Introduction

Students today are dramatically different than they were ten years ago. They’re not attending college just for a degree and “the college experience;” they want assurance of a job at the end of it all. And in addition to their heightened concern for finances, schedule flexibility, degree options, and a rewarding career, they want personalized answers—immediately. In short, they’re tough customers for marketing and enrollment departments to serve.

And the challenges don’t stop there. Recruitment professionals also face:

• **Declining enrollment and budgets:** According to a survey by the Chronicle of Higher Education, nearly half of all higher education institutions have experienced enrollment declines and consequently, shortfalls in net tuition revenue goals.

• **Increased competition:** The number of institutions chasing the same shrinking pool of prospective applicants continues to increase.
• Overburdened staff: While very few institutions are increasing staffing levels, College Planning & Management Magazine reports that it takes roughly 25-50% more staff time and effort to give students the levels of customer service they expect.

• Multiple degree paths: There is no longer a single “traditional” educational trajectory. Institutions must accommodate the needs and preferences of students ranging from recent high school graduates to working adult learners.

To meet enrollment and budget targets, institutions often attempt to introduce new degree programs or to launch broad, institution-wide advertising and marketing campaigns. They both seem like reasonable approaches, but results are often varied and unpredictable for two reasons:

1. While extensive market research would give institutions a full understanding of their market opportunities and ideal targets, few have the internal resources necessary to carry it out.

2. Without data to support their decisions, many institutions implement campaigns that don’t differentiate the institution or its programs in ways that resonate with today’s students.

According to marketing and enrollment professionals*:

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<th>Discovery and recruitment of new prospects are hampered by:</th>
<th>Only 34% ranked their institutions’ marketing efforts as “very effective.”</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>• Limited budgets (74%)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>• Limited resources (55%)</td>
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<td>• Limited data (30%)</td>
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*Blackboard survey “Marketing Leaders in Higher Education,” 2013

Four Leading Marketing and Recruiting Strategies:

The key to enrollment growth and competitive strength in today’s higher education market is to offer the right programs to the right students. Using marketing and recruitment strategies in decision-making will help boost enrollment, leading to more positive outcomes for both students and institutions.

1. Research the Market Before Launching a New Degree Program

To successfully draw students, new program offerings must align with three data-based objectives: 1) applicant goals, 2) the institution’s brand identity, and 3) the job market. The following tactics can help institutions find balance and ensure success:

A. Applicant Goals

Understand Student Demand

Institutions should use market research to form a clear picture of which degrees, skills, and industries are of most interest to its prospective students. Are they looking for two-year or four-year programs? What style of instruction or modality of learning are they most comfortable with? What is their desired time to completion? Institutions must answer these key questions before crafting programs that match student preferences. Otherwise, they may be offering a well-designed, highly effective “product” for which there is no market.

Institutions can often gain a better understanding of their target audience and what they value most by conducting an online survey that asks prospective or enrolled students for feedback on potential program offerings.

Analyze Competitors’ Degree Programs

According to a survey by youth market research firm TRU, 88% of college-bound students value “career preparation” or “future success” over traditional “personal growth or pursuit of passions.”
Public data from similar institutions is invaluable. Figures about enrollment, conferral trends, types of instruction, graduation rates per degree, and post-graduation employment rates can help steer an institution toward successful degree programs. These figures can also assist in identifying opportunities for improvements to existing programs that will help attract desired applicants and achieve targeted outcomes.

A good resource for such statistics is the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) from the National Center for Education Statistics. Raw data and related analyses from every institution participating in federal student financial aid programs are available, including numbers of students enrolled, degrees conferred, staff employment, and budgets.

B. Institution’s Brand Identity

Determine A Degree Program’s “Fit”

Does a new program suit the institution’s brand? Is the program consistent with the institution’s legacy and reputation? Comprehensive market research can answer these questions. It can provide a clear picture of how prospective students perceive an institution and whether added courses of study strengthen or detract from that identity.

C. Job Market

Research Employer Demands

Students today have their eye on employment prospects. Corporations that have partnered with an institution can offer valuable insight into their priorities and perspectives on current and upcoming workforce requirements to help the college or university design new programs. Additionally, if particular geographic regions have traditionally provided high volumes of desirable applicants, the institution could gather input from employers in those core markets, then use that information to further refine degree programs to include practical, marketable skills and expertise. For example, incorporating specialties such as concentrations, certification preparation, or practicum study can help a degree program stand out.

In summary, collecting, synthesizing, and analyzing the appropriate information will help clarify which programs present the greatest opportunities. As illustrated in the accompanying graph, this is a matter of identifying the programs that are in greatest demand but available only from a limited number of competitors. Keep in mind that these results must also be balanced with the institution’s brand and expertise.

2. Understand Target Student Profile and Market

Market research can not only help determine which degree programs to offer but also who will enroll in and be most successful in those programs. The following three steps can help define an institution’s target audience:

Develop Profiles of Your Most Successful Students

Clearly defining the backgrounds and personalities of an institution’s highest-performing current students can be very helpful in understanding and attracting its most successful future students.
What are their age ranges? Which segment of the student population has the highest retention rates? What are their socio-economic backgrounds? These are just a few examples of the types of questions that will help develop a successful student demographic profile.

A student profile will also reveal psychographic details about these students—motivating factors, preferences, behaviors, and decision-making processes. For example, why were they attracted to a particular program? Do they share common learning styles or future goals? Insight into all of these elements and more will be crucial in developing and managing communications with prospects when an institution is ready to execute its marketing program.

