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# ENGAGE THE RIGHT STUDENT

## STRATEGIES FOR MORE SUCCESSFUL TARGETING

From Inquiry to Enrollment

**DATA MINING**

PREPARE & ADAPT TO  
ENROLLMENT CHALLENGES

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SPRING 2017

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Drop us a line, we'll be listening. For comments, suggestions or general inquiries contact us at [hifrank@thefrankagency.com](mailto:hifrank@thefrankagency.com)

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WE ARE  
<INSERT  
COLLEGE  
NAME>

# From the President

## IF YOUR SCHOOL IS DIFFERENT, WHY DO YOU MARKET IT LIKE EVERYONE ELSE?

The education landscape is shifting. You see it in the closure of ITT Tech, Purdue's purchase of Kaplan, and the privatization of the University of Phoenix. You see it in the nationwide enrollment struggles borne from online school competition, technology advancements and evolving student demographics. These changes aren't going away anytime soon, and schools can no longer afford not to stand out.

This is the time to reassess – to distinguish yourself from the crowd in a tangible way. Promoting your institution through “We Are <Insert School Name>” statements is not branding. It's time to move away from such generic brand positioning and figure out what you stand for and how your institution is actually perceived. Either take the leap and own this perception, or work to develop the image you want to portray – the image that best encompasses your values.

But it doesn't stop there. Your brand distinctives are only half of the picture. The next big challenge will be in tailoring your marketing to channels that deliver the highest lifetime value and return on investment – so you can increase enrollment without getting bogged down by marketing costs.

We're The frank Agency, and we've been providing solutions to higher education's toughest challenges for over 15 years. That's where re:view comes in. We see the proverbial signs, and we're here with the information you need to ensure sustainable growth and a 360-degree view of whatever lies ahead.

We're here to help you overcome your challenges, and we want to hear your own comments on these insights. So let's dig in, anticipate the challenges ahead, and stake out a claim to the future landscape.

**Tony Ali**  
CEO/President

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INSIGHTS,  
INNOVATIONS AND  
STRATEGIES FOR  
THE HIGHER  
EDUCATION  
MARKET



# LEADING STRATEGIES

## to Engage and Enroll the Right Students

It was once understood that traditional students, the high school grads who jumped right into their postsecondary degree at an established brick-and-mortar school, comprised the majority of college students. The nontraditional, typically older students who were juggling classes, work obligations, and families, were on the outer fringes of the paradigm.

As of the last decade, however, the whole "traditional/nontraditional" structure has been turned on its head.



Changing this mindset so drastically presents unusual challenges both to enrollment and student retention. But to truly understand these new pain points and how schools can adapt, we first need to know what the new demographics look like.

Per the National Center for Education Statistics, as of 2014, fully 40% of college students were over the age of 25. The long-held idea that the vast majority of students are fresh-faced high school grads is becoming an out-of-date standard. Granted, this statistic is looking at college students as a whole, both graduate and undergrad, but it

Aside from these broad differences, we're also seeing the fade out of one generation and the entrance of the next – with its own unique set of preferences, influences, and motivations.

Gen Zers (also known as Plurals or Post-Millennials), are the first technologically indigenous generation. Millennials are incredibly tech-savvy, but Zers have never known a time before cell phones and ubiquitous Internet access. As such, they expect to see high-speed, intuitive technology integrated into their classroom education.





Fully traditional, lecture-driven classroom models may not be appealing to the incoming student for this reason alone.

Gen Zers also communicate much differently than their older brethren. Social media is incredibly influential in their decision making, so how you brand yourself online and the personalization you put behind each post creates a meaningful impact on your Gen Z audience. One important note, however, is that while Post-Mills want to interact on social media, they don't necessarily want to receive personal communication in a public forum. They prefer to see an email or a private message, to keep that one-on-one connection.

In terms of social channels, Facebook is still on top, but Gen Zers use it more to keep in touch with old friends than to communicate with current friends. Outlets like Instagram and Snapchat are where teens converse and share with their peers, but again, not necessarily with schools or businesses. This means that such platforms should be used by schools to share posts that invite engagement – not demand it.

While we're on the topic of social, there's another significant influence in Gen Z's decision-making: their peers. Post-Millennials are much more swayed by the advice and attitudes of their peers than by

that of their own parents. Thus, a tactical shift is in order for enrollment marketers who tend to direct their efforts to both student and parent.

Yet another shaping facet of the burgeoning Generation Z is their upbringing during the Great Recession. They have a very economical, practical outlook, and as a result their educational choices are focused on value. They're willing to incur the cost of an education, but only if that cost will yield appropriate results – which, to them, means a career that is both fulfilling and financially stable. They need to be assured that their investment will pay off in the long run.





## Millennials: The Grads

The Gen Z crowd has a lot in common with their Millennial counterparts, but there are still some unique factors in play that should be considered.

The Millennial generation is getting a little older. Though some late-bloomers are still plugging away at an undergrad degree (possibly online, working around their jobs or families), most of the learners in this category are graduate students. In either case, there seems to be one common thread throughout the Millennial mindset, and that is the desire for flexibility.

Millennials value a solid work-school-life balance, so many of them look for alternative schooling routes to fit classes in around an already busy schedule. Online schools are booming for this very reason, and traditional schools that offer online, hybrid or accelerated courses are often a great fit for the Millennial learner.

Similar to the up-and-coming Gen Z, Millennials are also technologically driven. They remember the birth of Internet technology and a host of other tech advances, and they've organically learned to adapt with such changes. They are heavily influenced by the online realm – particularly social media. One important aspect of this, however, is that Millennials don't just search for *information* to help them make a decision; they look for *stories*. Millennials want to feel like they're part of something bigger, possibly because they remember a time of more personal connection than just

social media presence. They seek personalized messages and well-crafted stories that make them want to join your mission. This is why inbound marketing (especially online content) is so critical in reaching this generation.

Another aspect of personalized experience is the tactile characteristic, which makes direct mail an appealing avenue to reach Millennials and, surprisingly enough, their younger Gen Z compatriots, according to reports by Mintel and InfoTrends. Although snail mail is being abandoned by many in favor of

digital, statistics show that it's an incisive way to reach younger audiences. Post-Mills and Millennials alike value printed media for the sensory quality, so a visually engaging piece of mail can bridge a gap in a way that even email sometimes can't.

