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Nine strategies for successful enrollment management in today's higher education environment

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by [Peter Bryant](#)

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Successful enrollment management requires a data-informed approach that addresses campus marketing, student recruitment, and student retention. I have been involved in enrollment management for more than 40 years, both as an enrollment manager on campus and as a consultant for Noel-Levitz. During that time, I have seen changes in higher education that are nothing short of revolutionary. Shifts in access to higher education, the gender and ethnic composition of classes, the number of students attending college, and technological innovations are just some of the sweeping changes that have made higher education an increasing force in the social, economic, political, and cultural life of our country. While many of these changes have been positive, change is often not easy for many in enrollment management. For all the ways in which higher education has propelled us forward, we sometimes resist and even fear the changes brought on by ensuing generations of college students. However, if there is a lesson I have learned from my own campus experiences as well as consulting with hundreds of colleges and universities, it's that adaptation is not an option in enrollment management. Change and succeed, or resist and stagnate. Right now, we're seeing more changes than I ever recall in enrollment management. Student demographics, financial circumstances, technological advances, and political pressures are all bearing down hard on colleges and universities. These changes are too big and sweeping to be avoided, and too powerful to be resisted. Simply put, enrollment managers have to adapt. While every campus is different, the following nine strategies have helped many campuses not just stay ahead of these changes, but use these changes for their advantage in recruiting and retaining students.

1) Set realistic enrollment goals—not projections

Think about the enrollment goals at your own campus. Do you know what they are? Do other key personnel know them? Does everyone support them? Every enrollment manager should answer yes to those three questions, yet very many cannot. Why? Because goal-setting is often an abstract exercise free from relevant data and market analysis. It is crucial to look at who you have been enrolling and who your competition enrolls before you set future goals. Enrollment goals also need to go beyond one number. They need to be segmented into subpopulations—major, ethnicity, geography, nontraditional, transfer, and so on.

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2) Identify and secure sufficient resources to meet enrollment objectives

As part of a realistic goal-setting process, you have to know what resources you will need to reach your goals. At a minimum, you need to know what it costs to recruit and retain a student at your institution, the cost to compete in your market, and the "price tag" of your desired student body.

3) Develop an annual marketing and recruitment plan as well as a three-to-five-year strategic enrollment and revenue plan

Much like asking what your goals are, do you know what's in your annual enrollment plan? Is it visible from your desk, or tucked away like a library book? Successful enrollment plans are *living* enrollment plans. They are working action documents that should be referred to regularly and routinely modified. They should also include daily tasks, monthly objectives, and 90-day action plans. In addition, it's important to have a working, realistic strategic enrollment plan that looks three to five years ahead. That plan should chart a course for your campus from what it is now to what it will become.

4) Devote as much attention to student retention as you do to recruitment

Let's say you want to raise enrollment by 5 percent. You could increase incoming enrollment by 5 percent. Or you could increase new students by 2 percent while increasing student retention by 3 percent. The latter approach tends to be much more cost effective. However, retention requires attention. Your campus has to be committed to persistence and completion, and must develop a system for identifying which students need and want assistance, so you can help more succeed and graduate.

5) Build your recruitment database and inquiry pool by design, not by chance

Getting the enrollment you want begins with a plan to build and manage a database, including an inquiry pool of the right size and shape. You also need to set specific conversion and yield goals so that you can manage your inquiry pool more strategically. Note, too, that different types of applications will convert at different yield rates. Paper, online, and the Common Application will track differently—be sure to monitor these rates and plan accordingly.

6) Track your marketing and recruitment activities

Michael Porter famously said, "What gets measured gets done." In an era of limited resources for campus marketing and recruitment, you cannot afford to put time and dollars into activities with no measurable return on investment. This process can be boiled into four main components: 1) Identify which metrics to track. 2) Know how to track the metrics you identified. 3) Guide your decisions with the data you collect. 4) Monitor the effect of your efforts and adjusting accordingly. Having a solid set of marketing and recruitment metrics you can track allows you to benchmark your efforts from year to year and make crucial decisions on allocating resources and strategies.

