

ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT 101:

A WHITE PAPER ON MARKETING PRIVATE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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Many private college presidents, independent school heads, and enrollment managers find themselves navigating their institutions in a very challenging environment. The enrollment pressures that many independent schools and colleges face can be daunting, especially if you are relatively new to managing enrollment or a veteran looking to improve your institution's enrollment situation. Competition for students is fiercer than ever, with a complex array of promotional media and more sophisticated marketing plans being developed by colleges and independent schools. And, if your school is relatively tuition-driven, rather than endowment-driven, the enrollment pressure can be even greater. From the new college president, school head, or enrollment manager looking for some fundamental basics to setting up a good enrollment effort to the enrollment veteran evaluating the efficacy of their current enrollment operation, is there a cogent set of fundamentals which can be used as a framework to develop enrollment?

The Most Important Distinction: Tuition-Driven or Endowment-Driven?

I like to make the important distinction between private schools that are **tuition-driven** or dependent versus private schools that are **endowment-driven** or dependent. In my view, tuition-driven schools are highly dependent upon tuition revenues and considerably less dependent upon earnings from their endowment. These schools -- which represent the vast majority of small colleges and independent schools -- are in constant need of sustainable enrollment, both from recruitment and retention, to remain viable programs. Without sustainable enrollment these schools operate in fiscally challenging environments. Endowment-driven schools -- while certainly dependent upon tuition revenues -- are often characterized by larger endowments and greater annual earnings from these endowments, therefore providing a greater subsidy for the annual operating budget. These institutions represent a much smaller number of small colleges and independent schools and, in many cases, can weather a poor recruiting year or a disappointing retention semester without significant consequences to their operating budget. Understanding which environment your school operates in is the first step in providing a framework for sustainable enrollment. The distinction between the two kinds of schools shapes the direction you take in enrollment planning.

The Eight Key Areas of Developing Enrollment

Perhaps you find yourself in a new leadership role as a president, school head, or enrollment manager and are looking for a framework to build sustainable enrollment. Or maybe you have been in your role for a period of time and are looking for a simple model to test the efficacy of your current enrollment efforts. What are the most critical enrollment issues that you must face in the immediate, short-term, and long-term time frames? Which areas can you address that are tactical in nature, perhaps affording you the immediate or short-term opportunity to better arrange your resources around a problem or opportunity? And which areas are much more strategic in nature, therefore requiring more long-term vision about positioning your institution?

After consulting for nearly 50 independent colleges and schools and working in enrollment development (admission, financial aid, retention) for near 20 years at a few colleges and independent schools and -- three times over -- being placed in the daunting position of rebuilding an enrollment operation, I have found there are eight key areas that are typically necessary at any institution to develop enrollment. Each of these eight areas falls into one of three time frames: immediate (six months), short-term (six months to two years), and long-term (two years and beyond). Some areas are simply common sense while others are less obvious. Whatever the situation in which you find yourself, perhaps these eight key areas will help you build or enhance sustainable enrollment at your school.

IMMEDIATE KEY AREAS

Enrollment Analysis and Tracking

Of all the fundamental elements in setting up a good enrollment shop, I suspect this one has the most immediate utility. In almost any enrollment situation I have been thrust into – whether consulting or a practitioner – I found myself trying to make sense of the historical nature of the enrollment at the institution I was serving. To get a clear picture of the current state of affairs in your school's enrollment, you first need to know where your school's enrollment has been over the past five years. And, once you have that material in hand, you need to develop well-timed, insightful enrollment tracking systems, measured at consistent intervals throughout the enrollment cycle. These tracking reports will provide your future baseline for comparing activity and you will find them critical in evaluating your enrollment efforts as you develop them.

To get at the analysis side of this, search for past enrollment reports and other enrollment-related data which has been generated at your school over the past five years. (Beyond five years is not particularly helpful to your current situation.) Perhaps you are fortunate and already have excellent data from which to draw insight. Many are less fortunate and must spend some time digging into past enrollment documents to piece together the data they need. Once retrieved, spend some time aggregating the data and putting together some enrollment tracking reports based upon the data you have found. This data should give you some insight to the cycle of enrollment activity that has historically been witnessed at the institution. Keeping in mind that no two schools are the same, your enrollment activity is unique to your institution. The data you find should provide clues to critical points in your enrollment cycle, such as application activity, admit-to-enroll yield and retention rates from term to term.

