

Enrollment Strategies for Small Schools

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Enrollment management remains the single most vital area of any college or university with a tuition-driven budget. A private college with an endowment of under \$100 million should have a full-time enrollment of at least 1,100. This number provides “critical mass” for campus climate, student life, and budgetary operations without compromising the small college atmosphere.

Other programs should be added: graduate, special session, early enrollment, and online, reflecting service to diverse student markets.

A winning enrollment strategy starts at the top with a president fully committed to the comprehensive enrollment plan. It’s too easy for enrollment issues to be deferred as fundraising consumes presidential time and energy. It is essential that the president remain hands-on in both areas.

The president must take the lead in setting financial-aid priorities. We hear many stories of presidents getting into trouble over runaway financial aid budgets. “Buying” students with steep discounts is a recipe for financial ruin. Contrary to popular opinion, it is possible to attract and retain students, while also improving selectivity, access, and affordability. It’s all in the planning.

Scott’s transformational story as president of Wesley College in Delaware was extensively profiled in “Small College Guide: Weathering Turbulent Times” (Michael K. Townsley/NACUBO) and “The Entrepreneurial College President” (James L. Fisher & James V. Koch/ACE). Recently, as president of Virginia Wesleyan University, Scott was profiled by John W. Dysart, president of The Dysart Group in Charlotte, in a piece for Dwyer Education Strategies: “The Commonwealth is Witnessing a Transformation at Virginia Wesleyan University in Virginia Beach.” Dysart noted the positive results of academic expansion, investment in infrastructure, and a “systematic and comprehensive communication plan” for student recruitment.

Several constant factors are worth remembering in building enrollment strategies.

Full-Time Traditional Enrollment — This is the budget driver of any small liberal arts college. Our colleague Jeffrey Docking, president of Adrian College in Michigan, has authored a particularly useful book titled *Crisis in Higher Education: A Plan to Save Small Liberal Arts Colleges in America* that outlines an effective model of growing full-time enrollment. He recommends leveraging intercollegiate athletics and co-curricular events. Written to facilitate replication and generalization of Adrian College’s tremendous enrollment growth and retention success since 2005, his book directly addresses the economic competitiveness of small four-year institutions of higher education, and presents an evidence-based solution to the enrollment and economic crises faced by many small liberal arts colleges throughout the country.

Our colleague John Dysart takes it a step further. Develop the comprehensive model, he says, but utilize a data-based process: databased decision making in recruitment, data-based decision making in financial aid award policies, data-based decision making for retention.

Graduate Programs — With rapid growth in size, stature, and delivery systems, undergraduate degrees are now the minimal expectation for educational attainment. Many institutions have accelerated their marketing of the next level of degree completion: master’s programs, which are often packaged as an extension of the four-year degree.

January Term, May Term, Summer Session — Special sessions are important to the comprehensive model. They improve retention and cohort graduation rates while generating needed revenues. Special sessions also enrich the curricular offerings with unusual or special-topic courses.

Early Enrollment Programs — Dual-credit programs and Advanced Scholars programs for motivated high school students are popular. It’s not unusual now to have students apply to enroll in college with 30 to 60 hours of college credit. For private campuses, these programs can also provide important contact with high school instructors who influence students’ college choices.

Online Programs — Small private colleges should develop hybrid classes and online programs. Liberal arts colleges, for the most part, aren’t trying to be the University of Phoenix, but current students would benefit from developing technology proficiency in this area. Cohort graduation rates increase with these offerings in non-peak periods, and adult learners benefit significantly, too.

In conclusion, effective enrollment planning is essential. Many small colleges have not met their enrollment goals in recent years. By following our suggested guidelines, your campus can minimize its chances of being among them.

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