Yet another similarity to Gen Z is Millennials' view of education as a means to a career. Millennials also grew up in the thick of the Great Recession, and this led many to embrace education not for personal fulfillment, but for the sole purpose of landing a job. This has paved the way for Millennials to pursue advanced degrees, as they see a master's degree as a ticket into a higher-paying job. This is only reinforced by the rising demand in the workforce for employees that hold specialized master's degrees (more on this on page 18).

## The Generational Impact on Higher Ed Enrollment

These demographics, motives and mindsets are what make an institutional brand resonate with a student. These factors will be the force behind whether a potential student stops to engage or keeps on scrolling. Social and demographic issues need to play a critical role in

Millennials are the first generation to grow up with the Internet, which means keeping them engaged can be challenging but, on the other hand, invigorating. The key to recruiting Millennials is to make sure information and resources that relate to your institution are easily accessible and can be found in multiple places.

**Tyron L. Harris**, Recruitment Manager  
The University of Chicago – Graham School

higher education recruitment strategies, both in day-to-day practicalities and in the broader picture.

### Practical Applications

The common trait among these demographics is the need for personalized experiences. Every step of a student's journey should be rife with relevant and engaging information that conveys to the student: You belong here.

Even in the earliest stages of recruitment, students should be targeted based on background analytics work. Data mining and predictive modeling (more on this on page 28) help you form a solid idea of where your best candidates are, based upon prospective student interests and past student successes.



VALUE



VARIETY



FLEXIBILITY

Creating targeted ads that center not only on demographics but also on particular areas of interest and where a student is in their consideration process allows you to cut right through to their immediate situation. This can pave the way for further communication, like personalized, automated messages or the eventual follow-up phone call. Streamlining recruitment in such a fashion not only helps personalize the experience for the student, but also eliminates wasted resources on the university's end.

This principle applies to retention as well. Keeping tabs on student performance and class enrollments can let the school know how likely a student is to succeed, and what kind of assistance they need in order to stay on track. Students need their personalized experience to continue throughout their schooling, lest they feel adrift and lose their motivation. Automated messages that clue students in on their progress or provide help are just one way a school can remind their students they are seen and they matter.

## Broadening Focus

These nitty-gritty details fall flat if an institution's overarching emphases are not shifting with the demographics. Schools should be ready to turn their overall focus to points of need for the new "traditional" (read, "not-in-any-way-traditional") student.

The emphases for schools should align with those of its students, and in the case of the upcoming generations, that means offering value, variety and flexibility.

- 1. Value:** Some schools are now offering more scholarships or streamlined certificate programs to allow students to achieve certifications more quickly. Others stress that their degrees are investments that will pay off by providing high-wage jobs. However your institution chooses to approach this, it's clear that Gen Zers and Millennials are looking at the bottom line, and this needs to be a priority for schools.
- 2. Variety:** For the potential master's student, the name of the game is specialization. Specialized degrees (more on this on page 18) offer a faster route through to a career, with more opportunities post-

graduation. Now is the time for schools to diversify their program portfolio by focusing on burgeoning fields of study.

- 3. Flexibility:** A school's class course schedule can be the deciding factor for many students. Strictly brick-and-mortar campuses are already having a difficult time competing with online institutions where students can learn entirely at their own pace. Traditional schools who want to stay ahead of the curve should branch out into more online, hybrid or accelerated avenues to offer more options to potential students.

The old adage "grow or die" has never been more applicable for schools than it is right now. As the idea of what constitutes a "traditional" student rapidly becomes broader, schools need to be ready to change their game according to these shifting characteristics. Incorporating personalized experiences and more schooling options creates an atmosphere that is more engaging to this unique student landscape, and in turn, schools that conform to these new standards will set themselves apart as distinctive and coveted institutions. ●



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## EDUCATIONAL TRENDS:



# VS. TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

## AVAILABLE DEGREE PROGRAMS? SCHEDULE OPTIONS? FINANCIAL AID?

Students have dozens of questions to answer in order to find the right college fit. But possibly one of the biggest decisions they will make is: online or traditional?

With innumerable online options on top of brick-and-mortar institutions, students have a wide pool from which to choose – and schools face more competition than ever before. A closer look at the various trends and market conditions affecting student enrollment at each type of school reveals just how critical it is for schools to carefully distinguish themselves and adapt to ever-evolving student needs.

### The Online vs. Traditional Face-off

While the majority of brick-and-mortar schools have experienced declining enrollment numbers since 2011 (*Fortune*, 2016), online institutions are seeing an overall rise in their ranks. This disparity is due to a number of factors:

#### Online schools are largely proprietary.

It may seem like an unrelated circumstance, but this is actually a big contributor

to online school growth. Because proprietary schools closely monitor return on investment (ROI) to ensure their marketing is profitable, they also tend to be more aggressive in implementing changes. Adjusting to market conditions allows schools to be more effective in reaching target demographics and accommodating student demand, and proprietary schools excel in this area.

Reporting is a point of much needed improvement for

traditional institutions. These schools have historically been less diligent about tracking marketing ROI (perhaps simply due to inertia) and thus have been slower to adapt to changing tides, putting them behind the game.

#### Flexibility is a critical issue.

This factor reflects less on the school itself and more on the shift in student needs. There is a growing number of students age 25 and older, and these individuals generally have family





# VS. TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

and employment responsibilities in addition to their class load – thus, they need a school schedule that permits them to complete work on their own time. Online schools offer this opportunity.

While many traditional schools are trying to keep up with this movement, many would benefit from expanding their offerings to more online or hybrid options. Accelerated summer courses are another opportunity for traditional schools to reach the adult demographic. The more

convenience brick-and-mortar schools can offer, the more they will appeal to working students.

## **Demographics are shifting.**

In addition to the demographic shift toward older students, there is also an unusually high number of women enrolled in online programs. Women make up 70% of all online learners according to CollegeAtlas.org, possibly because they tend to pursue more programs that require ongoing certification

(i.e., education and healthcare), which may be completed online. Others speculate that this trend is, again, due to the flexibility of online schooling, which allows women with children to pursue their education while balancing family responsibilities.

Female students comprise the majority in conventional institutions as well, but not to such a dramatic extent. Traditional schools that want to compete with online for this target should be ready to expand their certificate programs and implement more diverse schedule options. This would not only capture the rising number of female enrollees, but also serve the dual purpose of reaching the rising number of 25-and-over students.