Once the analysis is complete, build weekly recruitment and retention tracking reports throughout the cycles of high enrollment activity. For instance, when I was at Pacific University, we ran weekly enrollment tracking reports for the College of Arts & Sciences at Pacific University from December through August. At that institution, nearly all measurable new enrollment activity for that College occurs during those months -- little to no new activity occurs in September, October, and November. Also, get as specific with your tracking as will be helpful. Our weekly enrollment report tracks inquiries, applications, admits, deposits, and enrolls by every state. In addition, we used our knowledge of past behavior in all of our key recruiting areas to set goals for applications, admits, deposits, and enrolls for each state and those goals are listed on the tracking report. This let us track our efforts by audience and determine -- by percentage -- how much of each goal we met in developing our enrollment. Whether you break down your report by gender, region, or other factors, the important element is that you segment down to the audience that is important to track.

A couple of final notes on enrollment analysis and tracking. First, having excellent analysis and tracking reports are foundational elements for building enrollment goals. In other words, you cannot develop reasonable goals without a strong understanding of your enrollment past. Second, strong enrollment tracking software is critical to pulling this off. Whether you are running an institutional software package, such as Datatel or Peoplesoft, or a smaller enrollment tracking software program, it is important that it is well-managed and utilized. It is key to managing the data that you wish to track.

The Right Team and Leader

One of the most important elements in developing a strong enrollment effort is to start with the right team in your recruitment and retention areas. Hiring and retaining high quality recruitment personnel can be a challenge, but ask yourself what you are truly looking for in an enrollment manager and staff. If you are operating in a highly competitive recruitment environment and are a tuition-driven small school, chances are that you need a highly competitive, marketing-oriented enrollment manager and staff. Likewise, if you are in a highly selective environment with high numbers of applicants and limited numbers of spaces available, you likely need an veteran with selective admission experience.

Another distinction might be helpful at this time. Most admission activity at what we earlier discussed as "tuition-driven" schools is really recruitment-centered. That is to say that admissions is more of an outreach, promotional, and marketing-oriented activity at schools that are likely moderately selective in their entrance standards. On the other hand, much of the admission activity at schools we earlier considered "endowment-driven" is often more selection-centered. In other words, many of these types of schools have very high entrance standards and are often in the enviable position of "selecting" -- rather than recruiting -- their students. Every enrollment manager brings a

different set of skills and orientation with him/her to a post. The enrollment manager and his or her staff must have an orientation and experience that matches up with the kind of enrollment activity that is likely in your institution. At Pacific, and other institutions during my career, I rarely hired staff members who have long-term experience in admissions. Instead, I intentionally sought out potential hires from more competitive sectors of the economy, such as retail, sales, or marketing. Since most of the schools I served – both as a practitioner and consultant – fall into the tuition-driven category, I find that hiring staff with a marketing orientation serves the institution well.

There are firms that assist in searches for enrollment managers, including our firm. Their job is to work diligently for a college or independent school to find the right kind of enrollment leader given the environment and landscape of the institution. These firms can often find exceptional enrollment development professionals and have the professional connections to identify them and connect them with the right school. Often they take the guesswork out of the process. Again, the key is simply to find the right leader and team members for a very important task.

Understanding the External View

A final area for immediate consideration is a simple one. Whenever I go into a consulting situation or have gone into a new enrollment situation at a college or independent school, I have tried to survey the admission office (and other offices, if appropriate) from an external point of view. In other words, I try to put myself in the shoes of prospective students or parents and glean some insight into how they might experience the institution and its service levels. I find when I divorce myself from my own biases and see the enrollment area as it truly operates from an external point of view I gain valuable insight into how to improve the service level of the area.

