

Admissions and Retention: New Challenges for Higher Education

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Abstract

The pandemic caused major changes for higher education institutions, especially in recruiting new students and retaining existing ones. In the past, college enrollment and the economy were interconnected. Improvement in one was related to the downturn of the other. This time the case was different. Institutions needed to implement innovative strategies. The technique and strategy used in the past were not helpful anymore. There was an enormous limitation regarding campus access and even technology access. Most institutions were not ready for new challenges. To meet these challenges, institutions, after absorbing the incoming shocks, developed approaches to recruiting new students, like having virtual recruitment events using available tools. This by itself created more challenges. There was more information than most people could reasonably consume. Standing out amongst the flood of pamphlets, posts, and emails was critical. This manuscript addresses solutions implemented by a team of admissions and how to plan events such as standing out among others and not overwhelming.

Keywords: Pandemic, recruiting, new students, challenge, virtual events, retention, higher education

Introduction

Higher education in America continues to see fewer inquiries and smaller applicant pools, along with low enrollment, and completion rates. Institutions of higher education have faced a decline since 2010 (Juszkiewicz, 2019), and was exacerbated after 2020 due to the pandemic. According to the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), there was a 2.7% decline in total enrollment in the fall of 2021 and a 2.5% drop in fall of 2020 (NSC, 2021). This 5.1% decline in enrollment in the last two years is twice as high as it was from 2018 to 2019. According to this data, the largest drop was among undergraduate (NSC, 2020), which fell by 3.1 percent or 465,300 students over the previous academic year, attributed largely to economic factors.

In the past, the US economy and college enrollment were closely correlated, and the ups and downs of college enrollment were tied to the shift in the economy: as the economy declined, college enrollments were up and vice versa. However, this correlation no longer applied to student enrollment with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, other issues now driving the decline in college enrollments, including limited campus access, health concerns, social and governmental policies, and restrictions related to the pandemic. The impact of the pandemic on enrollments has been substantial. For several programs and schools, the decline was in double digits (NSC, 2021), the most significant drop in US higher education history. In particular, New England, with its dense student population and higher educational institutions, got hit hardest. Already faced with declining enrollment, the pandemic resulted in major challenges, making recruitment and retention even harder than it used to be or had been expected to be. This manuscript discusses these challenges and solutions in one of these higher education institutions, where different approaches have been implemented to retain existing students and recruit new students.

Problems and Solutions

The pandemic created significant challenges for higher education institutions. This time it was imperative, more so than ever before, as schools were forced to compete harder for a declining number of students, and each institution needed to address issues more-aggressively with enhanced and innovative strategies. Their goal was to reduce the barrier for enrollment caused by the pandemic. Due to the new challenges, institutions began to implement strategies right at the beginning of the pandemic to recruit new students and retain their existing enrollments. The traditional technique used before the pandemic was not sufficient anymore. Institutions limited the campus access to employees and students and implemented social distancing, which created a more challenging situation to communicate effectively. This time different issues were causing the decline in college enrollments, including limited campus access, health concerns, social and governmental policies, and restrictions associated with the pandemic. Therefore, it has become imperative for colleges to be both persistent and innovative. At this time, colleges have to be more strategic in their use of marketing and communication resources with students, especially prospective students.

The key challenge for colleges was increasing enrollments through new student recruitment. To meet these challenges, institutions have developed innovative strategies to recruiting new students. For example, it became common to have virtual recruitment events using available tools like Skype, Zoom, Google meeting, Microsoft meet, etc. Colleges started to spend more time, effort, and money on high-yield events, communication plans and support platforms, orientation programs, and virtual meetings to help break down barriers and keep students engaged.

Colleges and universities started to plan virtual events by announcing these events on the institutions' websites, social media, and other available forms of outreach. These virtual events are usually called "Open House" or "Information Session." These events often last several hours, and prospective students get an enormous amount of information about the institution, application process, registration, financial aid, policies, and everything relevant and vital for the prospective students.

