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REMARKABLE TOPICS

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INSIDE

Letter from the President

In this issue, we are honored to include a timely essay by Don Hossler, Ph.D., exploring the critical need for thoughtful dialogue between senior enrollment officers and CFOs.

Dear Octane Booster:

It is a fact. Most institutions depend on the efforts of enrollment professionals to meet budgets. In this issue, we are honored to include a timely essay by Don Hossler, Ph.D., exploring the critical need for thoughtful dialogue between senior enrollment officers and CFOs. I have known Don for many years. He is a prolific writer, dynamic presenter, and educational thought leader, and his article will get you thinking.

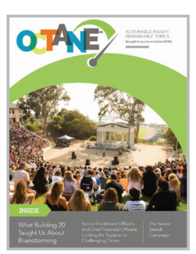
Mike Wesner, enrollmentFUEL's founder, tackles a topic everyone at our company obsesses over, and that is Senior Search. Mike looks at the pluses and minuses of this workhorse campaign and explores whether it is truly necessary for every school.

Adam Connolly, Vice President of Enrollment and Marketing at Coker University, shares thoughts on recruiting rural students, and why they often need special attention. My article draws on history and the lessons learned at Building 20, built during WWII, sharing ideas on improving brainstorming sessions to meet goals. And, in our final article, we explore whether it makes sense for schools to devote resources to compete for national and regional rankings.

Thank you for being an *Octane* reader. As another cycle begins, please know you have our best wishes for the year ahead.

Yours in collaboration,

Jacquelyn D. Elliott, Ed.D.
President



enrollmentFUEL would like to extend our gratitude to Point Loma Nazarene University for allowing this photo to be featured on the cover of our magazine.*

Octane the Magazine: A publication of enrollmentFUEL
A collection of innovative thoughts from a team of people bonded to clients in a way to prevent the knocking that comes with the "one size fits all" Student Search strategies. Adding *Octane* to your thinking fuels creativity and releases positive energy among enrollment professionals.

* FUEL welcomes three new California schools to the family — Hope International University, Point Loma Nazarene University, and San Diego Christian University.

inside OCTANE™

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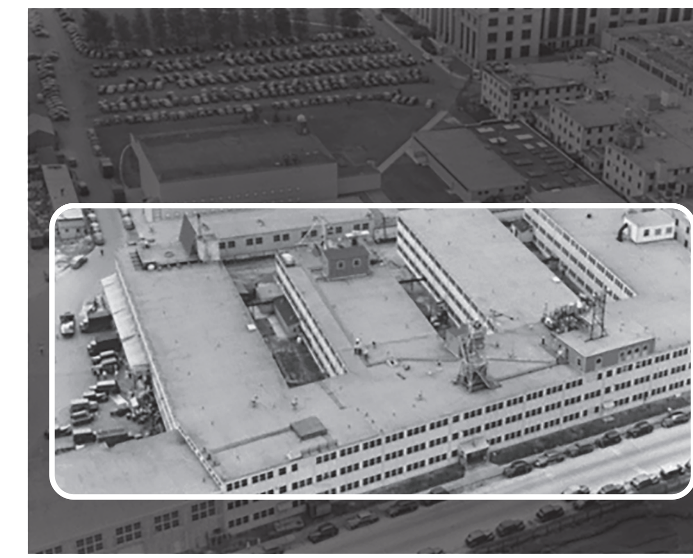
What Building 20 Taught Me About Brainstorming—and Meeting Goals

By Jacquelyn D. Elliott, Ed.D.

Every enrollment leader looks to brainstorming at some point in his or her career to either advance the initiatives of the office, or to help solve problems in an effort to meet the enrollment goal. What we often think is the best form of group participation—involving everyone on the team in traditional brainstorming—can actually be one of the worst ways to generate innovative solutions.

For those of you who have read my past articles, you probably have learned I love history. History gives us an opportunity to learn from mistakes and look forward with a roadmap laid out by those who already took the wrong turns for us. Let me share a story of what history taught me about brainstorming.



The Celebrated MIT Building 20

During WWII, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) needed more space for their scientists who were engaged in government-funded ramped-up research and development in the Radiation Laboratory (Rad Lab). As a result, they constructed a temporary wood-frame building (that met not a single code). The roof leaked, it was freezing in winter and boiling in summer, and it didn't meet the fire code.

The structure was called Building 20. It became one of the most infamous buildings in U.S. higher education history because of the inventions, innovations, and ideas that emerged under that roof.

Due to the nature of the building's design, the researchers, students, and staff had total flexibility to use the space as a vessel for original thought and innovation. Because it was meant to be a temporary space (and only expected to stand for six months after the end of the war), people were casual in how they treated the space. Furniture was moved where needed. Equipment was bolted to the roof, and walls were torn down to create open spaces with no "boundaries," allowing for experiments to be conducted in untraditional ways.

