

When Celebrating Success Is Not Enough: Avoiding Complacency in Enrollment Management

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Your institution has had a successful recruitment year, the incoming students have experienced a fun orientation and said their goodbyes with family, and classes have begun for the fall term. It's late August, and all is well, right?

There's something missing, however: what you're supposed to be doing next. To keep enrollment momentum going, it's imperative that admissions staff never take their eyes off recruitment goals for even a second. Complacency among enrollment staff, coupled with lax accountability and expectations by their supervisors, can undo winning programs.

The result? One successful year without strict adherence to goals for next year can mean loss of market share, empty beds in residence halls, even new rounds of operational budget cuts.

With extensive experience in student recruitment during his 28 years as a college president, Scott has learned to take nothing for granted in the enrollment office. Simultaneously he has developed a set of "recruitment commandments" that cannot be broken.

Visit the enrollment office early and often.

To ensure that staff are not simply sitting back and reading their own press reviews, presidents need to insert themselves in each recruitment cycle. Ask for trends data, regular reports on conversion of applications to deposits, coherence with marketing strategies and institutional messaging, and updates on staff evaluation and accountability. Each day he's on campus, Scott makes a point of checking in personally with the Vice President for Enrollment once or twice a day. When he's on the road, emails and texts prompt updates.

Stress the vital revenue stream of enrollment.

Most institutions are enrollment-driven, meaning that operating budgets are balanced on occupied seats in classes and beds in the residence halls. Unless your college or university has an exceptionally large endowment, as enrollment goes so goes the budget. One year's downturn can have significant consequences on the balance sheet, usually leading to required cuts in personnel and program budgets. Therefore, not meeting admissions goals is not an option.

Clarify goals.

Make sure that the head of enrollment and his or her fellow coordinators and counselors have clear understanding of goals. Counselors may have more than one set of numbers to hit, depending on what kinds of students are being recruited. Goals might be met for one group of students, while others are neglected. An example is bringing in the targeted number of commuting transfers while failing to produce the full-time, residential students who really drive the operating budget.

Beware the downward spiral of declining enrollment.

Campuses represent multiple realms of internal and external communication. Students talk to students--on campus and back home. Faculty listen closely for enrollment updates and the possibility of salary increases.

Trustees and alumni councils expect to hear that the numbers are up, not down. Email and social media can spread negative or false perceptions about the health of your institution. The best antidote is good news from the enrollment operation. Just as important is transmitting that good news to your stakeholders--including current and prospective students--because exciting your internal constituents empowers them to be strong advocates externally.

Make sure the enrollment operation has the right kind of support.

In addition to establishing clear goals and holding staff accountable, regularly review your electronic and printed publications, website, social media, and marketing and communications collateral. Be consistent and current across all platforms with your messaging, branding, and constituent talking points. Someone on staff should monitor institutional social-media sites, and counter negative, invalid, or out-of-date postings quickly. Set up welcome signage for open houses and related events. Train student tour guides to respond to questions with easily understood answers.

Be adaptable.

Even the best enrollment plan can use updating or adjusting. While being careful not to change strategies too quickly without adequate evaluation of results, be open to new directions for marketing. Tweaking can make a huge difference. For example, focusing on a few key themes (think value of education, not just cost; stress timely completion of undergraduate work, dual-degree programs) can help prospects and their families see your institution's commitment to student success.

With each passing year, the enrollment game becomes more challenging--and the rules often change without notice. Two constants, however, should be resistance to complacency and adherence to a comprehensive enrollment plan and the goals it outlines. Otherwise, it's all too easy to go backward in August instead of ahead.

About the Authors

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