## **Cost matters to students.**

Tuition costs at online schools are generally comparable to the cost of in-state tuition at

**IN 2011:**  
71% of students under 25  
29% of students over 25

**IN 2014:**  
60% of students under 25  
40% of students over 25

Source: National Center for Education Statistics



traditional institutions, with one big difference – room and board. Online schools obviously don't need to charge for room and board, which gives them a cost advantage over their traditional counterparts.

In a culture that is increasingly apprehensive about student loan debt, cost is a big determining factor for prospective students. Many traditional schools have been forced to raise their tuition due to state cutbacks, which, coupled with the on-campus expenses that accompany tuition, only contributes to student skepticism. Brick-and-mortar institutions that are already having revenue problems can't afford to cut tuition, but they can continue to remind prospectives that their programs will deliver a sizable return to the student in the form of achieving future career goals.

publicity has negatively impacted online schools as a whole. Online establishments still struggle to regain their reputational footing, which leads many to develop marketing that focuses around their strengths and student success rates to show that their goals are in sync with their students' needs.

## The Universal Call-Out

In 1999, Cisco CEO John Chambers predicted, "Education usage over the Internet is going to be so big it is going to make email usage look like a rounding error." The rise of online enrollment and simultaneous decline of traditional reveals he was absolutely correct, and that serious changes need to be made in the traditional model.

For some schools, transformation has come through augmenting traditional programs with online

**Online programs aren't a passing trend – they're rapidly becoming the preferred course for many students** and traditional schools must adapt their methodology accordingly.

On the other hand, online and traditional schools can both improve their attention to rising industry needs. A progressively technology-driven culture has shaped the demand for new talent in fields like analytics and coding, and schools that are continuously projecting emerging career fields and developing corresponding programs will thrive due to their relevance and focus on student success.

## Further Progress for the Trads

But if a traditional school doesn't have the ability to expand its programs, slash tuition, or increase scheduling options, how can it adapt to these changing needs?

**There are two ways to accomplish this: a detailed analysis of ROI, and clear messages in marketing.**

ROI is a critical metric and, as mentioned previously, one that traditional schools tend to neglect. These institutions can no longer afford for this to be the case.

By regularly gauging ROI, schools know exactly where the majority of inquiries are coming from and how to best engage with them. As a result, departments can better judge how to allocate funds to eliminate waste while still increasing enrollments. Better

**Schools that pay attention to which industries are growing, develop corresponding programs, and focus on student success will thrive.**

### Reputation struggles.

One area where traditional schools do have a significant advantage over their online counterparts is in their reputation. Conventional institutions carry a significant amount of weight in the education arena, whereas a few instances of poor

classes, or providing completely online program options. Schools like Arkansas State University (Talkbusiness.net, 2017) that have made this transition see a higher enrollment percentage than those that offer only in-person classroom experiences.



yet, knowing where the inquiries come from gives insight into how to improve the chance of them becoming enrollees and indicates whether they will be students with a higher lifetime value.

**REGULARLY MEASURING ROI LETS YOU KNOW HOW TO SHORE UP YOUR ENROLLMENT MODEL FOR INCREASED EFFECTIVENESS. SOME CONSIDERATIONS IN DETERMINING ROI SHOULD BE:**

Is the cost-per-enrollment (CPE) delivering the anticipated end return?

If not, where is the breakdown occurring?

What should the CPE of a specific program be, based on the cost of the program itself?

Which programs yield the best lifetime value, and how do you market these programs more effectively to gain enrollments?

---

By asking these questions as you examine your ROI data, you can uncover any weaknesses in your marketing, programs and tuition rates, and make changes wherever necessary to increase profitability.

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But measuring ROI will only be effective if paired with clear, relevant marketing messages that garner interest in the first place. And for traditional schools, this will mean appealing to the main benefit they offer over and above online schools: a well-rounded experience.

Online schools are focused on students who have a clear-cut career path in mind, and their programs are tailored and concentrated to fit these paths. However, online degrees can't offer the kinds of challenges, connections and sharpening that occur in the context of an in-person college class.

So while an online student and a traditional student may get the same bachelor's degree, their knowledge base will differ in some respects – purely due to their differing experiences.

This will be the main point of emphasis for traditional schools that want to remain competitive in an online market. Having a degree does not connote ability. Brick-and-mortar schools need to drive home the main point: the experience gained throughout education is just as important as the degree itself. ●



# From Inquiry to Enrollment:

## CHANNELS THAT SHAPE THE STUDENT COURSE

Is your inquiry development process helping you generate enrollments? Or does it stop dead in its tracks after your first contact with a prospective student?

Robust inquiry generation and nurturing strategies, combined with continual tracking and reporting, are the keys to a healthy admissions plan – and one that allows you to continuously zero in more tightly on your target audience. Allow us to explain in more detail.

### Initial Awareness

To start, you have your initial points of engagement: the channels that first draw a student in. These span across both the traditional and digital spheres, and you need to have a number of different channels operating in sync in order to cast the widest net possible.

Below you'll see some of the main avenues that are used in an inquiry-generating campaign.





People are constantly barraged by digital advertisements, so it's critical to vary your strategies to extend to more traditional routes like direct mail, TV ads or radio spots, and personal touchpoints like recruitment fairs and campus visits. These traditional methods not only create brand awareness, but they also begin influencing the prospective student through crafted messaging and highlighting your institution's unique selling points.

At the end of the day, these channels all serve one ultimate purpose: to invite connection from prospective students. So, for instance, your blog content will include calls-to-action that send the inquirer to a landing page where they can fill out a web form for more information. TV ads offer a phone number or URL specific to your campaign, which can then be used to gain information from your inquiry and track where these inquiries are being generated.

From here, a person may choose to engage or not. If a prospective student does reach out (i.e., fills out your web form, calls your campaign-specific phone number, or sends an email requesting information), the inquiry data should automatically populate in your customer relationship management system so you can follow up – and the nurturing can begin.

## The Retargeting Detour

Before we can talk about nurturing, let's look at a very important digital strategy for when a student doesn't engage. What happens if an individual sees one of your digital ads, follows it to your landing page, but never fills out your web form? Well, there's good news – that person can still be reached through a robust retargeting campaign.