Some of the most obvious areas that I consider from an external point of view include:

- Telephone -- Is the school using an automated voice mail system? If so, is it easy to navigate, get in touch with a live person, and get messages returned? If the school is using a receptionist, how friendly is he or she? How many times did the phone ring prior to being answered? Was I put on hold during the call or was the call distracted in any way?
- Visits -- Is it easy to schedule a visit during one phone call attempt? Is the person who is scheduling the visits knowledgeable and effective in preparing a well-conceived visit for me? Once scheduled, did a reminder with a map and schedule of appointments get sent out to me? On the day of the visit, was the office and staff prepared for me and did they appear to have planned with my visit in mind?
- Web -- Does the website have an online inquiry or application form? If so, will an online inquiry or application be automatically acknowledged upon submission? If I email a staff member, how long was the response time? Can I find the information I need on the web quickly and easily?
- Correspondence -- When receiving mail from the institution is it personally addressed or does it at least have the appearance of personalization? Was it timely in meeting my needs? Did it arrive in good repair?

While these points all seem very obvious, they are simple yet effective ways to conduct a small communication audit of your institution from the most important vantage point, the external view. It is always interesting to watch a college or university spend unusual amounts of time on the outreach side of recruiting but fail to note that the students who are most likely to enroll at their school are the ones who are seeking the school out. These students seek out a college by calling, emailing, and visiting. We live in the information age, where state of the art information is at our fingertips and immediate response is becoming the norm. Today, it is often the school that is the most responsive to their audiences that enrolls the students.

SHORT-TERM KEY AREAS

Core Audience Assessment

More often than not, most colleges and independent schools would like to have more of the same types of students. In many cases, some of these same schools would like the opportunity to shape their enrollment within the student body they already are enrolling. However, all too often these same schools look elsewhere for new students, searching for their next new market or opportunity. The truth is this -- most schools would do exceptionally well if they became masters of knowing the core audiences who already call their institution home. It is often within those audiences where schools can create more enrollments or shape the nature of their enrollment and have the greatest likelihood of being successful.

Given this assumption, it is critical that any institution identify the core audiences who enroll at their college. Once these groups are identified and carefully segmented, the key is to truly understand the needs, expectations, and orientation of your institution's core audiences. Once these areas are understood, you can plan marketing activities around your audiences needs. To do this one must ask a few basic questions:

- Has your school carefully identified its core audiences? Do you know what segmented socioeconomic, academic, and geographic groups they represent?
- Do you know the collective orientation of your core audiences, including their value systems, what factors they consider when making decisions, or even how they perceive private education?
- Finally, can you draw insight from the answers to these questions that lead you to take action? In other words, can the insight you gained from your systematic study lead you to organize your recruitment and retention strategies and tactics around the needs of your audiences?

Understanding fully your institution's core audiences is another foundational element to building sustainable enrollment. It is a necessary precursor to building enrollment plans, developing enrollment materials, or setting enrollment goals. Gather the data, spend some time analyzing, and hire assistance if necessary to do the research on your core audiences. Virtually everything that takes place in your enrollment effort should center on them.

Key Message Development

Determining what is distinctive about an institution and turning it into a promotional set of messages and themes is often one of the most exciting aspects of marketing. However, understanding the difference between what is distinctive and what is marketable is important. Keep in mind that value lies within the eyes of the beholder and -- in the case of private education -- the consumer or client is the prospective student and parent.

Key message development is another critical area of creating sustainable enrollment. It takes research, creative professionals, discipline, and a dose of reality to make it outstanding. As we discussed in the previous section, all messages must relate back to the audience and their orientation, value systems, and the segmented groups they represent. When creating materials, enlist some professional help and let them drive the process. There are several really outstanding firms that specialize in education marketing. They can help with creating the message and the materials and can often guide the process in a much more effective way than handling it alone. Creating integrated marketing materials that appeal to the president, headmaster, board of trustees, or the enrollment manager is a mistake. Unless they fall into your key audiences, they really don't represent the nature of whom you are trying to reach. Follow the advice of the firm you hire and let them use their expertise to create the most effective media -- it is what they do best.

