Navigating the New Chaos of Student Recruitment

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Pity admissions directors in an academic world disrupted by the pandemic.

Their jobs have become harder on many fronts. The digital outreach to students made popular during the pandemic, such as virtual tours and video-call Q&A's, has to be kept up. But now admissions departments also have to return to arranging high-school visits, attendance at college fairs, and on-campus events. One moment admissions staff may be answering direct messages on social media, the next minute talking face to face with students.

Students are now much less apt to open email and to opt in to marketing when they take admissions exams. Stricter privacy laws (in California and Canada, for example) and the masking of which emails are opened on iPhones can make it harder for colleges to track which students they are reaching. "As the parent of teenagers, I love that. As a marketer, I hate it," says Jeff McLaughlin, executive vice president for enrollment data, strategy, and analytics at Fire Engine Red, an enrollment-management company.

The rise of early-action admissions, which award nonbinding decisions to applicants early in the recruitment cycle, means admissions officers have a long courtship period in which they must entice admitted students to enroll at the same time they are pushing to fill the rest of the undergraduate class. All potential

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Partnering with Education to Transform the Student Experience

Over the past twenty years of my career, I've worked closely with a variety of leaders in higher education. And as part of my current role at Cisco, I meet regularly with chancellors, deans, chief information officers, and academic leaders.

Institutions of higher education are at an inflection point as education leaders grapple with lower student engagement and struggling course attendance, rising student drop-out rates, and new challenges faced due to the oncoming enrollment cliff. Many will look to attract new and non-traditional learners by leveraging technology to transform the student experience.

Importantly, student experience is intrinsically tied to digital experiences which is why we must start with Internet connectivity for all. Since Cisco's founding on the campus of Stanford University in 1984, developing the tools that power the Internet for the betterment of education has been in our blood and is core to who we are. Decades later, we are still partnering with education customers, working alongside them to offer asynchronous learning options; enable smart and connected campuses that empower students, faculty, and staff with seamless mobile and location services; and securing all users.

As the education market evolves and more devices are connected to the Internet, education and industry must continue to partner to ensure that all learners have access to secure, quality education. Using cutting-edge applications and the power of data analytics, universities can deliver students success through intelligent and flexible digital experiences, responding to future learning trends.

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applicants expect fast responses to questions. "We're constantly asking ourselves, Where do we find students and how quickly can we get back to them?" says Karen Kristof, assistant vice president and dean of admission at Colorado College.

The elephant in the room at admissions offices, though, may be the sliding number of enrollment leads they get from the providers of the two major college-readiness tests — the SAT and the ACT. The organizations behind the tests, the College Board and ACT Inc., were the dominant sources for names of prospective students for many years. But fewer institutions are requiring the tests, and many colleges went "test optional" when the pandemic complicated onsite testing. In addition, there has been a steep slide in the proportion of test-taking students who choose to release their contact information to colleges, those familiar with enrollment management say. It's a bit too early to declare doom for the test providers — the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for example, has reversed course on test optional — but they are unlikely to recapture their powerful position as lead generators.

The potential college students who manage to avoid the official marketing are weaving together a perspective on colleges from websites, news sites, social media, and what their friends and family tell them. "Students have a wealth of information at their disposal, so they are far more informed than they may have been five years ago," says Satyajit Dattagupta, chief enrollment officer and senior vice chancellor at Northeastern University. "Somehow, though, some of that information is in the form of misinformation, so they may be drowning in information, starving for wisdom."

Adding to the difficulties of mentoring prospective students and recruiting them, costs have risen. For tuition-dependent private institutions, the cost of recruiting an undergraduate went from $2,114 in 2020 to $2,795 in 2022, a 32-percent increase, according to a 2022 report from Ruffalo Noel Levitz, a consulting firm. (The cost per student for public institutions only rose 5 percent over the same period, to $494 from $470, the firm found.)

How, then, can colleges navigate this chaotic and expensive enrollment-management universe?

- Colleges are seeking out — and creating — new, alternative lists and similar ways to access "leads."

- Institutions are increasingly turning to marketing that is focused on online behavior, not licensing names.

- Colleges are paying growing attention to improving yield — the proportion of admitted students who enroll.

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The 'Big List' Alternatives

Colleges are turning to alternative sources for prospects' contact information. One source is commercial vendors who wrap access to prospects up with consulting services. Another is for-profit platforms and nonprofit collectives with member colleges that make it possible for students to apply to multiple institutions and for colleges to market to them.

Many companies that provide tutoring, test-taking, or college-advising services to middle- and high-school students are selling access to those students. A scholarly report, "The Student

List Business," takes note of a series of mergers and acquisitions in the industry that have condensed the number of players. (Changes in the industry, the authors say, risk making access to colleges less equitable.) Two of the most powerful remaining competitors, the report says, are EAB, which packages access to names with consulting services, and PowerSchool, which sells educational and operations software in the kindergarten-to-12th-grade market.