When a prospect turns down your invitation to connect, they'll be set apart in your cookie pool. Then, when this potential inquiry next hops online, you can target them with ads based on their past

visit. These retargeting ads may be videos, display ads, or social media ads.

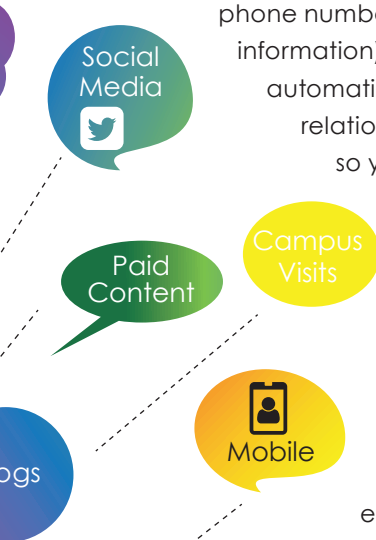
Social media is an especially effective platform for retargeting, as you can use link ads to lead potential inquiries back to your site and invite them to engage yet again. Or, for the less motivated prospect, lead generation ads offer the opportunity to fill out a contact form without even leaving Facebook. These types of ads are generally used on mobile devices and carry that convenience factor that can make the difference between an actual inquiry and a dead end.

Remarketing lists for search ads (or RLSA) are another useful retargeting method, as they allow you to focus more closely on your market by targeting individuals who have both visited your website and are actively searching for certain keywords which you specify and bid on. In this circumstance, you can increase your bids based on certain criteria which you preset. For example, you can add increased bid modifiers for keywords when they're searched by people who have visited your site and are therefore more likely to convert. Another strategic RLSA move is expanding to broader keywords that may only be worth bidding on when you're targeting an individual who has already engaged with you in the past.

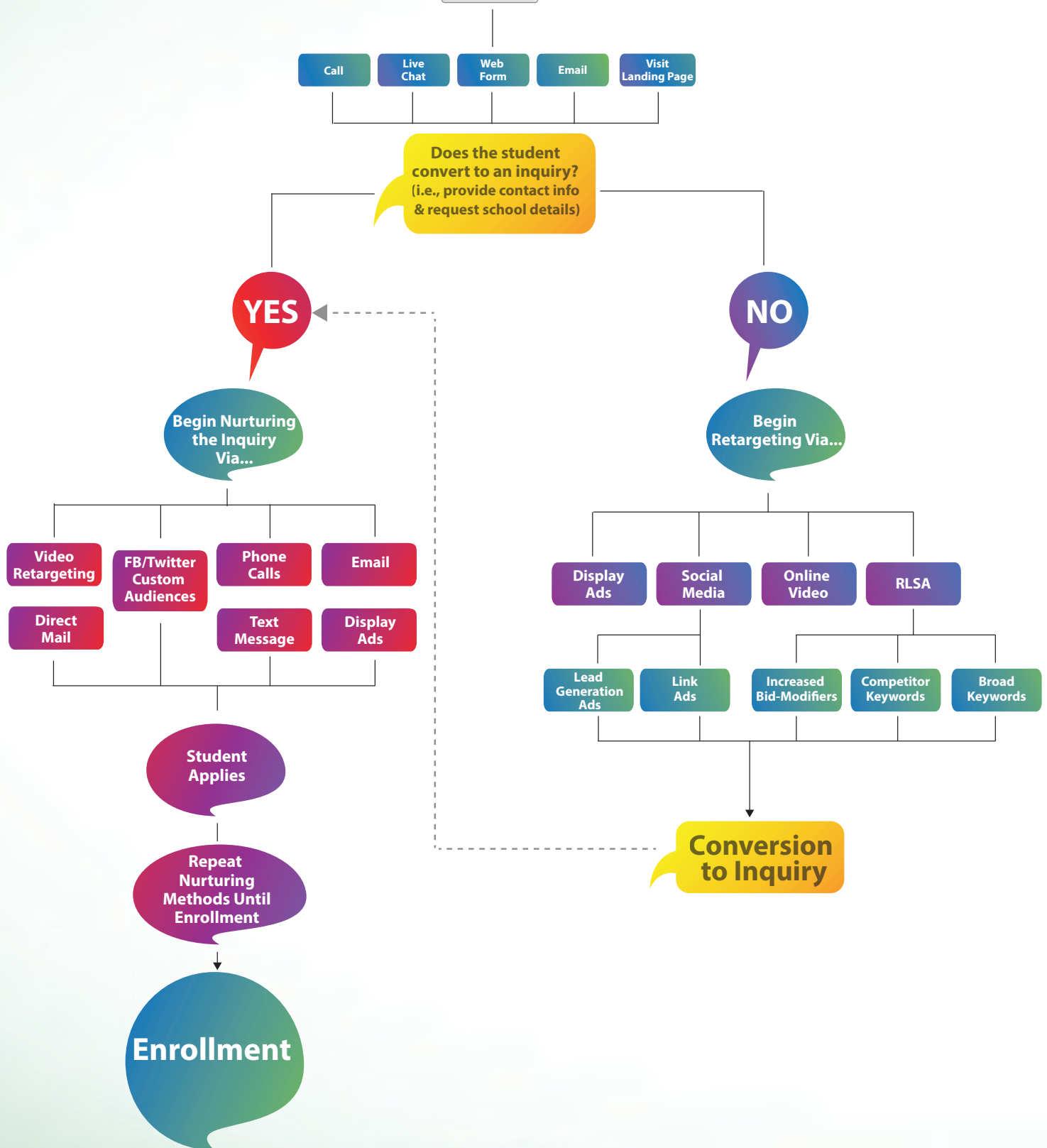
Now, this may sound like overkill – but this is one of those circumstances that warrants it. One recent study by Media Experts suggests that display ads need to be seen an average of 20-30 times for maximum effectiveness. Remember, in retargeting, your audience consists of the students who are on the fence. They're not positive that your institution is right for them – they need convincing, and retargeting gives you the opportunity to convince them.

## Inquiry Nurturing

Now that we've had that little sidebar, we can move on to the nurturing process. So you have a healthy number of inquiries at this point and you're ready to nudge them along into application and enrollment. One important step must be tackled before this,



# Nurturing & Retargeting





however: you need to prioritize and segment your inquiries.