The goal of developing your key messages is to create themes that pass two basic tests. First, they must represent true distinctiveness. This means that they must be claims that are unique to your institution and are generally not shared by your close competitors. For instance, for a college to develop a key message of being a small, private, liberal arts college focused on personal attention is not unique -- it puts that college in the same ball park with hundreds, if not thousands, of other schools. Focus on uniqueness and statements that truly reflect your distinctive position. Second, your created messages should be stated and represented in line with the orientation and value system of your core audiences. Speak in their language and depict your institution in methods that are natural to

those you are hoping to appeal.

Finally, a word of basic marketing advice: test. After all of the research you have put into your efforts, test your materials with your core audiences. And, not only take the time to listen, but to reflect the wisdom of their advice in your materials. Again, virtually everything that you wish to communicate to them should center on their needs and expectations.

Written Recruitment Plan

As I mentioned at the outset, a few of the eight key areas are truly obvious and this might be one of them. However, I am often surprised by how few admission or enrollment management offices have a true recruitment plan, and rarely is it written and shared by all who need to know it. A written recruitment plan is your institution's road map toward meeting your new student enrollment goals. Most schools spend anywhere between 12 to 24 months recruiting an entering class of students and have a goal of where they would like to be at the end of that time frame. Imagine taking an automobile trip across the country for that period of time and never having the trip planned, a map on how to get to the destination, or even an idea of the end destination!

A recruitment plan must have three components. First, it must be written. It has to communicate -- in simple terms to all who will share it -- the course and plan that will take place to recruit the class. Second, it must contain goals and the more specific goals the better. And, since you have spent a great deal of time learning about your core audiences, a good idea would be to arrange your goals around your segmented audience groups. Finally, it must be chronological in sequence. Good recruitment plans are step-by-step in nature and have a date-specific sequence to nearly every outreach effort, whether it is phone calling, emailing, snail mail, alumni contacts, or travel recruitment.

We encourage our clients to develop an enrollment report (part of an enrollment tracking system) that indicates all of our goals for the year, broken out by specific audience. That report should be circulated weekly to all staff members in admissions, as well as the colleges, schools, or programs for which the enrollment is developed, the enrollment management office, and the cabinet. In addition, many of our clients use a communication plan that details by specific date every recruitment activity in which they engage over an 18-month cycle. That plan is also widely shared by staff, depending upon which projects are handled by them.

The key is simple -- devise a written plan that details a sequence of activities in relation to your segmented goals. Use the insight you learned when reviewing the enrollment analysis earlier in this discussion. It will give you clues as to when the right time is to mail, email, or call students based upon the unique needs of your set of audiences. Finally, follow it closely and don't be afraid to alter it if the road gets bumpy. A plan is a plan -- sometimes the route must change when the environment changes on you.

Retention Analysis & Strategy

Getting in touch with your audiences and learning how they really value your institution is important, as we have discussed. One of the most important ways to do this and to learn how to improve your schools' enrollment is to systematically study your retention and develop strategies in which to improve it. It has been said by many enrollment managers at one time or another -- it is easier, and less expensive, to keep a student rather than to recruit a new to replace him or her.

There has been so much research devoted to retention -- as well as strategies developed to improve retention -- that we cannot discuss them in detail here. However, there are two simple methods which come to mind that will enable your institution to get a glimpse of why students stay or leave your school and what you might be able to do to improve that situation.

First, put into place a way to measure student satisfaction on a regular basis. Start by learning how students value your institution before they think about leaving. There are many instruments which offer this effort, including the ACT Student Satisfaction Survey for college clients. Through this instrument, which can be administered on an annual basis to a representative sample of students, you can learn to systematically study the opinions of our current students. Using what you learn, you can devise strategies to better improve services to students based upon what you learn through the survey results.