The cost of licensing a name can range from 30 cents to $7, say enrollment-management experts.

Students can apply to a growing number of institutions through the Coalition for College, which restricts member institutions to those that demonstrate they provide substantial support to low-income and first-generation students and have a record of getting a high proportion of students to graduation. The coalition's platform went live in August, and relies on a college-advising and application system, Scoir, already in use at 2,000 high schools nationwide. As of the end of September, 109 institutions were participating in the coalition.

Colleges are also banding together by region and by institutional type, believing their chances of attracting students is greater if they recruit collectively. The University of Delaware, for example, works with other flagship public universities in the mid-Atlantic. Colorado College works with 13 other liberal-arts colleges to make a case for the style of education they offer.

Many higher-education institutions are moving their marketing earlier in the admissions pipeline, trying to connect with high-school freshmen and middle-school students. A 2022 Ruffalo Noel Levitz report found that 41 percent of students started their college planning before high school. The messages for pre-teens and young adolescents tend to be less of a hard sell. Adrienne Amador Oddi is vice president for strategic enrollment and communications at Queens University of Charlotte, where about a third of the students get Pell Grants and may not initially be familiar with how to apply to colleges. She says the institution's tone with younger prospects is, How do we walk alongside you in this process and keep you moving to whatever the next best step is for you as a student?

Targeting by Behavior

Social media is no secret. Colleges use YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok to get in front of middle-school and high-school students. But enrollment managers have to deal with a rapidly shifting, complex social-media environment. One college has experimented with using Pandora, the music-streaming service, to reach potential applicants. Another institution has tried getting the word out through Discord, the popular app for talking and texting.

ZeeMee is a social-media niche player that allows college applicants to supplement their applications with videos and other social-media style content and gives prospects for particular institutions the opportunity to message each other. After being admitted, the applicants can communicate with other admitted students.

Another digital-marketing tactic is geofencing, which uses location as a trigger to activate digital ads. A university might, for instance, try to target ads for graduate degrees to those who are in the buildings of a local major employer. Such geographical marketing has also been used by state universities to try to recruit students from areas where few adults have completed degrees, in an effort to improve social mobility and long-term neighborhood economic development.

Many students, of course, learn about colleges through their websites. An often-neglected feature of college websites, marketers say, is

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departmental and academic-program pages. Those pages are sometimes designed more for internal institutional use than for prospective students. Marketing staff work with faculty members to help them use web pages to bring the type of students they would like to teach into their classrooms.

Pumping Up Yield

At the same time as the national college-age population is dwindling, students are applying to more institutions. The most recent edition (2019) of "The American Freshman" survey by the Higher Education Research Institute found that nearly 39 percent of first-time freshmen were applying to six or more institutions, up from 23 percent a decade earlier. As a result, applications have risen sharply at many institutions, especially the highly selective ones, even during the pandemic. But the proportion of admitted students who actually enroll — the yield — has gone down for many institutions.

Enrollment managers say they can't wait until the time of admission to try to improve yield — they have to sell their institution's value throughout the entire application process. Since finances are key to many applicants' decisions, awarding financial aid has become a crucial component of improving yield. "We want to give students enough money that it will make it worth their while to stay for four years," says Rodney Morrison, vice president for enrollment management at the University of Delaware, "but not so much that the institution loses the revenue it needs."

Colorado College has experimented with what it calls temperature surveys, asking students who have been admitted how interested they are in attending. The institution wanted to see if it could learn which students to focus its enrollment push on. But those who expressed strong interest also often had questions they wanted to ask of current students, so the admissions staff members realized they needed to have those students ready to respond.

At the University of California at Santa Cruz, Michelle L. Whittingham, associate vice chancellor for enrollment management, says that to maintain yield, the institution has to engage alumni, current students, and faculty members and get them to communicate, online or face to face, with admitted students. The goal is to help the students make a decision without overwhelming them, she says.

Along with all the new digital avenues for reaching students, admissions departments say that many traditional methods still work: making phone calls to prospective students, visiting high schools, and mailing out brochures. One added twist is to send college "swag" along with a letter of admissions, a feature that has become competitive. "The swag wars are real," says Kristof, of Colorado College.

Inexperienced admissions staffers may think they can find one powerful tool that will give them a recruitment edge. But the veterans say the magic is in the marketing mix, blending creativity, persistence, and a willingness to keep learning — just like the students they would like to enroll.

"Navigating the New Chaos of Student Recruitment" was produced by Chronicle Intelligence. Please contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.

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