After the war, because of the boom of students on campus, Building 20 wasn't demolished. This was because space was still a critical need. As a result, students and professors from a hodgepodge of offices and departments ended up there, mingling freely. These unstructured interactions created some of the best-known brainstorming sessions ever produced, where big thinkers like Amar Bose (Bose Corporation) and Noam Chomsky (the father of modern linguistics) produced amazing outcomes. In fact, the structure found in Building 20 inspired Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, and Dan Cathy, founder of Chick-fil-A, to design similar modern workspaces for their employees.

Moral of the story? This unplanned space contributed to unstructured, free-thinking that led to a host of new ideas and innovation.

With that being said, it probably isn't realistic in *our* environments to approach problem-solving ONLY from the position of chance interactions with colleagues and random debates. However, you can draw upon the insight offered by the lessons of the Building 20 environment to shift your approach to brainstorming and find new ways to meet goals, solve problems, and generate new ideas.

Rethinking Traditional Brainstorming

Think about your last brainstorming session. Did it take place in the conference room, where a team of colleagues sat around a table? Was there a leader at the front of the room, writing down ideas as they were thrown out on a whiteboard or flip chart?

How did all this work for you? Did you feel frustrated that good ideas were generated, but you felt they would never be addressed or used? When people were asked for input, maybe you heard someone say, "Well, Anne took my idea."

One of the major downsides to a standardized brainstorming session is groupthink. The first person to speak usually sets the tone for the solution. All other ideas are loosely related to the first thought spoken, limiting the original intention to produce a *variety* of responses.

Having participated in these types of sessions as an employee for many years, I just assumed this was how they were done. As a leader responsible for helping my team to meet unwavering goals, I eventually decided these sessions weren't working well enough and researched different ways to engage my staff.

When I now lead brainstorming sessions, I use three guidelines. The first is an analogy I call the ***kitchen drawer***, the second is called the ***pizza rule,*** and the final guideline is the ***generate alone and synthesize together*** (GAST) rule.

First, the ***kitchen drawer*** analogy is simply that—an analogy of the process we use during the gathering. We all have one catch-all kitchen drawer where odds and ends collect. These items may not be used often, but they can be found in that drawer when needed.

It is important to let your staff know that ideas produced in your brainstorming session will be like those found in the kitchen drawer. There is going to be some clutter, it might be a little unorganized, and everything won't be required. This concept sets the tone, so people don't leave disappointed if their idea doesn't make the cut.

Second, the ***pizza rule*** simply states, "Having more people in the room than one pizza can feed means the size of the crowd can prevent you from generating the *best* ideas." Identify the problem to be solved. Start with your best and brightest. Include diversity of thought. To tackle enrollment issues, I usually bring six people to the meeting. The group is comprised of three people from the admission department, one from financial aid, one from student life, and either a trusted and engaged faculty member or our best student ambassador.

Once you assemble your brainstorming team, employ the GAST rule. I particularly like the 5-15-45 minute structure. Here's how it works:

1. As the leader, you understand your goal and can articulate it to the group. Be clear and concise. Hold people to the stated goal, so they don't get frustrated with rogue answers and painful rabbit holes.
2. Create a prompt (a question) for individual thought. Allow **five minutes** for your brainstormers to think and generate ideas alone, and write them down individually.
3. Partner members into pairs, letting them work together for **15 minutes** to select the ideas and answers they collectively wish to put forward to the larger group.
4. Spend **45 minutes** on this last and most important step. Allow all participants to present their solutions. Then, synthesize the information into clusters, identifying those clusters you wish to implement.
5. Watch the process, but don't *lead* it. Serve only as a facilitator by providing the initial prompt and structure for the meeting.

Leaving the meeting, you should have a list of the best ideas to tackle the goal you articulated in the prompt. For example, how can we make our campus visit the best in our state? Or, how can we increase international student enrollment? Because you are using smaller groups to attack issues, you may want to have two or three sessions in a day focusing on varied, distinct goals with different people participating.

Once the brainstorming session is completed, the next meeting gathers your *entire* internal team, involving them in the process of ***implementation***. This buy-in process helps team members see their various roles. They identify the steps to completion, deadlines, and decide who is responsible for the required tasks. The most important task for you, as the leader, is to provide the resources for the team to meet the implementation timeline.

Successful Brainstorming Relies on Successful Leaders

Leaders create a culture that leads to successful brainstorming. To share ideas, people must feel safe in their environment to speak freely. Effective brainstorming celebrates *cognitive diversity* and is a recognition of anti-uniformity. The challenge is that most employees are taught to "not go against" their supervisor. So, it's imperative that you have a truly intrinsic desire, as the leader, to make yourself and your office better—even when that means encouraging your team to push the envelope.