These events provided a wide range of information for prospective students and were preceded by a huge barrage of advertisements and events. Social media platforms were full of ads to encourage prospective students to attend these virtual events and individual institutions' websites were full of advertised events as well. All of these efforts have created an over-complicated and confusing environment. Where to go? What to do? What to study?...

Standing out amongst the flood of pamphlets, posts, and emails was critical.

Inquiry Retention Strategy (IRS)

The study site, identified as College C, which is a private, non-profit, mid-sized, institution in the New England region. The institution has an open-access admissions policy for all of its programs. College C offers undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs. This institution caters to non-traditional students, as the student population is largely working adults. A team from the Admissions Department at College C took new innovative initiatives. Instead of having large events mentioned above and transferring an overwhelming amount of information all at once, they planned short events with different, engaging titles where they would pass along a limited but not exhausting amount of information. Their slogan was "recruit students before they think about attending school." The plan was "retention, retention, retention." In the past, college enrollment would go up while socio-economic issues were in an upward trend. This time this was not the case. The team immediately figured out, getting new inquiries would be more challenging than ever. They knew the strategies and events that have happened and used in the past were not effective anymore.

The Admissions team did not plan any large events such as an "Open House" or "Information Session," as everyone else was doing, which left students exhausted. Instead, they understood students' minds were not responsive to these overly complex, ordinary events, and there was always more information than most people can reasonably consume. They also wanted to keep students excited about beginning their educational journey and help them with problems that might arise before they get overwhelmed by the daunting to-do list. To do this, the team started with totally different events. One of their first events was called "Peer Lounge."

The event's title was eye-catching and stood out among the rest of the events. It was easy for everyone to differentiate this event from the norm on the institution's website and social media and wherever it was advertised. The team knew getting inquiries was not as easy as it used to be.

It is necessary for an event to grab and retain not only interested individuals but create as much excitement and interest as possible. Using these new event titles and advertising strategies the team was able to "recruit students before they were inquiries." This approach meant that the team would more easily retain anyone attending their events and convert them to applicants. In addition, the event was run by a current student or alumni. A professional admission team member supervised the event to ensure the event would meet the planned objectives and accuracy of the information passed during the event. Before the event, the student in charge had been coached in the expectations and the targeted outcomes of the event. These events were well planned and designed. During the event, the student in charge explained steps to take to get admitted, reviewed the required documents, strategies, policies, and anything else of practical use to the prospective students. The event purposefully maintained a very casual and friendly environment in the form of a dialog between students. The intent was to create an environment of trust where no one was selling, pushing, or enforcing anything.

This created a space to establish peer relationships/friendships before stepping foot on campus. The event was always positioned as a conversation between adults who tried to give and get information and was also planned for only an hour. Everyone who had attended this event received sufficient information they were expecting. Attendees were satisfied with the structure, duration, quality, and information that they have received. After the event, everyone attending expressed their willingness to attend more events and move to the next step. By implementing this strategy, the team was able to create and retain the interest of potential students without exception!

The team called this, Inquire Retention Strategy(IRS).

Applicant Retention Strategy (ARS)

For the next step, this team planned another event called the "Application Completion Workshop." This event was just designed to assist inquiries in filling out the paperwork required for application and leading them through the process of how to submit their paperworks. Everyone who attended the previous event, "Peer Lounge," has participated in this event, filled out the application form(s), and submitted the required paperwork and documents such as their personal statement, reference letter, resume, etc. The event was short, had a simple outcome, and was run by a professional team member. The aim was to retain these applicants and convert them to registered students.

The team planned other events such as "Connecting Past to the Future," "Lead the future with an MBA," "Later is better than never." Again these events were short, limited in the amount of new information provided, and were planned with a specific outcome in mind. For these events, the team integrated both current and past students. At this stage, the planned events had a casual atmosphere, where prospective students could get answers to their questions related to what to expect during the first semester and have an informal conversation about the policies, strategies, FAFSA, academic programs, expectations, and be comfortable enough to raise any question and concern beginning from the first day of the semester to the graduation day. The environment was purposefully casual, friendly, and cozy.