Second, systematically ask students why they are leaving. Conduct exit interviews to learn why students leave your institution. At one independent school I served, my office was asked to connect with every family who chose not to re-enroll from the previous year. Since there had been no exit interview upon leaving, I made the connections with the family after the departure, which was less than ideal, but it still gave us meaningful information. In that particular instance, we chose to do a more qualitative analysis through telephone interview with each family, rather than a quantitative analysis such as a questionnaire. We found that the personal contact with the family made an important impression. We also gleaned some insight into how to improve student satisfaction based upon those phone calls. As a consulting firm, we have provided this service to some of our clients, as well. In the past year alone, we completed comprehensive exit interviews for Westminster College (UT) and Carolina Day School (NC) in order to assist them in better understanding the retention patterns of their students and devised strategies to assist them in addressing it.

Treat retention like recruitment. Don't go into retention without a plan but instead put into place systematic ways to measure your student satisfaction. And, take what you learn and develop strategies and tactics to improve your service levels.

LONG-TERM KEY AREAS

Strategic Marketing Planning

So far, we have only discussed the immediate and short-term key areas to develop sustainable enrollment. Most of these areas reflect tactic more than strategy and are areas in which one could -- with some research and diligence -- implement a new plan during a short time at an institution. The final piece of this discussion is much longer term and encompasses true institutional positioning. Most everyone in this profession has learned about the "four P's of marketing" -- product, price, place, and promotion. These same marketing principles apply to enrollment management and can offer insight into how to build an enrollment management program.

Taking a strategic view of your institution will give you insight into how your college or school really stacks up in the marketplace. For instance, consider the following questions:

- What is your school's main product? With which schools does it primarily compete? How do its programs and services compare to these institutions? Are these programs and services advantages or disadvantages?
- What is your school's price? After taking into consideration financial aid or discounts to cost, how does your school's price compare with your competitor list? Is your price a marketable advantage or disadvantage?
- Among your competitor list, what position does your institution fill? Does your institution have programs or services that clearly are superior or inferior to your competitors? Are there programs that are unproductive or needed programs that are not currently present in your school's offerings that could enhance your position with your competitors?
- Are your institutional promotional efforts (recruitment materials, etc.) in line with your product, price, and position? Do they clearly articulate the value in your institution as defined by your core audiences and as your programs warrant?
- What does the external world say about trends and forces which will likely impact your school or college or the audiences it serves?
- And, what is the intersection between mission and market opportunity? In other words, how can your organization stay true and build upon its mission and yet find the market opportunities in doing just that?

Considering these questions -- and more -- will enable your institution to think strategically, rather than tactically or operationally, about its array of programs, future pricing strategies, and overall position in the marketplace.

The word marketing is often confused with the word promotion. Marketing is not promotion, though promotion is a part of marketing. There are four "P's" in marketing and promotion is only one of them. In private education, marketing means much more than promotion. It means developing programs, services, and pricing strategies -- and then promoting them -- that are in line with market opportunity and yet related to the mission of the institution.

We have pioneered a process at our firm which we have utilized about 15 times with clients during the past three years. That process starts with strategic marketing planning and ends with a sustainable strategic plan. Most schools and colleges approach strategic planning first, then marketing second. Because 80% of any good strategic plan contains marketing related items and positioning strategies, we do strategic marketing planning prior to strategic planning. Also, strategic planning often requires programmatic or pricing change, it is an activity that must include senior decision makers and is intended to be an impetus for long-range planning. At the end of the day, developing truly sustainable enrollment has everything to do with developing an array of programs and the right pricing strategies that are in line with market opportunity and still institutional mission-related.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

For new officers and veterans alike, I think there are eight key areas that typically need to be addressed to develop sustainable enrollment at most private schools and I have outlined them here. Yes, some are clearly obvious and perhaps easier than others to implement, but still necessary. Others are mid-range types of activities that require some research and insight prior to taking action. And, of course, strategic planning is a long-term activity focused on the overall position of the institution in the marketplace. Each area is necessary -- all are capable of being completed. And developing a timeframe in which to encounter each activity might be the best place to start. While I perceive it is ideal to tackle each one of these key areas in due time, it is important to know, however, that accomplishing a few is better than none. The order is less important than the activity itself, though I think there are clearly immediate and short term areas which are likely easier -- and more quickly productive -- than others. At the end of the day, perhaps you will have gained insight to your institution and had the opportunity to move the enrollment effort forward.