williams College and Wesleyan University, for example, each sponsor 32 varsity teams).

So here is our advice to make this concept work:

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

The college should utilize experienced enrollment counsel to develop an enrollment matrix that will control the discount rate and produce a significant return on investment. Many of our colleagues have utilized John Dysart of The Dysart Group.

At the same time, institutions should utilize counsel to evaluate the effectiveness of chief enrollment officers and their teams, 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 extra-curricular and co-curricular

activities that will utilize these facilities and boost enrollment is a wise move. A marching band is a good example that 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 recommend the following:

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, non-traditional 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. (Again, The Dysart Group has a good history in this area).

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They have collaborated on 12 books, including "President to President: Views on Technology in Higher Education" (Volumes I to III) and "Presidential Perspectives" (Volumes I to IX). They edit the popular higher education thought series "Presidential Perspectives" (Aramark Higher Education), now in its 10th year (www.presidentialperspectives.org).