Integrating current and past students created a comfortable and encouraging situation for prospective students. For these events, current and past students not only helped during the events but also promoted the event in their communities. More than ninety percent of the people who have attended the "Application completion workshop," "Connecting Past to the Future," "Lead the future with an MBA," "Later is better than never" moved forward to finish the application and submitted all the required document and pre-register for at least one course. While these events were short and discrete, the team felt there were some individuals who were ready to go earlier than others and could not wait to finish the process. There was an event for this kind of students as well: "Express Admission". This event was planned to help prospective students submit all the appropriate documentation and the team processed the paperwork within one week of submission and moved the student to the review and acceptance stage.

The team called this strategy, Applicant Retention Strategy (ARS).

Student Retention Strategy (SRS)

The institution has multiple campuses. After all of these short events with small steps and outcomes, the next step was to connect students to the entire organization. To do this, the admissions team invited the leadership and staff from different departments like president's office, admissions, registrar office, deans, program chairs, faculty, alumni office, student services to a final event. They planned two events, one called "Inter-College C Event," and another one called "Town Hall Meeting."

These two events also were virtual and started with welcome words from the president of the institution who emphasized the mission of the institution and ensured students that every office door would be open if anyone needs help. Then the provost recounted the academic advantage of being at the institution and discussed what makes the institution different. Then students met in virtually breakout rooms with the deans and chairs of the program they were interested in, giving these prospective students the having the opportunity to attend additional virtual sessions to ask questions from the financial aid office and registrar's office.

The team had these unique events with eye catching titles, and they integrated alumni and current students in their events. This targeted student engagement effort extended the level of interest, improved motivation, and established a higher level of commitment to the learning activities within and beyond classwork for present, past and prospective students. Students who feel integrated into their schools and communities are more likely to persist and succeed in their educational goals than students who do not (Tinto, 2012).

Conclusion

As colleges in America continue to see low enrollment and recruitment pools, primarily due to the recent pandemic, it is crucial that institutions plan their communication and marketing strategies by engaging prospective and current students, and understand in advance how students will react and engage with the information they receive. Just giving out information is not sufficient. The proper communication strategies should be implemented immediately upon the initial inquiry or even before. The very first communication is critical. This is when students become motivated to start the process and become a student.

Planning and initiating constant and step-by-step communication and outreach, establishing a connection with the admissions offices, academic advising, financial aid, and prospective students' orientations and meetings all play a crucial role in retaining the inquiries, applicants, and students. Communication and engagement are critical, and the more institutions engage students with institutions activities, the more likely they will stay and graduate (Burke, 2019; Hern et al., 2019; Ishitani, 2016; Lowry, 2016; Tinto, 2012; Xerri et al., 2017; Zilvinkis & Dumford, 2018). This paper explains the strategy and processes the admissions team implemented to integrate the alumni and current students in their events by giving them the responsibility for the success of the event. This kind of authentic engagement makes students feel valued, trusted, and connected and increase student retention.

The interaction of peers greatly influences students' personal and academic development, and social involvement, including support, and positively affects retention. Perceived emotional support can provide a buffer against the stressful experience for new students. Peer support impacts student outcomes as new students move through their first year (Briggs et al., 2020; Woodard & Fatzinger, 2018; Xerri et al., 2017). They work such that they would retain the inquire, transfer to the applicant, retain applicants and transfer to registered student and then retain students as well.

Standing out amongst the flood of pamphlets, posts, and emails is critical. The events planned by the team were designed to intervene on a step-by-step basis, with the right incentives, structures, and titles to avoid overloading students with more information than most people could reasonably consume. Specialized content goes a long way.

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