Not all inquiries are created equal. Some are more interested in your institution than others, and these promising inquiries should receive more detailed attention so that resources aren't wasted. This can be done by implementing a predictive scoring model.

Predictive scoring consists of gathering past student information and identifying patterns to determine the probability of conversion. Assessing high lifetime value students based on their demographics, programs completed, geographic location, channel they used to initially inquire, etc., allows you to create an algorithm with which you can categorize future inquiries according to their likelihood of enrollment (high, medium, or low probability of conversion). The resulting categorization allows you to focus your nurturing efforts on those students that are further down the inquiry pathway, saving you resources and lowering your cost-per-enrollment.

Segmenting your inquiries not only lets you know who's more likely to convert – it also helps you target them with messages that suit their level of interest and where they are in the enrollment funnel. Keep in touch through a variety of channels – email, direct mail, phone calls, display ads, text messaging, and online videos that give an idea of what your institution is like. Consistent communication can be automated through your CRM to ensure that inquiries receive relevant and timely messages.

Once an inquiry becomes an applicant, the campaign doesn't stop. Many students apply to several different schools before making their final decision, so once you have an applicant pool, the nurturing starts all over again, now with enrollment-focused follow-ups.

## The Continuous Cycle

If you keep tabs on each student's movements through this initial inquiry process and then on through their enrollment and program completion, you gain a wealth of information that can be used to target and nurture future inquiries. You can even track back to how much in marketing and manpower was spent to target, nurture, enroll and graduate each student and see what your school made in net revenue – giving you your return on investment and lifetime value of the student.

You'll also discover statistical trends on geography, demographics and media channel usage habits to better inform your strategies for attracting students with the highest potential to succeed in your programs. You can predict potential challenges students will encounter and prepare for them. You'll have higher returns that will allow for necessary upgrades, new programs and better facilities. Most importantly, you'll have the ability to streamline your students' experience and provide them and their communities brighter futures. ●



# The Explosion and Future of Specialized Programs

The two-year MBA has long been considered an ace in the hole for advancing a career. The average MBA graduate sees a 50% salary increase upon completing the program, and after five years, this percentage can jump to 80% (*Forbes*, 2014). If this were not motivation enough, there's also the unspoken status rise that accompanies the MBA. This type of degree has been the standard route for anyone ready to move up in the business world...but is this still the case?

MBA programs mushroomed to an unprecedented extent between 2008 and 2012 as individuals sought ways to advance their careers through the declining economy. Gradually the financial climate has stabilized, and now the market is flooded with MBA grads. The stand-out status is clearly fading. However, a newcomer has risen to take the place of the MBA: the specialized MS degree.

**A newcomer has risen to take the place of the MBA: the specialized MS degree.**


## Out with the General, in with the Specialized

Students are searching for a new way to distinguish themselves, and the specialized master's degree has afforded the opportunity. The MBA is a broad degree that touches on

numerous areas of expertise – but it doesn't dive too deeply into any of them. In other words, it's flexible, but not focused.

A specialized MS zeroes in on a specific area of study – typically one of rapid industry growth such as accounting, business analytics or finance. The purpose of these programs is to create high-level industry experts, not necessarily broad-based business executives. So while an MS may be less versatile, it allows students to carve out a niche and fill roles in high-demand fields.





MBAs also suffer the disadvantages of requiring significant work experience and taking longer to achieve. A prospective MBA student needs around three years of business experience to even be accepted into most programs, and the degree itself takes two years to complete. A specialized MS, on the other hand, can take anywhere from 6 to 24 months and doesn't require such prior training. For an increasingly financially minded student body, this makes a huge difference.

The sooner a student can complete a degree and launch a solid, well-paying career, the better. This prevailing mentality has helped spur the movement toward specialized MS programs – and schools need to be ready to accommodate for this growth.

### Shaping Experts by Being Experts

The name of the game is expertise. Students need it, and the specialized MS is how they plan to obtain it. Thus, schools need to be ready to both develop and market their own areas of expertise.

**Schools cannot educate leaders without first being leaders themselves.**

Institutions that do not offer specialization would benefit from establishing these degree programs around booming industries. Financial engineering, supply chain management, analytics, accounting and management are all rapidly expanding fields that need knowledgeable individuals, and colleges

that create tailor-made programs can groom students to fill these needs.

That said, schools cannot educate leaders without first being leaders themselves. Publishing student success stories and interviews with professors are absolutely critical to elevating an institution's authoritative image. This type of content marketing, combined with a strong social media presence on professional platforms like LinkedIn, will speak to those potential students seeking an established and reputable institution.

Another big marketing emphasis point will be the value of specialized degrees in these expanding fields. Some of the main draws to these programs are shortened completion time and resulting high-paying careers, so schools need to appeal to these factors. Prospectives want to know that their education will provide for their future. Share information through your social platforms on growing industries and career opportunities, and show how a related MS degree can be a fast track to advancement. This will convey the cost-benefit ratio to students who may be on the fence about pursuing an advanced degree.

**Prospectives want to know that their education will provide for their future.**

### Specialize in Student Success

As industry growth and educational priorities continue to merge, the best way to remain relevant will be to keep a finger on the pulse of expanding fields. Your institution's own reputation as a leader, innovator and authority is the key to reaching those students who need guidance in pursuing their goals. With the careful development of tailored programs and accompanying thought leadership, institutions stand to gain both graduate enrollments – and a reputation for excellence. ●

# 2017's top enrollment challenges

## – how you can prepare and adapt

Higher education has had its fair share of obstacles over the past few years. Its boom during the Great Recession, as students sought education as a way to avoid unemployment, gradually gave way to an enrollment slump when the economy improved. Now institutions are seeking ways to remain competitive and marketable despite the widespread inertia facing U.S. higher education.

What exactly are the factors causing this slump, and how do schools overcome them? Here we'll examine a number of these challenges, along with practical solutions to the perpetual enrollment problem.

caused animosity in both current and prospective students.

Since there doesn't seem to be much indication of if or when state funding will become more favorable to higher education, schools are forced to find other ways to keep enrollment steady. Rather than raising tuition or cutting programs, many have opted to rebrand and invest in more marketing that focuses on their strengths. This allows schools to tell prospective students about their quality and stresses the idea of education as an investment in the future. Some schools have also gone the route of incorporating more online programs to up their versatility in a market that's increasingly consisting of more adult learners.