When I served as the Chief Enrollment Officer, one of the best ways I found to create this culture was a two-step process. First, I asked my president to conduct a neutral and anonymous 360-degree evaluation of my performance with my staff, which brought forward the issues where I needed to improve. After the review, I strategically called out areas for personal improvement and spoke favorably about how glad I was to know the issue so it could be addressed. Over time, the team came to know I was serious and genuine in my intentions, which created an open environment for discussion.

The second step happened at the end of the year. By then, my intentional actions had demonstrated that I wanted to improve my leadership and *listened* to what my staff had to say. They spoke more freely without fear of reprimand, judgment, or punishment. In each of their performance evaluations, I asked them to tell me one thing they wanted to improve in the office the next year. Rather than the issues being anonymous, I knew who said what, and I was able to publicly talk about each person's suggestion and how we were moving to resolve their issue. The combination of these two steps created a culture for the next six years, whereby the staff engaged in cognitive diversity to advance the office and team goals. During those six years, not one admission counselor left, and we exceeded our office goals every year.

Once the landscape for office culture had been planned and cultivated, I used four basic guiding principles to frame our "Building 20" random and unplanned debates over those next six years. These random and unplanned debates took place during staff meetings, in the hallway, in individual offices (I could hear the staff engaging on their own) and in one-to-one staff meetings. These guiding principles provided only the ground rules – but not the structure. I also told the team this was how we would play moving forward:

1. Remember, we are all on the same team
2. Keep it about facts, logic, and the topic at hand
3. Never make it personal
4. Be intellectually humble[1]

The four takeaways were (a) our shared goal is to find the best way to do X; (b) the debate is not about who cares more, who is loudest, who has the higher position, or who is the most articulate; (c) assume everyone's intentions are good, and reward people for moving the group forward, ***not being right***; and (d) be willing to respect every viewpoint and change your mind when appropriate. It is important to be curious, since new and better ideas make all of us more successful (which means raises).

Isn't it amazing what a little story from history taught me about leadership, how to conduct better brainstorming, and how to meet my enrollment goal every year? I find it amazing that a ramshackle building that didn't meet any codes and was meant to be torn down six months after the war made such an impact on thought, innovation, and intellectual discourse. Much like Building 20, enrollment leaders can uncover innovative solutions, when unconventional brainstorming and random and unplanned debate are celebrated as part of office culture.

1 Retrieved from: https://hbr.org/2019/01/how-to-debate-ideas-productively-at-work.

Dr. Jacquelyn D. Elliott is President of enrollmentFUEL. Using a variety of training and brainstorming methods, she had developed strategies that led multiple campuses to record enrollments. She can be reached at jacqui.elliott@enrollmentfuel.com.

Senior Enrollment Officers and Chief Financial Officers:

Looking for Support in Challenging Times

By Don Hossler, Ph.D.

In 2017, I talked with two senior enrollment officers who were attending the annual AACRAO SEM Conference. During our conversation, they shared they had recently been asked to come to a regional meeting of NACUBO (National Association of Collegiate and University Business Officers) to lead a session on enrollment management. One of the purposes of this session was to discuss the role that enrollment management plays in helping colleges and universities meet the financial needs of their institutions. My colleagues noted one of the themes that emerged at the meeting was why institutions needed to do a better job of containing costs. Many in attendance agreed that spending less was needed in these difficult times.

It seems like every week, as I scan the *Chronicle of Higher Education, Inside Higher Education*, and other sources, I find articles suggesting more colleges and universities in the United States will close. Indeed, in early August, Moody's projected a continued negative outlook for many private and public institutions.[1] Perhaps, no senior administrators have greater concerns for the sustainability of their institutions than the chief financial officer (CFO) and the senior enrollment officer (SEO). CFO's realize they're the ones who are supposed to find ways to pay the bills. SEO's are well aware that they are the ones who are expected to generate enough tuition revenue to balance budgets. As I thought about the conversation with my colleagues, it made perfect sense they might be invited to speak before a group of senior CFOs. Indeed, it is increasingly likely that unspoken strategic alliances between SEOs and CFOs will become more common. We can expect both senior administrators to be pressing their presidents, their academic vice presidents, and others to look for cost-saving measures.

It is no secret that colleges and universities have proven to be better at adding new academic programs and new administrative functions than they are at

1 Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2019/08/14/moodys-maintains-negative-outlook-higher-ed.

The goal for enrollment managers is to help CFOs develop a better understanding of the complexities that enrollment managers face—just as enrollment managers need to develop a better understanding of the economics and financing of the institutions at which they work.

eliminating them.[2] Nevertheless, for both public regional institutions and private regional schools located in areas projected to have fewer high school graduates, eliminating academic programs and/or some administrative functions may be necessary. It is the convergence of these factors that creates the organizational press for SEOs and CFOs to work together.