7) Qualify and grade prospective students precisely

The "secret shopper" phenomenon—prospective students who make first contact at the application stage—is a growing and well-documented development. This has made qualification even more important, because contact at the application stage leaves campuses with so little time and space to maneuver with a prospective student. It's now more imperative than ever to give students opportunities to raise their hands and make contact, especially on your Web site, where many will go for their initial research. Turning a potential secret shopper into an inquiry can buy you valuable time to connect with a prospective student and nurture a relationship that can lead to enrollment. Predictive modeling is another way to qualify and shape your pool. This statistical model examines the characteristics of students who enrolled at your institution, then uses those data to predict the enrollment likelihood of prospective students. That qualification can dramatically increase the strategic focus of your recruitment efforts and make the allocation of recruitment resources much more efficient. My colleague Sarah Cohen has written more about [predictive modeling for student recruitment](#). Feel free to [e-mail me](#) if you have any questions or would like to learn more. Just be sure to look into predictive modeling if you are not familiar with it, because the enrollment and economic benefits to campuses can be enormous.

8) Implement a strategic communications flow

With the seemingly chaotic mix of print, e-mail, Web, and social media, there may not seem to be much "flow" with recruitment communications. As with student qualification, though, building a communications flow remains a bountiful recruitment strategy if it is handled strategically. First, you still have to think through the communications at various enrollment stages—inquiry, applicant, admit, deposit. Regardless of where a student enters the flow, progressing them to the next enrollment stage remains the goal. Second, focus your electronic communications wisely. Having a Web site that engages students is paramount. You want to invite communication in addition to delivering information. Give students opportunities to provide their e-mail addresses or even opt in to text messaging. Do the same with social media, but be careful not to go overboard. You are better covering fewer social media outlets well rather than spreading yourself too thin. Finally, get parents

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and guardians involved in the flow. [According to the latest E-Expectations research](#), 60 percent are involved with the college research process. Target them with communications and make them ambassadors for your campus.

9) Award financial aid so students get what they need *and* expect to enroll

The ability to afford a college education has emerged as the biggest roadblock to attending college. Perhaps nothing will turn away a prospective student faster than a feeling that they cannot afford your institution. You have to address this concern immediately and accurately. Putting a net price calculator on your campus Web site is a great first step to addressing the cost concerns of students and their families. However, you need to make the calculator easy to find and customized to reflect merit aid (something the federal calculator does not do). Providing a price estimate that does not include all eligible aid from federal, state, local, or institutional sources can put your campus at a competitive disadvantage. In addition, you need awarding strategies that address need *and* willingness to pay. Doing this successfully means that you have to understand the price sensitivity of the various student populations you hope to recruit. It is also important to allocate aid for the career of the student. Front-loading awarding could put students at risk of dropping out, which hurts both the student and your campus, as recruiting new students costs far more than retaining them. I hope you found these strategies helpful. Of course, we could write posts on each of these individual strategies (and many of my colleagues have). What this shows you is a systematic, forward-thinking way to approach enrollment management. With so many changes in the higher education marketplace and the economy, you must take a data-informed approach to every aspect of recruiting students, so that you focus on the types of students you want to enroll and don't waste your limited resources in trying to recruit them. I will be discussing these strategies in greater detail at our one-day [Enrollment Management Workshop](#), coming to several cities in the U.S. and Canada. The workshop also features breakout sessions focusing on recruitment and retention—you can [sign up and see the agenda](#) at the Noel-Levitz Web site. I also welcome your questions and feedback, either in the comments below or [by e-mail](#). Most importantly, continue to move your recruitment and retention efforts forward and learn how you can adapt and thrive, even in an uncertain higher education environment. The opportunities to succeed are always there.

About the author



Peter Bryant is one of the nation's most respected enrollment managers, perhaps most widely known for his ability to diagnose enrollment opportunities effectively and efficiently.

[Read more about Peter's experience and expertise »](#)

Reach Peter by e-mail at Peter-Bryant@noellevitz.com.

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Posted by Peter Bryant

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