Middle East, projecting the sentiment that individuals from other countries are not welcome in America. 38% of surveyed institutions reported a decline in the number of international applications they received early this year (*Inside Higher Ed*, 2017). The general uncertainty and tension surrounding the ban has contributed to the decrease, and many smaller schools that rely on international students are concerned about making up those lost enrollments.

The ban has been blocked from taking full effect, but schools will still need to go above and beyond to build up their international relationships and establish rapport. One way this can be accomplished is by streamlining and simplifying the admissions process to create a less daunting task for prospective international students. Schools will also need to adopt more aggressive strategies of reaching their local markets to compensate for their international losses. For example, by implementing more paid digital advertising or analyzing data patterns of the area, they can see where there is the most potential for student enrollments.

### 1 State Funding Decreases

**For public colleges, a major pain point over the past decade has been state budget cuts.** In fact, 47 out of 50 states have less funding for higher education now than they did prior to 2008's recession (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016). Most schools have tried to accommodate for this by hiking tuition, but this has only

### 2 Federal Immigration Legislation

Although last year was a record year in the number of international students studying in the U.S., 2017 looks to be a bleaker year as far as this statistic goes. The immigration ban enacted at the beginning of President Trump's term suspended the visas of many current and prospective students from the



### 3 Declining Number of High School Graduates

This factor is a bit deceiving, as the graduation rate itself isn't what's declining – it's the birth rate. There are overall fewer high school graduates simply because there are fewer in this age bracket in general. This decline is only expected to continue over the next 20 years.

However, as the total number of graduates declines, the demographic is also shifting, revealing that within that number of graduates the percentage of those who are non-white or low-income is increasing. For schools to increase enrollment within a shrinking pool, they will have to redouble their efforts to reach these expanding minorities through marketing that reflects this rise in diversity – both in its imagery and its messages.

### 4 Weak Demand Due to Low Unemployment Rate

In March 2017 the unemployment rate fell to 4.5%, which is the lowest rate since 2007. While this is a fantastic improvement in the economy at large, it has had a negative effect on higher education. When jobs are plentiful, prospective students tend to forego or postpone their education in favor of entering straight into the work force.

For schools to reach this potential market, there must be a consistent focus on conveying the benefits of having a degree, i.e., increased earning potential and better job opportunities. An

additional way to reach out to this demographic is by promoting specialized degree programs, as the growing need for industry experts in high-paying fields like business analytics and finance has created a market for these advanced degrees.

### 5 Geography Plays a Bigger Role

Whereas 15 years ago the distance of a college was not considered a huge issue for most students, the average student now is more practical. Many students wish to complete their degrees as relatively inexpensively as possible, and out-of-state tuitions are still an obstacle for these prospectives.

Some schools have jumped this hurdle by offering discounts in tuition rates for out-of-state students, but others have taken the simpler approach of promoting their strong suits. An excellent reputation for particular academic programs and high completion rates go a long way in recruitment, and create a draw that outweighs the geographical considerations.

### 7 Ramped-Up Competition

The changing priorities of younger generations have lessened the appeal of brick-and-mortar schools over the past decade, leaving an open avenue for online schools to break through. The diversity of schooling models has increased the competition to the point where many schools are discovering that their brand

6

## Online Pressure

As convenience and flexibility become greater priorities for students, traditional schools are lagging behind the booming online schools (see more on this on page 10). The best solution for brick-and-mortar institutions would be to branch out into online, but that requires considerable time and funding.

Nevertheless, the forecast is clear: online schools (and even community colleges with diverse programs and online options) are flourishing, and the best option for traditional schools is to make whatever investment necessary to develop their own online programs. Those that have gone this route have experienced rapid success, proving that the investment is well worth the return.

is mere white noise in the vast expanse of college marketing.

Now, more than ever, institutions are seeing how critical it is to set themselves apart. Many are accomplishing this via brand evaluation – researching and rethinking their image, voice, and what makes their institution unique, recognizable and inspirational. Such appraisals are a highly effective way for established schools to regain their marketing direction without overhauling their academic methodology.

## 8 Lowered Retention Rates

Attrition is a perennial issue for schools. A 2013 study performed by the Educational Policy Institute shows that the average school loses out on approximately \$10 million a year due to students dropping out before they've finished their programs. If enrollment is continuing to decline, one way to make up this revenue is by halting the exit rate.

Many institutions are calling on technological advancements to assist with this issue. Automated communication systems that analyze students' performance (both past and present) are an incredibly effective way to keep students on a path to graduation. These systems guide students into classes where they will have the most success based on their past work, and even notify them when their grades are slipping so they can seek help. Proactive communication is the first step to student retention, and

automation can help schools achieve this.

## 9 Effective Communication During Admissions

In the area of higher education admissions, there is a disconnect between how prospective students wish to be contacted, and how schools *think* students want to be contacted.

Admissions staff are turning to social media to engage the upcoming Gen Z audience, but statistics are showing that young people are not thrilled by this method of contact.

Prospective students spend a great deal of time on social media, to be sure. But when it comes to schools, social media is a research source, not a communication method. Instead, students prefer to have personal communication with admissions offices via email or phone. This doesn't mean that schools should back off their online presence, but rather that they should view it as information-providing and brand-building, not a communication tool.

## A Year of Growth

The challenges facing schools right now are a wealth of opportunity for higher education. A chance to adapt to the changing climate – to step back, recalculate, and achieve better momentum going forward. The schools that will be up to the task are the ones who are willing to be flexible and shift their focus, and these will in turn see sustained growth and a thriving student body. ●

10

## Reputation Problems

Higher education institutions across the board have been affronted by reputation issues stemming from student loan debacles and rising tuition rates, and the problem only worsened when the Obama administration laid heavy regulations on proprietary schools. The resulting public skepticism bled over into the nonprofit realm just as it had already tarnished the proprietary sector's image.

Regardless of what happens with these regulations under the Trump administration, the entire education industry will still have the heavy task of rebuilding its image. Increased transparency and accountability would be huge in helping to dispel skepticism – as would marketing that emphasizes student success rates. Boosting the public's trust will depend entirely on conveying that the institution's priority is first and foremost to benefit the student.