Creating alliances between SEO's and CFOs, however, does not always come easy. CFOs often look at discount rates. They think that enrollment management units need to reduce tuition discounting and quit spending so much money – yet, still bring in the requisite number of students to cover institutional expenses. SEO's, on the other hand, often think that their partners in the business office don't fully understand the value of tuition discounts, and believe the business office sees institutional financial aid dollars as expenses, rather than an investment with a positive impact on income. This raises the question: how can senior enrollment officers work more effectively with chief financial officers, who seem dubious about tuition discounting and enrollment management?

For SEOs who want to develop a better working relationship with their colleagues in the business office, the first step is learning more about the budget model and the economics and finance of higher education. *What are the primary cost drivers at their institution?* Enrollment managers need to acknowledge that in addition to tuition discounting, the number of professional staff in areas associated with enrollment management are likely to have increased at their campus in larger proportions than in any other professional area. This is not to say that those positions are not needed, but I am suggesting that SEOs need to be aware of these trends, be willing to acknowledge them, and to take a hard look at those positions if their institution is in a downsizing mode.

The more enrollment managers know about the financing and budgeting of their institutions, the more effective they will be in speaking *budget talk* to CFOs. SEOs need to be willing to spend time with finance administrators, going over demographic projections and the discount rates of other similar colleges and universities. In addition, the SEO should provide information on the outcomes of peer institutions who have reduced their tuition, or who have lowered their discount rate. *How did these strategies work? How did they affect the economic health of the college or university?* The goal for enrollment managers is to help CFOs develop a better understanding of the complexities that enrollment managers face—just as enrollment managers need to develop a better understanding of the economics and financing of the institutions at which they work.

In addition to administrative costs, the costs of academic programs are primarily driven by the number of full-time faculty. New programs should not require presidents and provosts to terminate tenured faculty members. Faculty members are well-equipped to access new information and become knowledgeable in new academic fields. Tenure is designed to protect academic freedom; it does not dictate the courses that individual faculty members are asked to teach. It should be possible to ask faculty members to move into new areas where there is growth in student enrollments.

During my career, I have taught both enrollment management courses, and courses on the economics and finance of higher education. Many of the students with whom I worked have not had much experience with the financial side of postsecondary institutions. I tried to drive home the importance of understanding higher education finance. Too often, I have senior campus administrators *rolling their eyeballs into the back of their heads* when CFOs start discussing institutional finances. To influence the CFO, and other senior policymakers, enrollment managers must be willing to engage in *budget talk*, as well as discussing their field of expertise.

Cultivating a partnership with campus CFOs supports two important goals. Creating a stronger working relationship between SEOs and CFOs helps to ensure both groups of senior administrators are more knowledgeable about important financial challenges faced by their institution. Additionally, a stronger partnership between CFOs and SEOs can lead to more realistic decisions regarding academic programs, enrollment goal setting, and administrative support at an insitution.

Ultimately, the goal of both CFOs and SEOs is the same: to help their institution thrive in difficult times.

Don Hossler, Ph.D., is the Senior Scholar at the Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice, Rossier School of Education, at the University of Southern California. He has authored or co-authored 23 books, multiple scholarly reports, and numerous articles. He has received awards for his research from the American College Personnel Association, the Association for Institutional Research and the National Association of Student Personnel. Dr. Hossler can be reached at hossler@usc.edu.

2 Epple, D., Romano, R., Sarpça, S., & Sieg, H., "A general equilibrium analysis of state and private colleges and access to higher education in the US," *Journal of Public Economics*, 155, 2017, 164-178.

THE SENIOR SEARCH CAMPAIGN

By Mike Wesner, M.Ed.

It may surprise you to know this (especially since I founded a Student Search company), but I haven't always been a fan of the Senior Search marketing campaign. More than a decade ago, when I first entered the field, I worked with many schools with strong, recognizable brands that had no problem meeting goals with a Student Search strategy focused on engaging sophomores. Back then, I thought of senior campaigns as catch-up tactics for schools that hadn't built a strong pipeline.

I am now convinced we are recruiting in a very different world, where every school can benefit from doing some type of Senior Search campaign. Many schools, even those with exceptionally strong brands, are taking this approach.

Why is there the new interest in senior campaigning? I believe it is driven, in part, by the evolution in marketing technology, which allows schools to run more effective campaigns. It also reflects the challenges schools face when recruiting sophomores. After a sophomore is engaged, schools need to maintain relationships for two long years – and that is a resource-intensive and cumbersome task.

Improvements in marketing technology help enrollment management professionals determine which students in the inquiry pool are most engaged, through a combination of measurements and behavioral scoring. Every click in an email, or on your website, offers a nugget of marketing intelligence. These golden data points give guidance on an inquiry's interests, and your next best steps.

