

ENROLLMENT MANAGER

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FROM THE FRONT LINE OF ADMISSIONS

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These days, most colleges exist in a buyer's market. Prospective parents and their students have an unprecedented array of higher education options from which to choose — large and small, public and private, four-year and two-year, online and for-profit. The notion of “college” has long since ceased to denote only the residential, four-year experience, and the ongoing pandemic has only underscored this more. Now you can assemble a higher-education package as easily as you can buy furnishings for a new house.

What's changed?

Higher education is — hold your ears, academic purists — a consumer-driven business. Individual preference rules, though there's nothing new about promoting the advantages of choice. But now students and their families have more choices than ever.

A growing trend is trumping a student's financial aid offer from a competitor. In one study, 38 percent of American college admissions officers indicated in that they continued to court prospects even after the students had committed to another institution. In some cases, not only are financial-aid packages matched or exceeded, but the student's original deposit to the other college is covered as well.

Photographing beautiful campus buildings for printed publications has given way to launching precision strikes via social media. It's faster and cheaper to reach students where they dwell rather than to print a fancy brochure that increasingly they don't read.

All of this makes perfect sense. What is less clear is how to keep students once they enroll. As with any business, it takes twice the effort to lure a new customer than to retain an existing one. Most competitive colleges do an admirable job of employing analysis on the front end, the recruitment and matriculation stages, but less so on the vitally important area of the actual collegiate experience. Anecdotal evidence, social media communications, exit surveys and the like offer some clues. But where much of higher education fails today is useful assessment of living and learning on campus.

A notable exception is the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) which measures “the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities” and “how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities that decades of research studies show are linked to student learning.” Comparative data reveal how happy — or dissatisfied — students may be with those of peer institutions.

Colleges also do well to encourage employees to keep their ears to the ground, listening for what works and what doesn't among today's student consumers. This is especially important for front-line staff in the offices of enrollment and financial aid, housing/student affairs, the finance department, and the registrar. Although some institutions have aggressively pursued customer-service training and quality-control measurement, such exercises often go the way of campus strategic plans — directly to a shelf in the library.

The admission war is increasingly high-tech, and the stakes are higher than ever. Senior administrators devote many hours to individual recruitment of students, spending time with prospects in their offices, reaching out to parents and siblings and making the process as personal as possible. Scholarships remain the cornerstone of fundraising. Rural and urban campuses alike try to always remain photo ready as all prospective students have their own following on social media that could affect your next recruiting cycle.

We know that competition for students will occupy more of our time and resources. With a declining college-aged population, we are already fighting over fewer prospects and offering more incentives to enroll and stay. Cost as well as perceived value will determine the fates of many, many institutions.

We will need to stay at the top of our game in every respect to win our individual admissions wars. Not only is failing not an option but judging from the intensity of competition in higher education now, we would say that even success is a relative term.

These days, you're only as good as your next freshman class.

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