# Navigating

## Current Policy and Public Perception

### IN HIGHER ED

The education sector is always subjected to the fluctuations of public policy – and 2017 will be no exception. Upcoming policy shifts combined with a general public's waning confidence in higher education has created an unusual environment through which to maneuver, yet overall the climate seems to be turning in favor of higher education. Here's a glimpse into the anticipated changes ahead, along with insight into how schools can seize these positive conditions to recover enrollments.

#### Regulatory Rollback

President Trump has indicated several impending shifts in higher education. There has been recent discussion of rolling back certain regulations within the proprietary sector – ones that many in the sector have blamed for declining enrollments and unwarranted, negative press over the past three years. Though no action has yet been undertaken

to eliminate these regulations, in March the Trump administration delayed the enforcement of one of these rules, indicating that there may be a complete rollback in the works.

Chief Executive of Career Education Colleges and Universities Steven Gunderson is quoted in *The New York Times* as saying, "We're going to get some regulatory relief, which is desperately needed." However, Jennifer Flood, CEO of National Compliance Group, recently gave a contrasting opinion in an interview with The Frank Agency.

**"People are asking, will compliance still be an issue? Yes – but everyone will follow it, not just proprietary schools."**

Ms. Flood says many in higher education have begun discussing the possibility that the Trump administration, far from removing laws like the Gainful Employment Rule, will extend them beyond the proprietary sphere to nonprofit schools

as well. Thus, all degree and certificate granting programs would be subject to the same standard of turning out graduates that are able to find employment and repay their student loans. This would level the playing field, in a sense, but also be extremely difficult to implement for nonprofit schools, since many traditional degree programs tend to be aimed toward general education and do not fall under the label of "career education." Gainful Employment could, however, be applied only to specific, career-oriented fields or graduate programs.

It is uncertain as of yet which way the regulatory tides will turn. But it appears that either way will be a reprieve for proprietary schools, and should regulations hit nonprofits, there are thankfully some other reforms in the works (outlined on the next page) that may balance out some of the effects.



POOL  
CAY



## Student Debt Reform

A heavy obstacle facing prospective students is the growing perception among America's youth that they will leave college with debt they will be unable to repay. Long a political football, the issue of loan reform was brought to the forefront in the 2016 election debates, due almost entirely to the massive number of individuals in default on their student loans (reported by *The Wall Street Journal* at over 40%).

To that effect, Congress has discussed the possibility of reauthorizing the Higher Education Act this year. This would enable lawmakers to revisit the law and streamline it to allow for better access to financial aid, while driving down tuition costs. President Trump has also proposed his own student loan reform, which would consist of income-based repayments and a forgiveness plan if the student pays faithfully for 15 years.

Should one or both of these possibilities take effect, it could boost confidence among prospective students enough to see higher levels of enrollment across the board.

## The Comeback of Year-Round Pell Grants?

Yet another potential enrollment-booster is an upcoming proposal to reinstate year-round Pell grants for students. This program, which allowed students to receive grants for summer classes, was done away with in 2012 by the Obama administration due to

budget pressures as Pell costs ballooned in the wake of the recession. A 2016 proposal to reinstate year-round Pell opportunities met with political friction and ultimately died on the vine, despite cost stabilization and some bipartisan support.

However, Congress now appears favorable to a new incarnation of the program, which has been adjusted to accommodate some of the budgetary constraints that were an issue in the previous round. Should it pass, those motivated students who desire to continue their education throughout the summer can receive the support they need to do so, which would increase summer enrollments.

## Shifting Policy, Challenging Assumptions

Politics aside, there are indications that higher education may receive some significant breaks from policymakers this year, which would go further than just improving enrollment figures. Since public policy and public opinion tend to go hand-in-hand, expanding measures toward education may actually have a positive influence on public opinion. This creates the perfect opportunity for schools to reclaim enrollments by challenging some prevailing assumptions.

This will require a number of adjustments to the current status quo:

### Increased transparency.

Public skepticism can only be dispelled by transparency. Institutions who offer career-focused or career-advancing programs will need to be forthcoming with statistics on graduates' performance in the job market. This ensures a trustworthy perception, and thus, a more preferable selection.

### Active involvement in career placement.

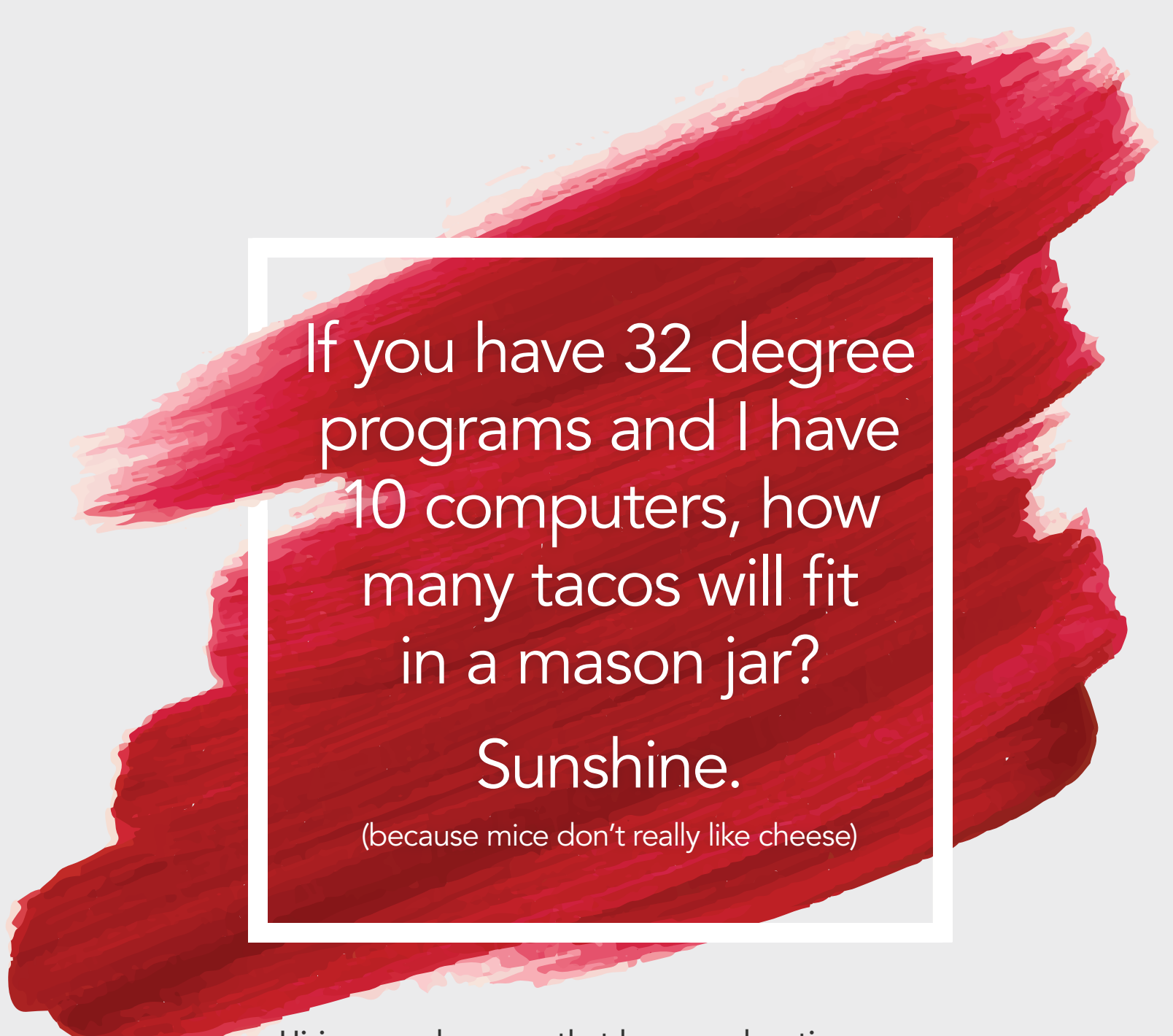
A growing sample of prospective and present students are more concerned with whether their educational investment will yield a career. Schools that wish to increase their student success rate will need to take an active role in helping soon-to-be-graduates in finding job opportunities. Whether this is through internships or a job notification system, career assistance will help graduates find the employment they need while proving the case that education is indeed valuable.