Savvy schools know it's the human touch that ultimately helps you win. However, without the intelligence provided by marketing technology, teams often struggle with knowing when it is the right time for a one-to-one interaction. Even worse, they might experience a drain in resources because they are spending too much time on the wrong inquiries. While every Student Search campaign generates many different metrics, I believe there is one that matters – and that is knowing who is in the top group of 500 students who are actively engaged. These are the inquiries who are actively seeking information about your school, and who are more likely to convert if you keep feeding them more.

Behavior, as evidenced by clicks, website visits, and requests for information, tells you a lot about a senior and what they want to know as they search for the right school. The same activity from sophomores doesn't send the same strong behavioral signal. To me, it's a lot like a junior high school romance. Sophomores fall in and out of love with many schools. That's part of growing up, but few of these relationships actually last.

Show me a senior who's clicking, and I take notice. At this stage, the behavior is far more intentional and more likely to indicate the student is seriously considering starting a real relationship with your school. It is a cue for you to act immediately.

It is also important to acknowledge that today's Gen Z consumer is tech and media savvy. They understand clicks provide your school with data, and they are fine with it if a click leads to a positive outcome, such as getting the information they seek. Data is critical for today's enrollment leader, but on occasion, the biggest roadblock for data collection is an institution's overprotective IT department. If

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Savvy schools know it's the human touch that ultimately helps you win.

this is the case for your school, it is an area you want to address, because you need data to compete.

I thought it might be helpful to offer a list of what I see as both good and bad about Senior Search campaigning.

The Positives:

- Senior Searches are great for those who now want to know where they stand. They are great for those who demand the unvarnished truth. The word I use to describe Senior Searching is "***real***." It compresses the marketing timeline into something that can be easily understood by your junior staff. The steps you want the student to take are clear: inquire, visit, apply, deposit, and attend. You can apply effort where it is needed.
- The Senior Search campaign presents powerful behavioral scoring opportunities. Tagging inquiries who take certain actions by "baking" cookies, also known as tracking pixels, is more meaningful with seniors. Clicks matter within this audience.
- It dovetails nicely with big "buying signals," like campus visits and applying. These are the logical next steps in the progression toward enrollment. With seniors, you also don't have to worry about having the resources to nurture a long-term relationship over three years. Senior campaigns often don't mess around with soft calls-to-actions (CTA) asking, "Are you interested?" Instead, they ask, "Are you ready to visit (or apply)?"
- Senior Search can plug gaps and help you catch-up to reach a goal. However, it is not magic. You still have to do the heavy lifting required to get 80 percent of your class in other ways. These campaigns work by giving a school the margin they need for success, which is why they are worth doing.
- When you run a Senior Search campaign with purchased names, you can combine them with other lists, such as current inquiries, who may have become a little stale. Encouraging campus visits as a call to action generally works well for the combined pool of leads. (This is a great way to qualify an inquiry pool that is full of soft leads.)
- Your Senior Search campaign works out the kinks in the next round of campaigning to juniors, which positions you better for success.

The Negatives:

- Senior campaigns are not a cure-all for weak brands. In fact, brand activation is one reason why it makes sense to reach out to juniors and sophomores, showcasing what you have to offer. For optimal results with any targeted age group, please be sure to include digital advertising, such as IP targeting, social, and retargeting.
- Response rates can be low for seniors, and they may not look pretty when you peer at the top of the funnel. Sophomores, when thinking about a college, are excited. They click on everything and are exalted to get your personalized postcards. Seniors are more blasé. Whether you are sending emails or direct mail, you must work harder to stand out. Here's a tip from our campaign data. **Do include a mail piece in your senior campaign**. When it arrives, it inevitably gives email response rates a significant lift.
- Senior campaigns can't fix all wrongs – especially when wrongs represent a long history of accumulated issues. You can't rely on Senior Search to build a class. It's a supplemental campaign built to squeeze a lemon that has already been squeezed. It is a gap-filling strategy, and many schools cannot bring in their class without it.
- Campaign timing can be tricky. In early September, there is a huge glut of mail that goes out from schools – exactly when families are distracted by the start of school and a new rhythm in the household. It's important to understand your institution's best timing. Some schools do benefit from going early, but I have also seen evidence that later starts – sometimes even as late as December – can also be effective. I say this even though I know the thought of waiting until then has some readers reaching for their Maalox.
- Senior Search is an added expense for some schools. You need more names, more postage, and more internal resources devoted to managing the process. As you evaluate this, it pays to ask, "If we don't do Senior Search, are we confident that we will bring in our class?" If you are not, then a campaign is an option to consider.

When enrollment management leaders evaluate all the pluses and minuses, some schools conclude that a senior campaign is the only workhorse needed, an outlook explaining why enrollmentFUEL's microSEARCH™ solution is largely a Senior Search campaign tool.

