

Enrollment Growth Strategies for Post Pandemic Realities

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With spring in the air and more Americans getting vaccinated every day, there's much to look forward to for the Fall 2021 semester. But before we get ahead of ourselves, how are your enrollment strategies for this upcoming semester working?

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 apply and be accepted by a multitude of schools given the test-optional status of so many higher education institutes due to the pandemic. Furthermore, many of today's high school seniors have been unable to travel to visit campuses in-person due to travel restrictions, so students may be casting a wider net than usual this year. 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. During a recent discussion about enrollment trends and practices hosted by the Council of Independent Colleges at its (virtual) annual Presidents Institute, countless veteran presidents commented on the intensity of the student-recruitment process and the need for new practices. No impetus in our lifetime has caused the need for change quite like the COVID crisis. Online view books and virtual campus tours are no longer nice extras, but crucial necessities for student recruitment. Virtual open houses require a new kind of savvy. It is no longer essential that only enrollment counselors are adept at making real connections with students virtually. Many stakeholders across campus - faculty, campus life and student activities staff, and yes, even the president - must be compelling in a virtual format.

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. We developed a strategy in the 1990s that Scott has tested at multiple institutions. It has received widespread attention in Michael K. Townsley's *Small College Guide to Financial Health: Weathering Turbulent Times*, James L. Fisher/James Y. Koch's *The Entrepreneurial College President*, and a variety of trade publications. 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.

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, for example, sponsors 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 student-centered, non-traditional program for learners of all ages. Consider online offerings for majors in rapidly growing fields like allied health, data science, and information systems.
- 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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