**Segment Research Data With Comprehensive Market Analysis**

As the institution gathers more information about its most desirable students, in-depth analysis will allow for even deeper segmentation of potential audiences. For example:

- Collected data might indicate areas where high schools, industries, or economic conditions are creating the most likely applicants.
- Additional research drills down to identify specific sites matching the institution’s desired audience segments.

Audience segmentation can include factors such as political affiliation, per capita income, graduate vs. undergraduate degrees, media usage and preferences, etc.

**Develop Personas of Your Optimal Candidates**

As the target audience becomes clearer, the institution can begin to develop detailed personas representing each segment of potential students. These “personality templates” should include attributes such as:

- Thumbnail Descriptions
- Average Age
- Beliefs and Values
- Behaviors and Motivations
- Influencers
- Media Preferences & Behaviors
- Leading Reasons to Enroll

Examples of segment categories might be “Deferred Starters,” “Overachievers,” or “Career Switchers.” Such descriptive names will help in crafting customized communications designed to appeal to the characteristics of each group.

**3. Develop a Customized Communication Strategy That Entices the Targeted Candidates**

Armed with a clear profile of each audience segment, the institution can now customize its messaging and media preferences accordingly.

**Highlight Practical Benefits**

Today’s students prioritize practical outcomes. Successful communication should showcase details such as job placement opportunities, corporate partnerships, and guest industry instructors. These will have a much greater positive impact on prospective applicants’ decision-making.

**Tailor Tone, Language, and Content to Each Category**

Messaging should suit prospective students’ interests, priorities, and style. For example, content for graduating high school seniors or transferring undergraduates can be more informal than for graduate school applicants or adults pursuing a career change. However, regardless of the category, language and style should always match the institution’s brand and public image.

Psychographic insights should include highly specific characteristics of each target segment, such as:

- “Have taken all of the opportunities available to get ahead or keep up with top tier classmates” for Overachievers, or
- “Extremely well educated with most already having some college education” for Career Switchers.
Differentiate Content For Your Target Audiences

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<tr>
<th>Sample Category</th>
<th>Sample Headlines</th>
<th>Sample Messaging</th>
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<tr>
<td>Career Climbers</td>
<td>• Change course. Chase your dreams. • Where endless opportunities are within reach.</td>
<td>You have real-life experience. We have flexible learning, career connections. With all that, you have only one way to go... up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inactive Military</td>
<td>• Discover new ways to serve. • Where honor and integrity meet precision and performance.</td>
<td>You’ve got skills, discipline and experience. We have flexible learning options and tuition reimbursement for military service. Advance your career without putting your life on hold.</td>
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Communication messaging aligns both with each category and with the institution’s existing brand and legacy.

Make Smart Media Choices
From owned to earned, purchased to traditional, media outlets vary. While a broad mix gives greater exposure, choices should take each persona’s media preferences and psychographics into account. This ensures that each selected channel is appropriate for reaching the target audiences.

Continually Improve and Refine
A successful media campaign doesn’t end after the launch. Positive results depend on monitoring each channel, identifying and examining top- and under-performers, and appropriately revising content, budgets, and distribution.

4. Nurture Prospective Applicants Every Step of the Way
With the proper preparation outlined above, an institution can turn prospects into applicants using a few highly effective tactics. These nurturing activities will gradually increase prospects’ engagement with the institution and continuously move them closer to enrollment.

Move the Relationship Forward
Every contact with a prospective student should offer clear options for initiating the next step. Calls to action might include:
• “Call this number for information on a specific degree program.”
• “Text your number to be contacted by a financial aid specialist.”
• “Click here for an application.”

Follow Up At Regular Intervals
Each prospect should receive timely, consistent follow-up via their preferred mode of contact. A customized timetable that suits the institution’s marketing strategy (more/less aggressive) and is appropriate for specific targeted groups is a useful tool. Each communication should contain new information that is relevant to the individual. For example, a prospect who has expressed strong interest in a particular program would receive different content and transactions than one who has been less responsive.

Provide Access to Recruitment Advisors
All communications should include contact information for immediate live assistance from knowledgeable recruitment advisors who are available outside of normal business hours. This serves three distinct purposes:

1. Prospective students get timely answers to their specific concerns, which meets their expectations for customer service.
2. Prospective students build ongoing relationships with advisors, which increases their engagement.

3. Institutions can make ongoing improvements by reviewing calls and gaining insight into problems and challenges prospective students may face.

Maintain Complete Records of All Contacts
Accurate, up-to-date records of communication frequency, response rates, conversation histories, and scheduled follow-up activities help ensure timeliness and adherence to the marketing plan. In fact, College Planning & Management Magazine estimates that institutions with “complete customer profiles with accurate data...stand to increase revenue by 66 percent.”

A robust Customer Relationship Management (CRM) solution can help accomplish this task. It tracks such information allowing the recruiting process to run efficiently, and making it easier to measure and refine activities that are tied to specific marketing and recruiting tactics.

Optimize Enrollment Outcomes With Complete Marketing and Recruiting Services
To optimize success, institutions must use research and planning to identify and target students, develop programs to meet those student’s goals, then follow through with strong, personalized recruitment and enrollment efforts. Some institutions may choose to implement a complete marketing and recruiting solution to most efficiently and effectively make use of valuable resources.

A complete solution like Blackboard Marketing and Recruiting Services can help institutions build comprehensive, customized market research and recruiting initiatives. The result: degree programs optimized for that institution’s expertise and reputation, and lead generation and recruitment strategies that target the institution’s most promising applicants. The practices outlined here, coupled with the expertise and resources of a complete solution like Blackboard Marketing and Recruiting Services can make dramatic differences in application volume and yields while enabling marketing and recruiting efforts to operate more cost-effectively and efficiently.

About Blackboard
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To learn more about how Blackboard can help your institution, visit blackboard.com.