If your school is marketing effectively, ensuring you are findable, visible, and differentiated – which all sums up as creating an activated brand – then running a Senior Search campaign is a smart way to harvest those efforts and give you the margin you need to meet your goals.

Mike Wesner, M.Ed., is Founder and Chief Imagination Officer of enrollmentFUEL—a boutique Student Search company that understands every school has a unique set of circumstances and may or may not benefit from having a Senior Search campaign. Mike is actively traveling this fall and would love to visit your campus to discuss the pros and cons of such an effort by your school. Email him at mike.wesner@enrollmentfuel.com.

INQUIRE VISIT APPLY DEPOSIT ATTEND

The Rural High School Student: *Recruitment Strategies*

By Adam Connolly, M.Ed.

The landscape of higher education is changing rapidly for enrollment managers across the country. Drastic shifts in student demographics and declining high school graduation rates have already begun to impact enrollment in both the public and private sector. This has caused institutions to focus on their strategic enrollment management plan. Within the plan, there is likely to be a stated commitment to focus on specific student populations, either to grow or to ensure marketing share is maintained in a selected region.

What if I told you there is a population of students who have long been ignored and overlooked? What if this group of students is likely already represented in the incoming class for most schools?

This group of students comes from rural areas, and they are often underserved during their journey to college.

A National Clearinghouse study reports that 42% of all students, ages 18-24, are enrolled in a higher education institution.[1] Only 29% of that total population comes from rural areas, while 48% come from cities.[2] The rural student represents a large portion of many incoming first-year classes, but often, takes a very different enrollment path than their urban classmates. This can make it challenging to recruit rural high school students.

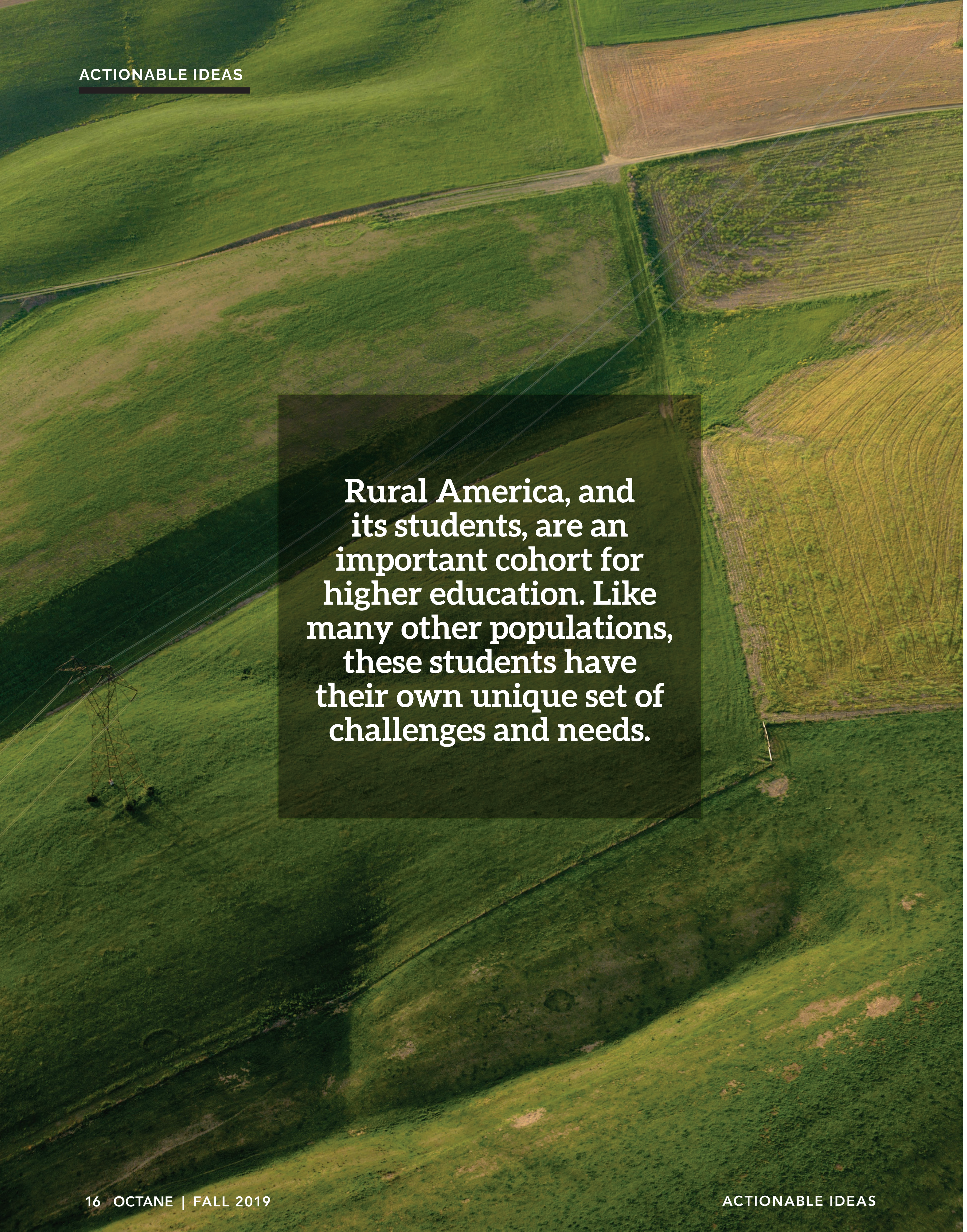
Many rural students grow up in areas of the country where it was once completely feasible to make a decent living without going to college or getting a degree. Jobs in farming, mining, forestry, and local factories were plentiful, and the desire to invest in higher education was not seen as an attractive or necessary option for these students or their parents.