### Deliberate messaging through marketing.

Institutions can make great headway in influencing perceptions by simply assessing the messages they're sending. Marketing that is clearly student-centric and conveys priorities that resonate with specific audience segments creates confidence in potential and even current students.

With these considerations in place, schools can be prepared to take advantage of the favorable political climate, and position themselves for progress in the coming years. ●





If you have 32 degree  
programs and I have  
10 computers, how  
many tacos will fit  
in a mason jar?

Sunshine.

(because mice don't really like cheese)

Hiring an ad agency that has no education  
experience makes even less sense.

Let us do the marketing math for you. With over 15 years'  
experience in higher education, we'll work to deliver the lowest  
cost-per-enrollment at the highest conversion rates.

**LET US SIMPLIFY THE EQUATION**

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# The Right Fit:

## Big Data, Predictive Modeling and Student Acquisition

If you're in higher ed, you're probably well-acquainted with big data. Maybe you're even putting it to work tracking student performance. But if you're not using it to streamline your recruitment model, you're not realizing big data's incredible potential.

The uses of data mining and analysis extend much further into the education arena than just keeping students on course to complete their programs. And while statistics show that less than a third of colleges are effectively strategizing with data analysis, schools who do incorporate these methods see a decrease in marketing spending and higher successful enrollment. Case in point, the University of Iowa has been developing predictive modeling strategies since 2014 and, as a result, has seen more accurate enrollment projections and lowered marketing costs.

So how exactly does data analysis fit into the equation and deliver these results?

You can sum it up in three main concepts: prediction, prioritization and performance tracking.

### Data for Prediction

Predictive modeling examines historic patterns in order to project future results. By culling data from your most successful past students and looking for commonalities, you're able to see trends that can be extended into forecasts for future enrollees. These predictions and common traits are used to help create personas: models of which types of students are more likely to be interested in and flourish at your institution.

And because your student demographic is broad, you will likely have multiple personas that are generalizations of these demographics – a microcosm of your student body.

Once you have your ideal students categorized into personas, you are able to effectively target them based on what you already know about them: their interests, media usage, personalities, age bracket, motivations, and so forth. You can then tailor the marketing experience to each persona.

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**How can data analysis be used to advance your recruitment model?**

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Not only does this increase the effectiveness of your campaigns, but it also provides a more personalized experience for the prospective students and demonstrates that you see and understand their needs.

## Data for Prioritization

Developing personas for more focused targeting is certainly useful for gaining inquiries. But once you have a slew of inquiries in your system, they can be impossible to sort and prioritize without some indication of which inquiries are most likely to convert.

Using the same data from developing personas, you can identify specific traits that indicate whether the inquiry should be prioritized as High, Medium or Low. These labels essentially tell you which inquiries have the highest likelihood to enroll and stay enrolled in your program, so you can focus on them first. By pairing these categories with your CRM, you can even automate the follow-up process according to your prioritization to save time.

## Data for Performance Tracking

We get it – tracking your return on investment is a pain. In a higher education setting this is particularly true, as you're not just dividing the lifetime value (LTV) of a student by the cost spent on marketing to the student. You also have to treat each program and degree level individually, then factor in the cost of the program, the average length of enrollment, whether the student is a transfer student or not, and the source of the enrollment itself. It's a complicated formula. But before you write it off as a waste of time and energy, consider that all of these scenarios and values can be figured using your historical student data.



## Tracking your students' historical data gives you everything you need to determine your ROI.



You already have all the information – now use it to see if your marketing investment is delivering the return that it should. And if it isn't, you can return to the data to see where the breakdown occurs and tweak your model accordingly.

Tracking ROI shouldn't be considered a cringe-worthy practice in education. It's in the best interest of both school and students to ensure that money is not being thrown to the wind – or in this case, ineffective marketing strategies. By tracking ROI, you can cut costs on ineffective practices while increasing your enrollments and retention – and this, in the end, means more funding can go toward developing first-class degree programs and investing in students.

## The Big Data Movement

The number of schools utilizing data mining for retention programs is increasing as schools realize the potential of big data. However, without applying these strategies to the very first steps of recruitment and enrollment, your campaigns will quickly lose steam. With inexhaustible amounts of information at our fingertips, the best way to benefit schools and students alike is to utilize this data to form a single, united process that runs from recruitment to enrollment to graduation. And the efficiency and financial gains to be had from this would allow institutions to focus on the real mission: developing students that are primed for success. ●



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