However, the economy has changed. Manufacturing has left many rural areas, and automation within the factories that remain has resulted in fewer jobs for people who once relied on local employers for steady work.

Historical statistics indicate gaps in college attendance and completion rates for rural students. A report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service cites that fewer than one in five rural adults 25 years or older have a college degree.[3] This can be compared to the nation overall, where at least half of adults 25 or older have a degree.[4] Here is another statistic relevant to enrollment management professionals: the college completion gap for rural adults has grown from 15% to 19%.[5]

While there are challenges for rural high school students when it comes to enrolling in and completing college, this state of affairs presents an opportunity for an admissions office, if a proper recruiting plan is implemented. If rural students are a target for you, here are some key actions that the enrollment division, and also the institution, should have in place to successfully recruit within this community.

1 Retrieved from: https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/09/the-rural-higher-education-crisis/541188/.
2 Ibid.
3 Retrieved from: https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/07/education-deserts-across-rural-america/593071/.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.



Rural America, and its students, are an important cohort for higher education. Like many other populations, these students have their own unique set of challenges and needs.

Visit Them Often

In many cases, rural students are in a location where transportation barriers hinder their opportunity to attend a regional or consolidated college fair. Admission offices should be scheduling information sessions, instant decision days, application days, and admitted student receptions at these rural high schools.

Recognize Technology Limits

If a student's high school is located further away from college campuses and larger populated areas, the odds are that students will reside in a similar location. Though our nation's technology infrastructure continues to improve, there are still many rural students who lack reliable access to technology at home. This hinders them when they want to apply, deposit, or handle other transactional details. Be aware of this, and have a plan to address it.

Don't Let the Verification Process Become an Insurmountable Hurdle

The College Board reports that 1.8 million low-income students start the FAFSA each academic year, but only 45% complete it.[6] An even smaller percentage will be able to navigate through the verification process. A large percentage of rural high school seniors applying to institutions are first-generation students. Colleges must be able to communicate with rural students, and their families, to educate them on the verification process. There are a limited number of schools that can successfully enroll students without students requiring some assistance with financial aid. Rural students are likely to need the most assistance.

6 Retrieved from: https://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/2018-trends-in-student-aid.pdf.

Orientate Students Early and Often

There is always going to be summer melt. However, research studies have indicated students who are engaged and invested with their selected institution are more likely to be present on the first day of classes.[7] Students from rural areas may only get the chance to visit campus once before classes begin. The entire orientation process, along with the transition from high school to college, can be very daunting. With targeted outreach from staff, advisors, and faculty, you increase the chance that a rural student will show up on campus for classes. Remember, solving this by using technology (as you would for urban students) may not actually solve the problem. There is still a need for informational mailings to this subset of students, and you should budget accordingly.

Rural America, and its students, are an important cohort for higher education. Like many other populations, these students have their own unique set of challenges and needs.

Rural students also bring tremendous value by adding to the diversity of a college campus. Therefore, as changing demographics lead to higher levels of enrollment uncertainty, you can expect rural students to be an even more important student population to pursue as part of your strategic recruitment strategy.

7 Retrieved from: https://nces.ed.gov/npec/pdf/kuh_team_report.pdf.

Adam J. Connolly, M.Ed., is the Vice President for Enrollment Management and Marketing at Coker University, where he oversees admissions, financial aid, and marketing. He has presented at numerous conferences on financial aid leveraging, staff development, dynamic recruitment strategies, and the rise of the "homelander" generation. Contact Adam at aconnolly@coker.edu.

By David Francis

There is no doubt about it. Parents and students look at rankings, but they are not a singular factor in determining where a student will go to school. When your institution does appear on a list, a ranking helps establish a baseline of credibility.

Chasing ratings requires an investment of time and resources by your school's marketing team and the entire campus. If you think you need more effort put into finding a way to improve, the question you need to be prepared to answer is, "Do high rankings actually lead to an increase in the number of applicants to a school, and, in turn, an increase in enrollment?"

The broad answer is yes. Schools that manage to land on the *U.S. News and World Report's* "Top 25" list experience a 6-10% increase in the number of incoming applications. The same is true for *The Princeton Review's* annual list; schools on their "Top 20 Best Overall Academic Experience" see a 3.2 percent bump. Even minimal movement on the list can have a big impact; just one percentage point uptick in *U.S. News* rankings leads to a 1% bump in applications received[1].

Do high rankings actually lead to an increase in the number of applications at a school?

According to Robert Wynne, a marketing expert in California, universities are very aware of these stats. "Universities know how important these rankings are. Even the best ones work to pad statistics that help them gain in the rankings, especially on the *U.S. News* list. It's a monster that can't be tamed. You have to play the game. The rankings are worth millions in publicity, donations, and admissions. It could be worth billions, overall." he said.[2]

Wynne, who is the former head of communications at the University of Southern California business school, added, "Keeping our ranking up was the most stressful part of my job."[3]

Speaking anonymously (and candidly), a marketer and public relations specialist at a major school at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill said, "It's an arms war. Without a high ranking, we can't compete," the marketer said. "We have hired outside consultants to help us improve our ranking. If we slip, everyone notices. Most importantly, the dean and faculty notice. If we slip, even a little, we hear about it."[4]

This has led some universities to attempt to game the system, said Ellen Bradley, a public relations expert who has worked at the University of Richmond and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill[5]. Because rankings are subjective and not objective – each ranking uses its own criteria – schools can act to make gains without actually improving the quality

1 https://thebestschools.org/magazine/big-business-college-ranking/
2 Interview with Robert Wynne. Phone Conversation. May 9, 2019.
3 Ibid.
4 Anonymous Interview. Phone Conversation. May 10, 2019.
5 Interview with Ellen Bradley. Phone Conversation. May 10, 2019.

of education. Rankings incentivize colleges to manipulate metrics like selectivity, class rank, and standardized testing outcomes to rise above competitors.[6]

There are also different geographic tiers of rankings, something of which Bradley has first-hand experience. When she was at the University of Richmond, the school actively worked to move from the regional rankings of liberal arts colleges to the national one. She said the school's president actively lobbied *U.S. News* to include Richmond on the national list, even if Richmond fell in the national rankings compared to the regional list.

"We marketed ourselves differently," Bradley said of making the national list. "We started competing nationally, competing for students with national liberal arts universities. We could still say we were among the top 50 and start talking to parents and students in a different way. We started to feel like we had more credibility."

Twenty years ago, *U.S. News* was the go-to ranking site. There are now dozens of lists. Keep in mind – all of the data used to rank the schools is self-reported, so there is no independent verification of what a school submits.

An alternative strategy is finding ways to leverage the specific attribute of your school. Look for ranking opportunities for:

- Appropriate for your department in terms of mission and vision. Examples include engineering, journalism, or specialized programs
- Outcomes, such as the post-graduate earnings, or the number of students who are accepted into a specific post-graduate program

If you excel in an area, but can't find a way to get ranked, then use statistics. For example, if a large percentage of students pass professional tests on the first try, look for a way to use this in your enrollment marketing. If you hold more job fairs than average, you can also report that.

6 https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/headcount/george-washington-u-inflated-class-rank-data-for-more-than-a-decade/32828

RANKING SITES

- Colleges of Distinction
- Forbes America's Top Colleges
- Kiplinger's College Rankings
- Niche 2019 College Rankings
- US News and World Report Best Colleges Rankings
- The Times Higher Education World University Rankings
- QS World University Rankings

You can also use associated rankings. For example, if your school is located in a city that ranks highly for job growth, use that in your messaging and tie it to student goals, like internships.

Beyond Rankings – Don't Ignore Reviews

Whether Gen Z buys a computer, selects a restaurant, or chooses a college, online reviews will be part of their decision-making process.

That's why you need to monitor your online reputation, and see what students are saying about you on sites, like *Unigo* (unigo.com/colleges).

If you discover bad reviews, think about asking students at your school to add a post. While new positive posts never replace old negative ones, they generally push older reviews down on a page, making them less noticeable.

Your online reputation also benefits from other formal and informal positive PR efforts, such as sharing stories, encouraging alumni to re-post news and stories, and using traditional public relations tactics, such as posting press releases.

Last Thoughts

Ratings and reviews are worthy of a conversation with your marketing team. There is no quick fix for better ratings. However, reviews are a different matter. If online reviews concern you, or do not seem to accurately represent what is good about your school, work with students to take action. You should follow the advice of the tennis legend, Arthur Ashe. *"Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can."*

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